

W H A T D O
DISABILITIES
H A V E T O D O W I T H
DIVERSITY?

For three years, the author had developed many programs aimed at promoting “the open exchange of views about the value of diversity”—programs that focused on racial and ethnic minorities and occasionally on women or religion, but never on the disabled. Until one day two years ago . . .

I T ALL STARTED when Rachel Arfa came into my office with a challenging question: Are students with disabilities part of diversity at the University of Michigan? This was in February 1999, when I was administering the university’s campuswide theme semester—Diversity: Theories and Practices. The semester was in full swing, with over one hundred courses in fourteen of our schools and colleges, special events, and research funding for faculty and students. There was also funding for the Capstone Week, which would take place at the end of March and feature activities intended to highlight the project as the semester drew to a close. Rachel had seen a notice for the funding available for Capstone student projects. She told me that she wanted to organize a video event that would pose a central question: Are disabilities part of diversity?

By Pat McCune

I can't remember what I told her. I probably blinked for a moment or two, then smiled professionally and said something like, "I don't see why not, but the final decision is up to the funding committee." I *can* remember what I felt. I was anxious and uncomfortable, certain that I would offend her somehow, because Rachel has a hearing impairment, and at that first meeting I had difficulty understanding her. And like many people, I was too embarrassed to say so. This meant that I was missing about a third of what she said, between her unfamiliar speech patterns and my racing thoughts—racing because I was intrigued. Were disabled students a component in the diversity that the University of Michigan valued and in fact had been defending in the courts its right to value? (Our university's undergraduate admissions process, which considers race and ethnicity, was challenged in *Gratz v. Bollinger*; the court found in favor of the university on December 13, 2000. A similar suit filed against the law school, *Grutter v. Bollinger*, went to trial on January 16, 2001; as of this writing, a decision in the case is still pending.)

I AM the program coordinator for Dialogues on Diversity, a campuswide initiative that, as the mission statement says, promotes "opportunities for the open exchange of views about the value of diversity." Our objective is to "enrich campus discussion and facilitate honest dialogue concerning the broad range of topics relating to diversity." I've held this position since the initiative began in January 1998—just a few months after the lawsuits were filed by unsuccessful applicants to the University of Michigan. Jennifer Gratz, Patrick Hammacher, and Barbara Grutter thought they were unjustly denied a place at the University of Michigan and challenged the use of affirmative action in the admissions process at the College of Literature, Science and the Arts and at the law school. Since 1998 I've developed a variety of programs, focusing primarily on racial and ethnic minorities and occasionally on women and religion, but never on the disabled. I think this is because, historically, people with disabilities either have been categorized by

the type of disability and thus been thought to have nothing in common with people who have other disabilities or, worse yet, have not even been acknowledged as participating members of our society.

At that first meeting with Rachel, we discussed her idea for a project involving the use of personal video cameras to record student responses to the question, Are the disabled part of diversity? She had thought of compiling a series of "man in the street" interviews with students as they passed between classes or had coffee in the student union, but she later decided there was not enough time to develop the project before the deadline for the funding that originally brought her to my office. However, Rachel was not willing to give up on the idea. She continued to explore with me, in e-mail exchanges and office visits, the components of her initial proposition. Were students with disabilities a coherent minority group with a shared identity? Did their experiences as members of this group enrich the education of others on campus? Would the medium of video make their experiences more immediate or more remote to others in the campus community?

At the conclusion of this theme semester, I proposed this video project to the chair of my executive committee for Dialogues on Diversity, Earl Lewis. Earl, who also is vice provost for academic affairs, dean of the Rackham Graduate School, and professor of history and Afro-American studies, is known among faculty and students for his commitment to quality and equity in higher education. Earl once had urged the executive committee to consider the possibilities for video in program development, though at that time he had no particular topic in mind. When I proposed a video to the executive committee, one about students with disabilities, all agreed there were some obvious arguments for and against the project. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act had been signed into law in July 1990, so we could use this tenth anniversary to draw attention to the issues. On the other hand, I knew nothing at all about making a video! Once we realized that the university's media unit had the resources to guide

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me through the production process, we discussed the central questions. First, did disability fall in the category of diversity, along with race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and geographical origins? Second, who were the anticipated audiences?

