

Using Disability Studies Theory to Change Disability Services: A Case Study in Student Activism

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Abstract

In 2001, a group of student activists at Syracuse University started an organization called the Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee (BCCC). The BCCC activists used disability studies theory to engage the campus in conversations about disability and inform significant change in the way Syracuse administration think about disability. This paper explores what makes Syracuse unique and what happened between 2001 and the present day. It concludes with recommendations for disability services providers on how they can use the experience at Syracuse to inform their thinking about campus culture and services.

Introduction: Why is Syracuse Unique?

Disability Studies at Syracuse University is indebted in part to the last two centuries of the history of activism that has occurred in the Syracuse area. The history of Syracuse reveals a community that was ripe for progressive social action. In the 1850s, Frederick Douglass frequently visited Syracuse from his home in Rochester, New York, often to give public orations against slavery in Fayette Park. The city operated multiple stops along the underground railroad via the Reverend Jermain Loguen; residents protested the Fugitive Slave Acts by, for example, helping Harriet Powell and “Jerry” Henry escape capture. In 1851 and 1861, Susan B. Anthony traveled to Syracuse to attend the city’s Anti-Slavery Conventions.

During this time, in 1854, Hervey Wilbur, following the educational philosophy of Edouard Seguin, opened the New York State Asylum for Idiots in Syracuse. In declaring that “idiots” can be taught, Wilbur set up one of the first schools in the United States for people with intellectual disabilities. In 1855, 89 students attended; by 1912, 500 children lived at the school and in the allied farm colony (Taylor, 1998). By 1998, the last five residents moved out of what was, by then, known as

the Syracuse Developmental Center. Though certainly outdated and even “wrong” in their methods, the educational philosophies of Wilbur and Seguin represent a local lineage that eventually progressed to the development of socio-political understandings of disability.

In 1870, sixteen years after Wilbur opened his school, the Methodist Episcopal Church passed a resolution to charter Syracuse University. The University offered courses in algebra, geometry, Latin, Greek, history, physiology, elocution, and rhetoric. The College of Medicine was founded in 1872. After this period, many disability activists and scholars emerged from the Syracuse area. Elizabeth Farrell, the founder of the Council for Exceptional Children and an early, progressive educator, lived close to Syracuse in 1877. She adhered to, but then eventually veered from, Seguin’s teachings. In the twentieth century, other important disability rights activists emerged: self-advocates like Michael Kennedy, Pat Felt, and Al Zappala, and scholars such as Wolf Wolfensberger, Gunnar Dybwad, Bob Bogdan, Steven J. Taylor, Doug Biklen, and Burton Blatt.

Today, what makes Syracuse University remarkable are the continued, far-reaching connections among the University and Syracuse communities. The Center on

Human Policy, and the expansion of this Center, the Center on Human Policy, Law, and Disability Studies (hereafter “the Center”), is University-based yet highly engaged in the community, including housing the Early Childhood Direction Center, the Disability Rights Clinic, and directing Project Accessible, which works with community stakeholders to increase awareness of issues of accessibility of buildings and services in the area and to create more accessible buildings and services in the Syracuse communities. This article describes how, through student activism, the Office of Disability Services at Syracuse University came to contribute to unique engagement with disability studies theory on campus.

From Theory to Activism

Disability Studies at Syracuse University provides foundational knowledge for promoting positive social change on campus and beyond. Disability studies applies social, cultural, historical, and philosophical perspectives to the study of disability in society (Disability Studies at Syracuse University, n.d., para. 1). Disability studies diverges from the medical model of disability, which posits disability as something to be fixed and that essentializes the person to the sum of the impairment (Charlton, 1998; Davis, 1997; Gartner & Lipsky, 1999; Linton, 1998; Longmore, 2003; Slee, 1996). Disability studies theory is a synthesis of social constructionism and critical theory that places disability in the political realm, resisting notions of stigma and asserting alliance with other groups excluded because of race, gender, class, or sexuality. Disability studies examines barriers—physical, social, political, cultural, economic—that exist for individuals with impairments. Disability studies theory interrogates the positions that people with disabilities occupy, and have historically been forced to occupy, in political, social, legal, and economic relationships. (Thomson, 2000).

