

PRACTICE BRIEF

Bridging the Gap Between Disability Studies and Disability Services in Higher Education: A Model Center on Disability

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Abstract

The professional field of Disability Services in Higher Education and the academic discipline of Disability Studies share a perspective on disability that considers disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. Despite this common underpinning, there has been little effort or inquiry into the ways that disability services and Disability Studies can and should inform each other. At the University of Arizona, a model Center on Disability is taking shape that will explore the gaps between disability studies and services. Specifically, the Center will unite current and needed resources to advance theory and practice in disability-related research, teaching, and service that contribute to social change. The Center will be a catalyst for innovative, collaborative inquiry that will illuminate the intersections among education, the humanities, the arts, social and behavioral sciences, and the professional schools. The Center's research will address education, policy, and practice.

Over the past twenty years, great emphasis has been placed on improving the quality of service delivery to individuals with disabilities participating in higher education. As the primary professional association for disability service professionals, The Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD) has clearly articulated a mission and values that reflect disability as socially constructed and resulting from "the interaction between person and the environment" (Welcome to AHEAD, 2009). Further, AHEAD has developed and endorsed a code of ethics, program standards, as well as professional standards of practice—all of which consider the importance of redesigning the campus environment to be as accessible as possible. This movement has occurred as a result of many factors including evolving public policies, advocacy by the Independent Living and other disability rights movements, as well as knowledge and theories arising from the academic discipline of Disability Studies.

It is noteworthy that as civil rights for individuals with disabilities were advancing into the national consciousness, the academic discipline of Disability Studies was emerging. Linton (1998) has summarily explained Disability Studies as follows:

Disability Studies takes for its subject matter not simply the variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing but, more crucially, the meaning we make of those variations. The field explores the critical divisions our society makes in creating the normal versus the pathological, the insider versus the outsider, or the competent citizen versus the ward of the state. It is an interdisciplinary field based on a sociopolitical analysis of disability and informed both by the knowledge base and methodologies used in the traditional liberal arts, and by conceptualizations and approaches developed in areas of the new scholarship. Disability Studies has

emerged as a logical base for examination of the construction and function of “disability.” (p. 2)

As the professional association for Disability Studies academic programs and scholars, the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) has as its mission to

promote the study of disability in social, cultural, and political contexts. Disability Studies recognizes that disability is a key aspect of human experience, and that the study of disability has important political, social, and economic implications for society as a whole, including both disabled and nondisabled people. Through research, artistic production, teaching and activism, the Society for Disability Studies seeks to augment understanding of disability in all cultures and historical periods, to promote greater awareness of the experiences of disabled people, and to advocate for social change (SDS Mission, 2009).

The professional field of Disability Services in Higher Education and the academic discipline of Disability Studies share a perspective on disability that considers disability as a socially constructed phenomenon. Despite this common underpinning, there has been little effort or inquiry into the ways that disability services and Disability Studies can and should inform each other. It should be noted, however, that this shared perspective on disability is recent. Historically, disability services was administered and staffed by predominantly non-disabled professionals who sought to be experts in disability conditions, and to provide accommodation, rather than address accessible design of the higher education environment. Disability Studies has from its inception considered disability to be socially constructed, emphasized the insider as expert, and focused interventions on the environment.

Problem

Locally, nationally, and internationally, there exists a need for truly innovative, collaborative inquiry in education, careers, and life designed to advance access for people with disabilities. Institutions of higher education are not only catalysts for social change, but also serve as engines of economic development, and are at the vanguard of inquiry and generation of knowledge.

Despite over thirty years of our collective desire and efforts to throw open the doors to higher education opportunities and experiences for individuals with disabilities, they are often considered the poorest, least employed, least educated minority population in the United

States. The 2007 Current Population Survey (Bjelland, Erickson, & Lee) which defined persons with a disability as “those who have a health problem or disability which prevents them from working or which limits the kind or amount of work they can do” reported:

- 28.6% of men and women, aged 18-64 with a work limitation in the United States lived in families with incomes below the poverty line, compared to 9.2% of men and women aged 18-64 without a work limitation who lived in families with incomes below the poverty line;
- In the year prior to 2007, the median household income among civilian, non-institutionalized men and women without a disability, aged 18-64 in the United States was \$60,000 compared to \$30,900 among civilian, non-institutionalized men and women with a disability;
- In the year 2008, approximately 17.6% of civilian, non-institutionalized men and women with a work limitation, aged 18-64 in the United States were employed, compared to 77.7% of those without a work limitation.