I have to admit that I was making arguments to support the project not only to my executive committee but also to myself. I was concerned that other minority groups or administrators would challenge me, that I might be accused of deflecting attention from the core issues of diversity in higher education. In talking this through with Earl, with Rachel, and with Bess Chuang, who also works for Dialogues on Diversity, we saw the parallels between disabled students as a group and other student minority groups. There are many examples. For instance, in the admissions process, students with disabilities, like students of color, are faced with the dilemma of whether and when to reveal this part of their identity. Once here, they might be perceived as special admits who don't deserve to be here and can't do the work. There are formal student services to assist them with special accommodations. Many of the students can be stereotyped by the way they look or sound. Our institution still has facilities and procedures that are impediments in the realities of these students' daily lives. Students with disabilities definitely are an unacknowledged minority here on campus.

I was reassured in my decision to develop Rachel's idea as I discussed it with colleagues who have been partners in or consultants on other diversity-related projects. They are faculty and staff in Residence Education, the Intergroup Relations Program, the Dean of Students Office, the Office of New Student Programs, and the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. All encouraged me to make the video, though not all were comfortable with the notion of defining students with disabilities as part of diversity. Most asked if we

could use the words *diversity* and *multicultural* interchangeably. Far more intriguing than semantic questions was this: Do the disabled share a culture that shapes their experience and that is distinct from that of the majority of Americans? This was the conceptual hook for me. Was there a culture born of shared experience, and did that engender status as a disadvantaged minority in our society?

Reassuring on a practical level was that none of my colleagues questioned whether they could make use of a video about students with disabilities. They were not familiar with any film or video that explored this question, and they gave me examples of how the result of the project might be used as a training video. *Training video* was a term I associated with human resources in the corporate world, though when I thought of it as a discussion piece, it made more sense. They emphasized that if the video were about thirty minutes long, it could be used in the classroom, in workshops, and at meetings, to raise awareness about the disabled and generate discussion about the meaning and value of diversity.

Now Rachel and I faced another set of challenges, ones that for me demanded honest answers to uncomfortable questions. Did I have an agenda? If not, how could I write the shooting script that would structure who and what would be videotaped? Although Rachel wanted to make the video project into an independent study course in American culture, she was concerned that it would prove overwhelming. We agreed that I would take the lead and make this the major focus of our program development in Dialogues on Diversity. She in turn would not do it for credit but would solicit participants and introduce me to the community of disabled students. Early on, Rachel and I agreed that the subjects would be self-defining: all students who said they had a disability and wanted to take part would be included. Basically, this meant we'd have to actively seek the participation of those with physical, learning, and psychiatric disabilities. At this point I had no idea what I would ask them or how I could guarantee that the final content pertained to diversity as well as disability.

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We did know it would never work unless the students with disabilities were central to the production. We did know students would be inclined to become involved if the video might be part of a larger project. Students were less likely to feel their experience was being exploited if participation in the video might lead to positive changes at the university.

By February 2000 I had engaged in spoken or written exchanges with some fifty students by e-mail, by telephone, and in person. Some simply wanted to ask why I was doing this; others wanted to let me know that they refused to participate because of their dissatisfaction and anger about a failure of services. Nevertheless, we were fortunate in the distribution of the diversity of students' opinions and characteristics. Among the interviewees were nine men and six women, with hearing, visual, or mobility impairments, or with learning and psychiatric disabilities. They were undergraduate, graduate, nondegree, and professional school students disabled from birth, by accident, or by disease. A gay man, a lesbian, a graduate student instructor, and an alumnus who is now a university administrator were included.

In March we began taping interviews. Pat Murphy is one of the managers in the media production unit at the university, which provided the videography and editing. He spent hours with me describing the ways these training videos can be made, and he provided me with samples he'd made for neurosurgeons, the business school, and human resources. I borrowed copies of programs I thought might be similar to my project from the university's film and video library. This helped me to imagine the end result in stylistic terms. The central dilemma was the script. I couldn't map out the shooting script that would give the video a structure, because I didn't know what the students would say. How could I decide in advance what the topics would be? Of course, I had general questions, but I didn't know if a theme would emerge, something that would put flesh on the bones of question-and-answer sessions. All I knew for certain is that I'd ask the students if they felt they were part of diversity at the university.