While disability studies as a disciplinary field contests inequities, disability services offices focus on providing accommodations and taking up issues of participation. Staff often concentrate on legal and compliance issues, without recognizing a philosophical stance on inclusion and disability. Offices of disability services and disability studies programs are often distant and unconnected. However, disability studies *theory* operates as an academic and abstract critique of power and powerlessness and is transferrable to the practice of

disability services. This theory critiques authority, for example, privileging a student’s knowledge of him or her self, rather than assuming that a professor or administrator knows best. Disability studies in praxis works to define disciplinary boundaries; yet, disability theory transgresses boundaries and can be applied to multiple locations on campus far outside the Disability Studies program. Disability Studies puts heavy emphasis on the merging of theory and practice and begets activism, as our case study will demonstrate.

Theory and practice converge in the Disability Studies program at Syracuse University, as it encourages students to live what they learn in class. Since the program is grounded in the philosophy of full participation of people with disabilities, it was not likely that when students felt the University was a barrier to the full participation of all students in the program, they were going to stay quiet about it. The faculty of the Disability Studies program all were disability/human rights activists in their own ways. They based their teaching in the notion that disability studies, as a discipline, necessitates action. It is not enough to simply state that people with disabilities should have the same rights accorded all others; these faculty led by example in teaching students that disability studies scholars need to take a stand for the humanity of individuals with disabilities.

The Center on Human Policy, the institutional structure in support of the Disability Studies program, includes staff, associates, educators, human services professionals, people with disabilities, graduate students, and family members of children and youth with disabilities.

The Center has an Advocacy Board composed of people with disabilities, parents, and interested citizens who serve as a collective independent voice on the rights of people with disabilities in the community. The Center is involved with a broad range of local, statewide, national, and international activities, including policy studies, research, referral, advocacy, training and consultation, and information dissemination. The Center is also directly involved in the Disability Studies program, which includes Master’s and doctoral programs with concentrations in Disability Studies, a graduate Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) in Disability Studies, and a joint degree program in law and Disability Studies, which includes a law degree (J.D.) and a Master’s and CAS in Disability Studies.

Formation of the Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee

In the Fall of 2001, there was a critical mass of students enrolled in the disability studies program. Three new Ph.D. students commenced their degree programs with Disability Studies as their primary academic area. Each self-identified as an individual with a disability and each had an interest in disability that went beyond the Center's historic focus on deinstitutionalization and independent living for individuals labeled with cognitive disabilities. Additionally, there were two, more senior, doctoral students who had research assistantships in the Center on Human Policy and were part of the earliest discussions on disability rights in academia, specifically, at Syracuse University. These five students formed the Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee (BCCC).

There was a conflux of events that helped BCCC get started and take hold. The Center held regular Wednesday morning staff meetings. During one of these meetings, some of the students expressed frustration with the difficulties they were having obtaining appropriate accommodations. One student, who is blind, never had his books converted to e-text in time for him to read them for class. Another student, who is deaf, had difficulty in obtaining Computer Assisted Realtime Translation (CART) in some of his classes and Signed English interpreters in other classes. In both situations, the staff of the Office of Disability Services (ODS) argued that the accommodations provided were compliant with the laws, even if they did not meet the students' preferences. Also, during this time, the doctoral students at the Center were working on an information packet that eventually became *Beyond Compliance: An Information Packet on the Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education* (Cory et al., 2003). So, issues of accommodations, full and meaningful participation, and postsecondary education were in the forefront at Center meetings. In a meeting in Fall 2001, the idea to form an activist group clicked into place. The need to take action, not simply talk about the issues, became necessary, and the students arranged a meeting to start discussions on what actions they could take to move the University beyond a simple compliance to the law mindset. The students choose the name "Beyond Compliance" because they felt that as long as the University was meeting just the minimal compliance standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section

504 of the Rehabilitation Act (504), there was no possibility of equality of opportunity and meaningful participation in the academic community of the university. The students wanted to move University administrators beyond this compliance ethos. Additionally, they chose the phrase "Coordinating Committee" as part of the name for its association with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a seminal organization of the Civil Rights Movement that organized sit-ins, freedom rides, and voter registration drives throughout the South during the 1960s.

