Addressing People with Disabilities in Higher Education and the Workforce

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Within today’s society, the idea around accessibility and providing accommodations to people with disabilities matters. The reason this matters is because at some point in life everyone has the potential to become disabled. Whether that is a lifelong disability, a temporary disability, an injury that causes a permanent disability, or a disability due to old age, there is a high probability at some point in one’s life becoming disabled may be a reality. The world we live in is not built for those with disabilities and as a result acts as a system of oppression. This presents itself in the form of general access to buildings, inaccessible media content, lack of access to postsecondary education, as well as becoming gainfully employed within today’s economy. People with disabilities are the largest minority on record, and are also a group of people who are most underutilized in terms of workforce representation (Crosby, Kimberly, & Sophia, 2012).

In today’s higher education institutions there are a number of educational systems set in place to support students with disabilities, but the question remains: are they working? These support systems are required in today’s society because of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which together prevent the discrimination against individuals with disabilities (United States Department of Labor, 1990). Without a doubt, over the past twenty years the number of students with disabilities attending higher education institutions has increased dramatically, and as a result in today’s student affairs climate, this topic is becoming more relevant with the number of individuals disclosing their disability and requesting accommodations on the rise (Dukes, 2001).

Though many systems are set in place to support graduation and becoming gainfully employed within the greater workforce, many persons with disabilities struggle getting hired because of inadequate support. As a result, these individuals are unable to financially support
themselves and are forced to live below the poverty line (Pingry O'Neill, Markward, & French, 2012). Therefore, disability support services across the country need to analyze their different support structures to see if they are adequately supporting the needs of their students to the fullest potential. Even though students with disabilities are being supported in higher education environments, this does not necessarily prepare them or society on a larger scale to accept them into the workplace. The ableist society in which higher education institutions and a majority of employers fall into view people with disabilities as abnormal, and that needs to change. Failing to provide accessibility beyond wheelchair ramps, utilizing ableist language, and assuming people with disabilities are incompetent need to stop in order for people with disabilities to be viewed upon as legitimate members of society (Zeilinger, 2015). It is an important issue to address the lack of people with disabilities receiving a higher education degree and entering the workforce and one that holds deep interest to me.

**Literature Review**

Students with disabilities presence within higher education environments is increasing, and with the number of students rising, support systems and services need to be active. Recent estimates state enrollment of students with disabilities in two- and four-year programs have increased between 9.3% to as high as 20% (Raue & Lewis, 2011). Even with this increase in enrollment, young people with disabilities are less likely to pursue higher education than able bodied individuals (Whelley, Hart, & Zaft, 2002). Of the individuals with disabilities who choose to pursue higher education, there are many challenges they may face in order to successfully complete their degree program. Colleges and universities are beginning to see a need to help this diverse population succeed within their environments and are exploring strategies such as individual coaching, tailoring accommodations, and utilizing assistive
technology to foster the success of students with disabilities (Getzel, 2008). The effectiveness of these strategies must be researched and implemented beyond legal requirements for formal accommodation.

Once the hurdle of obtaining a college degree is conquered, the next step is becoming gainfully employed as a person with a disability. The prevalence of disability is high as noted by Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, and Kulkarni (2006) stating that approximately 12.6% of working-age individuals reported having one or more disabilities and that there was a 38.1% employment rate of working-age people with disabilities thus resulting in an approximately 60% unemployment rate of people with disabilities. Additionally, the gap between the employment rate of working-age people with and without disabilities is about 40.3% and of the people with disabilities who are eligible to work only 22.6% were employed in full-time capacities in contrast to 56.2% of working-age people without disabilities. Therefore, the question remains that if employers need new sources of workers as older generations retire and people with disabilities are available, why aren’t more people with disabilities being hired? This is one area that does not have much research on and more needs to be done to determine the outcomes for companies that do and do not hire individuals with disabilities.

