



The Role of Disability Cultural Centers in Creating a Supportive and Transformational Experience for Students with Disabilities



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Introduction

Students with disabilities (SWD) encounter several barriers which prevent them from a fair learning experience. These barriers make it difficult for SWDs to graduate as well as feel a sense of belonging. University systems should provide support and resources for SWDs as they do for other student populations to help resolve systematic and interpersonal challenges. The disabled identity is not a barrier and must be treated equally with other cultural groups. Furthermore, the establishment of cultural centers is integral to validating this marginalized identity. A disability cultural center (DCC) would be an essential resource to help university leadership build a healthy, inclusive conversation around disabilities. At present, there are roughly 10 centers on university campuses across the United States. My research uses a qualitative approach to establish the value of DCCs for students, faculty, staff, and university culture. Through my research, I am advocating for the establishment of additional centers. Universities, by law, have had a space for SWDs to be academically accommodated, but it is time to consider how students are supported beyond academic requirements and culturally impacted. Research and narrative testimonials show when SWDs engage in inclusive activities, they begin to experience an enhanced sense of belonging. A DCC is needed for universities to cultivate a community for SWDs, allies, and all students.

Traditional View of Disability

The concept of a DCC in higher education is a relatively new concept. DCCs emerged from the rise of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 70s and the signing of the ADA in 1990. The first DCC was founded in 1991 by students at the University of Minnesota and still exists as the student-led Disabled Students Cultural Center (DSCC). Then the DCC at Syracuse University and the D Center at the University of Washington emerged early in this decade. These centers focused on universal design, inclusive culture, and a positive community. The space really allowed students with disabilities to interact with one another. In the past few years, we've experienced a relative surge in DCCs on college campuses with strong interest from students, faculty, and staff across the U.S.

What is a Disability Cultural Center (DCC)?

a cultural center serves as a gathering place for communities of various identities and cultural backgrounds. These centers foster a sense of cultural appreciation of history and identity, facilitate dialogue, celebrate and acknowledge lived experiences, encourage social activism, and develop and strengthen community. From this definition of cultural centers, it can be directly applied to the disability community. According to the University of Syracuse, a DCC coordinates campus-wide social, educational, and cultural activities on disability issues for students, faculty, staff, and community members with and without disabilities. A DCC encourages deep reflection of identity/agency, community, and purpose. A DCC guides students to practice personal agency and actively connect students to the disability community. Most importantly, DCCs have the power and influence to educate the campus on the history and culture of disability justice and activism. To clarify, a DCC is not a Disability Resource Center (DRC) or Disability Services. The mission of DRCs is aimed at providing resources, knowledge, and skills necessary to ensure full access and engagement for students with disabilities in all aspects of college life.

Conclusion

After interviewing several staff members who work at other existing DCCs, it is clear there is a linear relationship between student success for students with disabilities and DCCs. It is up to institutions of higher education including students, faculty, and staff members to shift the way they describe, view, and construct disability. Disability education is a shared responsibility and needs to drastically change for a paradigm shift to occur. Disability in higher education should be approached as a form of diversity and with intersectionality.

Addressing Holistic Disability Experiences in Higher Education

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). From a social model perspective, disability is routinely missing from diversity representation in the academic arena. Higher education is incredibly important because college transition often spurs identity development. While disability representation and advocacy is one of the most underrepresented groups, the study of disability has extended to Disability Studies curricula programs, clubs, student organizations, committees, special projects, initiatives, and DCCs. Progress is moving along, but it needs to accelerate and quicken to ensure people with disabilities are integrated and considered in all aspects of society.

Disability Culture

Anthropologically, culture is interpreted as the shared set of values, concepts, and rules of behavior that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself. It is not just about a particular attribute, characteristic, language, race, or belief, it is understood as a dynamic and evolving socially constructed reality that exists in the minds of social group members. It is best understood as a social movement that champions "a sense of common identity and intersections that unite people with disabilities. It separates them from their nondisabled counterparts." While the spectrum of disability is radically diverse i.e., mobility, physical, spinal cord, cognitive, vision, hearing, learning, psychological, and invisible disabilities (a disability you cannot see), the identity of disability is a shared experience that binds the community together. Unfortunately, there are attitudinal barriers that challenge the acceptance of disability culture. The medical model of disability enforces this. The stereotypes of disability stem from the medical model of disability, so people tend to believe disability is not a culture, but a medical impediment. Even some people with disabilities believe this to be true.