Meet Shami Tarlanov, Associate Director of Student Accessibility Services

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Our office recently sat down with Shami Tarlanov, new Associate Director. Shami is a former international student himself and after meeting him over coffee, we asked if he'd be willing to share his story with us, as his journey and his current role with the Accessibilities Office has the power and potential to resonate with many of you. Thank you Shami, for your openness and the work that you do with Yale students!

Tell us a bit about yourself and your journey to the U.S. and higher education.

I'm originally from Azerbaijan and grew up in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. I'm the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college. My dad had a near-graduation from Azerbaijan Medical University, but things didn't work out for him. As a first-generation and person with a physical disability, I went on to earn my bachelor’s degree in communication from Baku Eurasian University in Azerbaijan. I have a lot to be grateful to my family that they worked relentlessly hard so I could go to college.

The desire to work with students with disabilities in higher education is deeply ingrained in my personal experiences. Because the legal landscape is different in my country, there is no equivalent to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and similar laws that provided wider protection to individuals with disabilities and mandated post-secondary institutions to provide equitable access for students with disabilities. So, during my undergraduate years, I did not get to have extended time on exams as it takes a little bit longer for me to type, take notes in longhand due to limited manual dexterity, or have alternative exam accommodation where I could type in lieu of handwriting. I convinced myself that was what I could do to the best of my abilities to academically succeed which in retrospect I think was a mismatch with what I could have accomplished.
I wanted to combine my lived experiences with a professional pursuit to support students with disabilities who might have similar experiences to mine in a unique way. That very desire carried me over into pursuing my master’s degree and I decided to apply to the Master of Social Work (MSW) program at the Washington University in St. Louis. My concentration track in the program was Children, Youth and Family with mental health support element and as I continued in the program, it seemed like a natural progression of interest in supporting students with disabilities. After graduation, I joined the Disability Resources of my university where I began my professional career in this field.

Can you tell us a bit about your role and Student Accessibility Services?

I’ll refer to students who are connected to our office as students with disabilities. I try to actively use the word “disability” and not shy away from it. I believe, if we can truly embrace the word “disability” and use it more frequently during our interaction, we can destigmatize and normalize it. I’d also like to acknowledge that the word “disability” may not resonate with some students and their experiences surrounding it can impact how they align themselves with the word “disability” and what that word means to them.

Student Accessibility Services (SAS) provides an array of support and accommodations to ensure equal opportunity and equal access for students at Yale who identify as having a disability that impacts their major life activities. Under the ADA, there is no exhaustive list of major life activities, but it does include walking, hearing, thinking, learning, eating, caring for oneself etc.

Whether it’s apparent or non-apparent, students with disabilities at Yale face the same challenges as their non-disabled peers do along with an entire other set of challenges related to their disabilities. A School of Nursing student with severe anxiety may struggle with public speaking and individual presentations, a School of Medicine student with hard of hearing may experience barriers during clerkship rotations, visual fire alarms, and accessible notification systems may not be available for a Deaf student in their bedroom, a Davenport college student with ADHD may have trouble focusing their attention or blocking out distractive noises during timed exams, a School of Public Health student with a chronic medical diagnosis may miss classes occasionally due to exacerbations, flare-ups, or treatment schedules, a Jonathan Edwards college student with dietary restrictions may struggle to find enough food options when they go into the dining halls on campus, the list is by no means exhaustive.

Through the interactive process with students who experience those barriers because of a disability to their education, access to campus-wide services and activities, we put in place an individualized accommodation plan to ideally remove, if not, to minimize barriers. As one of the Associate Directors at SAS, I carry a student caseload that includes School of Medicine, Physician Associate programs, School of Nursing, schools of Public Health and Management, two residential colleges - Pauli Murray and Davenport.

I work with students who are connected to our office starting from the initial/welcoming meeting during which we discuss barriers they encounter and the impacts of those barriers to determine reasonable accommodations or workarounds. I advise them on how they can utilize accommodations and provide ongoing support regarding their accommodation plan during their time on campus and beyond. I would be remiss if I didn’t mention that it’s teamwork within SAS and that work becomes possible thanks to the partnership with various campus entities we collaborate to promote inclusive and accessible campus practices and facilitate reasonable accommodations.

As a former international student yourself, what are three things you wish you knew about Accessibility services?

As a graduate student in the United States, the orientation was the first real event for me and although it was exciting, I was feeling overwhelmed with information I was receiving about different types of resources on campus. In addition to that, I was expected to know about resources specific to international students and navigate their processes. You can imagine how overwhelming it can be trying to absorb and understand all that information while you try to transition to life in the United States and make the most out of it.

Once I established rapport with my advisor at the Disability Resources (DR) office, I would schedule check-in meetings, discuss my accommodation plan and novel barriers in the given term. Because of those meetings, my advisor was well versed about my disability and the barriers I encountered, and they could connect me to the appropriate resources such as the writing center to tap into my compensatory skills in writing. I wish I knew how the DR office of my university could not only facilitate accommodations but also connect me to resources that I wasn’t
aware of or did not give much thought to how useful they could be.

But getting connected to the DR office was a process for me. Even though it was the purposeful pursuit of a career that I wanted to support students with disabilities and believed that it should be normative to ask for help, the cultural difference delayed my self-identification as someone with a disability. The way disability is perceived in my culture was/is different from how it is viewed in the United States, and it was not until during the finals of the first year that I connected to the DR office. It was a transition to be verbal about my disability, to reach out and discuss its impacts in detail with someone other than a non-medical professional. I wish I knew how it was safe and okay to ask for help and utilize the accommodations I needed.

Seizing this opportunity, I would like to humbly address to the international students here at Yale that all of these cultural differences and many others have the potential to impact how you may want to interact with the SAS office. And I can guarantee you that you are not and won’t be the only international student to receive disability-related accommodations and get connected to the existing resources you might need. It’s always safe to reach out and ask for help!

**How can students get in touch with your/your office to learn more?**

To get started, you can fill out the registration form [3] that is available on our website [2]. Once the registration form is submitted, one of the SAS staff members will contact you to schedule a virtual meeting. The meeting is really all about getting to know you, learning some of the barriers you experience because of a disability, and discussing potential accommodation options. There are no structured questions, and no preparation is needed for the meeting. SAS can be reached out at sas@yale.edu [4].

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