Decisions made by employers are critical to improving employment rates among working-age adults with disabilities. During the more than two decades since the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was first proposed in the late 1980s, many researchers have surveyed employers about their attitudes toward hiring and retaining workers with disabilities and their experiences with accommodating such workers. The picture that has emerged is generally rather rosy, reflecting “a veneer of employer acceptance of workers with disabilities” (Hernandez, Keys, & Balcazar, 2000). If this what reality, then why are the unemployment numbers so high
for those with disabilities in the workforce? In a study conducted in 2011, researchers asked potential employers why they believed other employers might not hire or retain people with disabilities within their organization (Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011). The results of this study were that the top three proposed reasons for employers not hiring people with disabilities were that they “worried about the cost of providing reasonable accommodations” (p. 529), “didn’t know how to handle the needs of a worker with a disability on the job” (p. 529), and that they “are afraid they won’t be able to discipline or fire a worker with a disability for poor performance, because of potential lawsuits” (p. 529). A consistent theme discovered regarding this type of research is that while many employers expressed specific concerns about hiring people with disabilities, a number generally expressed a more generalized fear of the unknown in hiring people with this identity (Nota, Santilli, Ginevra, & Soresi, 2014).

The untapped resource and knowledge within the largest minority in the world is a tragic phenomenon. People with disabilities are being overlooked on a consistent basis at a detriment to society. At some point in many people’s lives they or a person they know will become disabled and may have to face the same discrimination that others who have come before as disabled face on a consistent basis. Wanting to become a productive member of society who has a disability is not unheard of, and that comes into conflict with those employers who have misconstrued conceptions of what people with disabilities are capable of. With that in mind, employers could take a greater role in acquiring and centralizing the necessary information and expertise to better understand disability, appreciate workers’ abilities, and solve accommodation problems (Kaye, Jans, & Jones, 2011).

My Connection to Disability
As one of the most visible and salient identities I possess, being a person with a physical disability has played a major role in defining my life’s experiences and goals. My life has been shaped by those I’ve interacted with on a daily basis such as my close family and friends as well as most recently student affairs professionals. Most importantly, shortly after being diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) the quality of my life was largely going to be determined by how my parents, my role models, viewed the situation, informing how others also reacted. They could either have felt sorry for themselves and their first son or they could make a conscious effort to not let this news affect how they would raise their son. Thankfully, they chose the latter and that has greatly affected my life. From a very young age I have been committed to being a productive member of society and not letting my disability define who I am or what I am capable of achieving in my life. Therefore, higher education institutions and workplaces should not have the implicit capability to discriminate against those with disabilities. By not ensuring students with disabilities success in higher education as well as aiding in the transition to gainful employment in the job market, a disservice is being done to those with disabilities.

In summary, those with disabilities matter in today’s society and are a major population that are ignored on a consistent basis. The ableist society we live in is not built to support people with disabilities for them to learn, become educated individuals, and work a full-time job. As stated previously, support services are put into place, required by law, in higher education institutions to help accommodate and provide services to those who qualify to help them achieve success. Once successfully obtaining a college degree, the next barrier is finding an organization willing to hire someone with a disability. There are many reasons the unemployment rate is so high for those with disabilities, but one that is recognized across job markets is the attitude of the organization for hiring people with disabilities and the potential for extra work to be associated
with such hiring practices. Who I am influences my interest in this topic as someone who does have a disability and as an individual who will not settle for complacency with this issue. My purpose and commitment are to continue to be educated, driven, and an advocate to breaking down systems of oppression in place that hinder people with disabilities becoming valued members of society.

**The Intervention**

The oppression for people with disabilities is felt each and every day and acts as a weight that cannot be unfelt. Our society was not built, literally and figuratively, for people with varying ability levels, both visible and invisible. It is without thinking that people with disabilities are automatically counted in the other category and not viewed as legitimate tenants of society. This system of oppression is perpetuated by those in power who are not educated on disability rights, those not willing to learn, and those who are ignorant to learning about persons with disabilities. From a very young age, children with varying ability levels are categorized into another system within school districts meant for “special education” and once in this system, it is hard to break out of. When thinking about how to address injustices people with disabilities face in regards to access to higher education institutions and workforce placement it is important to realize how much impact the overall idea of general inclusion can play.

In order to fully understand why inclusion is important it is worth noting the progress our society has seen in terms of segregation of people of color, people with disabilities being sent to institutions, and women not being allowed to vote. This is not to say today we are a model of an inclusive society, but progress has been made. Today, some of these themes can still be witnessed through ablest, sexist, and racist comments. Developing an inclusive community is not something that can easily be put together with a few minor adjustments. The idea of an inclusive
community is an aspiration for many that can be accomplished with intentional approaches and also understanding what historical injustices have played an impact on segregated and unequal people within today’s society (Smith, 2015). In order for a group of students who typically feel excluded to feel included, such as students with disabilities, it is important that their community is recognized, brings value, and is appreciated for what they bring to the larger community. The value of inclusion is important to instill today because it helps shape generations to be more accepting of others, prepares individuals for society on a greater scale, and can help promote an enriched learning environment. Utilizing this value of inclusion on both an individual and systemic level is a proper basis for changing the system of oppression against those with disabilities.

