

DISABILITY AS PART OF CAMPUS DIVERSITY

Blackdisabledandproud.org

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Considering Definitions of Diversity

Most campuses recognize that undergraduate and graduate student populations are becoming increasingly diverse. Many campuses have set up multicultural, diversity, “safe spaces,” and bias trainings, with other efforts to get students thinking about what diversity means, their own identities and privileges, and how to improve the campus climate for everyone.

Where is disability?

For most campuses, disability is in four different places: it’s in disability awareness days or activities; it’s at health services and counseling services; it’s in special education, rehabilitation, and other degree programs related to helping professions; and it’s in service learning activities like Special Olympics. That means disabled people will be seen as unhealthy, objects to be helped or fixed, or as charity cases needing pity. This makes it difficult for students, staff, and faculty with disabilities to feel welcomed, respected, and included on campus. And students never learn to critique these constructions of disability in their courses. Nondisabled people become the focus of disability-related activities, instead of people with disabilities taking a leadership role and sharing the complexities of their experiences.

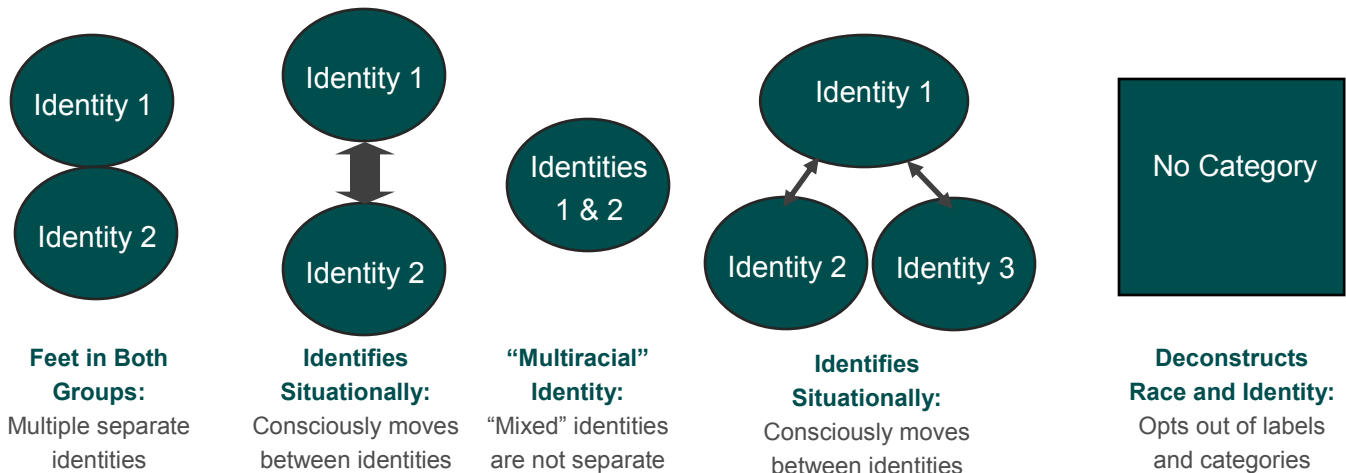


What can you do?

- ⇒ **Think** about where and how disability is showing up on your campus, and ask yourself what message that sends to disabled and nondisabled people. Talk with others about whether a disability cultural center might help.
- ⇒ **Learn** more — there are resources on our blackdisabledandproud.org website to get you started.
- ⇒ **Redefine** your knowledge of disability so it’s less about physical diagnoses and problems with individuals, and more about identity, community, history, and social justice. Explore disability studies and critical disability theories.
- ⇒ **Go beyond compliance** so disability isn’t an obligation—think about access as a first step, and then start getting creative! Bring in speakers and activities. Include disability in courses. Look for your own biases and work on them. Assume every person you meet has a disability, whether it’s visible or not...and watch your perspectives change.

Identity Development

Are all students with disabilities first-generation college students? In an introduction to her anthology (see cite below), Mary Lee Vance, a disabled Korean adoptee with Caucasian parents, discusses how students with disabilities usually have nondisabled parents and therefore start college without a sense of community, identity, and strategies for dealing with ableism and disability services providers. Since anyone can become disabled, students also have to figure out what it means to have a disability and how it relates to whatever other identities they may have. A model of mixed-race identity (like the adaptation of a model by Renn below (2003)) can help students, parents, and professionals think about the many different ways students may understand disability on any given day, since all the points on Renn's model are equally valid. And some students may not even think of themselves as having a disability! .



For more information, check out the following three readings. Dunn, D. S., & Burcaw, S. (2013). Disability identity: Exploring narrative accounts of disability. *Rehabilitation Psychology, 58*(2), 148-157. Renn, K.A. (2003). Understanding the identities of mixed-race college students through a developmental ecology lens. *Journal of College Student Development, 44*(3), 383-403; Weeber, J.E. (2004). *Disability community leaders' disability identity development: A journey of integration and expansion*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation for North Carolina State University.

Read More about Diversity within the Disability Community

Linton, S. (1998). *Claiming disability: Knowledge and identity*.

Higbee, J. L., & Mitchel, A. A. (Eds.). (2009). *Making good on the promise: Student affairs professionals with disabilities*.

McCune, P. (2001, May/June). What do disabilities have to do with diversity? *About Campus, 5*-12.

Miller, S. D. (Ed.). (2003). *Disability and the black community*.

Prince-Hughes, D. (Ed.). (2002). *Aquamarine blue 5: Personal stories of college students with autism*.

Prince-Hughes, D. (2005). *Songs of the gorilla nation: My journey through autism*.

Shapiro, J. P. (1993). *No pity: People with disabilities forging a new civil rights movement*.

Vance, M. L. (Ed.) (2007). *Disabled faculty and staff in a disabling society: Multiple identities in higher education*. (Note: This book is only available from www.ahead.org.)

