A Model Program for the Success of College Students with Attention and Learning Disorders

Cynthia Demetriou[*], Gabrielle Miller[**], Laurel G Mason[***], Christine Salvesen[****]

Abstract

Internationally, institutions of higher education have been called upon to engage college students with learning disabilities in campus life, to provide effective learning supports, and to hold high expectations (Tinto, 2012). Model programs providing comprehensive support to college students with learning disabilities are few and far between. As the number of college students needing learning support increases across many countries, there is a critical demand to identify programs and approaches that produce optimal outcomes for students. This article provides an overview of the legal structures on which supports for individuals with disabilities are based in the United States in comparison to Italy. For nearly forty years, a U.S. program called Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) Center has extended federally mandated supports in to higher education. As Italy grows its tertiary programs and supports for students with learning disabilities, the SALT Center may serve as a helpful model program.

Keywords: learning disabilities, higher education, student success

Introduction

Recent study of pediatric trends in the United States have identified both increases in the number of children with attention disorders and decreases in the number of children diagnosed with learning disabilities (LD). According to data used by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018), the percentage of children aged 4-17 with Attention Deficit

[*] PhD, oversees multifaceted programs, supports, and policies for undergraduate retention and student success at the University of Arizona.

[**] Director of the SALT Center at the University of Arizona and leads one of the nation's most prestigious programs for undergraduates who learn differently.

[***] Senior Associate Director for the Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) Center at The University of Arizona.

[****] The Author has worked at the University of Arizona for over 28 years in several capacities within Student Affairs. She is currently Executive Director for Student Success and Retention Innovation (SSRI) and Director of the SSRI Strategy Team.

Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) steadily increased from 7.8% in 2003, to 9.5% in 2007, to 11% in 2012; with some studies indicating that selected neurodevelopmental disorders, such as ADHD, impact as many as 1 in 6 children. (Boyle et al., 2011) and, since 2001, there has been a decrease of nearly 27% in students with an LD diagnosis (Pullen, 2017). Notwithstanding the changes in diagnostic criteria, which are believed to be associated with this reduction (e.g., Bollman, Silberglitt, & Gibbons, 2007; O'Connor, Bocian, Beach, & Sanchez, 2013), the total number of children with disabilities of any kind has remained stable at 13% of the total public school population (United States National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Thus, the need for significant investments in health and learning services at all stages of education from kindergarten through college has long existed and continues. Moreover, federal requirements to ensure equal access for all students, regardless of disability status, extend to institutions of higher education (IHEs) and can present significant challenges (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Davis, 2005; Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504).

With only 34 percent of United States (U.S.) students with learning disabilities earning a bachelor's degree within eight years of high school completion (Sanford et al., 2011), higher education leaders have been called upon to engage college students with learning disabilities in campus life, to provide effective learning supports, and to hold high expectations (Tinto, 2012). It has been identified that, in particular, students with learning and attention challenges are frequently challenged by recruitment and admission processes (Palombi, 2000), out-of-class activities (Kuh et al., 1991), academic and career advising, and financial need (Belch, 2000). Despite these well documented needs, model programs which provide comprehensive support are few and far between. As the number of college students needing learning supports and services increases, there is a critical demand to identify programs and approaches that produce optimal outcomes for students.

This article provides a brief overview of the legal structures on which supports for individuals with disabilities are based in the U.S. in comparison to Italy. We also focus on the impact of these structures on U.S. undergraduates and offer an overview of University of Arizona (UA)'s Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) Center. This model program has demonstrated that it can significantly increase the likelihood that undergraduates with attention and learning challenges will succeed.

Legal Structures

Both the United States and Italy have strong legislation which recognizes

and protects the civil rights of individuals with disabilities. Since the 1970s both nations have mandated a wide range of practices intended to offer instructional support, protect against discrimination, and facilitate full inclusion of individuals with disabilities across a wide range of settings (e.g., Forgacs & Tardi, 2014; Sandri, 2014; Thomas, 2000).

The operationalization of these legislative efforts, particularly as an individual transitions from school-age to adulthood can vary significantly between and within both countries. For example, the social protection system in Italy which entitles individuals with disabilities lifetime financial support based on the impact of the disability on the individual's potential earning capacity (Ales, 2005) stands in contrast with U.S. laws which shift from an entitlement to an eligibility paradigm, often resulting in fewer supports than previously provided (Duncan & Ali, 2011).