**Individual Interventions**

In order to understand how to individually address the ableist society, the concept of ableism must be understood. Ableism can be described as the “belief that it is better or superior not to have a disability than to have one and that it is better to do things in the way that nondisabled people do” (Storey, 2007, p. 56). Although higher education institutions and workplaces often advocate multiculturalism and acceptance of differences, disability and ableism are overlooked in this advocacy. Johnson (2006) recognizes that ableism is similar to other types of discrimination (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, age) but is often unrecognized as an important issue or one that even exists (as cited in Storey, 2007). On an individual level, there is work that can be done with regards to disseminating information about people with disabilities succeeding in the educational system and becoming productive members in the workforce.

On an individualistic level, the idea around combatting the system of oppression set in place for people with disabilities needs to be rooted in becoming an ally and advocate who
promotes awareness. Ableism appears to be rooted in negative cultural assumptions about disability, and these assumptions are typically based upon negative stereotypes as well as a lack of understanding of disability related issues (Hehir, 2002). To combat these stereotypes and work to promote inclusion of those with disabilities becoming an ally of the disability community comes to be an important journey.

For individuals who wish to become an ally to this oppressed community, knowing that there is a lot of work to be done as an ally is important. The disability community needs support from allies who are committed to making their ally-ship known. The first piece of being an ally is listening to people with disabilities. The most important element of being an ally to any marginalized group is to listen to that group and take the lead from them. No one knows how to advocate for people with disabilities better than people with disabilities themselves. Being an ally is not about taking charge, it’s about learning from people with disabilities and modeling disability inclusion and advocacy efforts based on their priorities, concerns, and feedback. The second way as an ally to combat ableism is to become educated around the injustices people with disabilities face, whether that is in school, their local community, or their efforts in looking for a job. Another way to be more inclusive of those with visible and invisible disabilities is being aware of the language being used. When speaking about people with disabilities, avoid ableist language, which includes words such as “retarded” and “crippled” and derogatory language using disability metaphors (e.g. seeing something wrong and comparing it to a physical or mental disability). The above mentioned ways to be an ally to people with disabilities is just the first step in creating an inclusive society and one that any individual can work on creating a ripple affect against the system of oppression in place against those with disabilities.
On an individual level there is a lot of work that people with disabilities themselves can do to break the stereotypes that sometimes define them in higher education institutions and the larger workforce. Making visible people with disabilities who have gone to college, graduated with a degree, and are working a full time position, would enable incoming students to have hope that the journey they are about to embark on has been accomplished before. Acting as a resource to students with disabilities in their preparation to enter a postsecondary institution is an intervention support system that can be implemented. With a support system set in place, the likelihood of success is higher because as those who have made it through successfully would be able to explain what is most critical to succeed. Morningstar et al. (2010) concluded that an individual’s level of self-determination and advocacy contributes to students with disabilities success in higher education. Additionally, students with disabilities come to college unprepared to self-advocate because of past reliance on parents, special education teachers, and a secondary school system that did not require self-advocacy, which has been reported to be the most crucial skill students with disabilities must develop in order to succeed in postsecondary education (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). By having people with disabilities more involved and prominent figures in society acting as role models, others with disabilities may find more hope that their effort and work is worth it overall.

Systemic Interventions

Society as a whole needs to change their attitude towards people with disabilities in order for higher success rates in higher education institutions and higher employment numbers in the workforce to occur. People with disabilities “are constantly told by the dominant culture what they cannot do and what their place in society is” (Charlton, 2006, p. 225), and many individuals internalize this oppression and “come to believe they are . . . less capable than others” (Charlton,
2006, p. 220). To address these issues and change the system, it would be beneficial to have the ability to reach all facets and levels of educational systems as well as small businesses all the way up to corporate America for trainings and inclusion improvements.

