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Title: Disability Rights as Civil Rights: a case study at the University of Illinois

About the Author:

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Abstract: The program for students with disabilities at the University of Illinois was the result of efforts by the Veterans Administration (V.A.), college administrators, and an initial group of students with disabilities. From its success and longevity, it is tempting to jump to the conclusion that there was abundant support from the institutions involved; however, archival evidence suggests that such support from the V.A. and certain sections of the college administration may not always have been enthusiastically forthcoming. By applying Derrick Bell’s theory of interest convergence, this paper aims to examine what motives the various institutions involved had in the initiation and continuation of the program, and in the process establish parallels between the disability rights and African-American Civil Rights movements.

Short Assignment on The Body Silent:

In The Body Silent, Murphy sets out not only to document his struggle with illness and disability, but also to draw from his personal experience and research in order to relate to readers the plight of the disabled in America, what he terms in the prologue 'the social history of (a) paralytic illness' (p. 3). To this end, his background in anthropology and ethnography enables him to take a step back in order to objectively observe and analyze the big picture concerning the situation of the disabled and their relationship with ‘able-bodied’ society, despite being so personally involved in it.

The unique usefulness of Murphy’s training is apparent from the very first chapter, where he comments on the peculiar social status of ‘being “sick”’ (p. 19), and of the social hierarchy present within our hospitals, making observations and conducting thorough analyses in a fashion similar to how an anthropologist would describe his findings about a new tribe. He then goes on to draw parallels of how the sick in our society are treated with practices within communities as diverse as prison populations to the military and even the
Amazonian Mundurucu, before returning, fittingly, to Susan Sontag’s Illness as Metaphor and a commentary about paranoia and the human need to impose artificial order on the world around us. From his thought process, readers see how anthropology has been helpful in providing a systematic framework for Murphy to organize and build his observations around, and from his insight, one sees the ethnographer drawing up analogies to societies he has previously studied, in effect enabling the extrapolation of said observations into a commentary about the human condition in general. Throughout the following chapters, and especially in Chapters 5 and 6, readers are then treated to not only full-blown political and social commentary about the situation of America’s disabled—which can conceivably be accomplished by any competent and well-researched writer—but the possible sociological reasons for society’s (mis)treatment of them as well, delivered professionally and urgently, in a manner one suspects only someone in Murphy’s unique situation could.

Despite the benefits it confers, however, Murphy’s background and employment in academia also make him one of a few within the disabled community who could remain gainfully employed—and ‘comfortably’ (p. 66) so—throughout his illness, and hence not truly disabled in this sense (a fact acknowledged with pride by Murphy himself in Chapter 3 (p. 81) while filling in a census form), in stark contrast to the infantrymen and blue-collar workers he describes in Chapter 6 as forming the bulk of the disabled population. Additionally, throughout the book, readers are reminded of the times when his wife, Yolanda was present to provide a despondent Murphy with much needed emotional support, a prime example of which was described in Chapter 3 (p. 65) when he contemplated suicide. Together, these factors make Murphy’s situation rather unique and especially fortunate among the disabled, in effect making him one of the few who have ‘gotten well’ (to paraphrase him), who have overcome their affliction to become productive and hence held in higher regard by members of ‘able-bodied’ society. However, this then poses a problem regarding the objectivity of his comments about the plight of the disabled who are truly marginalized—Murphy claims that ‘disability (is) a form of liminality’ (p. 131), that all liminals are somehow emotionally vested in each other in a way—but really, a large part of what he has been trying to demonstrate (and consequently a reason for writing the book) is that it is intrinsically difficult to establish a connection with someone worse off than oneself. It is thus only reasonable to question how accurately his observations of the destitute disabled demographic reflect the reality of their conditions, and especially how his views on the propensity for social change
are colored by his substantially more supportive environment.

