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Diversity Initiatives Committee

Working Group Recommendations on Disability Access

I. The Significance of Disability to Campus Diversity

As U.S. institutions, including those in higher education, endeavor to “recast” themselves in response to a new and rapidly changing demographic reality, it is critical that they not neglect to both consider and address the implications of our largest and fastest growing minority constituency, forty-nine million Americans with disabilities. One in every five U.S. citizens reports some type of disability, with one in 10 reporting the existence of a severe disability (Bureau of the Census, 1997). Internationally, the world population of persons with disabilities has grown to exceed 500 million (United Nations Division for Social Policy and Development, 1999). Looking ahead, the prevalence of persons with disabilities is expected to continue to increase as a result of ongoing advancements in medical technology and treatment for previously fatal disorders and illnesses, and the increasing prevalence of older individuals both nationally and worldwide. Current data suggest that our nation is ill prepared for this eventuality.

Since the enactment of the ADA in 1992, the U.S. has experienced the greatest period of economic growth in its history; however, persons with disabilities have generally not benefited from this unparalleled prosperity. Indeed, unemployment among non-institutionalized persons with disabilities of working age was consistently reported to be in the vicinity of 70 percent during that period. According to the *2000 National Organization on Disability/Louis Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities*, 12 years following the passage of the ADA, substantial gaps continue to exist between persons with and without disabilities with regard to employment, education, income, access to transportation, health care, entertainment/going out, frequency of socializing, attendance at religious services, political participation/voter registration and life satisfaction.

Higher education has been found to be an efficacious means of countering these foreboding outcomes. For example, the rate of employment among respondents to the aforementioned *NOD/Harris Survey* with at least some college education was 44% higher than that reported for those who had not attended college. Of course, even for those who attend and graduate from college it has been estimated that a differential of 15 percent or greater in annual income exists between full-time employees with and those without disabilities (Hendricks, Schiro-Geist & Broadbent, 1997). However, a study of UIUC graduates with disabilities from 1952 to 1991 found the salary gap between University of Illinois graduates with disabilities and their able-bodied cohort, when matched for age, gender, and college major and when health status effects were controlled, was statistically insignificant (Hendricks, Schiro-Geist & Broadbent, 1997). **Clearly, when persons with disabilities have had the opportunity to avail themselves of the resources of the University of Illinois, significantly more positive outcomes have resulted.**

Proactively seeking to increase the participation of persons with disabilities among the students, faculty and staff would not only serve to significantly enhance the quality of life of persons with disabilities, but it would also benefit the institution by:

- decreasing the demand placed upon pension systems, worker's compensation, and/or other government social welfare resources (e.g., SSDI) thereby directly and indirectly increasing the net financial resources available for mission critical institutional activities
- improving the retention of academic and operational expertise by reducing the frequency of retirements attributable to unaccommodated disabilities
- contributing to the development and support of critical research initiatives with applied disability-related foci
- enhancing sensitivity to the potential impact of disability-related factors in the research and curricula of all disciplines
- improving our knowledge and understanding of disability within the context of each discipline, and thereby improve the academy's ability to effectively respond to the questions and needs of a growing number of practitioners with disabilities
- improving curricula by forcing the academy to regularly consider the necessity of its assumptions, traditions, and approaches
- improving teaching by reinforcing the use of universal instructional design which emphasizes multi-modal instructional approaches, more flexible approaches to the evaluation of knowledge/competence and, thereby, makes the classroom more effective for all students

In light of this information, the working group recommends that the University adopt the following four disability access objectives.

Four Disability Access Objectives

1. Increase the prevalence of persons with disabilities among the faculty, staff and students
2. Promote better understanding and use of universal design principles. (<http://www.cast.org/udl/>) relative to all University resources, programs and services
3. Enhance academic discourse regarding disability by increasing disability content in UI curricula
4. Increase campus-wide disability education to enhance disability awareness and knowledge of how to appropriately and effectively engage persons with disabilities

II. Prioritized Disability Recommendations (FY03)

1. Increase the presence and visibility of academic courses that address disability in UIUC curricula (addresses objective 3)

- a. Promote dialogue on opportunities for creating an interdisciplinary disability studies program. There are a number of options for the form of such a program (e.g., an undergraduate minor or an interdisciplinary degree program in disability studies). What is needed at this time is encouragement for relevant units to consider such an initiative.
- b. Consider infusing central issues pertaining to disability within the general education curriculum, in order to ensure that all UIUC students secure a fundamental knowledge base in this area. This recommendation could be implemented in a range of ways (e.g., asking general education courses in appropriate areas, such as social and behavioral science, to infuse content on disability within course offerings; adding a disability requirement to the general education sequence).

