All members of a campus community have a role to play in increasing the academic and social integration of students with disabilities.

Fostering a Disability-Friendly Institutional Climate

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Students with disabilities are entering college at increasingly high rates due to legal mandates, sophisticated assistive technology, and improved access to educational accommodations. The 1990s saw an increase in offices of disability services on campuses throughout the United States. These offices evaluate documentation that students provide, approve appropriate accommodations, and ensure that accommodations are properly administered. The range of services and programs available to students with disabilities varies by institution (Getzel and McManus, 2005). All offices, however, are asked to provide increasingly varied and individualized services. In addition to the business of accommodation provision, offices of disability services are increasingly called on to find creative solutions in a difficult economy, provide guidance to offices on campus in order to improve accessibility, and advocate for students with disabilities. As institutions work toward a disability-friendly climate, the work of offices of disability services needs to be reenvisioned.

It no longer makes sense for these services to be the sole responsibility of one office or department. As Jones (1996) advises, disability work should be the responsibility of all units on campus rather than those whose sole responsibility is to oversee disability services. A campuswide commitment to increased accessibility and usability requires rethinking the mission of offices of disability services and building new partnerships with campus constituencies. Improving accessibility and inclusiveness is the job of the university as a whole. Offices of disability services can provide road maps for institutions as they commit to a culture shift to facilitate the full participation of all students, including those with disabilities.
This culture shift will allow institutions to respond flexibly to the ever-changing needs of its student body. Rather than reacting to the accommodation requirements of individual students, a truly inclusive environment is prepared for and welcoming to a diverse population. As the campus climate opens, the need for individual accommodations will diminish.

This chapter discusses the value of the increased integration of students with disabilities on campus to the students with disabilities and those without disabilities. It then establishes that faculty, disability services practitioners, other administrators, and student leaders can play a vital role in increasing integration by providing practical guidance for each constituency.

A Disability-Friendly Climate: The Value to Students with Disabilities

Colleges and universities are decentralized by nature. In some instances, departments can operate seemingly independently, with little opportunity for collaboration. There is a great range in how offices of disability services interact with other departments on campus. Depending on the structure and mission of these offices, support services can be centralized or decentralized. This terminology refers to the amount of ownership and responsibility of issues related to disability (for example, student services, architectural considerations, and hiring practices) housed in a central office of disability services (Duffy and Gugerty, 2005). The chosen structure of disability offices can have great effects on the students that it serves.

The organization of institutions of higher education by department (such as the registrar, campus life, or academic departments) allows efficiency and specialization. However, it also requires students to navigate unfamiliar structures and cross invisible boundary lines in order to access the opportunities on campus that are most suitable to their interests and needs. This process can be detrimental to student learning and growth. A study by Dutta, Kundu, and Schiro-Geist (2009) found that students stated that the inadequate coordination of services for students with disabilities adversely affected their perception of the quality of these services. Students are recognizing the need for synchronization of services, and institutions must to find ways to meet this need.

Students do not think of themselves as consumers of distinct departmental resources and supports. They see themselves more holistically, and rightly so. For example, a student might be interested in international affairs. As administrators, we quickly parcel this conceptualization out into departmental silos: courses in international service, education abroad opportunities, and participation in internationally focused clubs and organizations. Absent an integration of services, students must work with a multitude of offices to create a coordinated college experience.
In order to facilitate appropriate accommodations, students with disabilities are required to identify departments and programs that they may need to access. A traditional model presumably requires a disability services practitioner to meet with a student individually to determine the accommodations necessary for each course and activity. The administrator then coordinates these accommodations with faculty, facilitates communication with the study-abroad office, and works with specific leaders of clubs and organizations to ensure the accessibility of its activities and meetings. In addition, the student would likely have additional requirements placed on him or her, such as communicating accommodation needs to faculty, detailing specifics of the disability to provide understanding by departmental administrators, and creatively problem-solving in order to facilitate access. This prepackaged approach works well for students who do not deviate from the preselected plan. This student, however, is rare.

Instead, students with disabilities change their minds and majors often, like any other student. They see themselves in the same holistic manner as other students do. The student referred to sees himself or herself as someone interested in international affairs, not as a bulleted list of courses and activities. By focusing on the accommodation needs of individual students, the institution puts a different burden on students with disabilities than it puts on others. These students must preplan their interactions to a degree that minimizes opportunities for spontaneous interaction and exploration. In addition, the need to self-identify and request services for participation in certain programs can lead students to think that they do not belong in the institution (Getzel and McManus, 2005).