As readers of The Body Silent nearly two decades after it was written, it is indeed depressing to note that much of what Murphy describes as the plight of the disabled, drawn from both his personal experience and capacity as an anthropologist, still rings true today – for example, parents still routinely tell their children to ‘don’t look’ (p. 130) at the disabled, while the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), like its predecessor the Rehabilitation Act, still gets its share of similar criticism. However, it is imperative to note as well the great strides that have been made since then, the ADA being a foremost example, and the fact that it is not unusual anymore for one to see disabled–friendly classrooms and public transport services, or even just the sight of disabled youths hanging out as equals with their able–bodied friends: despite the anthropological analyses and sociological rhetoric, it is thus Murphy’s most human illumination that shines through: that there is indeed hope for social change, and, though the ideal may still be a long way away, life is worth living as long as one retains the necessary spirit for it.

The attached document is a correspondence between R. L. Graffouliere (then Veterans’ Benefits Administrator and Counselor of the Galesburg Division) and Dr. Robert G. Bone (Director of the Division of Special Services for War Veterans [DSSWV], University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign [UIUC]) in September 1948, describing in cursory detail some aspects of the Galesburg program for paraplegic war veterans, including the history behind its establishment and some of its achievements and problems. In particular, Graffouliere mentions the difficulty faced by the veterans in obtaining their ‘last two years (of college education), necessary for graduation’. As such, this correspondence could very well have been the impetus for the eventual transfer of said veterans to UIUC, in turn bringing about the improvements in accessibility conditions that the campus is now somewhat recognized for.

In the correspondence, Graffouliere mentions how the Galesburg program was set up by a conference conducted in 1947 with the Galesburg Division and certain veterans and Veterans Administration organizations to take in students under Public Law 16 (P.L. 16). Passed by Congress in 1943, P.L. 16 aimed to provide up to 4 years of training – such as a college education – directed toward restoring the employability of disabled World War II veterans; in this way, it can be viewed as a precursor, albeit on a much smaller scale, to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. One would then be led to asking: why did it take all of thirty years for Congress to realize
that all people with disabilities, and not just veterans, required equal education opportunities as part of their rehabilitation? Most probably, this was due to the fact that disabled veterans were in their situation as a direct result of their service to the nation, and the respect accorded to that then mitigated their lowered social status due to their disabilities: thus, veterans’ needs, rather than the needs of the disabled, were being satisfied here. This could also be an explanation for the non-paternalistic tone adopted by Graffouliere – at no point does he reveal in any way that he holds lower expectations for the veterans than he does for other students, and he refers to their disability only infrequently, in sharp contrast to the societal norm that prevailed till the late eighties as highlighted by Shapiro in No Pity. Naturally, it would be illuminating to look into how, or if, veterans on campus have been treated differently from other students with disabilities.

Despite the information one may be able to glean from it, however, the professional nature and tone of the correspondence mean the focus is placed almost exclusively on practical problems and practical arrangements for improving the accessibility of campus facilities and physical rehabilitation, with little to no insight into the emotional make-up of the veterans, nor of any attempts to provide them with counseling opportunities or other forms of emotional support, both of which are crucial aspects to rehabilitation, as highlighted by Murphy in The Body Silent. In fact, all the veterans in the program are described to be ‘very pleasant and willing’, which seems almost too good to be true for men and women whose lives and careers had been defined by being able-bodied till that point. It is thus reasonable to question the accessibility of the program itself, to ask if less emotionally viable candidates were not given or did not embrace similar opportunities, and if so, why. On a similar vein, it is terribly suspect that all students under the program were paraplegic – wouldn’t quadriplegic veterans have been in greater need of education opportunities for future employment?

