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

About the Author:

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Abstract: In the 1960s and early 1970s, the Division of Rehabilitation Education Services (DRES), played a large role in admissions decisions about students with disabilities. Partially due to this, standards of admission differed between able-bodied students and students with disabilities. The passage of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 made equal admissions standards a requirement, and this forced DRES to have a very limited role in admissions decisions. There are many benefits to equal admissions. These include fairness, greater acceptance of students with disabilities among the campus population, and a greater willingness of professors to help students with disabilities. Also, with equal admissions, students with disabilities at the University of Illinois are not underrepresented because DRES is a well-established program. There are downsides to equal admissions as well. It causes problems for a school with a developing program, since extra students with disabilities can’t be admitted. In addition, there may be insufficient accommodations, since the disabilities services program can’t control how many students who need these accommodations are admitted.

Short Assignment on The Body Silent:

As an anthropologist and ethnographer, Murphy is a specialist in studying the culture and social customs of a group. In The Body Silent, the group studied is the disabled, and Murphy is a part of this group he is researching. Murphy’s anthropology background allows him to give an exceptionally educated and thorough description of many aspects of being physically handicapped, but being his own subject in this anthropology project causes other aspects to be ignored.

One benefit of being an anthropologist is that
Murphy knows about the cultures of many groups of people. This allows him to make comparisons between the handicapped and other groups that make things clearer to the reader. Comparing the homeless with the disabled, Murphy says “Our cities are littered with homeless people sleeping in bus stations and doorways, rummaging for food in garbage cans, abandoned by a society that dodges responsibility by telling itself that such people choose to live that way. The successful simply shrug their shoulders and say, ‘i’m all right, Jack.’…They do the same thing with the disabled” (116). Most people would acknowledge that they ignore the homeless on the streets, but would have difficulty admitting that they ignore the handicapped because that is not societally acceptable. Due to this, Murphy’s ethnographic comparison helps the reader come to an important realization.

In another comparison, Murphy showed that this type of treatment was not confined to America, but was worldwide. A story relayed through a colleague expressed how a blind man was teased in India, which was their equivalent of putting distance between the disabled and the able-bodied. “Indian joking toward the disabled is a simple transposition of American avoidance of them” (118). Having educated colleagues who offer outside perspectives is another reason Murphy’s anthropological background helps this novel. A different colleague offered another valuable point in the novel. Goffman, talking about a social confrontation when someone has a great flaw (a disabled person), said that the flaw “robs the encounter of firm cultural guidelines, traumatizing it and leaving the people involved wholly uncertain about what to expect from each other. It has the potential for social calamity” (87). At the beginning of last year, I remember meeting a girl in a wheeled chair during orientation. Just like Goffman noted, I didn’t know exactly how to interact with her. Was she just like any other person, other than her wheeled chair? Or was there also a mental problem? Was I not supposed to mention the wheelchair at all? All this confusion led to polite small talk,
but never an actual conversation. An additional reason for not being able to speak about anything meaningful was the fact that most of my attention was on her wheel chair. Murphy said, “This one obvious fact, the disabled person’s radical bodily difference, his departure from the human standard, dominates the thoughts of the other and may even repel him” (122). From that experience last year and many more throughout my life, I couldn’t agree with Murphy more. As much as Murphy’s background helps him give a clear and educational report on the disabled in society, it also is a cause for large amounts of missing information. As an anthropology professor, Murphy is an individual from a higher social class, and the reader sees everything through this lens. Therefore, how a less privileged individual deals with a disability is not investigated. At the onset of Murphy’s disability, he was middle-aged, so there is no insight in this novel to the struggles of growing up with a disability. And since he became disabled when he already had an established career and established contacts, the challenges of meeting new people and finding a job are never explored. Murphy says that it was a struggle to hold on to old friends, so would it have been even harder meeting new people? Also, because Murphy is a man, much less time is spent discussing the effect of disabilities on women. He says that men are emasculated due to disabilities, but what happens to women? The fact that everything is seen through Murphy’s perspective, that he is his own subject, creates an inevitable subjectivity. Murphy even talks about being his own subject in the novel. “I coped with the rather unexpected discomfort I felt when among others in wheelchairs by assuming the investigator’s fiction that he is an independent and objective observer, in but not of the group he is studying. This neat separation of subject and object is never valid, and it was doubly false in my case” (126). Because Murphy was both the researcher and the subject in the anthropological study that became The Body Silent, much is left unexplored. What is explored is
done exceptionally well though, in large part to Murphy’s anthropological and ethnographic background.

