

SAMANTHA KESSLER – October 2016

Institutional Researcher Translates Data and Charts Into Student Success



Working with data and charts as an institutional researcher at a college in California was not in Samantha Kessler's radar growing up in a small Pennsylvania farm town and majoring in Spanish at East Stroudsburg University.

But the combination of taking a sociology class as an elective taught by an inspirational professor, going to graduate school, having a mentor give her research opportunities, and attracting an employer who recognized her talents, led to a career where her skilled analysis of those data and charts can affect a college's future.

"I became interested in sociology as a sophomore because the professor made the topic so interesting," says Samantha. "She encouraged me to take specialty classes focusing on projects like gender in sports and race and ethnicity, and I began looking at life in a different way. I started noticing the big patterns of why things are happening, and I found it fascinating. With her encouragement, I ended up continuing to study sociology in graduate school."

Armed with an MA in sociology from Lehigh University, she was chosen for her first job as a research associate at a local community college because her employer had been a sociology major, had started his own career as an institutional researcher, and knew she would have the skills to be successful.

"At that point I was realizing that I really liked working with research and working around education and seeing how different things could positively impact education," says Samantha. "I was thrown into it without very much experience, so it was sink or swim to find my own resources."

Toward the end of the two years she worked there, she began dreaming of leaving the sleepy farming town where she had lived all of her life and started sending out resumes to find a job in a place with specific requirements: no snow and near a big city. When she was offered a job as an institutional researcher at a small, private online military intelligence university in Santa Clara, California, she grabbed it. Then she had to convince Eric, her boyfriend of two years, to move with her when he finished architecture school in six months. Soon he was helping her pack her car to make the 3,000-mile trip.

It was at Henley-Putnam where she began gaining experience working with program reviews, assessment, and accreditation. But after three years she missed working on a community college campus and was excited to accept the position she found at Merritt College as Research and Planning Officer. By that time Eric had moved out, they were engaged, and the wedding she had been planning was two months away. "I was starting a new job and planning a wedding at the same time," says Samantha. "I'm glad I did it, but I wouldn't recommend it!" After a weeklong Jamaican honeymoon, she was back at work.

Nearly a year later, Samantha enjoys her job where she collects data about the college, its students, and the community to use for supporting decisions or figuring out where improvements can be made or services can be added that will make a difference. Her work touches the entire campus.

“I use data to help the college plan, make informed decisions, and ultimately improve student success,” she says. “Right now I’m helping the Basic Skills Grant Team with tutoring and research, working with Brock Drazen to look at his athletes’ success, helping Lilia Chavez with a student services survey, and assisting Jeff Lamb with institutional effectiveness and planning. My goal is to help establish a good system of tracking data to teach others so they can be more conscious and data driven and help the college be evidence based and accountable, or even just be able to talk about their success in a quantifiable way. I’m already seeing incremental changes, and I’m getting great feedback.”

—*Susan May*