

## Disability Studies in Higher Education

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Every new group entering higher education has a profound influence on academic programs and curricula. The expansion of educational opportunities for women and members of ethnic minorities since the 1960s led to the establishment of programs in women's and gender studies, African American Studies, Latino Studies, Native American Studies, and similar ethnic studies. More recently, the gay and lesbian rights movement and the increased acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons in American society has resulted in the emergence of LGBT programs at many colleges and universities. The latest group to increase its presence on American campuses is students with disabilities. In 1975, the passage of P.L. 94-142, later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, increased opportunities for students with disabilities in America's schools and raised expectations of people with disabilities that they could benefit from educational programs and contribute to society. The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, required educational institutions, as well as other public and private entities, to end discrimination against people with disabilities. As increasing numbers of students with disabilities have entered higher education, it is only natural that they would expect universities and colleges to develop academic programs that reflect their experiences in society.

As a topic of study, disability is not new at institutions of higher education. Psychological and intellectual disabilities have been of interest in psychiatry and psychology at least since the late 1800s and early 1900s. The post-World War II era, in particular, witnessed the rapid expansion of academic programs in special education, vocational rehabilitation, speech and language disorders, and similar clinical or instructional areas. In sociology, courses in social problems and deviance have covered disability, along with race, ethnicity, and sexuality, since the early part of the twentieth century.

Each of these fields views disability from the perspective of a nondisabled majority. Disability has been treated as a condition to be cured or ameliorated or a characteristic that can interfere with the social order and social interaction. Enter disability studies.

The academic area of disability studies approaches disability from a different vantage point than traditional fields. It examines disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon. In contrast to clinical, medical, instructional, or therapeutic perspectives on disability, Disability Studies focuses on how disability is defined and represented in society. From this perspective, disability is not a characteristic that exists exclusively in the person so defined, but a construct that finds its meaning in social and cultural context. This is similar to the way in which women's and gender studies approaches the difference between *sex* as a biological condition and *gender* as a social role.

Disability Studies is a vibrant and diverse field or area of scholarly inquiry. First, it is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. No single academic discipline can place a claim on Disability Studies. Rather, the field is informed by scholarship from such different disciplines as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, political science, law, policy studies, economics, cultural studies, anthropology, geography, theology, communications and media studies, and the arts. Major professional associations, including the Modern Language Association, the American Sociological Association, the American Education Research Association, and the American Studies Association, have interest groups on Disability Studies.

Second, Disability Studies covers an incredibly diverse group of people. People who are blind, deaf, use wheelchairs, have chronic pain or fatigue, learn at a slower pace than other people, process written words differently from others, and so on, have vastly different experiences and perspectives. Does it make sense to lump together such different human beings under the category of disability? It does—not because they are the same in any biological or philosophical sense, but because society has placed them in this category, with consequences for how they are viewed and treated by the majority presumed to be nondisabled.

Finally, it is easier to define what Disability Studies is *not* (medicine; rehabilitation; special education; speech and language disorders; and professions oriented toward the cure, prevention, or treatment of disabilities) than to specify what it is. Although Disability Studies scholars generally subscribe to the “minority group model” of disability—the view that the status of people as a minority shapes their experiences in society—they can agree on little else. Some scholars view disability in terms of culture and identity, while others regard disability as a label and social construct. Others consider disability as both an identity and a social construct. Further, Disability Studies scholars differ on the compatibility of Disability Studies with other academic perspectives on disability. Some reject medical and clinical approaches to disability and argue that these approaches inherently treat disability as

pathological. Others maintain that different perspectives on disability can coexist, with Disability Studies bringing much-needed attention to society's treatment of people with disabilities.

Scholars even use different language to refer to the people at the center of inquiry in disability. *Disabled person* is used to draw attention to the centrality of disability in individual identity; *person with a disability* or *people first language* conveys the idea that having a disability is secondary to people's identities as human beings; *person labeled disabled* (*mentally retarded*, *intellectually disabled*, *mentally ill*, and so on) focuses on how disability is a socially constructed definition imposed on people. Within different groups, minor variations in language and spelling can carry tremendous significance. Thus, *deaf person* and *Deaf person* mean very different things, with the latter emphasizing membership in a linguistic minority, based on the use of American Sign Language.

The first Disability Studies programs in the United States were established in the mid-1990s. Today, there are at least twenty-nine undergraduate and graduate disability studies programs in the country, with one or two additional programs added every year. Table 10.1 provides a listing of universities or colleges that offer undergraduate or graduate degrees, minors, majors, or certificates in Disability Studies.<sup>1</sup> The Society for Disability Studies and the Disability Studies in Education group, which is associated with the American Education Research Association, sponsor annual Disability Studies conferences. Major academic publishers, including New York University Press, Syracuse University Press, Temple University Press, and the University of Michigan Press, have Disability Studies series or have published multiple titles in Disability Studies. Although Disability Studies scholarship can be found in many social science, humanities, policy, and applied journals, the *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Disability and Society*, and the *Journal of Disability Policy Studies* are exclusively devoted to disability studies work.

Disability Studies is an academic area of inquiry, not a service field. Colleges and universities are required to provide accommodations to students, faculty, and staff with disabilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, and most maintain offices of disability services. Although Disability Studies programs do not provide services to students with disabilities, they can complement offices of disability services and help to make campus culture more inclusive and accepting of students with disabilities. Accommodations provided in compliance with the law are important, but cannot change attitudinal barriers that can isolate and marginalize students with disabilities. Just as women's and gender studies, African American, and LGBT studies programs have influenced college or university policies and practices, Disability Studies programs can address issues that transcend in-class accommodations.