To further develop the subject, it would be beneficial to investigate the relationship Graffouliere and Bone had with the veterans. Preliminary research at the University Student Life and Culture Archives, and namely into the Galesburg to Champaign Changeover files, where this document was found, revealed numerous consultations between Bone and the veterans regarding campus accessibility arrangements, which seem to imply the existence of a more intimate understanding and involvement in the lives of the students – perhaps this could provide more insight into any social or emotional issues encountered by the veterans on campus, since it is rather
unlikely that they could have been as passive as Shapiro painted them out to be. On another note, the necessity of these consultation sessions imply that the campus had not been handicapped-accessible before the transfer of the Galesburg veterans, thus making it a significant moment in the history of the college. However, it must be noted throughout this discussion that most, if not all, of the financial burden for these renovations would have been borne either by the VA or a similar off-college source; this would have accounted in no small part for the success of said plans rather than their languishment due to funding issues, echoing a similar point made by Shapiro in No Pity when comparing the economic consequences of the integration women and African-Americans versus the disabled into both public and private institutions. In fact, this might have been the cause for the scaling down of the original program from involving ‘as many as one-hundred’ to only a single paraplegic veteran: it would be interesting indeed to see how, over the years, the college has decided to balance its finances against the needs of the disabled student community and its obligations under the ADA.

As mentioned above, this document was filed under the Galesburg to Champaign Changeover, which was itself in the Division of Rehabilitation Education Services subject file. As such, it was found without much difficulty through the archives database, along with a fairly substantial amount of primary evidence to provide a contextual backdrop as well.

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Response to Mogged or Baldwin:

Mogged’s paper is chiefly concerned with the evolution of the wheelchair basketball scene at the University. In it, she talks about its origins and the rise and fall of its popularity, and cites possible reasons for these. One of the points highlighted by Mogged was the impact the difference in public opinion towards World War II and the Vietnam War had on the support and recognition received by wheelchair basketball and disabled veterans. Expounding on this, we see how the rights of people with disabilities were essentially at the mercy of the rest of society, hence accentuating the pressing need to have said rights enshrined in and assured by the law, the very situation Shapiro talks about in No Pity, and which eventually led to the passing of the ADA.

Another point mentioned by Mogged was that paraplegic veterans enrolled in the University studied at the Galesburg Undergraduate Division, in a campus separate from the one here at Urbana-Champaign, since the Galesburg campus was much more wheelchair-accessible and thus more suitable. However, this segregation was an interesting choice indeed, especially when
juxtaposed with the fact that the aim of the Galesburg program was for the eventual rehabilitation and integration of the veterans. Mogged states that the Galesburg campus was available because ‘the army decided to let the Mayo General Hospital be used for the public’, which raises the question if anything would have been done to accommodate the veterans had this fortuitous opportunity not presented itself. Evidence cited by Mogged about the college administrators’ reluctance to support the wheelchair basketball team seem to suggest the picture would not have been so rosy; it would thus be instructive to examine the evolution of the administration’s stance towards admitting and making provisions for students with disabilities, especially before and after the passing of the ADA.

Mogged makes use of a variety of resources, both from the web and from the university archives, ranging from newspaper clippings to informational articles. Sources are used to good effect as well, such as in the cross-examination of the articles concerning the airlift of the team in order to present a more tempered version of true events. There is one thing that needs to be said, however, and that is that certain portions of the paper are not as well-substantiated as they could be, for example, when Mogged throws out the theory that anti-war sentiment during the Vietnam War years led to the decline of support for the wheelchair basketball team.

Initial Question:

Was activism really absent from disabled students at the University of Illinois, as Shapiro made it out to be? Did the early students (i.e. the Galesburg transfer veterans) really not have issues with accessibility conditions, paternalism or even social stigma? If they did, what did they do about it? If not, were they especially well taken care of because of their status as veterans?