During the BCCC's first semester in existence, the students wrote a platform. The four strands of the platform reflected aspects of the University that they felt needed to change:

1. Reshaping Syracuse University's conception of disability to promote an understanding of disability as a form of diversity.
2. University recognition and funding of the Disability Studies program.
3. Creating model accommodations exemplifying the University's commitment to equality of opportunity for students with disabilities.
4. Hiring faculty and staff members with disabilities within departments across the University.

An early action of the BCCC was recruiting other doctoral students with a passion for disability studies. More students, both graduate and undergraduate, continued to join the core BCCC membership. With the assistance of the Director of the Center on Human Policy, the Committee identified a core group of faculty allies and brought them together for brainstorming and information sharing. At a luncheon meeting, these faculty reviewed the BCCC platform, gave feedback, and suggested next steps for the students. Along with the platform, the BCCC students wrote a more developed position statement, annotating the points of the platform.

In the Fall of 2001, at the request of the students, and with some behind-the-scenes support from the faculty, the Dean of the School of Education met with the BCCC and, after hearing their platform, invited the students to present the platform to the faculty at the next School of Education faculty meeting. This was a moving experience for the faculty and an empowering one for the students. One of the student presenters indicated that it was the first time that she, as a woman with a disability, felt like people were listening to and validating her experiences.

The faculty voted unanimously to endorse the platform. And so the work of the BCCC commenced.

The BCCC in Action

In the Spring semester of 2002, many members of the BCCC were enrolled in a Disability Studies seminar. In this seminar, the class read a book each week and students provided discussion guides and facilitated discussion of the books and issues associated with the books. During this semester, the entire class experienced the frustration of one of its colleague's not being able to fully and meaningfully participate in class. One student, who was a member of this class and also blind, needed his books scanned so that he could access them through JAWS, an assistive technology screen reading program. Even though the books were available to be scanned by mid-December; the books were never scanned in time for him to read them or prepare to facilitate or participate in class discussions. This issue was ongoing, and was in fact one of the events that led to the formation of the BCCC. Therefore, the class temporarily suspended the readings and focused on strategizing a protest of the ODS for this pattern of denial of access of course materials for a student.

During, and outside of, class, students wrote a letter to the Director of ODS pointing out that although books for the class were provided to ODS substantially prior to class meetings, this material had not been made available to the student with adequate time to prepare for class, if at all. The fact that he was unable to meet the requirements of the course, due to lack of provision of the books, was, in the class's view, discriminatory and compromised the academic process. In this letter, the class stated that its expectation was that for the remainder of his studies at Syracuse University, the student would have his course materials in electronic format one week prior to each class so that he could adequately prepare and participate in a productive and effective way, enabling his colleagues to benefit from his contributions.

All eight members of this seminar signed the letter of protest, and on February 15, 2002, a small group of students hand delivered the original to the Director of ODS and copies of this letter to the Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Vice President of Undergraduate Studies (who also served as the 504 Compliance Officer for the University), the Associate Vice President of Undergraduate Studies, the Director of Student Service and

Retention, and the Dean of the School of Education.

While the class was hopeful that these letters would yield fruit in the student's receiving his books in electronic format in a timely manner, he did not receive the next week's readings. The Director of ODS phoned the student, told him that the book was not ready, and that she would be willing to read the book to him. Of course, he refused. A human reader does not provide the independence and speed that the student had through the JAWS program. On February 18, the class received a memorandum of reply from the Vice President of Undergraduate Studies / 504 Compliance Officer, in which he refused to investigate the allegations of discrimination and demanded that the class provide evidence of our accusations.