The 2007 Annual Disability Status Report (Erickson & Lee, 2008) utilizing “American Community Survey (ACS) data—a US Census Bureau survey designed to replace the decennial census long form” reported that:

- The difference in the percentage working full-time/full-year between working-age people with and without disabilities was 35.5 percentage points;
- The gap between the employment rates of working-age people with and without disabilities was 42.8 percentage points;
- In 2007, the percentage of working-age people with disabilities with a Bachelor’s degree or more in the US was 12.5%;
- In 2007, the percentage of working-age people without disabilities with a Bachelor’s degree or more in the US was 30.8%.

Clearly, while the numbers of individuals with disabilities participating in higher education are increasing, there remain significant gaps as evidenced above. To be able to understand and articulate these gaps, we must begin to apply the theories and knowledge emerging from Disability Studies to the way that universities frame and respond to disability in academic, research, and service

efforts. This is a necessary first step, if a university is truly to serve as a catalyst for social change, an engine of economic development, and remain at the vanguard of inquiry and generation of knowledge.

As professionals in disability services, we have long considered the ideological shift from solely providing individual services to a balance between these services and facilitating systemic and environmental change. We must ask ourselves important questions such as:

- What is the meaning we make of disability, and how may this inform our practice?
- What is the relationship between knowledge and theories emerging from Disability Studies and Disability Services in Higher Education?
- What is the role of each in examining how addressing disability in its full complexity can promote the full participation, self-determination, and equal citizenship of people with disabilities in society?
- What can we learn about how services that support persons with disabilities, in conjunction with social, legal, and political change, can increase or reduce sources of disempowerment?
- How can disability services make an impact on institutions of higher education, such that individuals with disabilities are seen as inherently valuable to our economic, educational and employment environments?

The Center on Disability Model

Partner Structure

To address the above questions, The University of Arizona (UA) is creating a Center on Disability that will unite current and needed resources to advance theory and practice in disability-related research, teaching, and service that contribute to social change. The Center will be a catalyst for innovative, collaborative inquiry in Disability Studies, Rehabilitation, Deaf Studies, and Disability Services that will illuminate the intersections among education, the humanities, the arts, social and behavioral sciences, and the professional schools. The Center's research will address education, policy, and practice.

The Center on Disability brings together the Disability Resource Center staff and services with the faculty and academic specialties of the Rehabilitation program, including Deaf Studies. As envisioned, the center would be the first of its kind in the country, pairing a premier

Disability Resources program in the United States with nationally ranked programs in Rehabilitation and Deaf Studies. This partnership would implement a Bachelor's degree in Disability Studies and pursue a research agenda driven by Disability Studies' concepts.

The UA has a long standing institutional commitment to improving access to higher education for individuals with disabilities. As a result of this commitment, Disability Resources leads the campus and the profession in the pursuit and implementation of well-designed, and accessible campus learning, working, physical, and information environments. It also promotes a view of disability that places it in social, cultural, and political contexts. While the traditional role of a disability service office is the provision of reasonable accommodations to disabled students, Disability Resources at the UA has taken a lead role in also serving disabled faculty and staff, as well as engaging in innovative programs and partnerships. Additionally, Disability Resources has a state-of-the-art adaptive technology lab and offers five competitive athletic teams, a training center, and an equipment repair shop. This array of services and programs exceeds that of any other institution in the United States. Disability Resources staff are recognized locally, nationally, and internationally for their service to the profession and are frequently sought after for presentations, consultation, and formal program evaluation.