In terms of education, U.S. federal law entitles children with disabilities to a free appropriate public education, with significant due process rights for parents/legal guardians to ensure robust individual supports necessary for academic success (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 2004). However, when a student transitions out of school-age services, which may happen from age 18-21 depending on the individual, there are significant changes. Federal law mandates protection of the civil rights of individuals with disabilities for those determined to be *eligible* for such protection. Moreover, entitlement under the school-age mandate does not guarantee eligibility under the adult mandates (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990: Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504; Duncan & Ali, 2011).

Another significant legal change for *all* students and families is associated with federal education privacy laws. While an individual is of school-age, access to and communication about the individual's education is controlled by the student's parents/legal guardians. Upon the transition to adulthood, educational rights transfer from the parents/legal guardians to the individual. (Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, 1974). In practical terms, this means that individuals enrolled in postsecondary educational programs (i.e., colleges/universities) must give written permission before any information can be shared.

These changes are significant and often present challenges for families who are surprised to learn that tremendous involvement and legal control of their child's educational services to which they were previously entitled no longer exists. (Duncan & Ali, 2011; Thomas, 2000).

In sum, U.S. federal law requires colleges and universities to provide students with disabilities who meet eligibility requirements the accommodations needed ensure equal access. They must meet the standard of equal access, they do have to meet the (school-age) standard of 'appropriate'

for academic success (Duncan & Ali, 2011). Yet, students often continue to need additional academic and personal supports for post-secondary academic success. Securing these supports is now the responsibility of the student and availability of such supports can vary widely from institution to institution.

The successful navigation of the transition from school age to adult expectations can be the catalyst for the development of autonomy and independence in undergraduates (Schiffrin et al., 2014). Understanding and navigating these changes can feel daunting and add to an otherwise challenging time in students' lives. It is critical, therefore, that students and families both understand the changes to their rights and responsibilities as well as the changes to the rights and responsibilities of the institution of higher education.

The UA's SALT Center is a supplemental program that extends federally mandated supports provided by the UA. Students enrolled in the SALT Center, most of whom are also eligible to receive federally mandated supports, receive a wide range of individualized supports that significantly increase the odds of their academic and lifelong success. We offer an overview of this model.

Program History

For nearly 40 years, the University of Arizona has recognized and supported students who learn differently. The SALT Center was founded in 1980 when Dr. Eleanor Harner, then an employee of the Student Counseling Center, noticed an increase in the number of students with diagnosed learning disabilities seeking support. With her background as a diagnostician in the field of learning disabilities, she began working individually with three students, teaching them learning strategies and executive functioning skills and matching them with peer tutors. Awareness of the program grew and Dr. Harner added staff to serve an ever-increasing number of students with learning disabilities, ADHD, and other learning challenges who needed academic support services. In 1991, Dr. Harner initiated a capital campaign to fund the construction of a building to house the program. Her successor, Dr. Diane Quinn continued these efforts, and SALT Center building (now known as the Patricia A. Bartlett building) opened in 2001.

The program has expanded significantly since its inception, growing from 3 to almost 700 participants. Additional services have been added over the years the address the increased use of technology in education and emotional disorders that commonly co-occur with learning and attention challenges. However, the original core components of learning and executive functioning strategies and subject area tutoring remain pillars of the program.

Program Components

The SALT Center offers multiple services including weekly meetings with a Strategic Learning Specialist (SLS), tutoring, support with educational technology, psychological services, and academic skills workshops. High expectations and clear guidelines are provided for all students utilizing services.

Strategic Learning Specialist

Each student is assigned a SLS who can help students access SALT Center and campus resources. Students have an Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) that is developed in partnership with the SLS. ILPs are developed to best suit students' unique strengths and learning challenges. Plans may include educational goals, personal aspirations, learning strategies, tutoring, skills workshops, and assistive technology.

The SLS's goal is to provide strategies for students to improve their academic performance and to monitor academic success. Strategies focus on goal setting, time management, organization, and learning strategies. Furthermore, they provide guidance with transition to the collegiate environment, in addition to improving skills in communication, self-advocacy, and learning.

Students and SLS develop strong, collaborative relationships through positive, confidential communication. SLS create a supportive environment and encourage students to share their accomplishments, pursue their dreams, and to seek assistance in overcoming barriers to success.

