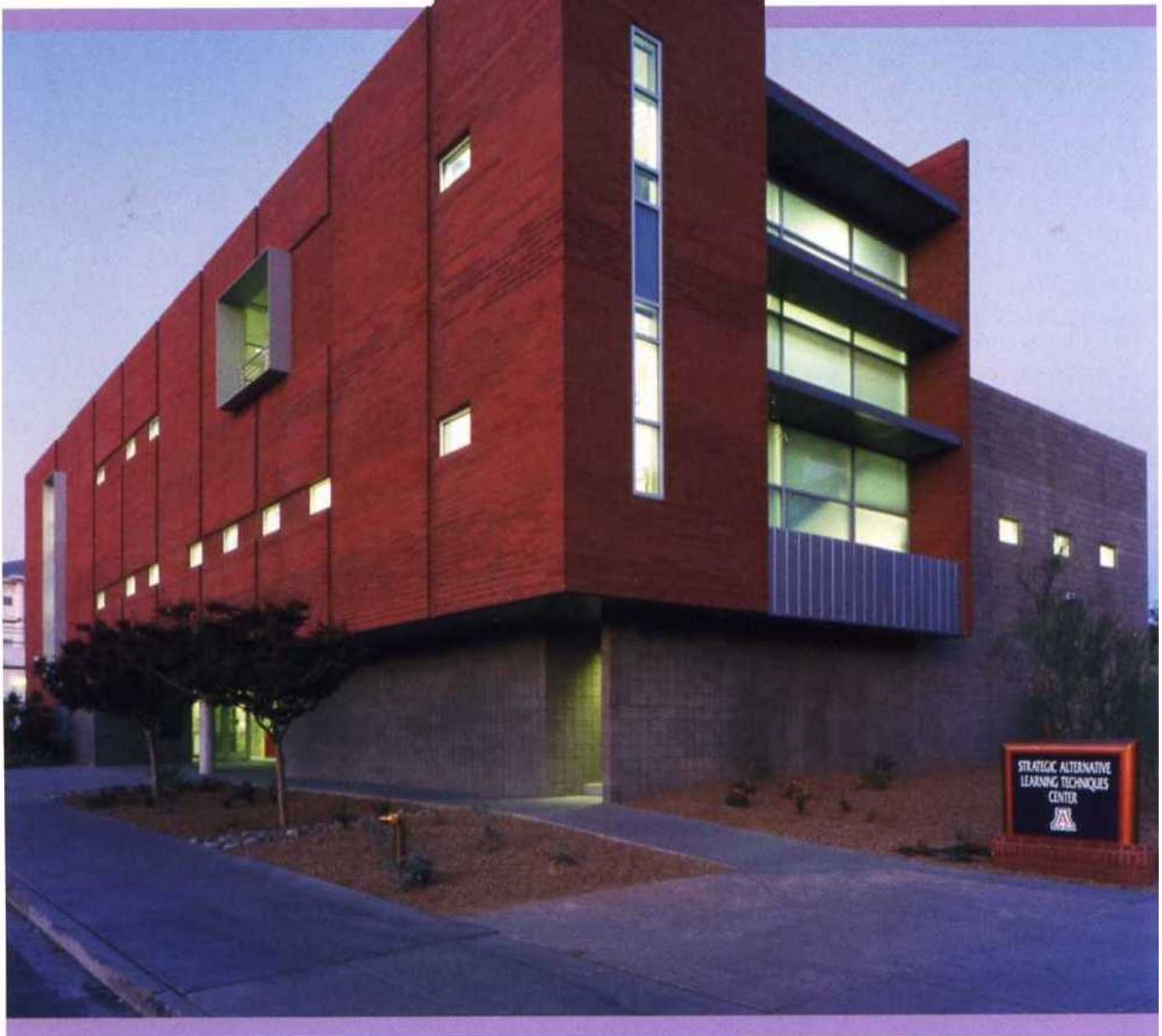


Dash of SALT

produces
seasoned
students

By Romi Carrell
Wittman

The SALT Center's 16,000 square-foot building opened in 2001, enabling the program to assist more than 500 students with dyslexia and other learning challenges.



Center helps those with learning disabilities succeed in classroom, life

Entering college can be a daunting experience for any freshman. Now imagine a student with a learning disability such as dyslexia. Suddenly, college can seem impossible.

