

University of Arizona's SALT Center

By Mark Katz, PhD

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS who struggle with attention and learning challenges to actually do better in college? “Yes it is,” says Jeff Orgera, PhD—and he should know.

Parents, educators, health care providers and well informed consumers are finding creative ways to address the needs and daily challenges of those who struggle with AD/HD. In each issue of Attention, we highlight one innovative program, model, or practice and pass on appropriate contacts so you can implement similar efforts in your community. Appearance in this column, however, does not imply endorsement by CHADD.

As director of the University of Arizona's Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques Center, otherwise known as SALT, Orgera has seen what can happen when struggling students free themselves from years of shame and embarrassment, reframe attention and learning challenges in a hopeful new light, and come to understand their true potential. SALT works very hard to help its students do this, according to Orgera, apparently with more than some success: 83 percent of SALT students are in good academic standing, a majority graduate from UA within five years, graduation rates are equal to or greater than UA students at the fourth, fifth, and sixth year level, 26 percent have cumulative GPAs of 3.0 or higher, and 74 percent of SALT freshmen successfully enter their sophomore year.

Keys to SALT's success

All SALT students work individually with a Strategic Learning Specialist. Together, they develop an individualized learning plan that outlines academic goals, tutoring services, organizational and time management strategies, and other important community resources and supports. Plans are reviewed on an ongoing basis and changed when necessary. Strategic Learning Specialists also play an important role in helping incoming freshmen transition from high school to college, and eventually into their chosen major and career path.

During the month of June prior to their first fall semester, incoming SALT freshmen participate in new student orientation, where they learn about SALT services and have a chance to meet and get to know other incoming SALT students. Immediately prior to the start of the semester, freshmen participate

in a second orientation called the New Student Experience, a program designed to prepare students for their first two weeks of life as a college student.

Through the Computer Resource Lab, SALT students also have access to their own personal technology lab, where they learn how to use a range of educational technologies, including voice-activated software, writing software, and software that can convert text to speech. In addition, students are coached on the use of software programs and other technologies that can assist with organization, time management and other executive functions.

Ongoing academic tutoring in specific subject areas is available as well. All SALT tutors go through required training before being assigned students. Tutors are encouraged to participate in advanced training courses to become “master” tutors, a status many current SALT tutors have achieved.



Prospective student and parents meet with a SALT Admissions coordinator.

A number of colleges, UA included, now use web-based course management systems where students can take exams online, upload course syllabi, and submit assignments. Through SALT workshops, students are coached on how to navigate UA's online management program, allowing them to locate assignments, keep track of grades, and perform many other time-saving functions.

The ability to write well is critical to success at UA, and SALT students receive a great deal of individual

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support to help them succeed in their writing assignments. Through the SALT writer's lab, students have access to computer software and educational technologies designed to improve writing skills, can attend workshops on major university writing events, and can work individually with writing tutors and learning specialists.

Providing hope to struggling high school students

Through SALT's VAULT (Volunteering and Utilizing Learners Talents) Program, students participate in community service projects, among them a mentoring program for high school students with attention and learning challenges. Struggling high school students have a chance to work with and get to know college students who struggled much like they did. For high school students losing hope of better days down the road, SALT mentors are living proof that students experiencing a wide array of challenges in high school can enjoy greater success in college.

The SALT High School Connection is another community outreach program helping at-risk students attending a local Tucson high school. In an effort to reduce school failure rates while encouraging college as an option, the program offers teacher in-service trainings, training on assistive technologies, tours of the SALT Center, and opportunities for students to attend two UA college classes by shadowing SALT students through their day.

SALT recently offered its first annual summer program for college-bound Arizona high school students with attention and learning challenges. Known as Road Map to College, the two-week nonresidential program provided college-bound students opportunities to spend time on campus, explore major and career options, learn strategies that can help them succeed in their coursework, and practice using assistive technologies. In the future, SALT will be reaching out nationally to college-bound high school students with attention and learning challenges with a new, expanded four-week residential model called Transitions.

Overall, the SALT Center at the University of Arizona provides students with learning and attention challenges a community where they can learn self-advocacy skills, reframe how they think about learning, and become empowered individuals ready for the professional world.

Readers wishing to learn more about SALT programs and services can do so by logging on to their website: www.SALT.Arizona.edu or by contacting Dr. Jeff Orgera directly (e-mail: jorgera@u.arizona.edu; phone at 520-621-1427).

Readers who had the good fortune of knowing Dr. Clare Jones will be pleased to learn that an endowed scholarship fund was started through the SALT Center in her honor soon after her passing in December 2006. Learn more about the scholarship fund by contacting Dr. Orgera directly. ●