Rationale: Educating tomorrow's leaders about disability today helps to minimize tomorrow's barriers to participation.

2. Create a central fund to underwrite expenses associated with disability accommodations for faculty and staff (addresses objective 1)

Rationale: Departmental funding for accommodations invariably results in a situation where faculty/staff must "beg" for accommodation resources that, too frequently, are begrudgingly allocated by unit heads. For faculty, such expenses should also be considered outside the start-up laboratory assistance negotiations. Generally, colleges should not be required to account for unbudgetable accommodation expenses with limited local resources. Centralized funding for disability accommodation would also seem appropriate given that "appropriateness" is judged in reference to an institution's total resources. The best approach would be for central campus to allocate a portion of the campus reserve for the purpose of underwriting these expenses.

3. Improve the utilization of universal design principles in all programs, systems and services (addresses objective 2)
 - a. Formally incorporate input from individuals with universal design expertise in all strategic information technology systems planning
 - b. Underwrite the development of instructional resources pertaining to accessible courseware design for faculty and staff
 - c. Support the development of tools that may be used inconspicuously by course developers to create accessible online instructional resources
 - d. Promote standardization in IT procurement practices of CIC institutions related to accessibility standards to improve vendor compliance

Rationale: Now that the State of Illinois has specific policy guidelines that the University must follow regarding IT accessibility
 <<http://www100.state.il.us/tech/technology/accessibility/iwas1.0.html>> it is critical

that the process of IT resource development incorporate individuals with universal design expertise in IT to ensure compliance and, more importantly, to ensure that our IT resources are not innately inaccessible to persons with disabilities. Inter-institutional collaboration in the promulgation of procurement standards would help to ensure that vendors take the matter of product accessibility seriously.

4. Fund a new tenure track faculty position to support the American Sign Language curriculum on the UIUC campus. The involvement of a faculty member who is a native user of sign language and/or a deaf individual would be highly advantageous to enhancing the curriculum and research agenda in this scholarly area (addresses objectives 1, 3 and 4).

Rationale: Now that ASL has been approved by the General Education Board as an option for meeting the foreign language graduation requirements of U of I colleges, funding for an additional faculty line is needed to support the full implementation of this four year curriculum option and enhancing existing courses on campus in this area.

5. Increase scholarship funding for undergraduate students with disabilities by college (addresses objective 1)

Rationale: The economic impact of a U of I education on the status of graduates with disabilities noted earlier augurs best for the importance of this action.

6. Provide Graduate College fellowships to support the successful recruitment of the most highly qualified graduate students with disabilities (addresses objective 1 and 3)

Rationale: The previously noted economic impact of a U of I education on the status of graduates with disabilities is echoed in support of this action. In addition, such action will increase the likelihood that disability will be better incorporated into the academic and administrative activities of all units.

7. Establish an academic professional position to coordinate faculty/staff accommodations (addresses objective 1)

Rationale: Just as Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services staff with disability and 504/ADA expertise work collaboratively with campus units in planning and implementing academic adjustments and auxiliary aids/services for students with disabilities, similar personnel would benefit the process by which accommodations are identified and introduced for employees with disabilities.

8. Include faculty with disabilities in existing campus programs designed to enhance faculty diversity (e.g., allow recruitment of faculty members with disabilities to participate in the Target of Opportunity Program). Assistance with recruitment should particularly be prioritized in instances where faculty member's knowledge of

and experience with disability will enhance curriculum (addresses objectives 1, 3 and 4)

Rationale: Disability research over the past four decades has well established that the best means of improving the attitudes about persons with disabilities held by persons without disabilities is to promote the sustained interaction of both in roles of an egalitarian nature. Unfortunately, the sparse presence of faculty/staff with disabilities greatly limits the possibility of such contact on a campus-wide level.

