

A Cultural History of People with Disabilities

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When student affairs professionals talk about diversity or culture, we tend to think about people of color, the Queer community, socioeconomic class, religion, or region. Student affairs professionals, however, are often not consciously aware of people with disabilities. During an experience in the Office of Students with Disabilities Services at the University of Vermont in 2006, I was exposed to another cultural group: people with disabilities. I intend to raise awareness of this group's history and culture. I will then explore what disability is, the history of this population, the obstacles facing this marginalized group, and why people with disabilities are rarely acknowledged in society and higher education. I will conclude with tangible examples of this issue being addressed at certain institutions.

During my experience in the Office of Students with Disabilities Services at the University of Vermont in 2006, I learned of a new cultural group: people with disabilities. Student affairs professionals are comparatively less consciously aware of this group than others such as the Queer community, people of color, socioeconomic class, religion, and region. I would like to raise awareness of this group's history and culture.

People with disabilities, whether physical, mental, or sensory, comprise approximately 23% of the population, making them one of the largest minority groups in the United States (Liquerman, 1997). This population cuts across racial, ethnic, religious, economic, and social lines, and members are not necessarily eligible by birth, but more often by circumstance. Such a population should be considered as differently-abled rather than disabled.

What is a Disability?

Federal law defines a “disability” as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits or restricts the condition, manner, or duration under which an average person can perform major life activities, such as walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, working, or taking care of oneself (Harvard College Accessible Education Office, 2006). With that said, does having a disability mean you are part of a cultural group? Viewing people with a disability, or dif-

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fering-abilities, as a specific cultural group is a new development. When people think about culture, they think of populations that share values, rituals, customs, traditions, language, folklore, and art. Such populations have developed a sense of unity and shared identity because of these aforementioned aspects of culture.

Traditionally, differently-abled people have been categorized exclusively in terms of physical, sensory, or mental differences with little attention paid towards their shared socio-cultural history. Nevertheless, groups within the differently-abled community often share characteristics such as a common language, (i.e. American Sign Language), customs and traditions (i.e. Disability Awareness Month), and visual and performing arts. They also share political goals stemming from a history of oppression, such as the need to lobby for legislation to protect the civil rights of differently-abled people (American Psychology Association Task Force, 1998).

What are Hidden Disabilities?

Some differing-abilities are obvious. For example, it is hard not to notice an individual utilizing a wheelchair. In contrast, some disabilities are hidden and can lead individuals with these disabilities to sometimes make self-sacrificing accommodations for those of the dominant culture. Examples of hidden disabilities include multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, full or partial deafness, psychiatric disorders, or learning disabilities. They also include medical disabilities such as cancer, diabetes, ostomy, lung disease, kidney failure, hemophilia, or heart conditions. Many individuals with hidden disabilities experience chronic or intermittent pain, muscle weakness, occasional blurred vision, dizziness, ringing in the ears, blackouts, seizures of varying intensity, or other symptoms which have effects ranging from aggravating to debilitating (Liquerman, 1997).

Learning disabilities further illustrate this misconception. Some individuals with hidden disabilities may not be aware of their own disability. They develop coping mechanisms without being fully aware of doing so. They may feel frustration because they are unable to perform up to their own or others' expectations. The individual is at times not fully responsible for this lack of awareness. For example, one may not be able to pay for the costly diagnostic exams for learning disabilities. As Andrew Profers (2006) mentions, "most insurance companies do not cover psychological testing costs" (<http://compasspoints.org/compasspoints/Psychological%20Testing.html>).

When a person with a learning disability does not naturally excel in an academic subject, it is often assumed the person is unmotivated or not committed. However, many people are unaware of the efforts these individuals put forth to succeed. Who would like to be called unmotivated? Student affairs professionals should acknowledge that the emotional pain caused by hidden disabilities can be as frustrating and intense as, if not more than, a physical disability.