Tutoring

Tutoring is offered for a variety of courses. In tutoring sessions, tutors model learning strategies specific to the subject matter in a one-on-one setting in which the tutor can provide individualized support. Students may drop-in or schedule an appointment, using an online appointment scheduler, for support with writing across the curriculum as well as math and science tutoring. Additionally, students can attend a group review session for specific courses. Tutors support students as they develop strategies specific to their needs and strengths. They introduce students to a wide variety of methods, demonstrating how to use visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities to begin, develop, and refine their work. The goal is to create an optimal learning environment that facilitates independent and lifelong learning.

The SALT Center has earned the International Tutor Training Program Certification (ITTPC) through the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA). Tutors are required to complete the Level I training program and are encouraged to complete Levels II and III. Through the ITTPC certification process, tutors are recognized for attaining an internationally accepted standard of skills and education for tutors. SALT Center tutors range from undergraduates to retirees. Each tutor represents a diverse and international community of individuals dedicated to student success. The majority of the SALT Center's tutors are current UA students with a minimum cumulative G.P.A. of 3.0 or have earned a bachelor's degree or higher credential.

Educational Technology

A group of peer tech coaches and an Educational Technology Coordinator comprise the educational technology team. These individuals guide students in the use of software tools that provide accessibility to course material and support individual learning styles. The team also assists students with using innovative technology embedded throughout the Center as well as campus-wide student learning systems, email, and electronic tools requisite for participation in particular courses. Students may schedule an appointment or drop in to see a student Tech Coach or the Coordinator.

Specialized technology includes dictation software for writing assignments, auditory supports so that students can listen and read along with course readings, and apps providing support for brainstorming and organizing thoughts. Recent emphasis has been placed on audio note taking applications that record audio in sync with typed or handwritten notes.

Psychological Services

The SALT Center's Psychological Services can help students address issues related to anxiety, depression, coping with stress, and managing life in college. Through convenient and specialized one-on-one counseling sessions offered in the Center, Psychological Services can also assist students with grief and loss, substance abuse, and sleep disorders. Students whose emotional needs surpass the expertise and availability of their Strategic Learning Specialist can be referred for a clinical assessment, treatment plan, additional supportive strategies, and, if deemed necessary, referral for outside resources.

Workshops

SALT Center workshops, facilitated by staff, offer students the opportunity to learn new skills and academic strategies, provide a better understanding of learning challenges, and explore ways to adapt learning strategies according to students' individual learning styles. Students can talk with their SLS to learn more about enrolling in workshops that may be suitable for their particular needs. Workshops at the SALT Center address multiple student needs. In the "Developing Effective Study Skills" workshop students discuss learning styles, concepts of executive functioning, time management, and organization to give students hands-on, ready-to-use strategies for studying and completing assignments. The "Exam Prep" and "Test Taking" workshops provide strategies to improve memory as well as effectively study for exams and course-based assessments. Additional workshop topics include note taking, writing kills, reading strategies, and avoiding procrastination. Additionally, the Center includes a workshop on text book navigation in which students learn how to navigate and organize the information presented in their course textbooks.

High, Clear Expectations

As mentioned in the introduction, it is critical to have high expectations for college students with learning disabilities (Tinto, 2012). The SALT Center communicates clear, high expectations to students and families from recruitment throughout program participation. Students are expected to actively engage in the learning process and are expected to demonstrate behaviors indicating their commitment to and sense of responsibility for their education.

For tutoring, students are expected to manage their tutoring schedule through the online scheduling tool, attend every scheduled appointment and to be on-time, prepare specific questions in advance of the tutoring session, bring requisite materials to the session (writing, books, notes, etc.), and come to the session with a ready-to-learn mindset. The role of the tutor is clearly defined to students who participate in the Center's activities. Furthermore, it is articulated what tutors do and do not do (see Table 1).

Expectations for the collaborative relationship between the student and their assigned SLS are clearly established. Students must maintain regular (weekly) contact with their SLS. They are expected to make school a priority through attendance, engagement, and investment of study time. Students are expected to utilize available support services and recommended strategies for success, seek assistance when needed and collaborate in academic planning, communicate effectively and honestly, demonstrate academic integrity, and

follow the UA Student Code of Conduct. Students are engaged in conversations about following through on commitments as well as exercising responsibility and being accountable. Students are also expected to participate in Center programs and leadership opportunities. The roles of expectations regarding the SLS partnership are described in detail (see Table 2).