On February 20, the class received an e-mail from the Dean of the School of Education who gave her assurances that administration was working cooperatively to reach understandings and to create solutions to the immediate issue of access to class material. The Dean asked that the class share its response and supporting materials with her before responding to the Vice President / 504 Compliance Officer. The students briefly met with her, and then the class responded on February 22, 2002, in a letter to the Vice President / 504 Compliance Officer, delivering copies to the same individuals who received the original protest letter. Included in this letter that students provided on November 30, 2000, was the ODS policy and a chronology of events documenting how this policy was violated, samples of improperly scanned materials that were difficult to read through the JAWS software, and five email communications between the student and ODS, in which, among other things, ODS admitted their tardiness in preparing his materials.

One of the outcomes of this protest action was that these students were invited to meet with the Vice Chancellor of Syracuse University. In late February of 2002, representatives from the BCCC met with and presented the BCCC Platform to the Vice Chancellor, Vice President of Undergraduate Studies, and the Graduate Studies Dean of Syracuse University. Similarly to the presentation to the School of Education faculty, students made a conscious decision, in a BCCC strategy meeting before the meeting with the Vice Chancellor, to focus on the Platform, not with specific complaints against ODS. The group wanted to make reasonable suggestions such as, for example, establishing a task force related to accessibility issues on campus. While one of the faculty allies attended this meeting, the faculty who could not

attend expressed unanimous support for the BCCC and its Platform. The breadth of support was wide. In presenting the Platform, the group related it to the academic mission of Syracuse University, that by integrating a disability studies perspective into research, teaching, and community service at Syracuse, disability would become recognized as a form of diversity. One student addressed the fourth strand of the Platform, hiring faculty and staff members with disabilities within departments across the University, in the context of suggesting the joint appointment of a scholar with a disability to Disability Studies and another discipline. While the group did not address the immediate ODS issue specifically, the issue was alluded to by suggesting the possibility of creating the summer position for a graduate assistant to help review university accommodations policy and to participate in Teacher Assistant orientation to ensure that issues around accommodations were addressed during orientation.

Administrative Outcomes

The group's actions did have one, almost immediate, impact: On March 1, 2002, the Vice President / 504 Compliance Officer sent a memo to three BCCC members in which he introduced his proposal for a Summer 2002 and Academic year 2002-2003 "pilot" plan "to secure the timely production of alternatively formatted materials for disabled students." He stated that he intended to present this plan for the Chancellor's approval and that he intended to share it with the student, "his professors, and those of his peers who have written on his behalf." By mid-April 2002, the pilot plan had not been shared, and the group was unaware if it had been developed at all. On April 19, 2002, students again hand delivered another round of letters, addressed to the Vice Chancellor, thanking her for meeting with the representatives of the BCCC in February, but expressing continued concern for the arbitrary way that ODS creates policy that impacts students with disabilities, and asking her to develop a formal means for students and faculty to be active participants in the crafting of disability policy. To this letter was attached a chronology of events to remind the Vice Chancellor of the history of the issue and reiterated the need for a formal mechanism to be in place for soliciting and incorporating student input into the accommodation process.

The frustration the students expressed with the accommodations was not frustration with a specific

person. The BCCC platform focused in part on the need for state-of-the-art accommodations, both low tech and high tech, that would allow students to achieve in their classes. Students saw Syracuse as having the opportunity to design and implement model accommodations. There was a possibility for Syracuse to become a national leader in the way campuses thought about and implemented accommodations, which would further articulate the University's national leadership in Inclusive Education and Disability Studies. On a campus that had a reputation for teaching, and acting on, inclusion, there was even more of a need, the students felt, for the campus to live inclusion.