Since the differently-abled population is a relatively large group, why do people not talk about disabilities? Suzanne Liquerman (1997) indicates that a person with a hidden disability appears to be “okay,” and is expected to be totally self-sufficient with no limitations in ability. If a person does not disclose the disability, he/she/ze might be labeled as lazy, belligerent, or uncooperative. If the disability is disclosed, a person may be pitied or shunned because of fear or misunderstanding. Because the disability is not visible, requests for accommodations may be seen by others as a ploy to get attention, forgiveness, or special advantages; or as an excuse not to participate or meet expectations. In addition, persons with hidden disabilities may appear moody, disagreeable, or unpleasant for no reason (Liquerman, 1997).

History of the Disability Movement

Education specifically designed for differently-abled people has existed in the United States for almost two hundred years. According to *A Chronology of the Disability Rights Movements*, the first school for Deaf children in the Western Hemisphere, the American School for the Deaf, was founded in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817. In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed an act giving the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and Blind, later renamed Galludet University, the authority to confer college degrees. This act made this institution the first college in the world specifically established for people with differing-abilities (Chronology, 1996). Gallaudet is still the only university in the United States designed specifically for the Deaf population.

The movement to establish public institutions which recognize the rights, needs, and culture of differently-abled people has been long and arduous. As stated in *A Chronology of the Disability Rights Movements*, the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 marks the greatest achievement of the disability rights movement. Title V, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, confronts discrimination against people with differing-abilities. Section 504 prohibits programs receiving federal funding from discriminating against “otherwise qualified handicapped” individuals (Chronology, 1996).

The passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 marked the peak of the disability movement. According to the article, *Disability as Diversity*, the ADA is a federal statute designed to prevent discrimination and promote equal opportunities for individuals with physical, sensory, or mental disabilities. The law is described as the most sweeping disability rights legislation in history. It brought more comprehensive legal protection for Americans with disabilities (Chronology, 2000). The law mandates that local, state, and federal governmental programs be accessible; businesses with more than fifteen employees make “reasonable accommodations” for differently-abled workers; and businesses, such as restaurants and stores, make reasonable modifications to ensure access for differently-abled members of the

public. The act also requires access to public transportation, communication, and other areas of public life. With the passage of the ADA, most universities now recognize that people with differing-abilities face difficulties similar to those of other minority populations (APA Task Force, 1998). Though it was claimed that the ADA increased rights for people with differing-abilities, discrepancies still exist.

Legal Ramifications of the Passage of the ADA

During the last fifty years, the U.S. Supreme Court has played a significant role in three major civil rights movements. In 1954, *Brown vs. the Board of Education* helped launch the campaign to give African Americans full equality in education. The women's movement greatly influenced the Supreme Court's decision in 1973 when *Roe vs. Wade* gave women abortion rights. Unfortunately, in a series of rulings on the ADA, the court disappointed disability rights activists by unintentionally limiting gains made by the disabled rights movement. Charles Lindner (2002) of the *Los Angeles Times* points out the problems of the ADA:

The only disabled people protected under the ADA are people who do not need protection. For the high court, then, some people are not disabled enough; some people are too disabled; but, so far, nobody has been disabled "just right." (p. 2)

According to the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, only the "truly" disabled, people who have physical or mental impairments that "substantially limit" daily life activities, are protected.

The Supreme Court interpreted the ADA and Section 504 as only applying to people who are: (a) disabled enough to be qualified for protection, and (b) in the context of employment, not disabled enough to maintain employment. For many people with differing-abilities, meeting both sets of criteria is almost impossible. Employers can determine conditions that may lead to disqualification in an application process, or dismissal from employment, which may not be viewed as sufficient criteria for protection under the ADA. While the ADA has been hailed as a triumph for the disability rights movement, the nation's highest legal system is on a path to reverse the long-term success of the ADA (Young, 2002). Linder (2002) describes the following cases: In *Sutton vs. United Airlines* and in *Murphy vs. United Parcel Service*, the plaintiffs, the Sutton sisters, were not hired because of a correctable vision deficiency, and Murphy was fired because of his medicinally corrected blood pressure, the court found that none of them were disabled for the purpose of employment under the ADA. (pg. 2) The inconsistency here is if individuals are able to do a job with glasses or medication, they do not fit the criteria of "disabled" under the ADA.

