

The SALT Center

A unique UA program for students with learning and attention challenges celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary

by Steve Cox
Photos by Jacob Chinn

"When I was in elementary school," Emily Shack says, "I was told I would have a hard time with high school and never graduate from college."

"I was in the National Honor Society," Scott Resnick says, "but nobody knew how hard I worked to make my grades. My learning disability is for math and foreign languages, and I had a math tutor two times a week."

"In middle school, I began to experience difficulties in reading," Alexandra Silvestri remembers. "I had always loved school, and this sudden change in progress came as a shock. I was diagnosed with minor dyslexia, ADD, and a processing disorder that made it difficult to comprehend what I was reading. It became apparent that this was a battle I would have to fight throughout my life."

Shack, Resnick, and Silvestri are among the students who, since 1980, have benefited from a unique UA program called the SALT Center. By applying the center's Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT), they have overcome their learning and attention challenges, graduated from the UA, and found success in rewarding occupations.

The SALT Center, providing academic support on a fee-for-service basis, is separate and distinct in purpose from the Disability Resource Center, which offers services for UA students, faculty, staff, and visitors, including those whose disabilities qualify them for accommodations under the federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

SALT offers its students an array of services. "We have 10 full-time, professionally trained strategic learning specialists," center director Jeff Orgera says, "and a hundred part-time tutors in math, writing, and a range of foundation and general education courses (the tutors are UA undergraduates, graduate students, or retirees). We have a clinical psychologist on staff part time." And the inviting new SALT Center building has its own computer lab with a generous suite of software. "Students can use a scanner to read written text out loud, for example," says Orgera. "Or they can dictate a paper into a program that will produce a written text."

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— Alexandra Silvestri

The SALT students' challenges often are quite subtle, and each student is different, especially when anxiety, depression, obsessions, and social and physical awkwardness compound their difficulties in processing information.

Shack, Resnick, and Silvestri's parents are present in their lives, and their hometowns — Palo Alto, Carmel, the Chicago lakeshore suburb of Evanston — are places where, since childhood, their parents have found services, from tutors to psychologists to speech therapists, tailored to their needs.

After high school, the SALT Center was their next step. Students and their parents hear about the SALT Center by word of mouth, or from guidance counselors the SALT staff assiduously courts, or from staff, student, and alumni ambassadors who regularly visit 21 schools in Arizona and 52 schools out of state.

Besides intensive academic tutoring, the SALT Center also develops a full schedule of social events to build





community among its students, “things that would be beneficial to any new student on a large campus,” says Orgera, from dinners off campus to UApresents performances, from intramural sports teams to community service projects such as the Relay for Life cancer benefit.

SALT students use the tutors, the psychologist, and the computer lab, and participate in SALT Center social events as they see fit.

As a freshman every SALT student is assigned to a strategic learning specialist, a person the student must schedule an appointment to see, one-on-one, for at least half an hour every week until graduation. “The student’s key contact point with SALT,” says Orgera, “is the learning specialist.”

“What did I like best about SALT?” Emily Shack asks. “My two learning specialists, Diedre and Lupe.”

Alexandra Silvestri concurs. “Lupe was the best thing that could have happened to me at The University of Arizona. She was the guiding hand I needed to help me survive my four years at the University. Leaving home was not an easy task for me, and she immediately became

Center director Jeff Orgera (top) and strategic learning specialist Lupe Thompson.

the mentor I would need to feel at home in my new environment. If I ever felt lost or confused in school or needed help she was always there to do the most she could."

Scott Resnick says, "My favorite memory of SALT was to stop by and chat with Lupe. She was a real good friend."

The specialist so fondly recalled by the students, can also remember those she's helped. "I was working in the admissions office of the UA," Thompson says. "A man came through, older than I, who did horribly in high school — a 1.7 G.P.A. He went to college and had all sorts of deficiencies, but did really, really well in photography. But it was an unaccredited school, and the UA denied him admission twice.

"He had a problem learning, or an attention challenge, and nobody caught it. I went to bat for him and got him admitted. He graduated from the UA magnum cum laude with a 3.8 GPA."

Experiences like that led her to switch jobs. "As I listened to students' stories, I started to see a pattern, numbers of students who experienced difficulty in school. But people didn't believe them, people just told them to work harder, to try harder.

"I wanted to learn how to help them, and ten years ago I came to SALT as a learning specialist," Thompson says.