Shortly after the BCCC's meeting with the Vice-Chancellor, the Office of Disability Services experienced a change in staff. The director who was in place in 2001 and 2002 was put on administrative leave, and eventually, an Interim Director was hired. This new Director had a long career in disability services and he was recruited as someone who had deep knowledge of disability and who would develop rapport with the students. He understood, and for the most part, agreed with the BCCC platform and did an excellent job of balancing the demands of meeting the University's legal obligations and administrative hurdles while listening to the students and incorporating their work into the design and implementation of the work of his office. He would often state that ODS and the BCCC were working towards a common goal and that sometimes their methods and ideas would align closely, and other times they would be further apart, but they were never oppositional. After a year as the Interim Director, he applied for and earned the permanent Director position.

Working Group on Disability

In Fall 2002, in response to the students' request for a clear mechanism for participation in disability policy and procedure, a Working Group on Disability was formed, in which members of the BCCC, the Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Studies, the Director of the Office of Disability Services, and the Office of Design and Construction would collaborate on resolving accessibility issues at the University. At the present time, almost eight years later, the Working Group is still active, and its members include BCCC representatives, Graduate Students, The Director of the Office of Disability Services, the Assistant Director of Design and Construction, the Associate Director

of Career Services, Librarians, and Faculty members. In the past, the Working Group has also collaborated directly with the Division of Student Support and Retention. The Working Group's main goals are to examine, address, and resolve urgent issues concerning students with disabilities on campus, and to establish communication between students with disabilities, staff, faculty, and University administrators. The Working Group functions mostly as a conduit in that concerns come to it via the BCCC, the Office of Disability Services, and other means. Once a concern is logged, the group works collaboratively across departments and services in order to remedy the situation.

In the early days, the working group struggled to find a common way to both function and to formulate goals. Within a semester, the Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Studies was able to realize that to really "work" on issues, all the relevant players needed to be brought to the table. Each time an issue came up, he invited the stakeholders to a meeting, and the details of a solution were brainstormed and implemented. Early issues the Working Group tackled included the review of the new ODS policy manual, creation of a snow-removal procedure (this was, after all, Syracuse, New York), and issues around the consistently broken elevators in the Law School parking lot. Later, the Working Group continued to look at barriers to accessibility, both large and small, while always asserting that compliance was a starting point, not an ending point.

Once the BCCC was established on campus as an advocacy group, members started to receive complaints surrounding the lack of physical accessibility of the corporate-owned campus bookstore, among other barriers to access. The bookstore kept all of their textbooks in the basement, accessible only by a steep flight of stairs. The obvious solution, of moving textbooks to the first floor, was not as simple as it would seem, there were still three steps on the main level that would disallow full access. Once the issue was prioritized in 2007, the Working Group formed a coalition that included Design and Construction (the bookstore leased the space from the University), the managers of the mall in which the store was located, and BCCC representatives. Essentially, a majority of stakeholders were invited to problem-solve collaboratively. A few interested parties offered to open a rear, ground floor, entrance which would remain open for those who needed to use it. However, the BCCC and the Working Group sought to go "beyond compliance" and would not settle for a back or alternate entrance.

Because the textbooks were kept in the basement, the arguments of the BCCC centered around the idea that the bookstore, as well as their customers, would all benefit from easier access to the textbooks. In this sense, the advocacy of the BCCC focused on a resolution to the problem of inaccessibility in the context of universal design. After multiple discussions, the corporation that owned the bookstore decided not only to move the textbooks upstairs to the first floor, but also to install a beautiful, red-oak hardwood ramp that led to the textbook section. The bookstore received public acknowledgement in the school newspaper, as well as increased business. Moreover, the BCCC improved its relationship with the Mall in which the bookstore was located—and this led to the next action.

Because of the BCCC's improved relationship with the managers of the mall, members became involved in the planning, design, and construction of the Fitness Center that would be located in the mall. The groups worked collaboratively to design large and accessible unisex bathrooms, bright and contrasting colors for the floor, universally designed fitness equipment, non-fluorescent lighting, and individual control of the television noise.