Tab. 1 - Setting Expectations: Tutors

What tutors do:	What tutors do not do:
Help you learn the material on your own	Tutors cannot give you the answers to the assignment
Teach learning strategies to help you become an independent learner	Tutors cannot reteach the material when you miss class
Help you develop your own language in a writing assignment	Tutors cannot tell you what to write in your paper
Help you with practice problems	Tutors cannot assist with take-home or online tests or quizzes

Tab. 2 - Setting Expectations: Strategic Learning Specialists (SLS)

What SLSs do:	What SLSs do not do:
Serve as your primary point of contact at the SALT Center	Release specific information to parents without a signed Consent Form from the student
Protect confidentiality with respect to FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974)	Report regular updates to faculty, family, or other outside entities regarding the student's performance or use of services
Facilitate weekly meetings and provide additional assistance through emails and phone calls	Disclose students' diagnoses to UA faculty or staff outside of the SALT Center
Provide strategies for organization, time management, reading, note-taking, focusing, studying, etc.	Suggest courses that are *"easy"* or taught by *"nice"* professors
Offer assistance in self-monitoring academic progress, grades, educational planning, & goal setting	Speak with faculty to negotiate grades, attendance, extra credit, or academic integrity issues
Provide direction with understanding key issues regarding how learning/attention challenges impact learning, processing, and educational & career goals	Arrange students' accommodations

Offer guidance in the process of making informed decisions and problem resolution in tandem with reinforcement of appropriate communication and self-advocacy skills	Offer personal assistant services
Make referrals to the SALT Center Psychological Services or CAPS (Counseling and Psych Services) at Campus Health & other campus resources, such as Academic Advising, as needed	Provide specific academic advising services

A Metacognitive Approach

As students enter higher education, they take on more responsibility for their own learning and are required to complete academic work independently. To assist students in meeting these expectations, all SALT Center services focus on strengthening students' metacognition – their knowledge of their own cognitive activities and the regulation of those activities in the learning process (Brown, 1978; Flavell, 1979). Strategic Learning Specialists and peer tutors help students develop metacognitive knowledge and skills (Veenman, Van Hout-Wolters, & Afflerbach, 2006). Metacognitive knowledge is defined as declarative knowledge about the interactions between person, task, and strategy characteristics, which includes assessing the demands of a learning task and identifying a problem-solving approach. Metacognitive skills represent procedural knowledge for regulating one's problem-solving and learning activities, such as monitoring comprehension and evaluating progress on task (Veenman, Van Hout-Wolters, & Afflerbach, 2006).

Students can be taught metacognitive knowledge to address an availability deficiency and coached to use metacognitive skills related to a production deficiency (Veenman, Kerseboom, & Imthorn, 2000; Ifenthaler, 2012). SALT Center Learning Specialists and peer tutors employ a large set of graphic organizers, planning tools, and academic frameworks to assist students with the organization, comprehension, and expression of their subject area content knowledge. The goal is not to force all students to use one set of strategies, but to assist students in identifying and tailoring strategies to their own individual needs.

Metacognition is the most important student-level variable related to academic performance and one of the top indicators of performance among all environmental, social, and individual variables (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1990; van der Stel & Veenman, 2010). The SALT Center's focus on

strengthening metacognition empowers students to take ownership of their learning process and to engage their strengths to tackle the challenges they encounter. This approach extends well beyond academics providing skills and knowledge that positively impact all aspects of students' lives.

How the Program Addresses Identified Challenges

Research has demonstrated that students with learning and attention challenges are frequently challenged by particular aspects of the college-going process including recruitment and admission (Palombi, 2000), out-of-class activities (Kuh et al., 1991), academic and career advising, and financial need (Belch, 2000). Appreciating these needs, SALT Center offers holistic support for through the undergraduate academic career from recruitment to degree completion. Furthermore, they build strong relationship with alumni beyond undergraduate degree completion attending to the entire student lifecycle.