The interviewing process solved the script dilemma. Each of the students had met and talked with me in a

general, wide-ranging discussion. After that, I realized in going through my notes that they shared common concerns and experiences—though how they reacted to those experiences differed markedly. Then I met again with each for a preinterview session in which I asked the students if the topics I was addressing were important and encouraged them to elaborate on their answer to that question. I became convinced that the program we produced had to be totally subjective, featuring the fifteen students as individuals and allowing them to voice their own experiences with no narrator to structure the audience's reception. There would be no pretense of objectivity and no claim that these students were representative of all with disabilities.

WE TAPED the fifteen interviews in March and April, but it wasn't until I read the transcripts that I realized what we had. The parallels with the experience of other student minorities are striking. Let's begin with the application process. Like many students of color, these disabled students had thought long and hard about making reference to their disabilities at any point in the application; their experience had been, all too often, that it evoked stereotypes subtly used as grounds for exclusion. Perhaps officials would see them as a burden because of all the services they would require or the physical changes that would have to be made in facilities. An inappropriately paternalistic admissions officer might decide they were not up to the challenge or misunderstand the nature of the disease.

Those with physical disabilities are not the only ones who withhold information. Laura Wernick, a graduate student with learning disabilities, had this concern when she applied to the School of Social Work. "Because there's so much stigma around learning disabilities, a lot of misconception about what that's about," she said, "I was afraid to self-disclose my LD during the application process." However, there were students who saw a strategy in disclosure that could work to their advantage. This, too, parallels the approach some students of color can take. Cynthia Overton, for example, knew that the pool of applicants to her program in education contained few people with disabili-

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ities and that it was therefore probably to her advantage to include her disability in her personal statement. Carey Larabee has cerebral palsy and began working with the university's Office of Services for Students with Disabilities while he was still in high school in order to optimize his chances for a successful application.

Once here, students with disabilities contend on a daily basis with the pernicious effects of stereotyping. Like students of color, those who can be identified at a glance as physically different experience assumptions about inferior intellectual capacity. Heidi Lengyel sometimes uses a wheelchair and had this to say about her experiences: "I find that people automatically assume that your intelligence level is lower. They sort of talk maybe slower to you or in a patronizing way. . . . They don't speak right at you or act like you know anything. And they're always surprised to find out that I'm a college student. Then they are surprised to find out where I go to school. They think, 'How could you go to U of M?' So sometimes they'll even say that."

The same stereotype is applied to students with learning disabilities. Perhaps we are loath to admit it, but many Americans suspect that a diagnosis of learning disability is somehow a hoax, a trick to secure an extra advantage. And many other stereotypes play into such an assumption. Michael Gonzales, a graduate student in public health at the medical school who is learning-disabled is all too familiar with this "double whammy." "I feel, like, dumb," he said, "because especially if they know that I'm a medical student then they're like, 'Why are you so slow with this?' Then if they know that I'm Mexican on top of that they go, 'Oh, you just got in medical school because you're Mexican, and you're just not smart enough.'"

Students with mental illness similarly face the suspicion that they deceive others in order to secure accommodations with regard to coursework and other responsibilities. As a result, they often hide their suffering or deny their symptoms. For example, a first-year student (who asked to remain anonymous) resisted seeking treatment for fear of what it would mean: "The symptoms are horrible, but I think that the perceived or the actual stigma, or the perceived or the actual

judgment that falls upon someone who does have a mental illness can be much harder, especially in a university setting."

The disability that marks students for discrimination also forms a significant component, if not the dominant one, in their identity. Each day, they are required to face the challenge of certain cultural and physical realities. Just as people of color in our country rarely, if ever, are allowed to forget that others consider race their most important feature, so it is with these students. Identity was a topic they considered in complex detail. Tim Kaiser is on the job market this year and has thought carefully about how to present his disability when interviewed. "My abilities are not standard, are not like everyone else's," Tim said, "because of my visual impairment. So I'm going to bring something different to the university, wherever I'm going to end up teaching. I won't do things like the professor next door. It's going to be different. And so that's good, I think."