In 1980, The University of Arizona's Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) Center began helping students facing such challenges as they moved from high school to college. That's when Eleanor Harner, who was on the staff of the UA's Student Counseling Center, began tutoring students who had diagnosed learning disabilities and were struggling in their classes. Word began to spread about the program.

"Parents talk to each other," said SALT Director Diane Quinn. "Parents let other parents know about good programs. The University began to get a reputation as a school that was supportive of students with learning challenges. The SALT Center is very unique for a large university environment."

The SALT Center evolved over the years as staff learned what worked best for students. In 1993, the center made a leap forward when it became a freestanding department, occupying office space in the basement of Old Main. It took another large step in 2001 when the center moved into its own 16,000 square-foot building. The \$4 million facility was funded entirely through private donations.

"The move made a monumental difference in how we deliver our services," Quinn said. "We serve 560 students now."

Help for students of all types

It's those services that make SALT stand apart from what is offered at most other universities. The center assists students with diagnosed learning disabilities as well as those with traumatic brain injuries and seizure disorders resulting in memory problems. SALT also helps students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Last year marked the first time the center offered its services to graduate students.

When working with a student, SALT staff focuses on individual needs.

"We look at what the student has used in the past. We look at what they need and what will be successful," Quinn said. "Then we develop an individual learning plan. The cornerstone of that is work students do with their learning specialist, who is a professional educator. No two (individual learning plans) are identical."

Students meet with their specialists each week. Specialists help students with everything from finding qualified tutors to navigating the sprawling campus to counseling them on events in their daily lives.

"This is a big and complex place," Quinn said. "New students can be overwhelmed."

The SALT Center's success rate is impressive. Its students have a graduation rate of about 80 percent, compared with the University-wide rate of 57 percent. Its first-year retention rate is 90 percent.

The SALT Center receives no funding from the University. Its income is generated by the fees students pay for services as well as the generosity of private donors. Donations also help the center offer scholarships.

Ann and Earl Skidmore were thrilled and anxious when their son, Clark, entered the UA as a freshman. He had struggled in school for most of his life and his parents didn't know what to expect as he entered a four-year university.

"He immediately jumped into the SALT experience and bonded with his learning specialist," Ann Skidmore said. "SALT helped him find the tutors he needed and he ended his freshman year with a 3.0 grade point average."

But she said that good grades were only part of the equation.

"His confidence bloomed," Skidmore said, "and, for the first time, he felt like he could and would succeed in the world of academics."

'Nothing was even close to as good as SALT'

Colin McHugh, another SALT student, said he chose the University specifically because of the program. His older brother was diagnosed with ADHD and had searched for a college that would help him. He picked the UA and quickly

became involved in the SALT program, where he thrived. When it came time for Colin to apply to college, he began a long search.

"I looked at a bunch of small colleges that had accommodations," he said. "But nothing was even close to as good as SALT. Every time I'd go to a college, I'd say, 'I like it, but they don't have SALT.'"

Colin decided that, like his brother, the UA and its SALT Center were a perfect fit for his needs. He completed his first semester in December and he believes the SALT Center has been his support system, helping him become more organized and self-reliant.

"I feel I'm learning the skills to be a successful college student and to be a more responsible person," he said. "Without SALT, I don't think I would be doing nearly as well as I am."

Nicole M. Ancich is a UA graduate and credits SALT with helping her lay the groundwork for her success at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine. Unlike many students who specifically chose the University because of SALT, Ancich discovered the center after she was diagnosed with a learning disability during her freshman year. Feeling overwhelmed and scared, she found the center's learning specialists and assistance invaluable, especially given her tough, heavily science-oriented classes.

"They found me tutors for classes where I needed extra help," said Ancich, who recently began her own dental practice in the Tacoma, Wash. area. "They helped me pick my classes. They really helped me create a foundation for success. Without their help, it would have been very hard for me."

The SALT Center has come a long way since its modest beginnings.

"We have an international reputation and we've earned it because students succeed," Quinn said. She said that the center wants to increase and improve upon the services it offers its students. "We want to do things that help students function as independently as possible. We want them to be successful in their adult lives." ■■■■

For more information on SALT, please visit www.salt.arizona.edu/.