9. Provide funding to support neuropsychological testing for enrolled UI students at risk of not being retained who have been identified by the staff of the UI Counseling Center, McKinley, or DRES as very likely having undiagnosed cognitive or psychological disabilities (addresses objective 1)

Rationale: Each year, neuropsychological testing is performed on approximately 60-100 students suspected of having undiagnosed cognitive and/or psychological disabilities, and who are on the verge of being dropped from the University for academic reasons. In those instances where disabilities are diagnosed and accommodations are introduced, significant improvements are typically observed. The current "wait-list" for this service is between 20-30. For many students, this wait list translates into academic probation and/or dismissal. This program, which is critical to the retention and graduation of these students, is funded exclusively through internally reallocated DRES funds. Additional funding will be necessary if we are to be able to effectively reduce the wait-list to zero.

10. Incorporate information related to UIUC disability policies, procedures and resources for students, faculty and staff into the systemic training activities of senior administrators and college intake specialists (addresses objective 4)

Rationale: Due to the infrequency with which most faculty have to respond to the needs of individual students with disabilities, and the difficulty of effectively reaching faculty with disability-related training, it would be best to focus disability training upon senior administrators and intake specialists to ensure that knowledgeable contacts are present in each college.

11. Hold campus-wide "town meetings" on disability issues every 1-3 years. A description of the most recent town meeting on disability access is available at the following URL: <http://www.rehab.uiuc.edu/access/meeting.html> (addresses objectives 1-4)

Rationale: In the absence of systemic, recurring data collection regarding disability access, this approach helps to ensure a feedback loop regarding the status of disability access on the campus.

III. Other Issues For Ongoing Consideration

Several other issues were brought to the attention of the working group that warrant future consideration. First, to reinforce the perception among outside constituencies that disability is considered a value-adding element of our diversity agenda, it was recommended that persons with disabilities be given greater visibility in campus promotional media, and that a standard "access statement" be included on all published campus media. For example, all campus publications could include the following statement, "a copy of this publication may be obtained in an accessible, alternative format upon request" (note: to accommodate compliance with this policy, it will be essential that all units to maintain accessible electronically formatted copies of all documents produced for public dissemination).

To enhance instructional access, it was suggested that the Office of Instructional Resources develop a mechanism for the systemic evaluation of disability access and support in the classroom context. This could greatly aid in identifying access issues for which educational responses were required. However, due to the typically small "n" of students with disabilities in any given class, it would be essential that these data not be communicated back to instructors on an individual class basis, or in any other manner that would compromise the anonymity of the student respondent. It was also suggested that the campus enforce the statutory textbook procurement timetable for all courses, and/or enforce a policy that no materials are distributed to students until instructors have made timely arrangements for their conversion to accessible formats. The latter recommendation was based upon the observation that the "just-in-time" approach used with increasing frequency to identify and order textbooks and other readings, including course-packs, invariably compromises the equal access requirements of the law relative to students with disabilities. This happens because most of the material is made available in a print format that must be converted to an alternative format to accommodate access using assistive information technologies. The time requirements of the latter process cause students with disabilities to receive materials after they are made available to others in the class, and/or they must accept their readings in a piecemeal, sequential manner based on their scheduling within the syllabi of their courses.

Finally, it was also brought to the attention of the working group that the Chancellor's Committee on Access and Accommodation devoted a considerable amount of time last year to the issue of providing more equitable support for the University's highly regarded varsity athletic programs for student athletes with disabilities. Student athletes with disabilities have been extraordinarily effective ambassadors for the University, and they have contributed immeasurably to the positive changes that have occurred in societal attitudes toward disability over the past five decades. Therefore, it would seem reasonable that the University evaluate the qualitative and quantitative differences in the gymnasium access, scholarship funding, travel, and operational support afforded students with disabilities in comparison to their able-bodied cohort, and that strategies be implemented for reducing or eliminating significant qualitative differences in institutional commitment and support.

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