NOMINATION LETTER SUBMITTED FOR HOLLY HARRIS, 2017

In nominating Holly Harris for this award, I felt that it was important to provide some background, as it provides the context for her effectiveness and success in advising graduate students who are enrolled in the MS in Rehabilitation Counseling. We run this program through our Department of Administration, Rehabilitation, and Postsecondary Education, via the College the Extended Studies. I first met Holly when she called about applying to our on-campus graduate program in Rehabilitation Counseling. She found out about the program through her neighbor who was recovering from a boating accident that left him paralyzed from the shoulders down. He was considering applying to the program and wanted her to apply with him. At that point, Holly told me about her own situation. In 1991, she had gone into the hospital for cancer surgery. After surgery she was placed in an induced coma for 5 days due to a surgical accident. When she woke up, she was completely blind. At the time, she had a 5-year old son and had been working as a social worker. The good news is that she has been cancer-free ever since; however, she has also remained completely blind.

Holly initially tried to go back to work as a social worker but in 1991 the technology just wasn’t there to support her. She couldn’t manage the work, and became frustrated, embarrassed, and depressed. She lost confidence in her abilities and in herself – she no longer felt like the outgoing person she had always been. She was then introduced to the local San Diego Center for the Blind where she re-learned basic skills for everyday life – cooking, cleaning, self-care, etc. Holly then attended classes at the Braille Institute, where she started learning Braille. Beginning with Braille books that she read to her son, she soon realized that, as an adult, reading Braille can be quite challenging and very slow. Fortunately, assistive technology (AT) was advancing rapidly and by the time she started regaining her confidence and entered our graduate program, she used audiobooks and JAWS software on her computer to listen to everything on emails and websites. Holly’s most used AT is a Braille ‘n Speak, which she uses in combination with her computer.

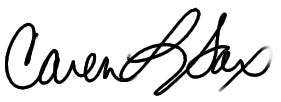
After graduating from our program in 2005with a Master of Science Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling, Holly co-taught and gave presentations in our program and then started working with us in our distance program. One of the benefits of working in our distance program, which is offered 100% online, is that she didn’t have to spend time traveling back and forth to the campus. Taking public transportation from where she lives would take lots of extra time that could be better spent supporting students. She now serves as our student advisor in the program, playing a key role in supporting students, faculty, and providing consistency from one course to the next as students complete the 3-year program. She’s especially helpful in encouraging and supporting students who use assistive technology themselves to access the course. She is always checking for accessibility, both in the application process and after students are admitted. She works closely with the ARPE/Interwork Institute’s Center for Distance Learning whenever we’re implementing new software or trying new platforms. She has become an invaluable member of the academic team.

Holly’s positive impact on students is unquestionable. Students trust her to give them accurate information and to help them navigate a program that is accomplished completely by distance. Holly helps students feel connected with the SDSU campus in a virtual way and makes herself available to them across many time zones at all hours. She is a strong advocate of the program and maintains high expectations for all students. Holly encourages students with compassion and understanding, while holding them accountable for excellence in their academic and professional performance. She supports them in working through challenges related to the course requirements, clinical hours, and program outcomes. Given that nearly all of the students are working full-time, they often need additional support in translating theory to practice, and understanding the connections from one course to the next. She is responsive to their needs in career planning beyond the graduate program as they pursue the next level of employment.

Holly works closely with the RC program coordinator and on-campus student support services in order to give students the most accurate and relevant information. She goes above and beyond to support student success; that is, she provides additional resources as they learn about APA style, improve their writing skills, and prepare for the comprehensive exam. Furthermore, Holly serves an essential role in maintaining consistent communication among all the instructors, many of whom are conducting their work from distance. She monitors student progress and is always proactive in intervening when a student is struggling, and consults with faculty as appropriate.

Holly is often the “unsung hero” in the way that she serves the distance program. She works behind the scenes to ensure students are supported, cared about, and well informed. She devotes far more hours than is expected and hears often from students who attribute their success to her support. Holly is certainly a role model for many students as they put aside their doubts and increase their confidence. It’s my honor to submit a nomination for Ms. Holly Harris for this Outstanding Advising Award. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Caren L. Sax, Ed.D., CRC

Professor/Chair, Department of Administration, Rehabilitation,

& Postsecondary Education

Director, Interwork Institute