

“Disability Rights and Concerns Chapter Committees, Their Role on Campus”

by

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UUP chapter disability rights and concerns committees serve UUP members with disabilities, but they do so under the direction of the Chapter Executive Board and in relation to other disability-related campus offices and organizations. We invited Nancy Belowich-Negron, Director, Disabled Student Services, University at Albany, a well-known expert in campus disability services for students who has worked with the UUP Disability Committee at the Albany campus, to tell us how UUP disability committees can work together with other disability-related campus groups to improve facilities and services for all. Nancy spoke from the perspective of the Albany campus. Following is a summary of her remarks.

Background of the Disabled Student Services office on the Albany Campus

In 1973 a three-year federal grant was received from Rehabilitation Services Administration to establish a program to support students with disabilities at the University at Albany. Several program coordinators established Rehabilitation Support Services (RSS) and laid the foundation for the program that exists today. In 1980 Nancy Belowich-Negron became the Director of the Program and the program became known as Disabled Student Services. At that time there were 88 students registered with disabilities. Also in 1980, the University at Albany had the only full service program for disabled students in higher education in the Capital District. It was at this time that the university began to make concerted efforts to attract, recruit and retain qualified students with disabilities. This was done in a variety of ways and on a number of fronts.

Disabled Student Services was asked to participate in any number of Admissions programs including information sessions, college fairs and in reviewing applications and meeting with or addressing inquiries from applicants and their families with disabilities. Concurrent with these activities the University's Presidents and upper level administrators were quite supportive of requests for accessibility modifications and adaptive equipment acquisition. Disabled Student Services began to work closely with the Disabled Students organization and with the Plant Department to prioritize campus improvement projects for furthering both programmatic and architectural accessibility.

Disabled Student Services (DSS) developed relationships with many guidance counselors and community college personnel statewide that rapidly began to increase the number of applicants with disabilities. DSS also developed special recognition programs that heightened awareness both on campus and in the community about services for people with disabilities at the University. This included annual programs that were well attended like DSS Awards Luncheon, Honors Convocation for students with disabilities, Abilities Awareness Month and a Disabled Student Scholarship Fund. In May of 1998 a Gala Celebration was held to commemorate the

Silver Anniversary of the establishment of Disabled Student Services and to recognize some of its distinguished alumni. Ted Kennedy, Jr. was the keynote speaker and over 200 people were in attendance for the event. It celebrated the graduation of over 700 students with disabilities since the program's inception. The university for the past eighteen years runs a statewide PreCollege Summer Transition Program for disabled high school students who are consumers of state rehabilitation services. This is the only program of its kind in New York State and is very well known by the state vocational rehabilitation personnel. It has heightened awareness about the University and its facilities throughout the state.

Disabled Student Services has become an integral part of the University. Faculty and staff refer students to the program and look to the office to furnish recommendations about reasonable accommodations. Representation from DSS or the disability community is or has been present on a wide variety of campus committees including but not limited to: Affirmative Action Commission, University Senate, Parking Committee, Student Life Committee, Library Access Committee, UUP and CSEA (campus unions), AIDS Council, Alcohol Prevention Task Force, Women's Concerns Committee, and many more. As well the staff of DSS are also invited to participate in state and local advisory councils, boards and task forces to develop policy and educate others about disability issues. The University at Albany has been and considered a flagship SUNY University Center for students with disabilities.

The population of students with disabilities at the University at Albany has risen from 88 in 1980 to 340 in 2000, to nearly 450 in 2004. ([see comparative disabled enrollment table http://www.albany.edu/studentlife/DSS/history/growth.html](http://www.albany.edu/studentlife/DSS/history/growth.html)) The steady upward increase is testament to the support and the reputation the University has received with regard to services for persons with disabilities. New programs and services are always being added to complement those that are already in existence. The Disabled Student Scholarship Fund was created to help offset the high expenses often encumbered by those with disabilities. The Disability Film Series was offered to help students and staff alike who were trying to understand their learning disabilities. The Testing program was developed as a way to safeguard the circumstances in which disabled students take their tests and examinations. Each year well over 1300 tests are administered through DSS with the help of 25+ volunteer staff test proctors. These are just a few examples of the ongoing program efforts developed by DSS to meet the changing needs of the burgeoning disabled student population. (<http://www.albany.edu/studentlife/DSS/history/index.html>)

What are the Reasons People with Disabilities Need Other Voices?

The more voices (and different perspectives) the better. Just as union members band together to negotiate with management, people with disabilities and the offices and agencies representing them can and must speak loudly and clearly about what needs to be done on campus. Not only facilities and services, but also attitudes and understanding may need improvement. For each person who speaks out about a problem, there may be dozens of others who are affected by it. Busy administrators may be more likely to respond when they hear a message or request from several coordinated sources.

Disability-Related Campus Services

The most well-known disability-related service is, of course, Disabled Student Services, but DSS serves students. A UUP Committee serves those represented by UUP. Other services, whose names may vary across campuses, include: Learning Disabled Student Services; Counseling Center; Alcohol & Substance Abuse Officer; Library Liaison; University Psychiatrist; Health services; University Counsel's Office; EAP Office; UUP Disability Committee. On some campuses, particularly smaller ones, some functions may be combined.

Relationship Between these Entities

The relationship between these departments varies by campus. Ideally, each campus would have an advisory council of representatives of all constituencies plus student and staff representatives. There should be regular communication between the groups. Each should have literature and cards from the others for referrals.

What are some of the Ways that Disabled Students Services and a UUP Disability Committee Can Work Together?

There are things which each can do better. Some problems affect only one person, but improved facilities affect everyone. Each has its own constituency.

1. Members of a committee can refer access or technology issues to UUP Executive Board, Disabled Student Services or Plant Department.
2. Disbursement of a disability newsletter
3. Surveys about disability need, services, facilities.
4. Faculty /staff discussion issues/ contract issues
5. Prioritizing disability- related needs, services, facilities' accommodations
6. Identify potential faculty, staff, or students who might benefit from the work of any of these disability-related concerns committees
7. Mentor students with disabilities
8. Serve as test proctors for students with disabilities
9. Raise funds for scholarships/ or establish funds for students with disabilities
10. Hold focus groups with faculty, staff and/or students with disabilities periodically to assess current needs.

What Projects are Most likely to Need Support on Most Campuses?

- Making all classrooms and all courses accessible to all through universal design.
- Making certain all new or newly-renovated buildings are truly accessible; not just done to code. This should mean working for universal design, accommodating *all* needs, e.g., obesity or elderly people. Establishing hearing-impaired facilities.
- Holding awareness sessions, perhaps with EAP, DSS or Counsel's office, etc.
- Central area for equipment loan program for faculty/staff (manual chairs, scooters, canes, etc.
- Call for the design of access maps/ Guides/ tactile maps of campus
- Periodic focus groups
- Identifying resources for : Braille services, books, films, speakers.
- Requesting emergency evacuation plans. (remember 9/11?) not just for fires but also chemical spills and biohazards.

Finally, a UUP Disability Rights and Concerns Committee could set the stage for the other unions to establish similar committees which could also cooperate for the betterment of all.