

College students with disabilities are too often excluded

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7-9 minutes

AnnCatherine Heigl, a sophomore at George Mason University, recently attempted to join all eight sororities at her school. All eight turned her down.

If you ask her sister, who Tweeted about how the experience left AnnCatherine “unwanted and devastated,” the reason the sororities denied AnnCatherine is because she has a disability: Down syndrome.

This kind of outright rejection isn’t the experience of all college students with disabilities. But AnnCatherine’s experience is [hardly an isolated case](#). Since colleges and universities only have so much control over student-run groups, it’s important to consider how disability is viewed within the school community.

I’m a [researcher](#) who focuses on raising disability awareness in educational settings.

All students [need to feel included](#) in order to succeed in college. But when a student has a disability, inclusion can be more difficult to achieve. One study shows students with disabilities participate in fewer extracurricular activities, like clubs or on-campus events, than non-disabled peers. This is due to a [lack of social inclusion](#), the study states. It also stems from the fact that many colleges and university programs “[focus mostly on academic and physical accessibility](#).” The social participation of students with disabilities gets less attention. Since many extracurricular activities are student led and organized, it’s all the more important to understand how peers with disabilities are being excluded.

College students with disabilities are also [more likely to drop out of school](#) than their peers without disabilities. Research shows that [only 34 percent](#) of college students with disabilities complete a four year program. Conversely, [51 percent of their peers without disabilities finish school](#). This begs the question: How can colleges and universities become more inclusive?

Start early

First, teachers at the K-12 level need to develop skills to talk about disabilities. While educators might teach about topics like race, class, gender, or sexuality, disability is [often left out of the discussion](#).

Ask yourself: How many books did you read in school that featured characters with disabilities? How much did you learn about the [disability rights movement](#) in your social studies classes? Or was it largely a [hidden story](#)?

Some educators have [begun to recognize](#) the importance of disability-based lessons. Still, [I’d argue that those lessons need to be more deliberately incorporated](#) in school.

By the time students enter college, they might hesitate to discuss disability because they are worried about saying the wrong thing. [Awkwardness and avoidance can continue long after college](#).

Teachers can help by using literature to [discuss disability](#) in class. The [mainstream success](#) of R.J. Palacio’s [Wonder](#) – a book about a boy born with a craniofacial disability – shows how this is possible.

Think about language

When people do talk about disability, they may default to “[disability rhetoric](#).” This sort of rhetoric casts people with disabilities as either inspirational or pitiable.

Ben Myers, an advocate for people with disabilities, [explains](#) the problem with disability

rhetoric. When you say that a person can do something “despite” his or her disability, it sets disability up as something that strong people overcome and weaker ones live with. While rhetoric might seem harmless, this kind of speech furthers the idea that people with disabilities are [incapable of success](#).

Inspiration-based language is [problematic](#) too. Colleges and universities should examine how disabilities are portrayed in their campus literature. They should also consider using language that reflects the [reality of disability](#). Rather than glorify or pity a person with a disability, talk about them like they would anyone else. Recognize the person and don’t focus on the disability.

Provide opportunities for inclusion

Many colleges and universities bring individuals with disabilities to campus through community service programs. Partnerships between college students and community members with disabilities often result in [mutual learning](#). However, it is equally important for college organizations to enable students with disabilities to participate as equals. On-campus disability groups can [increase disability awareness](#), [promote inclusion](#) and create opportunities for all students to engage in social activities.

At Villanova, where I teach, [LEVEL](#), a student-run disability awareness group, provides opportunities for students to raise awareness and participate in fully accessible social activities on and off campus. Similarly, Disability Rights, Education, Activism, and Mentoring, or ([DREAM](#)), is a national organization that advocates for campus disability groups and individual students. Groups like LEVEL and DREAM show the way toward greater inclusion. For example, members of LEVEL recognized that “service break trips,” where students travel and work together on a community service project, were not accessible to all students. In response, LEVEL organized the [first fully accessible service break trip](#).

Make disability a part of diversity

Although many colleges and universities have [embraced diversity initiatives](#), disability still gets short shrift.

For instance, in a [recent study](#) of the California State University System, researchers found that 66 percent of the websites had [minimal information about disabilities](#) on the home pages. Why does this matter? The home site is the “[virtual face](#)” of the university. It’s how a university represents itself to prospective students and the public. The [authors](#) of the study argue that visible representations of disability are important to make students with disabilities feel “welcome on campus in the same way that images of racial or gender diversity are used to attract diverse applicants.”

In a [recent opinion piece](#), Rosemarie Garland Thomson, a disability justice leader and professor at Emory University, said that most people don’t consider people with disabilities as having a shared social identity or a political status. Given how the disability community has struggled to earn basic civil rights, including [access to education](#), [employment](#), and [healthcare](#), it is important to think about disability in terms of diversity.

How disability can be visible and invisible

After the passage of the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) in 1990, colleges and universities had to rethink what accessibility looked like on campus. In many cases, this involved ensuring physical access to previously inaccessible spaces.

Recently, there has been a movement to map the accessibility of colleges and universities. At Penn, a graduate student and his colleagues developed the [Accessibility Mapping Project](#). This project is an effort to digitally map the “emergence of physical and social barriers” around campus. The project shows that a lack of physical access, such as having stairs instead of a ramp, also erects a social barrier, as people with disabilities can’t participate in that space.

It’s important to remember that disability isn’t only physical. In fact, many college students with invisible disabilities, like learning disabilities or autism, still [struggle to access appropriate accommodations](#) in their university classrooms.

What AnnCatherine endured is something no individual should experience. While there is no simple solution to address the exclusion of students with disabilities in higher education, colleges, universities and K-12 schools need to do more to provide resources, education and experiences that include students with disabilities in the conversation.