Recruitment and Admission

To meet the need for support and guidance during the recruitments and admissions process, the SALT Center engages prospective students and families through a variety of communications and information sessions. SALT Center representatives attend recruitment and orientation events to speak directly to students and families discussing the services the Center offers and how it could meet the needs of individual students. The Center has a detailed and informative website including videos with currently enrolled students who share their experiences. The Center also hosts events in their building to welcome students and invite them to get a sense of what their learning environment would look like as a college student working with SALT. At these events, admissions representatives answer questions about cost, commitment, expectations, and wellness. These intentional activities are an important part of SALT Center's work to help ensure students and families navigate the recruitment and admissions process as well as begin their college career with a clear understanding of expectations. serves to have

Out-of-class Activities

Students with learning disabilities may struggle to connect with other students and engage in out-of-class activities, both academic and social, that

are intrinsic to student success. Out-of-class academic activities include studying, assignment completion, communicating with instructors, research, and preparing for quizzes and exams. Staff within the SALT Center help students develop and implement strategies for learning beyond the classroom as well as developing skills and habits to stay organized, focused, and on task when completing work outside of class time. Additionally, SALT Center provides opportunities for social engagement and development outside of class by offering workshops and group activities. From developing life skills and coping mechanisms to participating in campus recreation to build friendships, SALT Center works to help student thrive outside of the classroom. The Center values holistic student development and as such the program intentionally supports social as well as academic development outside of the classroom.

Career and Academic Advising

For all college students, career and academic advising can be a confusing and daunting activity. This is especially true at a large, research university with decentralized services. It is often unclear where to go for advising, what academic policies students should be familiar with, and how to explore academic interests, majors, minors, and career pathways. To support students with learning disabilities so they may successfully navigate the university and spend time with knowledgeable advisors, staff in the SALT Center help students explore their interests and talents through conversations and reflective activities. Based on individual student needs, they make referrals to helpful resources on campus. The Center also connects current students to students who have graduated and started their careers or next steps in education. These opportunities to engage with students who have traversed advising and early career provides current students with role models who can share their stories of challenge as well as helpful strategies. These conversations and connections normalize challenges students experience and provide guidance for how best to seek and receive advising.

Financial Need

Students with learning disabilities are often challenged by financial constraints preventing them from receiving optimal learning supports in college. For this reason, the SALT Center offers need-based scholarships covering or reducing for the fees associated with participating in the program. Most scholarships are funded by donations from generous supporters and

alumni to ensure that deserving students have access to the SALT Center regardless of their family's financial status. Incoming freshmen, transfer students, and currently enrolled students are welcome to apply for need-based scholarships.

Program Outcomes

SALT Center program outcomes are measured in several ways. From an institutional perspective, we track the rates at which our students persist in and graduate from the university (see Table 3). Half of all SALT Center participants, most of whom enter the university directly after high school, attain their degrees within 6 years (SALT Center Fact Book, 2018). While this is lower than the university's overall rate of about 60% (University of Arizona Fact Book, 2018), it is significantly higher than the national average for students with learning disabilities – 34% within eight years of high school graduation (Sanford et al., 2011).

The SALT Center also measures student progress toward program learning outcomes to ensure program fidelity and assess the effectiveness of the program's services. The learning outcomes are defined as follows:

- **Self-awareness:** Students will engage in self-reflection by identifying and defining their specific learning challenges or formal diagnosis (if applicable) and articulating how their strengths and challenges intersect with their current academic and personal circumstances.
- **Executive Functioning:** Students will create plans and then initiate and sustain their effort to complete short-term and long-term tasks.
- **Academic Strategies:** Students will identify diverse, university-level tools and strategies and employ appropriate tools and strategies during learning specialist meetings, tutoring sessions, and personal study sessions.

During the latest analysis conducted in 2016-2017, a random sample of 60 students were observed during their meetings with Strategic Learning Specialists to gauge students' engagement and proficiency in each of the three learning outcomes. Data were collected at weeks 5, 10, and 16 of each semester. Engagement ratings were based on how often the student engaged in discussion or behavior related to the objective. Proficiency ratings were based on the student's level of mastery of the given objective. Ratings were applied using a Likert scale from 0 to 4 with 0 representing very little engagement or proficiency and 4 representing full engagement and task mastery.