Rachel feels that from an early age she repeatedly has had to choose whether to be part of hearing society or deaf society, and she has never been comfortable with that either-or attitude. As she explained it, "I spent a lot of time thinking about it: that's not how I am, that's not how I view myself, but that's how I'm going to be viewed in society. And the only way I could change that is to empower myself, to do something about it, to stop hiding myself."

Mary Kay Sisson, a nondegree student preparing to apply to medical school, was keenly aware of the debates about cultural definition and identification in the deaf community, even if she was uncertain where she stood. "I think," she observed, "they form not 'a' minority group. I think they form multiple minority groups. I should say we." To many people, Matt Conaway appears severely impaired by cerebral palsy. Yet his very determination to live the way he chooses has created false expectations and misperceptions about who he really is. "Yeah, they expect me to be a supercripple," he said. "But I'm not a supercripple. I'll be damned if I'll be a supercripple. I mean, I've been there, and I'm not going to do it. You know, and if people think I'm not being independent, well, I don't know what else they want. I

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live here by myself. I live in this apartment by myself and I run my business by myself. And if that's not being independent then I don't know what is."

Yet for a few, the very characteristic disdained by society at large is intensely valued. Becky Messing had no doubts: "I guess when we look at the definition of disability, my anxiety disorder definitely puts me at a disadvantage, and I've had to fight through many of my own physical limitations to remain here at the university and remain where I'm studying and in my everyday life. But it's something I've dealt with since I was little. It's a part of me. I wouldn't necessarily . . . I *wouldn't* give it up. It helps drive me to do what I do." Although they focused on the role their particular disability had in shaping their identity, the students all identified with the encompassing label of *disabled*. Cynthia Overton's summary echoes what was said by many of the students I interviewed: "I feel as though all people with disabilities make up some sort of culture. I mean, we share many of the same experiences, many of the same problems and same issues."

How, then, does their sense of belonging to a minority affect their views on the value of diversity in higher education? Carey Larabee had been considering where he fit in on campus when he posed a question: "Do I see myself as part of the university's diversity that they have spent so much time on?" His answer was, "No, I don't think so. I think, you know, the university prides itself so much on diversity and, you know, African Americans, homosexuals, or whatever. But I think the disabled population is kind of . . . I don't want to say 'hidden,' but it's just not noticed as much and really paid attention to as much as some of the other groups on campus."

All the students I interviewed voiced a similar sense that the disabled are rarely acknowledged in all the talk of diversity. Rachel shares this view with Carey. In the course of her activism during her four years on campus, she's given a lot of thought to how we define diversity. "Students with disabilities are not recognized as a minority group, but I think that it's an invisible population," she said. "When we talk about diversity it's usually in color but it's not in . . . what shapes our experience, which is something that disability does."

Jack Bernard is a graduate of our law school, now an attorney in our general counsel's office and a strong supporter of the university's defense of its emphasis on diversity. He admitted that the university wasn't as inclusive as he would like it to be in terms of students with disabilities, pointing out that these students have certainly not been even close to the top of the university's diversity agenda.

Interestingly, although in interviews students expressed views about the admissions lawsuits and affirmative action that spanned the political spectrum, none doubted the value diversity adds to education. Steve Laux, a graduate student in engineering, now paraplegic as the result of an accident, had a very pragmatic approach to the issue: "The U.S. prides itself on being probably the most diversified country. . . . You know, when we enter the jobs and work with teams, then yeah, we're going to need to know how to deal with those people."

Tim Kaiser, whose vision became impaired while he was in graduate school, presented the relationship between disability and diversity in different terms: "It has made me aware also, then, that people who can't hide their disabilities or their skin color or whatever it's going to be are forced to deal with these things on a daily basis."

Although it is true that these students with disabilities voiced experiences that parallel those of other minority students, there was one exception that emerged in the interviews. Most of them had faced blatant discrimination in the classroom. Instructors, perhaps out of ignorance, anxiety, or a misguided sense of fairness, refused to provide accommodations and often humiliated the students by publicly discussing their special needs. (Hearing about these incidents brought back shameful memories of my own responses to disabled students when I was teaching.)

