University Admissions of Students with Disabilities: Is Equality Really Best?

Joshua Glaser
12/09/08

Introduction:

For students with disabilities, the issue of accessibility on a college campus begins long before these students even arrive on campus. It begins in the admissions process, since if a student cannot gain entrance into the university, then accessibility issues at the university itself will be irrelevant. In this sense, the admissions process is potentially the ultimate issue of accessibility on a college campus.

Treatment of students with disabilities by the Office of Admissions at the University of Illinois has changed significantly over the last fifty years. Currently, there are equal admission standards for both able-bodied students and students with disabilities. This would appear to be an extremely positive thing, since disability rights activists have been fighting for equality for decades (Shapiro). However, upon further research, the issue is not so clear. Equality in admissions has its benefits, but it is not without negative consequences.

Methodology:

Since I researched the admissions process at the University of Illinois over many years, much of my research was archival in nature. I found a large portion of my data from the boxes of Division of Rehabilitation Education Services (DRES) material at the Student
Life and Culture Archives. There was a folder titled “Admissions” that contained many documents about admission of students with disabilities in the 1960s. This material was especially helpful to my project because noticing the differences between the 1960s and the present inspired me to continue on the topic. The problem with this admissions folder was that there was no useful information from any other decade. This motivated me to find an additional archival source. Since I had exhausted specifics on disabled student admissions, I decided it was necessary to find general admission material and make inferences about its relation to students with disabilities. Within the archives at the main library there was a box of general admissions material that allowed me to fill in many of the gaps of knowledge, although a few still remain. Much of my information on current policy comes from an interview I conducted with a DRES employee who chose to remain anonymous. In this interview, I did not tape record, but just took notes on relevant information. I asked the interviewee to repeat herself when I wanted to get the wording exactly correct for quoting. More information on the present comes from reputable educational and government websites on the Internet. Lastly, I used other classmates’ research in my paper.

Background Information:

Originally, students with disabilities were not admitted directly into the University of Illinois. From 1947-1949, the disabled students attending the University were at a satellite campus in Galesburg, Illinois, which was converted from a former Veterans Administration Hospital. After 1949, when the Galesburg campus was closed, students with disabilities at the University of Illinois began to demand a rehabilitation program, and
by the mid-1950s a legitimate rehabilitation program had been established.

In the early 1960s, with Tim Nugent as its director, the Division of Rehabilitation Education Services began to develop into one of the premier college disability services programs in the nation (History). It is at this point when facts about admission of disabled students began to appear in the archives.

Part of the reason for the program’s growth in the 1960s was that there was an active effort to increase the campus population of students with disabilities. There was recruitment of students with disabilities, as is shown by a 1964 letter thanking Tim Nugent for sending information about the University of Illinois’s program for physically disabled students (Mogren). Recruitment was especially important in increasing the size of DRES because there was competition amongst schools to have more students with disabilities. For example, Southern Illinois University was attempting to recruit students with disabilities for the sake of enhancing public relations. In a 1964 letter to the provost, there was serious concern over the number of students with disabilities Southern Illinois University was attracting because of less stringent qualifications. This was followed by a recommendation that the University should do more to attract students with disabilities (Letter).

Just like the beginning of the admissions process, recruitment, helped DRES to develop, acceptance decisions did the same. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Office of Admissions was “working very closely with the Division of Rehabilitation Education Services concerning the admission of all students with physical disabilities throughout the entire year” (Procedures, Admission). Further evidence for this is that a 1962 acceptance letter to new students came from Tim Nugent, the director of the Student Rehabilitation Center, rather than the provost or the admissions committee (Nugent). Effectively, this
meant that DRES officials had a large influence in choosing which students they wanted in
the program and, consequently, at the University of Illinois. This helped the program to
develop for two opposite reasons. First, DRES officials could help students below the
normal admission criteria be accepted, which would boost numbers in a growing program.
Second, DRES officials could practically ensure that students did not get accepted to the
University. Students with disabilities were required to make a personal visitation to the
University of Illinois so that they could “be physically and functionally evaluated and when
necessary given additional psychometric tests to realistically determine…”
admissibility” (Procedures). This helped the program to develop by ensuring that it did not
overextend itself; DRES officials only selected students they knew they could
accommodate and work with effectively. In addition to this all showing how intertwined
DRES was in the admissions decisions of students with disabilities, this also demonstrated
how, for better or for worse, unequal admissions standards used to be.

Since the 1970s, the process of admissions for disabled students has taken a 180-
degree turn. While there used to be active recruitment, there is currently very limited
recruiting. Recruiting for numbers is no longer necessary because DRES’s program is
already established and well known. DRES services almost 2,000 students per year. Instead
of recruiting for numbers, emphasis is put on educating potential applicants that DRES
offers services for all types of disabilities, not just physical disabilities. This education
occurs at college fairs for students with disabilities (Interview), since students cannot be
actively recruited due to the confidentiality clause of the Americans with Disabilities Act.
Another change in policy is that currently, applications are reviewed almost exclusively by
the Office of Admissions. “DRES cannot admit students to the University of Illinois. All
students must apply for admission through the Office of Admissions.” The only time DRES provides consult about applications is when the Office of Admissions requests that they review a personal statement (Admissions).