This question was inspired in no small part by Shapiro’s mention of the program for disabled students at the University of Illinois (U of I), describing how it started out as the first veteran rehabilitation program in the country, how ‘students got the campus ramped, had their own fraternity, and published their own magazine’, and yet, strangely, that it was ‘run by university officials’ and ‘did not incorporate the self-help approach of the Berkeley students’, implying somehow a sense of paternalism and lack of activism on the part of the students. In light of Baldwin’s interview with Freddy, who self-identifies as ‘severely physically disabled’, and who needs the aid of personal assistants with his daily activities, it is interesting to note that Shapiro states also that the U of I program ‘required students to be able to fend for themselves, without attendants’. These issues give one the feeling that perhaps this short blurb from Shapiro may not have been as fair an interpretation as it could have been, and access to the university archives certainly provides a great opportunity to set the record straight.

An obvious jumping-in point for this topic would be the files concerning the transfer of disabled veterans from the Galesburg division, seeing as how, from Laura’s clipping from the Daily Illini,
they appear to be the first paraplegic students on campus. Indeed, this seems to be corroborated by a cursory scan-through of the Galesburg file, from which one cannot help but notice how a sizeable amount of correspondences and memos are dedicated to the sessions spent consulting with the veterans as to how accessibility conditions could be improved for them.

In order to more fully examine the possible social issues faced by said veterans and how they overcame them, one would most likely have to go beyond the official documents maintained by the university. To this end, it would be tremendously helpful if one could locate any personal paraphernalia preserved within the archives, though this could prove difficult; one could as well look into the formation of Delta Sigma Omicron (DSO) and its early activities, since its founding in 1948 (brought up by Joshua) so closely parallels the timeline of the veterans' arrival on campus. The role of DSO as an outlet for disability-related activism in the early days was probably enormous, and its status as a professional fraternity endorsed by the university - and hence not as radical in the traditional sense as the Berkeley outfit - probably contributed to Shapiro's opinion that students with disabilities over here were somewhat less involved. Lastly, one would do well to find out more about Timothy Nugent and the DRES program, and how they have advanced the disability cause on campus.

Obviously, to examine student activism throughout the entire history of the disability program on campus would be foolhardy; thus, it is my intention to focus on the challenges faced by this first group of paraplegic veterans from the Galesburg division, and how (or if) these were addressed, before the arrival of Timothy Nugent and the advent of DRES. Major sources of information would obviously include the Galesburg files and records of DSO's early activities, as well as possibly any clippings from the Daily Illini in the period from the late 40s to the early 50s.

Through this project, it is hoped that more light can be shed on this momentous yet poorly-remembered occasion for the disability movement on campus; it should not be taken for granted that it was easy for the veterans involved then, just as it surely still is not smooth-sailing for present students.

Source Annotated Bibliography:

1. Notes by Ronald L. Graffouliere from conference regarding the enrollment of disabled veterans at the Galesburg Division

   July 24, 1947

   Administrative Subject File, 1946–1949

   Galesburg Division – Future of For Physically Handicapped, 1948–49
This conference is very likely where the idea for the program for disabled veterans at the Galesburg Division took root. Attendees included personnel from Hines V.A. Hospital, the V.A. and both the Urbana and Galesburg campuses. Notable points of discussion included:

a. Student selection would be done by the V.A. rather than the University.

b. The program would serve mostly paraplegics, arthritics and veterans with coronary disabilities.

c. The V.A. would foot the bill for the program.

The conclusion of the conference was that such a program was not impossible, a fact that has now been proven right. From this document, one can derive that the program was most likely an idea by the V.A. rather than the University, and motivated in no small part by the passing of Public Law 16. It is interesting as well to note the limited range of disabilities represented here: perhaps one could then look into how the diversity of disability on campus was expanded from here.

2. Memo from Homer G. Bradney to all Illinois Veterans’ Commission field offices

July 28, 1947

3. Publicity document concerning the program for disabled veterans at the Galesburg Division

Administrative Subject File, 1946–1949

Galesburg Division – Future of For Physically Handicapped, 1948–49

Record Series 49/1/1–2

These two documents highlight how the major selling point for the program for disabled veterans was the fact that the Galesburg campus was sited on the former Mayo General Hospital, and thus enjoyed unprecedented accessibility. It
should be noted that the hospital site was not initially acquired by the University with the express purpose of accommodating disabled veterans in mind (since the Galesburg had already been up and running a year prior); thus it is truly fortuitous that the program arose due to the circumstances at the time – notably the passing of Public Law 16 and very likely astute judgment on the part of certain University and V.A. administrators. While this is not very exciting (since it does not provide much room for further analysis), it is, in all likelihood, the main reason behind the initiation of the program.