Challenges of the Working Group mainly consist of the Group's attempts to balance long-term solutions and short-term needs. Although the Group would like to make every space on campus physically accessible, there are still some physically inaccessible buildings and spaces on campus that remain so because of the University's long-term plans for construction and renovation. Other issues still to address include: parking assignments which are currently given out based on seniority not need, a strip of old buildings that offer student services (Legal Services, LGBT Resource Center) that remains inaccessible, the University website's accessibility and usability, and continuing snow removal issues. But overall, the Working Group has coalesced into a formidable force on campus that collaborates across identities and roles in order to address pressing issues, that while they may appear to be singularly disability-related, are in fact a benefit to the entire University community.

The Chancellor's Task Force

In May 2005, shortly after taking her post as Chancellor of Syracuse University, in light of the campus climate and her personal and professional commitment to inclusion, the new Chancellor established the Task

Force on Disability. Led by two faculty and the Director of ODS, the goals of this Task Force include consideration of centralized funding, the development of future programs, and the potential of Syracuse University to again be a pioneer in innovative leadership, model accommodations, and the integration of disability studies in the University's academic mission. In September 2007, the Report of the Task Force was completed, establishing Syracuse University as a leader in moving beyond compliance with the law for accommodations and in collaboration on disability issues. Generally, the recommendations were to strengthen disability policy, programming, technology, and services across the University community. Challenges included: physical access, communication access, technology and virtual access, academic and program access, staff and faculty with disabilities, students with disabilities, and University life. Other prominent features of the Report include the push to publicize the core value of disability as a form of diversity, the need for regular staff and faculty training, the development of comprehensive plans by departments, schools, and services for disability inclusion, the adoption of a policy against harassment, and the need for a disability link on the University's homepage. The Task Force will to continue to operate within the values set forth by the Chancellor—a steadfast commitment to social justice and equality.

Campus-Wide Educational Programming

The Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee, in support of the mission of systemic change, provides campus-wide educational programming that supports a positive climate for disability. Since 2002, the BCCC has provided speakers, presentations, and performances, always without admission fees, that include scholars and speakers such as Eli Clare, Keith Wann, Dan Keplinger, David Roche, Jonathan Mooney, Greg Walloch, Lennard Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, and Chris Bell. In 2003, the BCCC began its annual film festival with "Reflections on Diversity: Disability in Film." During this film festival, the BCCC brought in guest speakers to introduce the films and engage in question, answers, and discussion after the films. The BCCC worked with different departments in the School of Education and across the University to obtain funding for honoraria and film rights. The films were shown over a semester, and were well attended each week. The 2004 festival was called "Laughing with Us: Comedy and Disability;" this

three day festival featured films, television episodes, and stand-up comedy that satirized and parodied stereotypes of disability. The festival continued annually through 2007. Then, in 2008, the BCCC hosted the first bi-annual Disability Studies Graduate Student Conference, with Brenda Brueggemann, professor of Women's Studies and Deaf Studies Scholar, as the keynote. Additionally, since 2005, the BCCC has organized Brown Bag lectures in which graduate students and/or faculty share their work in a community and cross-disciplinary space. The Beyond Compliance Award ceremony, started in 2004, is an event in which the BCCC celebrates a department, faculty, staff, student, or student group who deserves public recognition of their work on disability issues.

The BCCC has also presented to University Deans on universal design in learning and has made presentations to classes and national and international conferences. Because the BCCC has allied itself with administration, organizations, and services across campus, the group is able to respond quickly to conflicts or issues that occur day to day. For example, in 2004, the BCCC published a position statement that problematized an educational campus program called the "Tunnel of Oppression." The program, part of an effort to promote diversity by the Office of Residence Life, creates a haunted house-like production that simulates situations of oppression and discrimination. In one instance, the program depicts someone in a wheelchair trying to painfully squeeze into a door that is too narrow. In the position statement opposing the program, the BCCC points to the fact that the event becomes a "freak show" and that simulation and role-playing oversimplifies the complexity of oppression. The simulations all too often leave viewers with a feeling of distaste for those with whom the production is trying to "help." Though this is not the first nor the last position paper published by the BCCC, it helped the group gain significant public presence in efforts to understand disability as a complex, cultural identity whose oppression is not quickly remedied through simulation.