The discrepancies are not only illustrated from the legal ramifications, but also in the social welfare system. According to the documentary, *When Billy Broke*

His Head, Billy was a rock star until he suffered a brain injury in a traffic accident. Through his persistence, he gained his masters degree, but he could not secure employment. The government gave him \$1,000 a month, but because of different deduction fees, he took home roughly \$500 a month on which to live. The agency offered Billy a very limited welfare fund and told him that everyday many people were in the same situation (National Disability Awareness Project, Inc., 1994). Billy's story represents the plight of the majority of people with disabilities, whose lives depend on welfare from the government.

Support for Disabled Students in Higher Education

It is not common knowledge that almost everyone uses assisting technology, whether or not they have a disability. Eyeglasses, a letter-opener, a straw, and a wagon are examples of tools that make life easier. Technology and assisting devices enable people with differing-abilities to accomplish activities with more ease. Basic technology devices include reachers or grabbers, invented by shopkeepers who needed to reach items on a top shelf. More advanced technology devices, such as computers that speak or recognize speech patterns, are examples of technology designed to assist people with certain differing-abilities. These later examples are not too different from the ones mentioned earlier.

Universities are currently providing accommodations for students with documented disabilities as part of the ADA. In the U.S. higher education system, an increasing number of professors are putting lecture notes on the course websites, and some even have video or voice recordings of classes for students to download. The University of Vermont provides the following assistance to differently-abled students: adaptive technology (software that can read text out loud for disabled students), note-taking systems, exam proctoring, and sign language interpreters. Additionally, the University of Vermont is promoting Universal Design in campus buildings.

Universal Design is a concept or philosophy for designing and delivering products and services that are usable by people with the widest possible range of functional capabilities. Examples of Universal Design are curb cuts and captioning of television and movies (Roy, 2003). Curb cuts for those in wheelchairs would also create added convenience for people carrying luggage and utilizing a trolley. Online lecture notes assist non-disabled students with their class assignments. Voice recording of classes allows students to download lectures and listen anywhere in order to reinforce course content. Subtitles on television screens assist people in understanding content when equipment malfunctions or it is too noisy in the room to hear the sound. It is evident that Universal Design is beneficial for all people.

Conclusion

People with differing-abilities are one of the largest marginalized populations in the United States and are often overlooked by society and underserved by higher education. Although the federal government has passed Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American Disabilities Act, those with differing-abilities are still experiencing inequitable working and living conditions. People with hidden disabilities are often misunderstood by their communities because they appear “normal.” A great number of people with differing-abilities are receiving insufficient welfare benefits which lower their standard of living.

Despite some efforts made at some institutions, challenges still exist in the higher education system. The lack of proactive community-building makes it more difficult for students with disabilities to foster a sense of identity. This is very similar to the historical experiences of other marginalized groups such as students of color on predominantly white campuses. “The students are lacking the sense of community, therefore it is hard for them to foster an identity,” says a specialist from the Office of Students with Disabilities at the University of Vermont (personal communication). Accommodating students with differing-abilities is very expensive for universities and often involves hiring note-takers or sign language interpreters and/or creating special access to buildings and advanced technologies. According to the Director of the Office of Students with Disabilities at the University of Vermont, such offices often do not receive enough funding from universities to hire more disability specialists, purchase more efficient advanced technology devices, or promote their programs to better support these students (personal communication). These offices are not sufficient enough to support to the large population of students with differing-abilities on campuses.

Funding plays a significant role in terms of supporting the differently-abled community. Universities should implement more universal designs on campuses in order to offer more conveniences to students. Offices such as Disabilities Services need to form institutional committees to make plans to promote their programs on campus in order to tighten the community. Student affairs professionals should encourage such student populations to recognize themselves as differently-abled, rather than disabled, so that the students will become more confident throughout their personal development. It is obvious that this may create financial stress on the institution, but must not be overlooked. It is important to raise awareness of students with disabilities. If all the changes were implemented, it would provide a more supportive and conducive community for differently-abled students and students with disabilities to attend and graduate from college. In the long run, all students will be able to influence society on how to respect and recognize such a unique group through their college experiences.

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