4. Correspondences between Ronald L. Graffouliere and Robert G. Bone regarding the award of degrees to paraplegic veterans at the Galesburg Division

November 12, 1948, November 23, 1948

Division of Rehabilitation Education Services Subject File, 1948–2004

Changeover File – Galesburg to Champaign, 1948–49

Record Series 16/6/1–1

The correspondence basically lays out the problem facing the paraplegic veterans at the Galesburg campus – namely that due to accessibility issues, they, unlike their able-bodied counterparts, would not have been able to transfer to the Urbana campus in order to complete their degrees. Of note here is the fact that Bone, then Director of the Division of Special Services for War Veterans, is personally unsure of the feasibility of any plan to transfer the disabled veterans to the Urbana campus, given his opinion that the ‘campus does not lend itself to paraplegic veterans’. His view on this issue is interesting in that it seems to imply either a lack of willingness on the part of the college administration to make the necessary provisions, or perhaps just a lack of familiarity with the required modifications.

5. Memo from Robert G. Bone to L. R. Benston regarding the visit of a paraplegic Galesburg veteran

April 13, 1949

Division of Rehabilitation Education Services Subject File,
The tone of this memo is interesting, in that it suggests the University was at that point willing to meet the needs of any paraplegic Galesburg veterans who wished to transfer to the Urbana campus. Contrasted with the source 4., this then raises the question of what occurred in the intervening period to change the attitude of the administration toward accommodating the veterans – perhaps the availability of V.A. funding had been confirmed, or more simply some administrators could just have been convinced of the merits of such a plan.

6. Memo from Robert G. Bone to George D. Stoddard regarding the visit of a Galesburg paraplegic

April 14, 1949

Division of Rehabilitation Education Services Subject File, 1948–2004

Changeover File – Galesburg to Champaign, 1948–49

Record Series 16/6/1–1

This source concerns the visit of a paraplegic veteran from the Galesburg Division with the aim of evaluating accessibility conditions at the Urbana campus. By the end of the visit, the veteran seems to have been convinced that it was indeed possible for him and the others to enroll at the Urbana campus. Obviously, this display of initiative goes a long way toward dispelling any notion that the veterans were merely passive participants in the transfer process, and the fact that they requested for a conference with then President of the University of Illinois, George D. Stoddard, strengthens this point even further. The receptiveness of the administrators towards such active participation by the veterans themselves is also interesting, since such collaboration is precisely what was lacking at Berkeley, as described by Shapiro in No Pity.
7. Memo from Ronald L. Graffouliere to Clifton C. Delong regarding V.A. financing under the P.L. 16 contract

June 1, 1949

8. Memo from Robert G. Bone to R. L. Peterson and G. T. Stafford regarding financing contracts between the Galesburg Division and the V.A.

June 3, 1949

9. Memo from Frank Bridgewater to C. S. Havens and S. Earl Thompson regarding compensation for treatment space for paraplegic students

July 20, 1949

Division of Rehabilitation Education Services Subject File, 1948–2004

Changeover File – Galesburg to Champaign, 1948–49

Record Series 16/6/1–1

These three sources document instances when the University approached the V.A. for funding regarding accommodations for the paraplegic Galesburg transfer veterans. Together with source 1., it can be surmised that the program (both at Galesburg and Urbana) was heavily reliant on V.A. funding throughout its lifetime: this could perhaps explain why the administration did not initially seem to be terribly enthusiastic about the proposed transfer (source 4.). In light of the intrinsic role the V.A. played in the execution of the program, it would be interesting to see how university administrators and the veterans themselves would influence the direction of the program, and with it the general campus environment for students with disabilities.

