Elizabeth Todd

[Il5029pl@metrostate.edu](mailto:Il5029pl@metrostate.edu)

NAMI and Mental Health Awareness Week

Metropolitan State University, as well as the nation, celebrated Disability Employment Awareness Month in October. In honor of Mental Illness Awareness Week, from October 2 through 8, the Center for Accessibility Resources (CAR) and the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI) held a panel discussion on how and when to disclose a hidden disability.

Hidden disabilities are “certain kinds of disabilities that are not immediately apparent to others,” according to Disabled World. These invisible disabilities can range from mental illnesses to chronic pain. Individuals with disabilities are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and have the right to decide whether or not to inform others, including employers, that they have a disability.

“Eighty percent of students we serve fall under the umbrella of hidden disability,” says Kristen Jorenby, director of CAR.

The panel discussion on disclosure involved two students, an alumna and Chief Diversity Officer Craig Morris. The speakers focused on their personal experiences with hidden disabilities and mental illnesses, as well as what legal rights a person with a disability has, especially within the university. Jorenby explained the types of services available on campus, which included examples of working with students to provide reasonable accommodations throughout their educational career.

NAMI members also presented a chance for collaboration between organization members, speakers, staff and the students in the audience. A call for an increase in cross-cultural competency was cited as one of the most important goals moving forward. Ideas for how to accomplish this included staff and faculty training, working with other university organizations, designating safe spaces and safe confidants and increasing educational opportunities to learn more about how different groups and cultures are affected by disabilities and mental illness.

“We need to have conversations,” explained one of the founders of NAMI on campus. “That has to happen. There are so many layers to this conversation [about hidden disabilities and mental illness]. I think we need to have this conversation more than once throughout the school year. We need to do a better job at making safe people visible.”

Metropolitan State’s NAMI, as well as the national organization of the same name, strives to promote acceptance and education in an effort to diminish the stigma surrounding mental illnesses. Metro State’s NAMI organization is the first in the state of Minnesota, with the University of Minnesota working toward developing its own chapter.