Implementing inclusive education across the nation spawns a new generation of individuals to be better prepared to include those with disabilities later in their lives. “Inclusive education is about the child’s right to participate and the school’s duty to accept the child. Inclusion rejects the use of special schools or classrooms to separate students with disabilities from students without disabilities” (Mathias, 2015, p. 107). With this new model of inclusive education being followed, students with disabilities are being insured an educational experience that meets the standards students without disabilities are also experiencing. Johnson (2006) states, “[Nondisabled people] are less likely to be singled out bases on stereotypes that underestimate their abilities and be put in ‘special education’ classes that don’t allow [people with disabilities] to develop their full potential” (p. 32). By introducing inclusive education, the system of oppression against people with disabilities where they are “othered” from the very beginning of their life, viewed as less than, and placed in separate classrooms can be stopped. If this is done everywhere for everyone in education, the overarching perception of disability can change. There are more benefits to inclusive education than just receiving an adequate educational experience. Through an inclusive educational environment, a new generation of students begin to understand and learn about disability and what it can mean in their own lives. For some, this is their first time interacting with a student with a disability and in this environment students are able to see the person first and the disability second. Students are able to learn what inclusion can look like from a young age and why it is important. Also, it is important to recognize that peers of people with disabilities are going to be employers in the
future and creating an inclusive educational environment from the beginning can impact the stigma of a “special ed” community versus a “typical” community. Through doing so, the percentage of people with disabilities who are gainfully employed could be greater. Through the many benefits of inclusive education, society can be largely impacted by reaching young generations and teaching the importance of inclusion.

In addition to the creation of an inclusive classroom atmosphere, fundamentally implementing disability into the classroom from the instructor’s standpoint can also have an impact. Having mandatory disability awareness workshops for educational professionals would incorporate a new perspective into some classrooms not brought up otherwise. Educators would be taught about disability etiquette for visible and invisible disabilities. Additionally, these workshops would examine the various types of models of disability present in society, such as the medical model and social model. As a result of this training, the goal would be for educators to view their students with disabilities as assets to the classroom and not a problem that needs fixed and more work on their end to accommodate, but rather their responsibility to create an environment where the student could actively contribute and be valued. In-service training on ableism and the oppression people with disabilities face would be a new topic for some educators and is one that should be covered. Educators may be familiar with what their local school’s policies and procedures are to accommodate students with disabilities, though they may be entirely unaware of the oppression on a systemic level the disabled face on a daily basis. Although the general education curriculum embraces multiculturalism and other minorities, there is little, if any, mention of people with disabilities beyond perhaps the mention of Franklin Roosevelt using a wheelchair (Storey, 2007). Disability needs to be part of the educational culture and should not be overlooked.
Changing the perceptions of those within the business world to positive or neutral interpretations of disability can inherently change a workplace culture. In a mandated disability awareness training for businesses, employees would learn about able bodied privilege and how that gives them inherent power over people with disabilities in addition to statistics about the disabled population. As a result, employees would learn how to reasonably accommodate individuals who have a disability and how to create an equitable experience in addition to familiarizing participants with basic knowledge about the oppression people with disabilities face. By mandating disability awareness training and creating monetary incentives to hire people with disabilities, the disability community could have the opportunity to make a positive impact and prove their worth. Should they have to prove their worth? The answer is absolutely not, but until the system is changed to where able bodied individuals do not look down upon those with disabilities as less than, then people with disabilities are going to need to work to change this perception that their worth is not valued just because of their ability status. Additionally, developing accessible multimedia educational materials and training sessions geared to various industry types would start the conversation about how employing a person with a disability could benefit their organization. Impacting large organizations by having people with disabilities meeting with upper management to discuss new initiatives geared towards employing those with disabilities could offer new plans within different companies.

Even with employers on board to hire people with disabilities within their organizations, other discriminatory acts continue to be in place hampering people with disabilities from being gainfully employed. The fear of losing health insurance and other medical benefits as a person with a disability impacts the ability for someone in this situation to take a job even if they are offered one (Druss et al., 2000). Once gainfully employed, people with disabilities have the
potential to make too much money and as a result are removed from their federal medical plans which may help to pay for needed medications, equipment, assistive technology, and/or personal care services. Removing this barrier would eliminate a great piece to the systemic oppression against people with disabilities and create more opportunities for work.

A combination of both addressing educational and workplace attitudes is crucial to combatting the oppression people with disabilities face every day. It may be difficult for large scale entities such as school systems and established companies to believe they need this type of training and incentive to bring people with disabilities onboard and as a result may face resistance. Increasing the number of successes for people with disabilities in higher education environments as well as in the workforce may act as a pathway to others similar entities should do the same. Implementing changes that affect all schools, all workplaces, and governmental policy is the best way to address the inequities people with disabilities endure and would create a more just society.

