

# CULTURALLY RELEVANT DISABILITY SERVICES FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

[Blackdisabledandproud.org](http://Blackdisabledandproud.org)

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## It's Not Just Race...

Culturally relevant disability services is not just about race. If an office welcomes diverse students and professionals are willing to keep educating themselves, communication will improve, students will feel more welcome, and services will be individualized and respectful. And remember that many students may be developing a disability identity, too.

## Start by Educating Yourself

Beyond Black History Month and Martin Luther King Jr. celebrations, the history of African Americans and Black people with disabilities is something most people never learn in school or in the media.

## Start with a Little History...

The HBCU Disability Consortium realized most disability services providers don't know the history of African Americans with disabilities. On our project's [blackdisabledandproud.org](http://blackdisabledandproud.org) website, you'll be able to link to a timeline created by the Museum of disABILITY History. You'll learn more about Black college graduates who had disabilities while they were in school, and you'll find plenty of other resources to educate yourself, students using your office, and diversity organizations on your campus. There are also plenty of general resources about disability.

## ...Then Keep Going!

Start attending events about African American history, get on the mailing list for diversity events or cultural centers on your campus, and encourage all of the students using your office to embrace their many identities.





## Honesty is the Best Policy

Compared to most predominantly white campuses, one thing many HBCUs do differently is practice complete honesty about themselves and their disability services. If a quadriplegic student visits an HBCU and a disability services provider has isn't familiar with that type of disability, the professional will probably say something like "You are welcome to come here, but I don't have any experience with your type of disability. We can learn together, and I will do my best., but how would you feel about that?" It is also acceptable to admit any struggles the campus has been having with accessibility, how the campus is working on this, and timelines for coming into compliance. Offices may even refer the student to campuses with more experience. Students are legally entitled to attend any campus where they meet admissions criteria, but African American families will appreciate knowing what they get for their time, energy, and money. And really...wouldn't every family want that?

## A Few Other Suggestions from HBCUs...

- ☑ **Learn about the history of race and disability on your campus.** A trip to your campus library or archives is a good place to start. Or take a few alumni, senior faculty, or staff members out to lunch and ask them for stories.
- ☑ **Don't focus on disability to the exclusion of everything else.** Ask students about their support networks during college (including family and religion), find out if they are "out" about their disability to friends, and ask about hopes and fears during college. Get to know the whole person. This will also prevent you making assumptions about students' backgrounds, socio-economic status, majors, and family.
- ☑ **Don't assume students want to use disability services.** For most African American students with disabilities, the disability services office is the *last* place they go for assistance (after talking to friends, family, and instructors). Appreciate how hard it might be to show up in your office — and don't make judgments about it. Black people have many reasons to distrust medical and disability professionals.
- ☑ **Learn to talk about racism and ableism, and help students do the same.** Problems in the environment or with attitudes of others are easy to internalize. And help students reframe services as rights, not special help or a problem.
- ☑ **Include parents...if the student is ok with it.** Parents of Black students may seem like "helicopter parents," but some of their involvement may be due to family, cultural, or religious beliefs or values. It may also be rooted in terrible experiences with special education, where Black students are often mislabeled, segregated, and presumed incompetent. Ask students how parents or guardians should be involved.
- ☑ **Ask students how they want information.** You may assume email is the best, but many poor students or students from inner-city public schools may not have access to computers or be comfortable with technology.
- ☑ **Facilitate connections and share resources.** Don't assume all students are equally capable or comfortable with reaching out to mentors, finding financial aid information, using campus and community resources, etc. Offer to call ahead, make introductions, or even accompany students if it is appropriate to do so.
- ☑ **Keep a list of African American resources on your campus and in your community.** Identify accessible or disability-friendly resources in the community and on campus. Advertise jobs with these groups, too, and be sure all marketing includes accessible and inclusive language and images.