An inclusive campus environment allows all students to interface with the community in a seamless and real-time manner. The philosophy of universal design, discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Three of this volume, provides promising guidance for creating such an environment. Students may attend university events, discuss course content with a professor during office hours, or eat dinner with friends without prior planning or coordination. If the environment is constructed in a way that assumes accessibility and inclusiveness, students with disabilities are more easily integrated into the academic and social fabric of an institution.

A college or university that views all students as members of the campus community who should be able to access all of its programs and services will realize a need for a new way to provide disability services. Disability services then become the job of each member of the community rather than of a handful of trained professionals. This student-focused mind-set must be pervasive throughout the institution in order for true inclusiveness to occur and needs to be supported at all levels of the institution.

An inclusive environment has clear benefits to students with disabilities. In an open campus, they are able to navigate bureaucracies easily, enjoy the benefits of being more academically and socially integrated, and
explore the opportunities available at the institution. The benefits to the entire community are also significant.

**A Disability-Friendly Climate: The Value to All Students**

As student affairs professionals, we are concerned with the development and growth of students while they are in college (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). One of the central tenets of student development theory is the idea that students grow by experiencing life events and then by making meaning of these events. Interacting with a diverse group of peers has the ability to enhance the learning environment of all students, furthering their growth and development. Thus, a diverse student body challenges the assumptions that students hold, allowing them “to examine and overcome preconceived ideas and stereotypes and to learn about people who are different from themselves within a context focused on openness, respect and learning” (McClellan and Larimore, 2009, p. 234).

A disability-friendly institutional climate increases all students’ exposure to and interaction with peers with disabilities. Increased sensitivity to issues of difference is a valuable learning objective in college. Theories that underlie our conceptualization of prejudice can be translated to understand the role that the college can play in reducing students’ discriminatory thoughts and actions, specifically toward people with disabilities. The minority group paradigm can be used to explain that membership in a minority group—in this case, people with disabilities—can imply commonalities among all members of the group (Jones, 1996). This theory acknowledges the role that environmental factors play in discrimination, prejudice, and marginalization.

Mere exposure theory, extended contact theory, and intergroup contact theory, along with the practical implications that these theories lend to student affairs professionals, can be employed to lessen these environmental factors by increasing the sensitivity of all students around issues of disability:

- **Mere exposure theory** is based on the idea that people have negative feeling about different groups if they are not exposed to these groups (Levy and Hughes, 2009). This theory holds that exposure can be gained from pictures or stories rather than from actual interaction. Prejudice is diminished, according to this theory, through increased exposure to diverse groups. If college administrators aim to minimize the prejudice students feel, mere exposure theory holds that simply exposing students to brochures or classroom examples that include people with disabilities would meet this end.
- **Extended contact theory** holds that an individual’s prejudice against another group is diminished by knowing that others in the
individual's own group are associated with the other group (Levy and Hughes, 2009). Thus, a college student without a disability would be positively affected by being friends with someone who was friends with an individual with a disability. It follows that the ripple effects of integrating students with disabilities in the academic and social fabric of an institution could be great. According to extended contact theory, one friendship between a student without a disability and a student with a disability could modify the thinking patterns of a multitude of other students without disabilities.

- **Intergroup contact theory** states that individuals need actual contact with those different from themselves to reap the benefits of reduced prejudice (Levy and Hughes, 2009). According to this theory, mere exposure or tangential relationships with others are not enough. Students need to actually have personal and positive contact with members of other groups. Here, the academic and social integration of students with disabilities becomes vital. Friendships formed in residence halls, study groups, and student organizations are theorized to reduce prejudice.

As the workforce becomes more diverse, students graduating from college need to be comfortable working with those who are different from them, including those with disabilities. Mere exposure theory, extended contact theory, and intergroup contact theory all point to the same conclusion: greater academic and social integration of students with disabilities on campus holds benefits for all students. Faculty, disability services practitioners, other administrators, and student leaders must commit themselves to augmenting the level of integration on campus, given its potential for positive effects for students with disabilities and the student body as a whole.

**Campus Constituency Involvement**

An inclusive campus environment requires the support and assistance of all members of the community. As colleges and universities move from an accommodation model to an inclusion model, possibly through universal design practices, a greater number of individuals must understand their role in furthering the integration of students with disabilities.

All members of the campus community can facilitate and foster a more open learning and living environment. Faculty, disability services practitioners, other administrators, and student leaders are well positioned to pioneer these efforts. Small acts and adjustments can lead to big changes on a campus. The full inclusion of students with disabilities into the social and academic arenas of an institution is the job of the whole community.