Revised Question:
To what extents did the Veterans Administration (V.A.), university administration and students themselves influence the direction of the disabilities program at the University, from its conception as a veterans-exclusive program to its transition into one for all civilian students?

This revised question is broader in scope than the initial question, since the original was admittedly a bit too limited in its scope to be of major interest. Also, instead of the straight yes/no question that it was before, this revised version allows more room for development and possibly analysis that will
hopefully allow an extrapolation to a larger issue concerning
disability in general.

As much as it was motivated by the limitations of the original,
the revised question was also inspired by new information
uncovered in the process of archival research, particularly as it
became increasingly evident that no single entity could be
ascribed full responsibility for the initiation, success and
consequent longevity of the program. This paralleled certain
issues brought up by Shapiro in No Pity, specifically how the
successful passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act
(ADA) was due to the ‘hidden army’ of support in Congress,
and how these common interests managed to bridge partisan
lines. From this, one could possibly derive how the issue of
disability rights has (for better or for worse) generally been the
result of marriages of convenience, a cause to champion in
boom times but the first to be axed by fidgety administrations
in recession (touched on by Bérubé and highlighted by Tony in
class).

Elaborating on the theme of converging interests, one can see
from archived documents how the University’s program for
students with disabilities was really the product of the V.A.,
college administrators and disabled veterans themselves.
Notably, although the V.A. was responsible for the essential
roles of student selection and funding, there was in fact very
little mention of it within the university administrative files
otherwise. From this, one could conclude that university
administrators actually had quite a free rein in the day-to-day
running of the program: student input to the program was then
also harnessed by said administrators in the form of feedback
and consultation sessions and organizations such as Delta
Sigma Omicron (DSO).

To then demonstrate the individual extents to which the various
organizations contributed to the success of the program, it
would be instructive to examine the impact of the withdrawal of
V.A. funding – in effect when the program was opened up to
include civilian students as well. The handling of this transition
would reflect the college administration’s support for the
program, perhaps allowing an evaluation of the progressiveness
of its views regarding disability: additionally, the presence of any student initiatives – and if they were
tedited or civilian-led – in the process of this changeover
would indicate how much veterans with disabilities identified at
the time with civilians in similar situations.
To sum up, it is quite clear at this stage that the University’s program for students with disabilities was indeed a result of a convergence of interests, much like the situation that led to the passage of the ADA. It would be interesting to note from this point how the program was later retooled from a veterans’ program into a civilian one, and from this address the issue of mutual identification between disparate groups under the umbrella of ‘persons with disabilities’ (in this case veterans and civilians), both from within and without the disabled community.

Recommendations to Campus Honors Program:
The prevalent analogies between the disability rights and Civil Rights movements suggest a treatment of the two in tandem. Thus, lessons derived from the latter should be modified and taught with the added dimension of the former. For purely practical reasons, it would be beneficial for education efforts to focus in particular on promoting integration and equal opportunity as a public good, one on which it is impossible to place a monetary value but which is deemed desirable to society nonetheless.

Despite the need to pander to the more practical and mercenary tendencies of society that Bell’s theory would suggest, it is important as well that the notions of integration and equal opportunity as ideals, desirable in and of themselves, should not be discounted in education efforts either. This is so because it is the empowerment to dream that this provides that, like the galvanizing influence of an inspirational leader, will hold the disability rights movement together when interest convergence turns against it, which it surely will at times.

In this two-pronged approach, it is thus necessary for the University at large to work more closely with DRES in efforts to both raise awareness and discourse regarding disability rights on campus, and possibly to offer courses that endeavor to treat such issues with a healthy balance of both cynicism and idealism. Also, disability studies classes should
definitely be given a General Education classification as an American Minority Culture; this would not only acknowledge and highlight the fact, but make such classes more attractive to students as well.