Campus Map Assignment:

Upload Scanned Campus Map:

Document/Image/Artifact from Archive: After a tiring half hour walk, I entered the student life archives with the goal of furthering my understanding of the social lives of the disabled. Specifically, I wanted to find out more about Delta Sigma Omicron, the service fraternity for the disabled (It stands for Disabled Student Organization). I knew that by using this knowledge, I could find out more about disabled social life on campus. Also, since I am the member of a fraternity that is selective in membership, I was curious how Delta Sigma Omicron chose members. Finding a document that answered many of these questions was fairly simple. There were eleven full boxes of Delta Sigma Omicron materials, and one folder was titled Prospective Members Committee. This seemed to be an obvious place to look, since documents in this folder would speak both about membership and about the reasons to join Delta Sigma Omicron. It was in this folder that I found a document that was able to curb my initial curiosities, meanwhile creating many new ones.

The document is a generic letter from Delta Sigma Omicron to a new student at the University of Illinois. Dated October 11, 1954, this letter gives insight to the early history of Delta Sigma Omicron and the life of the disabled on campus during this time period. One thing this letter teaches the reader is that there were many ways for disabled students to get to know each other. There was a Freshman Week Program for Disabled Students, which shows that the University of Illinois put effort into accommodating the disabled. It also shows that the disabled were somewhat separated from the rest of
campus (they had a separate orientation). The idea of mainstreaming the disabled would not become prevalent for two or three decades, as spoken about in No Pity. The letter also mentions the DAV picnic and the Freshman Fracas as other ways that disabled students could have met each other. In the letter, the main reason that all of these events were mentioned was to show how the student could have already become acquainted with Delta Sigma Omicron. This shows that Delta Sigma Omicron was very integrated into the disabled social events on campus (whether they ran the event or not). This letter also teaches the reader that the disabled community was very welcoming and not exclusive. Delta Sigma Omicron let any disabled person be a member of the fraternity and was not exclusive. This letter, which was sent to all new disabled students on campus opens with “You are invited to pledge Delta Sigma Omicron.” In fact, the letter was encouraging all disabled students to become members. “We hope that at this time you are ready to state your desire to join.” This is unlike many other fraternities that are exclusive in membership. Along with the aforementioned disabled social events, this proves that Delta Sigma Omicron and the disabled community on the whole were very tight-knit.

One thing I found particularly intriguing about the letter was the included motto of Delta Sigma Omicron – “To exercise our abilities to a maximum so as to minimize our disabilities, that we might live most and serve best.” This is especially interesting because it sheds light on disabled people’s views of themselves. In the fifties, the disabled saw their disabilities as a negative thing. Their goal was to minimize their disabilities so they could “live most and serve best.” No Pity explained how this self-perception used to be prevalent, but now (since the founding of disabled civil rights) many people are proud of their disabilities. Something to research in the future would be to find out the current motto of Delta Sigma Omicron, and see if it has changed to reflect the changing self-perceptions of disabled
Much can be learned from the document, but extra information (like Delta Sigma Omicron’s current motto) would help the reader to better comprehend and interpret the document. One paragraph talks about taking pictures for the Illio, and I’d be curious to know what section of the Illio the photographs are placed in. Were they put with the fraternities or with all the other student organizations? This information would help me understand how Delta Sigma Omicron was viewed on campus. It would also be helpful to know more about Leah Mae Truxell, the letter’s author. For example, knowing her board position would give insight into Delta Sigma Omicron’s recruitment process. I’m also curious about who received this letter. Knowing this would allow the reader to further understand who was considered disabled in 1954. It would be interesting to research how the definition of disability has changed since then. Finally, it would be useful to know how this letter was communicated to the blind. Was there also a Braille version of this letter sent to blind prospective members? This would be crucial to discovering if Delta Sigma Omicron and the greater disabled community were equally accommodating to and accepting of people with all disabilities. This question inspires one possible future research path: how different disabilities were and are viewed within the disabled community. Other possible future research paths that I mentioned earlier were examining how both the definition of disability and the self-perceptions of the disabled have changed over the last fifty years. How the goals of Delta Sigma Omicron have changed to meet these new self-perceptions could also be researched. One more potential research path this document inspired is what other fraternities and organizations disabled students joined, since the document explicitly stated that Delta Sigma Omicron doesn’t inhibit membership in any other organization. Finally, there is much more to research along the lines of my initial curiosities. There are many more documents that speak about the social lives of disabled students on
campus and membership in Delta Sigma Omicron. I now am overwhelmed with options of where to take my research from here.

