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Bring Down the Barriers—Seen and Unseen

By Rachel Adams

A colleague in a wheelchair goes into an underground passage connecting two campus buildings. Once the entrance locks behind him, he discovers that the door at the other end refuses to open with his swipe card. Although he is a vigorous man of middle age, the maintenance worker who comes to his rescue calls him Pops.

A student with a sensory-processing disorder needs to sit in the front row of class and take notes on a laptop computer, but the professor insists that laptops may be used only in the back of the room. After the student explains her situation, he announces to the entire class that he is making a "special exception" for her.

I heard these and other stories about broken elevators, stairs without handrails, and inaccessible bathrooms at a recent panel on disability and the university that I organized on campus for students, faculty, and staff from our Office of Disability Services.

The news wasn't all so grim. One student with muscular dystrophy was welcomed into the marching band, and another described her professors as generous and accommodating. A professor who had been around since the 1980s insisted that conditions at our university are much better today than they were in the recent past. And the panelists and audience agreed that there was a general climate of acceptance and good will toward accommodating people with disabilities on campus.

They also agreed that good will is hardly enough. But neither are the requirements for accommodation mandated by the Americans With Disabilities Act, which fall far short of making college campuses genuinely inclusive environments for people with disabilities. Recent news stories indicate that my university is hardly alone in confronting these problems. At County College of Morris, in New Jersey, a student was told not to participate in class discussions because the instructor found his severe stutter to be disruptive. And a student with epilepsy at Colorado Mountain College was asked to drop a class after she had a seizure that was deemed distracting to

other students.

Of course, there's another side to the accessibility story, one that's rarely in the news. Wayne State University, Florida State University, Humboldt State University, and Binghamton University all receive glowing reviews of their services for people with disabilities from *New Mobility*, a magazine for wheelchair users. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has a program to support study abroad for students with disabilities and what it says is the first collegiate wheelchair basketball teams for both men and women. The University of California at Berkeley, where the Independent Living movement got its start, continues to offer one of the most accessible campuses in the country. But these tend to be the exceptions rather than the rule.

The controversies that have been in the news lately point toward the emergence of newer and more difficult terrain in the struggle for disabled people's rights. On campuses, considerable effort goes into material accommodations, such as building ramps and accessible bathrooms, providing note takers and sign-language interpreters, or securing extra time on exams. But, as important as these provisions are, they do little to meet the needs of students with invisible disabilities like bipolar disorder, chronic fatigue syndrome, epilepsy, or stuttering. And they do not mitigate the more subtle ways that people with disabilities are told that they are unwelcome: locating a ramp behind a Dumpster on a dark loading dock, holding parties and other extracurricular events at inaccessible locations, or offering accommodations only for talks specifically related to the topic of disability.

At Columbia, matters of accommodation are handled by our Office of Disability Services on an individual basis, with virtually no effort to inform faculty and staff about what it means to create a truly inclusive classroom. For example, every semester since the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech, my colleagues and I have received an e-mail with a list of alarming behaviors that might indicate psychiatric disturbances in our students. We can all agree on the importance of campus safety, but in the absence of any broader effort to educate faculty, the memo creates the disturbing implication that students with psychiatric disabilities are liable to be violent or dangerous.

One problem noted by Lennard J. Davis in a recent article in *The Chronicle* is that universities don't value disability as a form of diversity, as they do race and gender. While on most campuses there is a consensus about the value of including people of different racial

and ethnic backgrounds, genders, and sexual orientations, there is no such commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities. Materials related to disabilities rarely appear on course syllabi; students and faculty with disabilities are almost never featured in promotional brochures and videos. As Davis suggests, there is something wrong with a discourse of diversity that doesn't include people with disabilities, who make up around 10 percent of the world's population.

But there's another important point to be made here. Colleges stand to learn from the lessons of the universal-design movement, which showed that changes in the built environment intended to accommodate people with disabilities ended up benefiting everyone.

A genuine effort to include—not simply to accommodate—people with disabilities could have a radical effect on our teaching and our professional practices. What if the instructor who silenced the stutterer had instead taken his disability as an opportunity to examine the goals and purpose of class participation? What if a professor who was asked to give a disabled student extra time on an exam paused to think about whether 50 minutes was the ideal time for any student to complete the exam?

When our campuses tolerate, but do not welcome, people with disabilities, they undermine the values of democracy, justice, and intellectual freedom that are the core values of higher education. And when we regard students and colleagues with disabilities as nuisances or disruptions, we lose the opportunities they provide to think critically, with fresh eyes, about the assumptions on which our pedagogy and our intellectual projects are based.

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