The Rehabilitation Counseling Master's Program ranks 5th nationally (U.S. News Week & World Report, 2007). Rehabilitation's mission is to develop and offer rehabilitation education, research, and community services of excellence that will lead to leadership and practice at the forefront of the rehabilitation field. Rehabilitation graduates hold leadership positions locally and nationally. The majority of administrative leadership positions in the Arizona Rehabilitation Services Administration and in the University of Arizona Disability Resources are graduates of the UA Rehabilitation Counseling Master's degree program. To meet its land grant mission, the Rehabilitation program generates significant levels of grant funding which provides tuition and stipend support to the majority of its students. Through collaboration and recruitment efforts, a very diverse student population containing high percentages of people with disabilities and from minority backgrounds has been attained. Through grant funding, Rehabilitation also conducts state-wide training needs assessments for community rehabilitation programs and provides specific training to meet these needs.

The Deaf Studies program offers a Bachelor's degree in Special Education and Rehabilitation. Deaf Studies students must become fluent in American Sign Language and complete coursework in the areas of history, culture, and language of the deaf community. The Educational Interpreting emphasis in Deaf Studies is nationally recognized as one of the premier programs in the country. Graduates from this program have obtained the highest scores on the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment in the United States. The Deaf Studies program has also received funding from the Arizona Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing for a state-of-the-art interpreter training laboratory with laptops, a teacher work station, and designated lab space in the College of Education. The program faculty are involved at the national and international levels in the fields of deafness, sign language, and interpreting.

Goals, objectives and support of institutional mission

The Goal of the Center on Disability is to create the premier interdisciplinary center in the world for uniting theory and practice in disability-related research, teaching, practice, and service that contributes to social change. Objectives of the Center are to:

- Conduct theory-to-practice research in disability-related academic and service fields;
- Serve as a catalyst for innovative, collaborative inquiry;
- Promote innovative teaching in disability by encouraging faculty to include Disability Studies perspectives into the courses they teach;
- Promote interdisciplinary disability-related research and teaching among the Colleges of Education, Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences and Law, and the Health Sciences Colleges of Nursing, Medicine, Pharmacy, and Public Health;
- Generate external funding in support of the Center's mission;
- Offer research opportunities for faculty and graduate students to enhance the understanding of scholarly work and careers in Disability Studies and disability-related areas;
- Disseminate knowledge through a wide variety of formats including guest speakers, conferences, study groups, brown-bags, exhibitions, lectures, symposia, and artistic performances to University and public audiences;

- Continue to exceed University land grant obligations via Rehabilitation academics and disability services delivery;
- Advance universal access for people with disabilities in education, careers, and life.

The Center on Disability's goals and objectives, while specific to disability, parallel those of the University: "to build a world class and diverse faculty at the forefront of discovery." In meeting the objectives as detailed above, and in support of the institutional mission, the proposed Center will:

- Create, strengthen, and support disability-related research, education, practice, and service through collaborations across departments and programs, both within and across colleges, and campuses;
- Create synergies and leverage resources in the University's recognized areas of expertise;
- Create a culture that supports the success of all members of the University Community;
- Include national and international perspectives, policies, literature, culture, and history with an aim of placing current ideas about disability within their broadest possible context;
- Augment understanding of disability in all cultures and historical periods, and contribute to social change;
- Inform public policies, practices, service delivery systems, educational institutions, and applied fields;
- "Serve as an engine for economic development and as a source of inspiration that enriches individual lives and advances the collective well-being of our society." (UA President Robert Shelton)

The Center on Disability, will be an integral part of the University of Arizona mission "To discover, educate, serve and inspire" (About the UA, 2009), and furthers the vision of an inclusive society which supports the attainment of academic, professional, and personal goals for all persons. The UA is uniquely positioned to house the premier Center on Disability. The University has a long, rich history of fostering disability-related programs and services that have attracted an increasing number of students and faculty from around the world to Tucson. As reflected by its esteemed national ranking, Rehabili-

tation has been a leader historically and today continues to advance the field. Finally, faculty and staff from across campus have shown a long-standing commitment to cross-disciplinary research and inquiry, especially in cultural, ethnic, gender, and area studies, and in strengthening the university's ties with the larger community.