Initial Question: At this point in my research, my driving question is “who has a disability?” I want to look at this question from multiple perspectives, most importantly the perspectives of a self-identifying disabled person and an able-bodied person. More specific perspectives I would like to have on this question include that of the United States government, that of the Illinois government, and that of the University of Illinois’s administration, faculty, and students (both disabled and able-bodied). Realistically, looking at all of these perspectives would be beyond the grasp of this project, so after further research, I will narrow down the ways I will answer my initial question. And if I look at a small number of perspectives on the question, I may additionally be able to look at the change in disability’s definition over time. One definite is that there will be a focus on the University of Illinois, since this research is for EUI. This question was initially inspired by my research on Delta Sigma Omicron, the service fraternity on campus. In my initial archival research, I looked at a letter sent to all prospective members, and I wondered who these prospective members were. How did Delta Sigma Omicron know who was disabled, and more importantly, what was their definition of disability? Being curious about their definition of disability led me to be curious about a general definition of disability, and how this differed from one person to another. Along with my beginning research, much of the
The class reading helped me arrive at my question and refine it. In “The Body Silent,” I was intrigued by Murphy’s self-association with the disabled and how this progressed. For example, he still did not consider himself disabled for a portion of the time he was in a wheelchair. This contrast from normal assumptions forced me to start thinking about what disability really is. In “No Pity,” I learned how many people are now proud to be disabled, and was curious if more people will identify as disabled now than they did before. This helped me realize the importance of studying the question from the perspective of a self-identifying disabled person. Also, reading “AIDS and its Metaphor” aided in the formation of my question. While reading, I thought to myself, at what stage of AIDS is a person disabled? I realized that different people would have different answers to this question, and it was important to look at many different perspectives on disability’s definition. Discussions in class also helped me think about my question. An example is the one about the government’s change to whom they consider disabled.

In order to answer this question, I am going to need to do a significant amount of research. I am going to do many interviews with disabled and able-bodied students about what they consider to be a disability. I may also give out questionnaires that ask for their definition of disability, and ask whether many specific cases count as disabilities or not. Some examples of cases could be a person who is 4’6”, a functional person with cancer, and a person missing a finger. Using cases, I can find relatively objective differences between the perspectives of the disabled and the able-bodied. I will also be doing archival research, such as continuing to look through Delta Sigma Omicron files. Seeing what types of disabilities the members have can help me discover who they consider disabled. On the non-campus level, I can look at the government guidelines for who gets social security for disabilities along with other government guidelines on disability. I can also search for the membership criteria of other disability
groups around the nation (and world).
There are a few barriers for my research that I see right off the bat. One is that it is going to be difficult to make generalizations for a group, because within any given group, there are still many differing views. Another is that it will be difficult to compare definitions, since they are very complex. I also think it’s going to be very challenging to make the questionnaire so that it effectively samples topics that people have different viewpoints on. I’m sure I’ll come across many other challenges along the way.

Source Annotated Bibliography:

Works Cited
"APPLICATION FOR SERVICES." Disability Resources and Educational Services. 22 Oct. 2008. This is the application to get services from DRES. This will help me understand what types of people are able to get DRES’ services. I will then be able to consider who should be getting services that is currently not.

"Disability." Merriam Webster. This is the dictionary definition of disability. I will use this when comparing different definitions.

"Documentation Requirements." Disability Resources and Educational Services. 22 Oct. 2008. These are DRES's requirements for who is able to get their services. I will be looking at ways that these requirements should change and will also be looking at this as another definition of disability.