Table. 3 - Persistence and Graduation Rates of SALT Center Students

Academic Year	2016-2017	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014	2012-2013
1-Year Persistence Rate	**83%** n = 116	**77%** n = 152	**78%** n = 142	**82%** n = 138	**77%** n = 190
4-Year Graduation Rate	**46%** (Fall 2013 Cohort) n = 138	**42%** (Fall 2012 Cohort) n = 190	**36%** (Fall 2011 Cohort) n = 194	**28%** (Fall 2010 Cohort) n = 199	**30%** (Fall 2009 Cohort) n = 227
6-Year Graduation Rate	**50%** (Fall 2011 Cohort) n=194	**51%** (Fall 2010 Cohort) n = 199	**49%** (Fall 2009 Cohort) n = 227	**50%** (Fall 2008 Cohort) n = 172	**59%** (Fall 2007 Cohort) n = 166
n = total number of new freshmen considered by the university to be first-time, full-time freshmen					

As reported in a University of Arizona Student Affairs and Enrollment Management / Academic Initiatives and Student Success Data Byte (2017), the results show that engagement ratings were consistently higher than proficiency ratings. Students' identification and use of academic strategies were rated the highest in the final week of the fall semester, while their self-awareness and executive functioning were rated the highest in the final week of the spring semester. Engagement and proficiency ratings most closely matched each other during the final week of the spring semester. These findings demonstrate that gains in proficiency result from repeated exposure, practice, and experience over time.

Looking Ahead

The UA's commitment to the success of all students is clear and unequivocal. As stated in its new strategic plan, «UA will support a diverse and high potential student body, providing students with an integrated support ecosystem, the skills and mindsets to lead in the 4th Industrial Revolution Economy, and a degree that launches them to achieve their hopes and dreams» (UA Strategic Plan, 2018, p. 5).

As a pillar of UA's Student Success and Retention Innovation initiative, the SALT Center's future is anchored in its long history of recognizing the unmet needs of students with attention and learning challenges as well as helping students develop the capacity to guide their own success long after college.

In collaboration with other UA units, the SALT Center works to balance the need to respond to ever-changing student needs while not wavering from its mission to focus on the mild to moderate attention and learning challenges of its participants. For example, consistent with national undergraduate trends

(e.g., APA, 2019), SALT Center students exhibit growing needs for counseling and psychological services. Such services are often inextricably tied to the academic and overall success of college students with learning and attention challenges (Davis III, Nida, Zlomke & Nebel-Schwalm, 2008). Increasing psychological services is likely to be a future growth area for the SALT Center.

Another example the SALT Center's collaborative approach is its inclusion in the innovative Student Success District. This significant commitment to student success and retention is designed to ensure all students can access, in one location, the wide range of university supports available. Construction of UA's Student Success District will begin in 2019 and SALT Center resources will be available to students through this innovative and energetic effort.

Perhaps one of the most important endeavors to continue to strengthen the SALT Center's capacity to support students is the ongoing effort to engage internal and external partners in this work. Whether focused on research, program development, or building program resources, internal and external partners – including thousands of alumni around the world who have benefitted from the program – are actively engaged in continuous program growth and improvement. It is because of these partnerships that the UA's SALT Center has become and will continue to be a model for undergraduates with attention and learning challenges.

Conclusion

The United States and Italy have strong legislation to recognize and protect the civil rights of individuals with disabilities. The SALT Center at UA in Tucson, Arizona, United States, serves as a model of an effective educational environment for students with learning disabilities. As Italy grows its tertiary programs and supports for students with learning disabilities, the SALT Center may serve as a helpful model program. The program provides fosters the characteristics of effective educational environments: a sense of security and inclusion, mechanisms for involvement, and a sense of community/belonging (Strange & Banning, 2000). For nearly forty years, SALT Center has been a home away from home for many students at the University. It's warm and welcoming environment, paired with holistic support for learning and growth, have made the SALT Center a recognized model for inclusion and student success in college. Students enrolled in the SALT Center, most of whom are also eligible to receive federally mandated supports, receive a wide range of individualized supports that significantly increase the odds of their academic and lifelong success.

Acknowledgments

This article includes program details from the SALT Center website: https://www.salt.arizona.edu/ Visit the website for additional information and supplemental materials including video testimonials, descriptions of student experience, and current information on fees and scholarships.

The SALT Center is located at the University of Arizona. Address: Patricia A. Bartlett Building, 1010 North Highland Avenue Tucson, Arizona 85721-0136, United States. Phone: 520.621.1242

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