Collaboration across the four program areas of the Center—research, practice, service, and education—is governed by a Disability Studies perspective that supports universal access for all individuals in our society. The Center's emphasis on teaching, research and scholarship, active learning, and service further fulfill its mission of an inclusive society which supports the attainment of academic, professional, and personal goals for persons of all abilities.

The Center's activities will enhance faculty efforts to attract high quality students from diverse backgrounds to study at the University and to develop skills to become leaders in disability-related research, education, and practice. The Center on Disability will unite theory and practice in disability-related research, teaching, and service that contribute to social change. The Center's mission: "to help ensure an inclusive society which supports the attainment of academic, professional and personal goals for persons of all abilities" is an integral part of the University of Arizona mission. The mission also reflects the Arizona Board of Regents' strategic directions related to enhancing the quality of student education and enhancing research and impact on economic development.

Outcomes

Building a first of its kind Center within a large research-extensive university requires tremendous collaboration, time, and financial resources. Stakeholders at the UA have spent several years meeting with faculty from various disciplines to promote the concepts of disability studies; teaching various classes in support of our center agenda; participating in the design and implementation of research; collaborating on grant applications; and serving on local, state, and national boards.

While the economic downturn affecting the State of Arizona has limited the immediate availability of financial resources to the creation of the Center on Disability, the synergy and collaboration between stakeholders has resulted in many accomplishments that may not otherwise have happened. Examples of Center activities from the past year include:

- Receiving Congressionally directed funding for a Disabled Veterans Education and Reintegration project. This project includes research, program development, and program evaluation components.
- Submission of a grant application to the National Science Foundation - Research in Disabilities Education, Division of Human Resource Development. In collaboration with the Department of Teaching and Teacher Education, this proposal would examine the impact of the middle school science classroom environment on the motivation and achievement of students with disabilities in science, technology, engineering, and math fields.
- Collaboration with the Sonoran University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) in teaching, research, and service. Examples of collaboration with the UCEDD are wide ranging from pre-service training workshops for students in medicine, public health, nursing, and law, to replication of a national best practice model school-to-work program for youth with disabilities.
- Development and delivery of new Disability Studies curriculum in the College of Education. Courses have been developed and delivered, such as Introduction to Disability Studies and Services, Disability Perspectives and Narratives, and Mass Media and its Construction of Disability
- Arizona Board of Regents approval for the further development and implementation of a Bachelor's degree in Disability Studies.
- Co-sponsored with the University Poetry Center, the Tucson Poetry Festival that, among other artists, featured Deaf Poet Ayisha Knight.
- Collaborated with the DIRECT, the local Independent Living Center, on the submission of a grant to improve college access services to low-income individuals with disabilities in southern Arizona.
- Invited Disability Studies scholars to the University to lead faculty development workshops.
- Designed and delivered in-service workshops for Disability Resource Center staff. Discussion topics included power and privilege, the construction of Disability, and how the ways we

frame difference impact the manner in which we design and deliver services.

As the Center on Disability at the UA has evolved, it has been continuously met with enthusiasm. Senior administrators are increasingly supportive of interdisciplinary endeavors that reach across old divisions. Such broad collaborations serve to generate new knowledge and hold the promise of solving society's problems and improving our collective well-being. On a practical level, joining together disparate areas remains difficult, yet has already resulted in synergies that are furthering the University and the State of Arizona as leaders in the fields of Disability Studies and Disability Services.

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Dr. Alan Strauss is currently an Assistant Director of Disability Resources at the University of Arizona, coordinating services related to disability and employment. He is also an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the College of Education's Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies and a co-investigator with the Sonoran University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disability (Sonoran UCEDD) where he provides leadership in achieving goals related to developing an interdisciplinary degree in Disability Studies, and to increasing employment opportunities statewide for individuals with disabilities. Dr. Strauss has presented widely on disability services in higher education, as well as on the intersection between disability studies and disability services.

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