In 1949 the University of Illinois created a program with the hopes of aiding the disabled with becoming independent and eventually integrating into society. At first, the university’s program only focused on physical independence at first. However, the country was beginning to shift into a mode of desegregation, specifically with the Brown vs. Board of Education decision. Soon, the students were asking for more focus on social integration from the program as well. Therefore, my research paper hopes to answer the question of what effects these pressures had on the development of the program.

When presented with the task of selecting a single artifact from an almost infinite collection, one might feel slightly overwhelmed; however, there are only a few artifacts that truly provide meaning to the world of the disabled at the University of Illinois campus. While searching every term that seemed relevant to the disabled, I stumbled upon numerous photographs. It was not incredibly difficult to find these photographs, for searching the term “wheelchair” brought up a total of 16 thumbnails. The hard part was choosing one photograph to focus on. These photographs ranged from people in wheelchairs fencing to disabled people testing out the new accessible bus system, and they all seemed to reveal a lot about what being disabled was like at
the University of Illinois. However, I was searching for one that would not only provide insight into the subject, but that also prompted further questions and research opportunities. At last, a photograph stood out to me: this photo consisted of a group of disabled students square dancing. This photograph was taken around 1962, and the group was actually performing during a wheelchair basketball game. This photo truly showed how Illinois offered opportunities to the disabled long before they were required to. As Joseph P. Shapiro stated in No Pity, “The University of Illinois had been the first, setting up a similar but less ambitious program in 1950 to help disabled veterans returning from World War II. By 1961 there were 163 disabled students, 101 in wheelchairs.” (52–53) Obviously, Illinois took pride in creating an accessible campus for the veterans. The Disability Rights Movement did not become a strong movement until the 1970’s, so, as this picture illustrates, the University was ahead of schedule at providing the disabled a place where they could feel as though they were equals. This picture takes place about a decade after the changes began to be made to the campus, and one can assume that the campus was pretty physically accessible at this time. A student would now not be hindered by an excessive amount of physical boundaries, but one might still be skeptical about the social status of the disabled. This picture, however, illustrates how the university not only gave the disabled an opportunity to attend the university for equal academic opportunities, but also provided a location where the disabled culture could shine. A frown cannot be found in this picture, and it is quite obvious that the people in this picture are having a good time. This picture demonstrates the university’s effort in allowing the disabled to be able to participate in social activities and clubs that at one time seemed exclusively for able-bodied people. Seeing a picture of disabled people square dancing makes me feel as though they are quite capable of doing anything they desire.
At once, after seeing this picture, I desired to know more about the other extracurricular activities the disabled took part in. It seemed interesting to research how the disabled find a way to feel equivalent to the able-bodied in the amount of ways to spend one’s free time. If square dancing was a popular activity among the disabled, there had to be numerous more that they found ways to perfect. How similar were these activities to the corresponding activities in the able-bodied community? Were these activities given the same funding and opportunities as able-bodied student groups? In order to research these topics, it would be useful to look up where these photographs came from: the box where they lie in the Student Archives is sure to have information on more of these extracurricular activities. It also would be interesting to discover if the university was considered state of the art by having these activities available, or were these activities more common then I imagine at this time? It appeared significant that these square dancers were performing at a wheelchair basketball game. I began to wonder if this group of students was ever given the opportunity to perform at any events besides those that dealt with the disabled. In No Pity there was a lot of conflict within the disabled community about how much they truly wanted to be integrated into the able-bodied society. They wondered if integrating would make them lose their identities, and they questioned whether their culture would be lost if they were considered to be like everybody else. Were the disabled students at the University of Illinois afraid that they might lose their identities by becoming integrated with able-bodied students, and if so, did these extracurricular activities help them hold on to their identities? Were these disabled groups exclusively followed by the disabled student population, or did other students also show an interest in these groups? Were there ever any events, like square dancing, where both the disabled and able-bodied participated in together? In other words, this document made me curious about the social status of the disabled during the
years where it was becoming a newly accessible facility and veterans were beginning to attend the university at high rates. It fascinated me that the university offered so many of these programs before the Disability Rights movement even became prominent. Shapiro’s No Pity really made me curious about the internal conflicts of the disabled people. It is apparent that this group began to participate in activities that made them more and more equal to the able-bodied people, but by the looks of the photograph’s circumstances, it seemed they participated in these events exclusively with other disabled people. In regards to social life on campus, did the disabled desire to stick with each other, or did they desire to truly become integrated with the rest of the student population?