The largest ideological transformation has been the change to equal standards in admission among able-bodied students and those with disabilities. This change is largely due to federal laws. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that “no qualified individual with a disability in the United States shall be excluded from, denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity that either receives Federal financial assistance or is conducted by any Executive agency or the United States Postal Service” (Guide). Since the University of Illinois is a public institution, it must follow this law, and therefore cannot discriminate in admissions decisions. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 has also had an effect on the admissions process. The most relevant part of this law is the clause stating that disabilities must be kept confidential (Guide). This was reflected by changes in the University of Illinois admissions application. On a 1992 Application (before ADA changes were put into effect), there was a question that stated, “Do you have a permanent physical disability or impairment? If yes, please complete the background statement on page 6. Your response to this question will not adversely affect admission consideration” (Application 1992). The 1993 application has the first sentence changed to read, “Do you have a disability? (OPTIONAL)” and has an additional final sentence, “This information will be kept confidential” (Application 1993). The current application has no questions about disabilities (Freshman). While the Rehabilitation Act mandated that there must be equality in admissions, the Americans with Disabilities Act has made sure this equality is a reality by blinding admissions officers to
potential disabilities. As previously mentioned, the Americans with Disabilities Act also has played a role in the changes in recruitment of students with disabilities. Since disabilities are now confidential, students may no longer be sought out to be in a disability services program; the student must seek out the program (Interview).

The Question:

There is no doubt that the methods of the Office of Admissions have changed significantly since the conception of DRES. There is doubt, however, whether all of this change has been for the better. This raises the question: Is the University of Illinois current policy, equal standards throughout the admissions process, the best policy in dealing with admissions of students with disabilities?

The Answer:

The most obvious benefit of the current policy is that it is the most fair for all parties. Equal admissions standards prevent the injustices of certain groups of individuals having an advantage. This is an injustice that the disability rights movement has been trying to eliminate for decades. From a disability rights standpoint, equality is the ultimate goal, and that has been achieved through the current policy of equal admissions (Shapiro). Other benefits are derived from students gaining acceptance through their own merit. DRES employees can more effectively work with professors to accommodate students with disabilities, since professors understand these students are just as capable as any other since
they were admitted under the same standards. Also, able-bodied students on campus have more respect for students with disabilities, understanding that they have the same right to be attending the university. Lastly, at a university with an established disability services program, there is not an under representation of students with disabilities. There is no need to enact different standards of admission to increase numbers (Interview).

Equal admissions standards do become a problem when there is not an established disability services program. As demonstrated by DRES’s history, giving different treatment in admissions to students with disabilities helps to develop a program, and creates more diversity on campus by having a fair representation of students with disabilities. The program at the University of Illinois grew immensely in the past when DRES had a large influence over the Office of Admissions. With equal admissions standards, it is much more difficult to ensure that a new program will develop. Another problem is that accommodations may be insufficient when the disability services program and the Office of Admissions do not work together. An interview between Laura Tucker and the director of Beckwith Hall revealed that there will most likely be a shortage of housing for students with severe physical disabilities next year (Malik). This shortage is due to the current admissions process. More students have been accepted than there is room, because the Office of Admissions and DRES no longer work together.

Conclusions:

The current policy of equal standards of admission for able-bodied students and
students with disabilities has both pros, which are mostly unconditional, and cons, which are mostly conditional. Therefore, if conditions are optimal, equal admissions standards are almost purely beneficial. Expanding on this, if there is an established disability services program at the University, and the University has accommodations prepared for a numerical increase in students with disabilities, then equal admissions are best. For the University of Illinois, this means that the only flaw in the current policy is that there are currently not enough accommodations for students with disabilities. Otherwise, the equal admissions policy is beneficial.

**Recommendations:**

Due to the Rehabilitation Act and Americans with Disabilities Act, the current policy of equal admissions standards is required by law. Since it cannot be changed, adaptation in order to maximize the benefits and minimize the disadvantages of the current policy is ideal. Therefore, to eliminate one of the major disadvantages, I recommend that the University of Illinois make sure that there are always sufficient accommodations for students with disabilities. I also recommend that the University of Illinois help other universities create more fair admissions procedures, since the University of Illinois is a great model. While doing this, the University of Illinois should help other universities develop their disability services program because this is necessary for equal admissions to be the most beneficial, and because DRES is a good model of an established program.

**Future Research:**
In order to find out more information about the current state of admissions for disabled students, more interviews need to be done. Because I only had time to interview one DRES employee, I was unable to take many other perspectives into account. If future research is done, I believe it’s important that University of Illinois students with disabilities are interviewed about their experiences with the admissions process. Knowing what these students think is beneficial about the current process, and what they think needs to be improved, would be very useful information. If I had more time, I would also interview an admissions officer. Although the admissions documents I uncovered were revealing, I was forced to make some inferences. An admissions officer could provide details on true happenings that no documents contain. These interviews, which I did not have time to complete in my limited time, would further the findings of my research and better answer my question.

Works Cited


“Application for Admission 1993.” University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.
"DRES Employee Interview." Personal interview. 11 Nov. 2008.
Malik, Pat. Personal interview. 10 Nov. 2008.
Mogren, Ray B. Letter to Dr. Timothy Nugent. 29 Apr. 1964.