"Last year I worked with 65 students. Every week I see 50 students for half-hour appointments, and every day many others just drop in. I'm full of hope for all of these students. I can't predict who is going to buy into this program, but the majority do, and they succeed."

Thompson is soft-spoken and orderly — it took her only two seconds to retrieve the G.P.A. of the first man she had helped, 15 years before — and orderliness is the core of the SALT program. The directives seem simple: Go to class. Meet regularly with your learning specialist and tutors. Set goals, and schedule your time. Get to know your professors. Study in advance of your



exams. Ask for help. Learn from your mistakes.

The strategic learning specialists break these strategies down into tactics — five steps for goal-setting, six success-oriented reasons to go to class. "Break it down" is the learning specialists' mantra, whenever students begin to feel overwhelmed: I can't take classroom notes fast enough! What should I say to my professor during office hours?

Overarching all these strategies, tactics, and services is the matter of crafting a class schedule, settling on a major, and graduating.

"All the lightbulbs go on when they enter college," says Dr. Diane Quinn, who directed the SALT Center from 1993 until May 2006. "They're ready to listen to mentors who encourage them to 'do something that interests you.' Their parents often want them to go into business, into their fathers' businesses, to do something marketable, to keep a roof over their heads. For years these kids have been trying to do things they're not good at. In SALT, they get to ask themselves, 'What excites me about learning?' We encourage them to take a course just because they like it."

Resnick remembers exploring the abundant buffet of UA classes. "I took every '-ology' course across the board," he says. "I struggled with math, so instead I took logic in the philosophy department. Because of my difficulty with foreign languages, I took classics (the poetry of Ovid and Horace) in translation. I wrote a 30-page paper on Pompeii for Professor Jon Solomon, and



Tutors at SALT assisting students.

I got As in two classes I took with the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist N. Scott Momaday.”

Today, Resnick, with a master’s degree in education in addition to his literature degree from the UA, teaches literature and world history to sixth graders. He introduces the middle schoolers of his hometown, Evanston, Ill., to the ancient world that captured his imagination in his classes at the UA. His fellow teachers say he’s teaching Humanities 0.5, a middle-school version of a university’s Humanities 101.

Shack majored in retailing and consumer sciences. At freshman SALT orientation, she recalls, “I heard a student in SALT talking about the retailing program. The rest is history. Also, a neighbor where I grew up was a buyer — otherwise I would not have known that the occupation existed. I graduated in four years with a 3.8 in my major and a 3.6 overall.”

Now an associate buyer in the clothing department of the UofA Bookstores, Shack is doing exactly what she set out to do when she registered as a freshman at the UA.

Silvestri says when she first started at the University she had no idea what she wanted to do. “My learning specialist told me about the fields she thought would best fit me and my talents. I chose psychology and loved every minute of it.”

From the UA, Silvestri went to work for a private company offering intensive instruction to children diagnosed with dyslexia, hyperlexia, autism, and other learning disabilities. She began a master’s program in education at Arizona State University in the fall of 2006.

Studying something they love, SALT students graduate at a higher rate than other UA undergraduates, and 75 percent of SALT graduates, as of 2006, were employed full time. Half that number work in either business or education; 60 percent continue with advanced education; and 20 percent have achieved master’s or professional degrees.

“The attribute I so respect about SALT students,” says Quinn, “beyond any support their parents can offer, any services the SALT Center can provide, is their own amazing persistence and resilience. Their challenges are so overwhelming, but they’re determined to prove the world wrong, and they do.

“For some,” Quinn continues, “it arises from the influence of one significant individual in their life — a neighbor or grandparent — who has instilled in them the ability to succeed. Others say, ‘I can’t recall any person who has made me believe in myself, yet I still try.’ And what SALT students learn is that SALT will always believe in them. It’s worth so much to our students to hear that.”

“For years these kids have been trying to do things they’re not good at. In SALT, they get to ask themselves, ‘What excites me about learning?’”

— Dr. Diane Quinn

Your support can help the SALT Center

- Provide more scholarships
- Provide more comprehensive services to students
- Recruit students with more diverse backgrounds and needs

SALT Center enrollment
560 total enrollment
170 freshmen, 2006-2007

SALT Center students are half from public high schools, half from private schools, and come from ...

California	40%
Arizona	15%
New York area	11%
Illinois (Chicago and suburbs)	7%
other states	27%

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