Throughout the course of the semester our class has discovered that the University of Illinois was one of the first schools to set up a system so that disabled students could get the same education and college experience as everybody else. We have discovered records of everything from a fraternity dedicated to the disabled to all types of wheelchair sports, but what has been missing from these discoveries are activities where both the disabled and able-bodied are able to participate. This idea has aided me in forming my initial question that I hope to dedicate the rest of my research to: What actions did the university take to integrate the disabled students with the other students on campus? The first time this question came into my brain was when I came across a photograph of a group of students in wheelchairs square dancing at a
wheelchair basketball game. This made me realize that most of the activities I had heard of at that point in time seemed to be exclusively for the disabled. The wheelchair basketball games consisted of wheelchair cheerleading and wheelchair square dancing, but was there ever an instance where the able-bodied cheerleaders came to cheer for the wheelchair basketball team?

Then, while searching through the archives, I came upon a survey of disabled students from 1954. In this survey, the students evaluated the schools program for the disabled, and many brought up their concern to be integrated. They mentioned that while the school was providing them with activities, they were all separated from the rest of the campus and would not help them with their social status. Right then, I realized that this topic was a concern for the disabled students as well, and I decided I wanted to explore the development of this issue.

Joseph Shapiro’s No Pity and Clint Eastwood’s Million Dollar Baby both helped lead me to this question. In No Pity, Shapiro explores the struggle of the disabled to be recognized as equals to the able-bodied. They fought for their rights and earned respect with the American Disability Act, and it inspired a curiosity in me regarding just how equal the disabled students were in this college campus. Million Dollar Baby, on the other hand, portrayed a newly disabled person who decided it was better to end her life than live the life of a disabled person. Critics were infuriated at this idea, stating that this was a terrible illustration of a disabled person. They did not think it was right for a person to just give up, for disabled people are now able to live lives very similar to able-bodied people. Thus, I wanted to know exactly how similar the university made the life of disabled, and if the disabled had earned their proper place in society.

In order to discover more on this topic, I need to search through the archives. The DRES files would be very helpful in my search. I would hope that there is evidence of events or organizations where the university adjusted to give the disabled community
equal opportunities. It might also be beneficial to search through photographs, for any instance where a disabled person is seen involved in an event with an able-bodied person could help answer my question. In the archives I was already able to discover a couple instances like this one. For example, I discovered a strategic plan that allowed disabled people to attend varsity football games. Also, I hope to explore the career fairs and guidance the university provided the disabled, for this shows an effort to get the disabled integrated in the real world.

What will truly make this project challenging is the lack of information. This topic does not have specific subjects that one can easily look up. Instances of integration could be found anywhere, and so the searching could be a quite difficult task. I am certainly hoping that I will be able to uncover enough information to write about this subject, for it has become a topic of interest for me after this semester.

Source Annotated Bibliography:

“Beyond the Barriers”, 1991, Video—“Beyond the Barriers”, Disabled Rehabilitation Services Subject File, 1948–2004; Record Series 16/6/1, Box 2, University of Illinois Archives.

This video provides proof that the university changed its program in regards to the disabled students’ desires. Focusing on the student’s desires to become better prepared for life after college, this film provides many instances of how the university’s programs aid in this goal. From comments on the activities available to the students to comments on how successful the students are after the program, this video truly provides evidence that the university did develop a program that gave the students exactly what they wanted. I could only use this source briefly though, for it is not in the proper time period of the rest of my research paper.

“Campus Life Strategic Plan”, Disabled Rehabilitation Services Subject File, 1948–2004:
This document is evidence of the university attempting to make all parts of life accessible for the disabled. The document includes plans to give the disabled a chance to participate in all “leisure activities”, from clubs and bars to churches. It also provides ideas on how to “facilitate greater campus life inclusivity”. This source shows that the university was responding to the disabled student’s desires to become more integrated into campus life. The problem with this source is it did not have a specific date, so it is really hard to relate it to my other sources.

“Interview with Glen and Sylvia Bellows of Bloomington, IL”, Film 6, Rehabilitation Films and Videotapes, 1949–, Record Series 16/6/14, University of Illinois Archives. During this interview, one really gets to hear a first-hand experience of the Rehabilitation program at the University of Illinois. These two both described how the program helped them achieve where they are today. Once again this document reinforced the idea that the disabled expected the university to prepare them for regular society so they could function as individuals and compete just as any other person. Their successful lives truly show how the program at the university does prepare the students for integration into normal society.

Marcus W. Orr to Fred H. Turner, February 10, 1954, Survey–Provisions for Disabled Students on Campus, Disabled Rehabilitation Education Services Subject File, 1948–2004; Record Series 16/6/1, Box 2, University of Illinois Archives. This letter was a response to a survey sent out asking the disabled students their thoughts on the program at the University of Illinois. This student in particular had a lot to say about what the university does for the disabled in regards to integration and what they should try and do more of. He points out
that the university does a nice job at providing the disabled a way to attend any event or participate in any activity; however, then he brings up the idea that what he really desires from the university is to learn to be independent. He also thinks the disabled should be forced to interact with the able-bodied, to better prepare them for life outside of the university. This student gave me a new idea: the disabled look upon the university as a place to prepare themselves for integration into society by teaching them to be independent.