Conclusion: What We Can Learn

Disability studies is intimately tied to action. In this sense scholars and activists working in the field connect their work to communities outside academia. While the University is often perceived as the center of the City of Syracuse, in fact, the University is "surrounded by" the many communities that make up the city of Syracuse.

This sense of interconnectedness between and among the University and the “surrounding” geographies is not forgotten when disability studies is put into action.

This case study is an example of the power students have to inform change on campus. While Syracuse University enrolled 19,084 graduate and undergraduate students in 2007 (22% African American, Asian American, Native American, and Latino students), any college campus, regardless of demographics or size, can produce outcomes similar to what this study describes. There have been many active undergraduate and graduate student groups on campuses across the United States. The State University of New York (SUNY) at Geneseo, for example, has an undergraduate group called Students Educating About Ableism. An inaccessible campus led the group, in 2008, to lead a tour around campus demonstrating the barriers that existed. They have also heavily critiqued and taken action to develop a system to transport students with disabilities on campus, a system that is already in place at most of the SUNY campuses. A student group at Ohio State University called Unity works on ongoing projects that include social, educational, and cultural events. They celebrate out loud Disability Awareness Month on campus, bring speakers, provide entertainment, organize adapted sports, and art exhibitions. Also, a chapter of the Autism Self Advocacy Network has recently been established on The Ohio State University campus. And, of course, University of California, Berkeley, which is known for early disability rights actions in the 1960’s, has a 40+ year-old Disabled Students’ Union. Clearly, there is a connection between a campus having a Disability Studies program and it’s also having an active disabled student group. However, advocacy groups can still be established at schools that do not have a Disability Studies department.

This case study provides lessons in applying Disability studies theory across any campus, with or without a Disability Studies program. Disability services staff can create and administer services and accommodations while working with student advocates. The BCCC helped University administrators and faculty re-frame the “problem” of disability on campus. The students worked with the University to assist them in seeing compliance with the ADA as a starting point for conversations, not an ending point. Therefore the University could move “beyond compliance” to a place where students with disabilities are valued for their input and diversity. The student members of the BCCC worked with the University to, whenever possible, change the

environment, rather than expect change from students who use the Office of Disability Services. Disability studies theory insists that the “problem” with disability is not in the person, but in the environment. The problem is not a student’s inability to walk unassisted, but the flight of stairs they are being expected to ascend. A task force, or working group, consisting of advocates and administrators can benefit any campus.

The work of addressing systemic change in ways of thinking about disability was accomplished through programs and outreach, as well as through conversations and protests over campus activities the BCCC felt were discriminatory or oppressive. The annual film series helped raise awareness of disability and were accompanied by discussions that framed the films in the context of the social construction of disability. Additionally, events such as the e-books protest and policy letter against the Tunnel of Oppression, and the meetings with administrators that followed these protests, allowed students to share their philosophy with a wider audience. Although disability service providers may not want to participate in protests on their campuses, they can provide outreach programs and engage in thoughtful conversations with faculty and staff about the representations of disability in campus programs.

This case study also illustrates the power of having students who are served through offices of disability services involved in the process of creating the services. The Working Group that was formed in collaboration with University administration solicited direct input from the students on issues of accessibility on campus while allowing those students to be part of the solution process. It empowers the students and provides administration real expertise to solve problems.

