

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a person playing tennis. The person is in the lower-left quadrant, captured in a dynamic pose as if swinging a racket. The background is filled with colorful bokeh lights in shades of blue, yellow, and red, creating a vibrant and energetic atmosphere. The text is overlaid on this background in yellow and blue rectangular boxes.

TRULY INCLUSIVE

ADMISSION:

RECRUITING STUDENTS

WITH DISABILITIES

Students are more likely to feel welcomed when a college acknowledges their presence in and out of the classroom.

By Eric Endlich

Proactively recruiting disabled students makes good business sense in higher education. While changing demographics are reducing the overall number of high school students applying to college, disabled students may represent a key untapped market. The [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES) reports that 19 percent of undergraduates disclose having disabilities. According to NCES, more than a third of these students drop out of college in the first two years. Many colleges have become increasingly inclusive in the areas of race and gender; disability and neurodiversity represent additional growth opportunities for recruitment and retention.

Of course, full inclusion involves much more than student recruitment. Faculty training—and accessibility of curriculum, buildings, and other aspects of college life—are equally important. As Jeff Edelstein, doctoral student and coordinator at [Disability Rights, Education, Activism, and Mentoring](#) (DREAM), said, “Like with other recruitment efforts framed within diversity initiatives, disabled student recruitment wouldn't mean much without a supportive campus climate for students.”

Some institutions, including Swarthmore College (PA), are already taking steps in this direction. “We have made a lot of efforts to make sure that prospective students with disabilities know that they would be welcomed and able to succeed here—including ensuring accessible tour routes, various layers on the website and campus map regarding accessibility for those with a variety of disabilities, captioned online information sessions, sign language interpreters as needed, and in-person/online sessions with prospective students/families

to address specific questions,” said Susan Smythe, the campus's Americans with Disabilities Act program manager.

Making college accessible begins with providing information. Edelstein notes, “hiring accessibility consultants to analyze the accessibility of a university's communications, such as marketing materials, is essential. Inaccessible information is incomplete information when it comes to recruiting disabled students.”

Much like The College Equity Index can help Black students determine which colleges might be a good fit for them, an index regarding disability could be invaluable. “One of the key challenges currently is that students with disabilities don't have easy access to information about campuses that are particularly friendly to them, or accessible,” Edelstein said. “There are some informal rankings, but no formal system such as that which exists for LGBTQIA+ students. These challenges could be addressed by (1) hiring accessibility consultants, (2) training admissions officers in issues important to disabled students and their families, and (3) (investing in) institutional research that assesses the campus climate for students with disabilities.”

College disability resources are not limited to accommodations and support services. A handful of colleges have established disability cultural centers, identity-based resources that are separate from centers for disability services. Although such spaces remain rare, demand is increasing.

At some institutions lacking disability cultural centers, students have formed their own organizations, as in the case of [Access: Student Disability Union](#), founded at Emerson College (MA).



On other campuses, faculty and administrators have worked in concert with students to create spaces dedicated to students with disabilities.

At the University of California, the Academic Council recently sent a [letter](#) to the university provost recommending the creation of disability cultural centers on UC campuses. The letter also urged the university to recognize neurodiversity as a diversity, equity, and inclusion issue; provide neurodiversity training to faculty, staff, and students; and improve “various accommodations and support systems in learning environments and other campus resources and facilities.”

Cultural centers can play an especially important role in the lives of disabled students, said Ivy Banks, associate vice provost for diversity & inclusion at the University of Arizona. The university opened its Disability Cultural Center (DCC) in 2018. “...DCC serves as a place to call home or a place to belong; where students create community and advocate for policies that will elevate the experiences of students with disabilities,” said Banks. “We



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consistently look at our practices through the lens of prospective and admitted students to ensure we are inclusive, accessible, and proactive in our processes.”

Much as the creation of disability cultural centers lags behind centers for other identity groups (e.g., LGBTQ+ students, women, or people of color), higher ed is just beginning to focus the academic lens on disability studies. It’s common for universities to offer courses—in fact, entire majors—in fields such as gender studies or African American studies, but disability or neurodiversity-focused courses are relatively hard to find. Only a few universities even offer a minor in disability studies. Smythe observes that at Swarthmore, “the one area so far that hasn’t really improved yet is in pedagogy—i.e., courses specifically built around discussions of disability as identity, disability culture, etc.” Likewise, at Emerson, students created [The Access Advocacy Project](#), a plan recommending—among many other things—new courses on disability, informed by disability justice frameworks and taught by disabled professors and/or those

with an extensive background in disability studies.

There are additional benefits to having openly disabled faculty, as Eileen Bellemore, director of Accessibility Resources at Stonehill College (MA), explains: “I believe we should be encouraging faculty and staff to self-identify. Representation facilitates dialogue and mentoring opportunities and, I think, would enhance retention and engagement efforts. It’s not uncommon for faculty and staff to be called upon to represent other minoritized groups (e.g., first-gen, BIPOC, LGBTQ+), but how often do we see them openly and proudly acknowledging disability to the broader community? What an opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments of disabled individuals, signal what they can achieve, and foster a culture where students feel they belong.”

Students are likely to feel more welcomed at a university that acknowledges their presence in multiple ways (e.g., in academics as well as student life). Ideally, diversity of abilities should be “baked into” the very definition of inclusion at universities, as in the [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#)

[Strategic Plan/Social Mobility and Opportunity Agenda](#) at Southern New Hampshire University, which includes both physical and cognitive ability in its definition of diversity.

In addition to including disability in diversity statements, higher ed institutions can welcome students with disabilities by:

- Including diversity of abilities on freshman profile webpages
- Including photos of students with disabilities in admission office decor, marketing materials, and on webpages and/or social media content
- Encouraging the formation of relevant clubs and disability cultural centers.

Colleges that send such positive messages to disabled students will not only make them more interested in applying for admission; students will also be more inclined to disclose their diagnoses and access needed accommodations and services, thus increasing their chances of graduation and benefiting all parties involved. [□](#)

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