

Disability Cultural Centers: Embracing Disability Culture and Identity within Higher Education

AHEAD Webinar

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Let's Talk Numbers

19%

Of
undergraduates
reported having a
disability for the
2015-2016
academic year

12%

Of graduate
students reported
having a
disability for the
2015-2016
academic year


***Keep in mind this only accounts for the disabled people/students who reported.**



A Closer Look:

- Attainment of bachelor's degrees by disabled people (15.7%) remains much lower than nondisabled individuals (35.9%) (Erickson et al., 2022).

What we Know

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- Many colleges are still unprepared to support disabled students beyond legally mandated equal access and accommodations (Hong, 2015). Kimball et al. (2016) noted many “disabled students experience a “chilly” campus climate involving stereotypes, microaggressions, misconceptions and exclusion” (p. 1).
 - Disabled students are “invisible on campus because others see their disability only as a need for an accommodation rather than as an identity” (Abes & Wallace 2018, p. 551).

What we Know

- It can be hard for disabled students to find membership in the cultures and subcultures on their campus (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tinto, 1993).
- Often includes ill-prepared advisors, negative faculty perceptions, and stigma due to separation from peers such as having to leave the classroom to receive testing accommodations (Hong, 2015).

The Problem

- Traditionally, higher education institutions have focused on basic legal compliance and accessibility rather than a cultural shift of how disability is viewed on campus (Hong, 2015).
- Improved in providing accommodations and services but lagged far behind in recognizing, celebrating, and incorporating disability as a cultural identity (Davis, 2011; 2016).
- Legal debates about disability-related accommodations tend to divert attention from the importance of disability as a powerful, yet consistently marginalized cultural identity (Grigley 2017).
- Underrepresented college students are more likely than other students to feel disconnected and isolated (Bowman, Park, & Denson, 2015).
- Disability studies & social model perspective: **disability is routinely missing from diversity conversations and social justice initiatives in the academic arena** (Davis, 2011).



Disability Cultural Centers

- Disability cultural centers (DCC) are not synonymous with disability services in higher education. Rather than focusing on reasonable accommodations.
- DCCs have dedicated staff, space, and funding that allow disabled students, faculty, and staff to celebrate and explore the disability experience (Saia, 2022).
- The presence of a DCC can play a vital role in shifting the conversation from legal rights to the validation and expression of disability culture on campus (Chiang, 2019).
- Dr. Margret Fink (Director of the UIC DCC) shared “ I think having space and energy for disability community and culture is really important, because universities are not easy places to be as a disabled person” (Herder, 2022).



What is a DCC?

- Dedicated space
- Physical space
- Location
- Disability culture
- Community



What does a DCC do?

- Leadership
- Advocacy
- Faculty Training
- Pride

Avenues for improving **ACCESSIBILITY**

- Appropriate space in classrooms to navigate around the room
- Various seating options not exclusively in the back of rooms
- Easily movable furniture
- Make it a policy to have breaks during classes, making two-hour classes more feasible
- Use microphones consistently
- Have elevators accessing all floors in every building
- Make all class notes available to everyone prior to class
- Adopt braille maps and menus around campus not just within the DRC
- Use exclusively automatic doors on campus
- Remove fluorescent lighting on campus

Avenues for Improving **CLIMATE** and **ATTITUDES**

- Trust and validate disabled student experiences to decrease disabled students' feelings of not being trusted or making the non-disabled people the experts of the situation
- Include disability in diversity and social justice conversations without tokenizing one single disabled person
- Infuse disability culture and history into the curriculum, beyond a single reading.
- Create a disability studies major- not housed within the same department as special education
- Host disability pride events
- Reduce person-first language

Avenues for Improving **CLIMATE** and **ATTITUDES**

- Respect the lived experience of disability-
knowledge about disability and
understanding of the lived experience are
two different things
- Continue to have events that allow
disabled students and the disability
community to share their stories and
experiences
- Host joint events with other cultural
centers to promote intersectionality.
- Commit to a strategic plan of advocacy,
organizing and visibility to create change



Questions?





Thank you!!

Please email me with any questions or collaborations tsaia@sdsu.edu