

The Invisible Community: Finding a Space for Disabled Students at Iowa

At the beginning of the school year, an Anthropology major with POTS and hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome was told by a TA, “I have a hard time believing you need these accommodations.”

After bringing up a potential solution to something she noticed to be inaccessible, a Sustainability Sciences student was told, “Not everything can be accessible.”

When asking for their accommodations to be followed, a visually-impaired student at the School of Journalism was told by a higher-up, **“We’ve already gotten another student to drop out – why won’t you?”**

These are all actual statements made to disabled students at the University of Iowa.

There is a profound misunderstanding of disability and disabled culture among the students, staff, and faculty here that can only be explained by ignorance – those with little knowledge of the complex workings of disabilities aren’t necessarily at fault, but they are, however, falling victim to the pervasive lack of information about disabilities on college campuses. Given the fact that nearly 20% of undergraduate students in the United States consider themselves disabled^[1], this lack of information and resources is a huge oversight. It creates an environment where disabled students don’t feel heard, supported, or understood – which explains the over 10 percent difference in graduation rates between disabled students and their nondisabled counterparts^[2].

Before getting into the meat of this proposition, I’d like to establish the difference between the medical model of disability and the social model of disability, which is an important distinction when understanding how to best help disabled students in higher education. The medical model of disability is based on the idea that a disability is a flaw of one’s physical body or mentality and that it is something that needs to be corrected. This sort of thinking is often what leads to things like disabled people being told they need to “try harder” to get better or infantilizing them when they demonstrate traits of a certain disability (like walking up to someone and pushing their wheelchair without asking or assuming someone cannot do something because they have Autism, for example). The social model of disability, on the other hand, does not view one’s disability as something that needs to be “fixed” for one to better fit into society. Rather, it is the idea that society has not been built with disabled people in mind. Under the social model of disability, disability is a socially constructed idea based on the fact that some aspects of society aren’t accessible to people with certain mental and physical traits that aren’t “typical.” As we move forward to discussing disabilities in academia, it is important to keep in mind that having a disability is not inherently negative and that we should work on fixing parts of society rather than fixing individuals with certain conditions.

The term disability casts a much wider net than most people imagine. The definition of disability is simply “a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person's ability to engage in typical daily activities and interactions.” Broadly, this encompasses chronic conditions like lupus and endometriosis, mental illnesses like anxiety and depression, neurodiversities like ADHD and Autism, deafness, visual impairments,

developmental disabilities like dyslexia and dyspraxia, and mobility disabilities related to things like cerebral palsy and paralysis. An indescribably large sect of society falls under at least one of these categories; ergo, an indescribably large sect of society struggles with completing day-to-day tasks in which education is included.

What disabled students here at UI need is a place where they can find community – a place where they can come together to advocate, socialize, find validation, and gain valuable skills and resources to improve their college experience. To achieve this, I'd like to turn our attention to our existing cultural centers – the Afro-American Cultural Center, the Latino Native American Cultural Center, the Asian Pacific American Cultural Center, the Pride Alliance Center, and the International Student Support and Engagement area. These areas are incredible resources for marginalized groups on campus. Individuals, both within and outside these communities, can gain access to educational resources, connect with others within these communities, and raise awareness for modern-day issues affecting them both at Iowa and on an international scale. A space like this is precisely what the disabled students at the University of Iowa need to feel more connected to the campus community.

This hypothetical space, which could easily take up a room in either the Main Library or the IMU as renovations occur, would be both an educational and a social resource. Similarly to the shelves of research and literature that are found on the bookshelves in current cultural centers, a Disability Cultural Center would give students, faculty, and staff access to modern research and pieces of writing that can better inform others of the disabled experience. This would also provide a space for educational information sessions that anyone on campus can attend to hear directly from individuals within the community. Even basic information, like how to access accommodations, how to advocate for oneself to university officials, and how the Americans with Disabilities Act works would drastically change the way disabled students can function on campus. Right now, there is a severe lack of support for us – SDS can only do so much. Disabled students need advice from their disabled peers who have experienced campus life firsthand and can guide them through the processes and setbacks. They need a place to connect with other people living with the same conditions, and they need to see that it is possible to get through higher education as a disabled academic. At a Disability Cultural Center, these forgotten students can find just that – a supportive community of all those who have come before them.

Socially, a Disability Cultural Center would provide a space for disabled and non-disabled students to foster connections with each other and the UI community. As disabled students, it is very easy to feel isolated. It is easy to feel isolated from the broad college campus because many of us must take into account our mobility issues, chronic pain, and sensory issues before hanging out with non-disabled people, and it is easy to feel like you are the only disabled student on campus. The only method of connecting to other disabled students on campus is through a small Discord server run by the UI Students for Disability Advocacy and Awareness. This is a great resource, but it is by no means a replacement for face-to-face connections that can be made in a designated space. Seeing people, face to face, and being present in a space where you're all there for the same reason, whether that be for a movie night, an advocacy meeting, an end-of-the-year celebration, or just a study session, allows students to understand that they are not alone; that they are valid in their experiences and are valued within the Iowa community.

Functionally, this space, as discussed by many disabled student leaders on campus, would have accessible seating, temporary spaces to store things like mobility aids, a low sensory environment without harsh lighting, open spaces for things like stimming and fidget toys, and a supportive group of disabled students who would be there to help their disabled peers through all the steps of higher education.

The benefits of cultural centers for disabled students aren't just anecdotally assumed - they are backed up by numerous studies on the disability experience in higher education. According to Dr. Toni Saia, "students who participated in a cultural center were 20% more likely to continue with their studies than students who did not"^[3]. Additionally, it has been proven in multiple instances that learning about disability history and culture improves disabled students' views of their own identities^[4]. Not only could a Disability Cultural Center improve graduation rates, but it would also improve disabled students' opinions of themselves, something that we all can understand as important, regardless of ability.

When disabled students are told that they aren't "disabled enough," that they can't be accommodated, and that they would be better off just dropping out, it becomes intensely apparent that our campus needs an aggressive shift in the way we view disabilities. The idea of a Disability Cultural Center may be a big aspiration, but history has proven that these cultural centers empower the groups they aim to help and allow individuals to express themselves and their identities. From dozens of other universities, we have seen these centers successfully implemented. The heavy lifting it would take to establish such a place would not outweigh the benefits.

The "disabled" label does not simply refer to a small group of people. It is a group that stretches across all races, ethnic groups, genders, sexualities, nationalities, political parties, and majors. It is a group that is ever-shifting. It is a group that anyone may become part of at any moment. To be disabled is to sit at the heart of intersectionality, whether you are a woman, multiethnic, queer, or from any background imaginable. A disabled cultural center would be a place of rich diversity, a place for everyone regardless of identity, and a place for people to connect, regardless of ability. We, as a community, are tired of being confined to windowless basements and inaccessible classrooms. The disabled community at the University of Iowa deserves better. We deserve a space to make the University of Iowa finally feel like home.

"Students with Disabilities: How Many Students in Postsecondary Education Have a Disability?" *National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)*, US Department of Education, 2017, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60>.

U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. *Students With Disabilities in Postsecondary Education: A Profile of Preparation, Participation, and Outcomes*, NCES 1999-187, by Laura Horn and Jennifer Berktold. Project Officer: Larry Bobbitt. Washington DC: 1999.

Saia, Toni. "Disability as an Identity: Disability Cultural Centers in Higher Education." *Thesis / Dissertation ETD*, The University of Arizona, 2019, pp. 18-19.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KGe6ctYLz46VyUzpyH0cSQLz4rJXPRsm/view?usp=sharing>