**Implications for Self**

The system in place preventing people with disabilities from successfully completing a college degree, applying for jobs, and becoming gainfully employed, is ever present in today’s society and will take time and strategic efforts to break down. A collective effort needs to be made by people with disabilities, but more importantly the able bodied community for a positive change to occur. It seems as though the collective voice of the disabled community is not enough for the world to notice our existence, my existence, and I need to be a part of the efforts to bring attention and value to our name. The number of times where I have heard, “You’re an inspiration” and “I’m so proud of you for what you’ve accomplished” is astounding. Where are
those people being supports and advocates? If they were really impressed, there should be more people fighting for the rights and inclusion for people with disabilities every day.

Throughout the various experiences of my life I have come into contact with many people, whether it be family members, friends, educational acquaintances, or professional colleagues that want to learn more about the state of disability in our society and how my life is affected. These situations all present themselves in different ways, but I find all of them able to be part of my intervention at the individual level. I am fully capable of making an impact in my everyday life through the interactions I have with others, and it is time I start taking advantage of that opportunity. To address the proposed interventions, I will employ strategies in two different ways within my life: in my professional life, and within my personal life with family, friends, and local community members.

Within my professional life, I am able to interact with many individuals who work with students with disabilities on a daily basis. Currently, I am a practicum student with Miami University’s Student Disability Services and work within the Office on a weekly basis. The leadership in the office values my voice as a student, as a person with a disability, as well as an individual who comes from a university well-known for servicing people with disabilities. In my current role, I am able to give feedback on current policy, procedures, services, and initiatives, as well as suggest new ones. It is my goal to work with the student organization I co-advice, the Students with Disabilities Advisory Council, not only to create a support group for those with disabilities to come together and work towards helping each other succeed in their academic endeavors, but to also help educate the larger Miami University community about disability rights and current issues. I also have influence in another student organization I advise called, Ambassadors for Students with Disabilities. With the students in this group, I am able to work
with committed students who are invested in becoming allies of the disabled community. Additionally, in this role, I am working to build an alumni network of graduates with disabilities to help bridge the gap from getting a college degree to getting a job. For this initiative to become a reality, I need the support of the Student Disability Services director, and in order for support to be obtained for resources to be put into mailings, publicity, and alumni events, I have to prove what value this would offer our current students. Another role I have in my professional role is that I am a co-instructor of an Introduction to Disability Studies undergraduate course. This role gives me influence over students who are enrolled in the course who possess some interest in learning more about the disabled community. I have the support of my co-instructor as well as the Disability Studies Department to bring new ideas to the curriculum that would influence what the students learned as a result of the class helping to better promote an inclusive atmosphere.

My disabled identity is centered in my life, and I work to incorporate its importance in various interactions I have. To better prepare incoming students with disabilities I am going to start being a peer mentor who can help coach students who are in similar situations. Reaching out to my undergraduate institution as well as Miami and trying to connect with those who are looking for guidance is where I’ll begin. I am also committed to becoming members of online support groups for those with disabilities and parents and family members of those with disabilities to better inform them of the positive nature and possibilities their child has available to them. So often today, parents of children with disabilities see their child as someone who needs fixed and someone who will only have struggles and challenges throughout their life. While life as a disabled individual is not easy in today’s society, I can start sharing my story in my various circles of influence to help change the narrative around what it means to be disabled.
Conclusion

While society has progressed immensely to promote acceptance and give basic human rights to people with disabilities, systemic oppression against disabled individuals continues to thrive. Society is not yet at a place where we accept those who think, act, or look different from the norm and as a result people with disabilities are pushed to the side. Through the various individual and systemic level interventions mentioned, it is my hope that higher education institutions and the workforce will become a more inclusive atmosphere that genuinely seek out people with disabilities to validate their existence and worth. Utilizing my circles of influence, I am starting to change the stigma and oppression against people with disabilities by questioning underlying ableist assumptions of others, teaching ally behavior, acting as a resource and role model for other people with disabilities, and raising awareness to businesses about the untapped employee market they currently are missing. This task is not easy, but with my efforts, and the efforts of allies sending similar messages of full inclusion for all – change can be accomplished.
References