**Faculty.** Faculty members are vital partners in accommodation provision and in increasing the inclusiveness of the educational environment. Faculty have been shown to be fairly open to providing needed
accommodations and academic adjustments (Houck, Asselin, Troutman, and Arrington, 1992; Nelson, Dodd, and Smith, 1990; Vasek, 2005), especially when they understand the connection between these actions and student success (Bourke, Strehorn, and Silver, 2000). Dutta, Kundu, and Schiro-Geist (2009), however, have cited an unfortunate lack of communication between staff in the office of disability services and faculty. This partnership is necessary for students to be fully integrated into academic life at the institution. Disability services practitioners can provide faculty with an understanding of disability services and accommodations if faculty are open to the conversation.

In addition to accommodation provision, faculty set the tone for the classroom climate. By using inclusive educational practices, faculty help to foster the academic integration of students with disabilities. Faculty are encouraged to:

- Evaluate students using multiple means (such as participation, written assignments, and exams) in order to allow students with various learning styles to demonstrate mastery of material
- Use course readings that are accessible or can be made accessible to students with disabilities
- Include people with disabilities in readings, classroom examples, and as guest speakers whenever possible
- Provide opportunities for work in groups that maximize the interactions of students, thereby increasing the comfort level of all students in cooperating with others of various levels of ability
- Become knowledgeable about the accommodation needs of students with various disabilities so as to be prepared to fully integrate all students in the educational experience
- Become familiar with the appropriate terminology to use when speaking about disability
- Use faculty governance structures to contribute to the inclusivity of the curriculum as a whole
- Maintain office space that allows all students to access office hours or outside assistance with course material

**Disability Services Practitioners.** Disability services practitioners are primarily responsible for providing appropriate educational accommodations. These specialists should work toward ensuring that the process for being granted and receiving accommodations is not overly burdensome. In addition to accommodation provision, offices of disability services can play a key role in increasing the integration of their target population with the general student body. These practitioners can provide a road map for their institution as it works to foster a more disability-friendly climate. Duffy and Gugerty (2005) advocate that “it is the role of disability services personnel to seek, nurture, and preserve institutional commitment and
Support for ensuring that students with disabilities have equal access to educational opportunities available to all other students” (pp. 89–90). To fulfill the expectation and mission disability services practitioners can:

- Maintain an up-to-date working knowledge of key legislation and case history so as to provide guidance on complying with federal and state law
- Provide training to faculty and staff regarding appropriate terminology, best practices for managing accommodations in the classroom, and suggestions for increasing access to offices and services
- Partner with technology services to ensure that platforms such as Web sites, course management tools, and e-mail systems are accessible to all students
- Work with students to identify impediments to integration and share these sentiments with campus constituencies so as to eliminate or minimize barriers

**Other Administrators.** Administrators other than those housed in offices of disability services can be key collaborators toward the goal of creating an inclusive environment for students with disabilities. Above all, administrators must be cognizant of the ways in which students interact with their offices and then determine how this interaction may be affected by various disabilities. A knowledgeable and sensitive administration is well positioned to foster integration. In this vein, all administrators should:

- Allow students to use programs and services through a variety of means (such as Web sites or in person) when possible
- Provide a departmental environment and physical space that allows all students to access personnel and resources
- Evaluate the accessibility of sponsored programs and services and work to minimize barriers for the integration of students with disabilities
- Collaborate with offices of disability services in order to understand the student population and appropriate terminology
- Visually represent people with disabilities in publications
- Practice nondiscriminatory hiring practices

**Student Leaders.** Student leaders often have considerable opportunities for interaction with administrators on campus and therefore are well equipped to learn about the diverse needs of students with disabilities. A heightened comfort level with those who are different from themselves will serve students well as they enter the workforce and continue to interact with people with disabilities.
Students are key to providing an open environment for all students to be integrated into the social fabric of an institution. In order to facilitate this social integration, student leaders should be encouraged to:

- Hold events and meetings exclusively at accessible venues, including on- and off-campus locations
- Bring speakers to campus who can address disability awareness
- Encourage the participation in clubs and activities of all students, regardless of level of ability
- Promote dialogue among students on subjects related to inclusion, stereotyping, and prejudice
- Find ways to increase students’ level of comfort with students who are different from themselves by increasing inclusion and integration
- Explore means to foster the social integration of students with disabilities, remembering that social integration can be more difficult for students with disabilities than academic integration is

**Conclusion**

The increase of students with disabilities on college campuses requires institutions to reenvision how to serve this population. The partnership and collaboration of institutional departments will offer students with disabilities increased opportunities for academic and social integration. This increased integration has ripple effects that will contribute to the learning and growth of all students. The job of fostering a disability-friendly institutional climate cannot be done solely by an office of disability services. Practitioners in this office, as well as administrators in other offices, faculty, and student leaders, all play vital roles in opening a campus environment.

**References**


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