“Quadriplegic Skills: Dressing”, 1960’s, Film 28, Disk 5, Rehabilitation Films and Viedotapes, 1949–, Record Series 16/6/14, University of Illinois Archives.
This video is one of many where the disabled are given step-by-step instructions aiding them to perform everyday activities. This video is more proof that the university supported the idea of making the disabled students more independent, and this was one of the steps to prepare them to become integrated into everyday life. These videos were widely sought out by other colleges and universities, and it shows that Illinois set the standards for a good rehabilitation program.

Timothy J. Nugent, “University of Illinois Rehabilitation–Education Services Rehabilitation Center at the Annual Meeting of the University of Illinois Foundation”, October 26, 1962, Development, Disabled Rehabilitation Education Services Subject File, 1948–2004: Record Series 16/6/1, Box 1, University of Illinois Archives. This source offers many statistics that I might need during the writing of my research paper. It contains how many disabled students attended this school during 1962, and it also gave further knowledge on how different all their interests were. When looking at if the university fully prepared these students for the outside world, the statistics on their careers and lives outside of school will also be nice evidence to
Revised Question: My question originally dealt with the disabled student’s integration into the campus life during their time as a student; however, after more and more research, I have reformed my question: How has the university contributed to preparing the disabled students for integration into society after school, and how do these contributions coincide with the desires of the students? Initially, I desired to find how well the university provided programs so that the disabled could be more involved in campus life. While searching through the archives for such evidence, I found that many of the students claimed that they were perfectly able to attend or participate in any of the activities the able-bodied could. The university apparently has done a nice job providing the students with ways to be involved if they wanted to, and even if things were not perfect they were able to find away around their obstructions. Yet, through my research I found an interesting pattern. These students looked at integration during their college years as preparation for their future independent lives in the world of the able-bodied. Through a survey of disabled students, I discovered that they expected the university to teach them how to be independent and ready to live among the rest of society. It was then my research turned to discovering how well the university met these desires, and whether the university had the same goals for their disabled students. I have found a lot of information that helps answer my questions on this topic in the archives. So far, the videos and documents from the archives have given me an idea of the many programs the university offered to the disabled. The evidence so far seems to prove that the university did emphasize on the idea of independence. I have also found a few statistics and personal accounts that seem to offer evidence that these programs do complete the goals of preparing the students for integration. What
I would really like to find is more accounts of how well these programs worked for the students. It would be great to see the opinions of these programs in the eyes of the students, who desired these programs to begin with. Also, I am sure there are many more instances of university programs such as the ones I have already found.

Unfortunately, some of the sources I originally had no longer seem as important. For example, I had found plans on how to get the disabled into football games; however, now that my topic focuses more on integration after college, this source would be a tad bit irrelevant. Luckily, my topic shifted rather early, and it was not a drastic change. Therefore, I have found ways to still incorporate some of my old research into my new topic.

The student feedback has also helped me immensely. They gave me more ideas for research that I hadn’t even thought about. They also assisted me with coming up with a question that would not just have a yes or no answer. I easily could have just asked if the university provided these programs that promoted integration; however, this question would have been pointless. I decided my question should delve into the lives of the disabled. I desired to see their views on these programs, and their opinions on their success. My classmates helped me realize that a paper that just dealt with the university would not contribute much to disabled studies. Instead, I have made sure to focus more on the students and their relationship with these programs of the university.

With that being said, the university still has room for improvement. The Division of the Disabled Resources and Educational Services should note how the program became what it is and never lose sight of these key factors. The administration should realize how important teaching these students independence is and keep offering more and more
services to the students to fit their needs. As our world changes, these people might need to learn different skills than they did in the past. Also, finding more ways to socially integrate these students will only further the progress of integrating the students into society. The goal should be to allow the disabled students the exact same opportunities as the able-bodied students, whether it is for academics or for leisure time. Specifically, keeping track of what the students with disabilities believe needs to be improved would be a good way to go about this task, for they experience life on campus first hand. Also, to promote integration, the university should offer more disabilities studies classes to make sure that the able-bodied students are also being exposed to the ideas the university promotes. The more eyes the university can open, the better, for it will make the people with disability’s journey to achieve complete equality and integration much easier. In order to keep this program a strong one, every year should be about making it easier for the students with disabilities to become part of society.