Glaser, Joshua. Questionnaire of what counts as a disability. Raw data. 22 Oct. 2008. This is my questionnaire that I will be giving out to some disabled and some able-bodied students to better understand what they consider to be a disability. I will use this for the purpose of creating a better definition of disability and refining DRES's guidelines.

H.R. Res. S.3406, 110th Cong. (enacted). This is the ADA Amendments Act of 2008. It gives more people
access to the original ADA legislation. This document sheds light on the government’s definition of disability and who they think deserves help. I’ll compare this to the definition and guidelines of DRES.

H.R. Res. S.933, 101st Cong. (enacted). This is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. It will be used for all of the same purposes as its 2008 amendment.

Murphy, Robert F. The Body Silent. New York, NY: N.W. Norton, 1990. This book has a personal account of a disabled person’s identity transformation. I will look at when Murphy started to consider himself disabled and when he needed help. This is all in order to get the perspective on these issues from a disabled person.

Shapiro, Joseph S. No Pity. New York, NY: Three Rivers P, 1994. This book has insight into what counts as a disability, including a section talking about disabled people as normal people that happen to have disabilities.

"What is the ADA: Definition of Disability." Disability and Business Technical Assistance Center. 22 Oct. 2008. Since the original ADA bill is extremely lengthy, this document gives a good summary of who is able to receive disability services from the government. I will use it for the same purposes as the original ADA bills.

Revised Question: The current question that will drive my research is “Are disabled students seen as beneficial to a university?” This question is not merely a revision of my initial question, but rather a completely new question. This change was necessary because my old question (What’s the definition of disability?) could have been answered in two non-acceptable ways. This question could have been a boring list of different definitions and semantic comparisons, or it could have been a philosophical discussion suited
for a dissertation. I realized a complete change of question was necessary in order to write about a topic that will engage an issue within disability studies rather than rattle off facts (sadly this means that almost all of my previous sources are unusable). A class discussion approximately two weeks ago was the most important component in the formulation of my new question. We were discussing the University of Illinois’s policy on the admission of disabled students. Some argued that it would be more difficult for a disabled student to gain admission, since the university only has a limited number of resources for accommodating the disabled. Others, including myself, had an intuition that it would be easier for a disabled person to get into the University of Illinois. The main reason for this argument was that the disabled may be considered a minority, and thus they are wanted for diversity purposes and allowed entrance at a higher rate. Also discussed was the idea that the admissions process could be the same for all students, and disability accommodations occurred after admission. After hearing all of these opposing positions, I became extremely curious which explained how university admissions truly operated. I did nothing to explore this topic further for over a week, as I was in the process of attempting to salvage my initial question. After I realized that I needed a new question, though, I began to do further research on the topic of admissions. At the university archives, I uncovered many details about the admissions process for disabled students in the 1960s, and this intrigued me. I also found proof of recruiting disabled students and competition for disabled students among different universities. After looking at these documents, I yearned to learn about all of the current policies, and I also knew that admissions was a topic I wanted to stick with. At this point, my question would have been “What is the admissions policy for disabled students?” This paper, though, would have succumbed to the same format as that of my initial question: a dull listing of information.
I came to my current question by questioning how admissions were relative to the bigger picture of disability studies. I realized that if it was easier for disabled students to get in (like many minorities or athletes), then they were seen as beneficial to the university by the administration. And this is how my question became “Are disabled students seen as beneficial to a university?” I will use admissions decisions to tell whether the administration sees disabled students as beneficial, and will use interviews and questionnaires to learn about the viewpoint of faculty and students. I’d like to note that my question is not “Are disabled students beneficial to a university” because this would be a question worthy of a dissertation. I am solely looking at different viewpoints across campus.

There is still a significant amount of information I must uncover to accurately address my question. I need to learn all the details about the current admissions process and the statistics of disabled admission versus able-bodied admission. I also need to set up interviews with faculty and students or create questionnaires for them to fill out. Although huge amounts of research must be done, for the moment I am ecstatic to have a question I can write a meaningful paper about.

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Upload Final Paper: Admissions_Final.doc
Recommendations to Campus Honors Program: 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 pros and minimize the cons of the current policy is ideal. Therefore, 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 a more fair admissions procedure, 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.