Disability Studies is well established in higher education. The question that arises is: Why should colleges and universities support disability studies programs? Disability is part of the human condition and will touch practically

**Table 10.1. U.S. Academic Programs in Disability Studies**

<i>Academic Institution</i>	<i>Program</i>	<i>Academic Unit</i>
California Baptist University	Master of Arts in Disability Studies	School of Education
Chapman University	PhD in Education, Disability Studies Emphasis	Academic Unit: College of Educational Studies
City University of New York	Master of Arts in Disability Studies Multidisciplinary Graduate Certificate in Disability Studies	CUNY School of Professional Studies
College of Staten Island, City University of New York	Minor in Disability Studies, Interdisciplinary Program	Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work
Eastern Washington University	Certificate in Disability Studies	Center for Disability Studies and Universal Access
Gallaudet University	Master of Arts in Deaf Studies Cultural Studies Concentration Deaf History Concentration Sign Language Teaching Concentration	Department of American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf Studies
Hofstra University	Disability Studies Program (Undergraduate Minor)	College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Miami University	Undergraduate Disability Studies Minor	College of Arts and Sciences
National-Louis University	Disability and Equity in Education Doctoral Program	National College of Education
Northern Arizona University	Undergraduate Minor in Disability Studies	College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
Ohio State University	Undergraduate Minor in Disability Studies Graduate Interdisciplinary Specialization in Disability Studies	Arts and Sciences (Interdisciplinary)
Pacific University	Disability Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Minor)	College of Arts and Sciences
Stony Brook University	Disabilities Studies Concentration, Bachelor of Science in Health Science	School of Health Technology and Management
Syracuse University	Graduate (Master's and PhD) Graduate Certificate of Advanced Study (CAS) Science in Health Science Joint Degree Program in Law (JD) and Education (Master's and CAS in Disability Studies); Undergraduate Minor in Disability Studies	Cultural Foundations of Education, School of Education

Teachers College, Columbia University	Disability Studies in Education, Concentration in the EdD Program in Curriculum and Teaching	Department of Curriculum and Teaching College of Education
Temple University	Graduate Certificate in Disability Studies	
Washington State University	Undergraduate Minor in Disability Studies	Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences
University of California at Berkeley	Minor in Disability Studies in Undergraduate Interdisciplinary Studies	Undergraduate and Interdisciplinary Studies
University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA)	Undergraduate Disability Studies Minor	Division of Undergraduate Education, College of Letters and Science
University of Delaware	Undergraduate Interdisciplinary Minor in Disabilities Studies	College of Education and Human Development
University of Hawaii at Manoa	Interdisciplinary Certificate in Disability and Diversity Studies	Center on Disability Studies and Educational Foundations
University of Illinois at Chicago	PhD in Disability Studies	Department of Disability and Human Development
	Master of Science in Disability and Human Development	College of Applied Health Sciences
University of Maine	Minor in Interdisciplinary Disability Studies and Graduate Interdisciplinary Concentration in Disability Studies	Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies
University of Massachusetts–Lowell	Undergraduate Disability Studies Minor	College of Arts and Sciences
University of Pittsburgh	Graduate Disability Studies Certificate Program	School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, Department of Health Information Management
University of Toledo	Undergraduate Interdisciplinary Minor in Disability Studies	College of Arts and Sciences
University of Washington	Master of Liberal Studies Program (MLS), Concentration in Disability Studies (DST) Individualized Studies Major in Disability Studies	College of Arts and Sciences
University of Wisconsin–Madison University of Wyoming	Interdisciplinary Cluster Minor in Disability Studies	College of Letters and Science* College of Health Sciences

\* The University of Wisconsin–Madison does not yet have a formal academic program in Disability Studies. However, the university has made a commitment to the development of a program through a cluster hiring initiative to fill multiple tenure-track positions in Disability Studies.

all students directly or indirectly at some time in their lives. If people live long enough, they will either become disabled or have a family member or close friend experience a disability. For students with disabilities, in particular, Disability Studies can help them understand their personal experiences in social, cultural, and political context. From a scholarly standpoint, disability provides an intellectual lens through which to examine everything ranging from cultural conceptions of beauty or normality to the social dynamics of stereotyping, discrimination, and exclusion. Many, if not most, colleges and universities offer degrees in vocational rehabilitation, special education, and other applied fields. Students in social work, child and family development, and related fields often take disability-related courses. For students in applied fields, Disability Studies courses can complement their programs of study and help them understand that the best instructional and clinical interventions will be undermined if children and adults with disabilities continue to face social, physical, and attitudinal barriers to their full participation in society.

By developing Disability Studies programs, colleges and universities can demonstrate their commitment to diversity and, based on the experience at Syracuse University and elsewhere, strengthen their student recruitment efforts. Prospective undergraduate and graduate students who have disabilities or have a family member or sibling with disabilities are likely to be attracted to a minor, certificate, or degree program in Disability Studies. Graduate students who pursue Disability Studies programs also include those who have held positions in special education, vocational rehabilitation, or other helping professions and have become disillusioned by societal or administrative obstacles to their students' or clients' inclusion in society. Undergraduates in Disability Studies programs often have had a volunteer or personal experience that draws them to the area of disability. So having a Disability Studies program enables colleges and universities to communicate to prospective students: "If you want to pursue a degree in sociology, literature, history, education, social work, or other disciplines, but also have a personal or professional interest in the area of disability, our college or university is the right one for you." Disability studies can enrich campus life, college or university curricula, and the diverse composition of the student body.

### Note

1. This listing is based on a review of curricula and courses offered at these colleges and universities to ensure that they incorporate disability studies content.

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