The experience Heidi Lengyel related is not unusual: "Then she told me also that the other students in the class felt uncomfortable with me in the class. At this time, I had a brace on my leg and I was using crutches. But I mean, it could have looked to someone like I had broken my leg. So she said that they were very uncomfortable with me in the class and wanted to

know what was wrong with me. Those were the words she used. And she wanted me to get up in front of the class and explain it. I said 'No.' Then I ended up having to go to Services for Students with Disabilities and talking about this."

Often the faculty response was not so overtly cruel but simply thoughtless—and that in itself can be devastating. Becky Messing related the experiences she had had with seeking help from her professors: "I was actually very discouraged, especially by some of the faculty in the College of Engineering that were trying to help. One woman told me, 'Well, maybe chemical engineering is not for you.' And it didn't make any sense to me because I hadn't taken any engineering classes. . . . There's a lack of education about anxiety disorders and mental health and mental illnesses in general. And it was *really* frustrating to get discouragement from people that I looked up to."

Rachel Arfa told of this experience with a professor: "I had this one professor who was very intimidated by having real-time captioning in the classroom. It was a piece of technology; she didn't understand what it was for; she didn't try to learn what it was about. And then bad things started happening because as that affected me, she wasn't making the effort to reach out to me and treat me as a member of the class. She saw me as the girl sitting next to the real-time captioning." Unfortunately, Rachel's experience is one shared by other students who take advantage of the great advances in technology.

Brent Baribeau, who came to the University of Michigan on a golf scholarship, then suffered a spinal cord injury in an accident, couched these problems with faculty in the most generous terms: "There are instances when I do feel like some of my professors don't really I guess grasp or appreciate what it entails for me just to be a student. I think they tend to overlook the fact that I do deal with more than the average student does on a daily basis. That definitely can be frustrating that I just

feel like at times they really miss the bigger picture."

How then can we convey the bigger picture? The call for change I heard repeatedly in my interviews and conversations was matched by the plans these students have. Heidi Lengyel has written a proposal for a peer mentorship program that would ease the transition to college life for students with disabilities. Rachel Arfa has spoken to the administration about the need for a meeting room in the student union designated as a lounge for disabled students. Many, like Steve Laux, saw ignorance as the primary impediment: "I don't like this to define who I am, so I don't necessarily like to associate with only other people in wheelchairs. But at the same time . . . we need to come together and get stuff accomplished as a whole because there's just so much unawareness out there." Jack Bernard sees similarities with earlier political movements that advanced the interests of minority groups: "The more people we have on campus who have disabilities, hidden or otherwise, I think, the better it is for the community. There's a little more sensitivity out there. And that's like with any of the other movements we've had. The best way to improve understanding is to improve interaction."

AMONG ALL the competing demands for attention by student minority groups, there is a tendency to think that efforts to level the playing field for one group will somehow interfere with similar efforts for other groups. But why? Haven't we learned that the inclusion of one group does not require the exclusion of another? Over the last two decades we all have seen increasing access to higher education for a growing number of minority groups. What has kept us from including students with disabilities in that access—and from recognizing how they contribute to our community? Let's face it: sometimes we're held back by fear and repulsion, more often by simple embarrassment and ignorance, and sometimes by the desire to spend our allotted funding on another program affecting a greater

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number of students. We should be encouraged by the parallel experiences between disabled students and other minority groups. It's time to stop telling them who they are or aren't and instead simply listen.

As a society, we are ready. After the experience of making this video, I'm convinced that attitudes about disability really have changed over the past two decades. Rachel's initiating question—whether students with disabilities were part of diversity—has been answered with a resounding yes, at least on our campus. For there was no doubt here at the University of Michigan that students with disabilities contribute to the wealth of experience that so enriches the quality of education we provide. The response to the completed video program, *And You Can Quote Me on That: Students with Disabilities at the University of Michigan*, has been striking and powerful. I had expected an audience of perhaps one hundred at the most for the premiere in September. More than twice that number came that night; every inch of

the room was occupied, and people were waiting in the hallway. Following the screening, six of the students who were featured took questions from the audience. For an hour the questions came—questions that focused not on the disabled as some foreign group but as a part of the community unfairly excluded. The next day my e-mail in box was flooded with requests from faculty, students, and staff for copies of the tape. The requests continue to come in, because of the full coverage the premiere received in the student and staff newspapers and the word of mouth that promotes its value.

I don't know what the next step is, but we're ready.

NOTES

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