Disability service providers can also learn from this case study how to work with and support student advocates. The Director of ODS maintained throughout all discussions that his office and the BCCC were working toward a common purpose. Although their strategies, mechanisms, and decisions may vary, the larger objective was the same. This strengthened the directors’ relationship with the BCCC and kept it from getting adversarial, allowing him to maintain a positive working climate with the students. Disability service providers should identify as allies to students with disabilities, allowing them to support the goals of student advocacy groups. Additionally, through this case study, disability services staff can learn that student access to the staff and transparency of operations can support a positive advocacy spirit.

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Zosha Stuckey is a PhD candidate in Composition & Cultural Rhetoric at Syracuse University. She teaches Writing & Rhetoric as social justice and is finishing her dissertation entitled "Friction in Our Machinery: (Dis)Ability & Rhetorical Education at the New York State Asylum for Idiots, 1854-1884." Her publications include upcoming work in *Autobiography Studies*, a review in *DSQ*, and entries in the *Encyclopedia of American Disability History*.

Rebecca C. Cory is the Manager of Disability Services at North Seattle Community College. She facilitates accommodations for students and works with faculty to design accessible curriculum. Dr. Cory has given numerous presentations on inclusive higher education and Universal Design, and is co-editor of *Building Pedagogical Curbcuts: Incorporating Disability in the University Classroom and Curriculum* (Syracuse University Press, 2005) and *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice* (Harvard Education Press, 2008). Dr. Cory has also taught courses on disability studies, special education, and research at the university level.

Professional Perspective

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In their article, Cory, White, and Stuckey describe the impact that student activism has had in supporting the development of a positive climate for disability at Syracuse University. The impetus for change was students' experience that the compliant delivery of accommodations often does not support "equality of opportunity and meaningful participation." Informed, connected, and emboldened by disability studies, the students' response was community organization and activism rather than the more common individual complaint.

This case study provides a compelling example of how exposure to the historic, political, economic, and cultural experiences of disability taught through disability studies can ignite student involvement and significantly change a campus. As service providers we may find ourselves frustrated with our campus' failure to appreciate the essential perspective that disability offers, with its reactive approach to inclusion, and with students' hesitancy to use services or get involved. It may often feel like our advocacy is at odds with the mainstream and that we have too few resources (financial, personnel, and allies) to achieve comprehensive change. The experience at Syracuse demonstrates how we can alleviate these frustrations by embracing, both for ourselves and for students, a disability studies lens.

While many of our institutions don't have disability studies departments, Cory and her colleagues remind us that there are still ways in which we can capitalize on the potential of disability theory to encourage student activism and reframe concepts of inclusion and normalcy. The general lessons for the service profession that I take from the article include:

- Personally engage with disability studies theory through reading, research, and conversation. Disability scholarship offers perspectives that haven't been traditionally used to inform disability service practice but that offer a powerful impetus for professional and program growth.
- Consider how office policies, procedures, and messages frame disability consistent with disability studies theory... and if they do not, make changes. Intake processes, accommodation request/delivery procedures, communication

with students, faculty and administrators, and decision-making that may prioritize compliance over usability are all areas to examine. In each, is the "problem" framed as belonging to the student or an environmental barrier?

- Integrate progressive conceptualizations of disability into interactions with students
 - Foster a positive perspective on disability and resist traditional notions that stigmatize and segregate
 - Frame conversation not in terms of student "need" but in terms of environmental barriers
 - Respect student self-knowledge and expertise in identifying what works for them... sometimes over what the professional recommends
 - Provide opportunities for leadership and support students in those roles as their allies
 - Encourage students to engage with disability theory by collaborating with them in the development of progressive, campus-wide 'awareness' presentations and community development activities
- Encourage the inclusion of disability studies curriculum into the academy by engaging with faculty and administrators to explore and consider how disability is currently represented on campus. Disability studies content can be integrated into existing coursework, such as history, sociology, arts, and identity studies classes, or developed as new courses.

Syracuse's unique history and community and the presence of a "critical mass" of students involved in disability studies scholarship, were instrumental in setting the stage for change on that campus; however, the power of the article beyond case study is its demonstration of the empowering, transformational potential of disability theory for both students and the service profession.