Executive Summary Report:
Disability Issues Forum 1996

Attachment to a [DDD Memorandum](#) from:
Office for Students with Disabilities, Office for Student Services
University of Florida

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Invitation Letter

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October 30, 1996

Dear Reader,

The task of resolving disability-related issues at the University of Florida appears insurmountable at times. Even with these daily challenges, students with disabilities have been succeeding at our University and will continue to do so.

On March 30, 1996 the University of Florida held the First Annual Disability Issues Forum. This forum provided a unique and structured opportunity for University of Florida students, faculty, administration, and staff to identify the critical issues and needs of individuals with disabilities within the University of Florida community. Making use of the experience of the attendees potential solutions were also identified to suggest possible approaches to solve these important disability-related issues.

Within this document you will find a review of the process used to identify critical issues and solutions, as well as the specific issues and suggested solutions generated by the participants. It is hoped that this document will be a primary information resource and used in the efforts currently being made at the University of Florida. It is our hope that you will become more aware of these issues and apply outcome-oriented solutions to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Several groups at the University of Florida have made the commitment to use this document to drive their agenda for the 1996-97 academic year. To date, these groups include the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Office, the Of rice for Students with Disabilities, the University Committee on People with Disabilities, the Student Government Disability Affairs Cabinet, and the Student Council on Disability Issues (SCDI).

With the legislative direction of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as the continued efforts of this University and its constituency, further progress can be achieved. We invite each one of you to participate in the continuing effort to include all students with disabilities in all aspects of the educational, social, and personal experiences available at the University of Florida.

Purpose of the Forum

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The First Annual Disability Issues Forum at the University of Florida was designed to identify problem areas and potential solutions to the challenges currently being experienced by students, faculty and staff with disabilities, as well as related disability service providers on our campus. A critical element of the Forum was the level of student involvement in the assessment of problem areas and potential solutions. The purpose of the Forum was to conduct an inclusive needs assessment of the contemporary and critical problems facing students with disabilities in a postsecondary setting. The main purpose of this publication is to provide you with this information based directly upon the experience and perspective of University of Florida students with disabilities.

Overall, there is a dearth of assessment in the professional literature examining the impact of disability-related policies, procedures, and services provided by postsecondary institutions on student attitudes, performance, and access. The experience and perspective of the students with disabilities who necessarily develop individual solutions to daily challenges rarely have been solicited or assessed. Typically, studies are performed by able-bodied persons or those with limited experience interacting with persons with disabilities and rarely extend beyond generic survey research (Fine & Asch, 1988).

The heterogeneous nature of students with disabilities at the University of Florida underscores the need for inclusive involvement by a variety of students with disabilities in the process of developing programs, setting policy, and evaluating support services.

Sponsors of the Forum

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Our warm gratitude is extended to the following groups at the University of Florida who have provided their energy, effort, and resources which have made the Forum possible:

- Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Office
- Office for Students with Disabilities, a department of Student Services
- Student Government's Disability Affairs Cabinet
- Student Council on Disability Issues

The information in this document will be used to direct the agendas of these organizations for the 1996-1997 academic year to provide improved service, education, and leadership to the students, staff, and faculty with disabilities at the University of Florida.

Introduction

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The overall experience of students with disabilities at institutions of higher education is similar to other students except for the functional impact specific disabilities may have on their unique, human circumstances. Longitudinal studies (e.g., Henderson, 1995) show approximately 1 in 11 students arriving for their freshman year in postsecondary institutions report having some type of disability. A greater awareness of the existence of disabilities in higher education has been shown by increasing numbers of students recognizing disability-related symptoms, pursuing assessment of potential disabilities, and self-identifying actual disabilities in student services disability offices (West, 1993; Suskin, Spitznagel, & Costello, 1995). Overall, the number of postsecondary students who register with a disability has increased over 300 percent since 1977 (Henderson, 1995). The greatest increase in registrations can be traced to students with "hidden disabilities," such as learning disabilities. Since 1988, the percentage of freshmen students who self-identify with learning disabilities has increased significantly from 15 percent to over 32 percent, replacing visual and auditory as the most frequently identified disabilities (Henderson, 1995).

According to Section 504, Section E of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehabilitation Act, 1973) and the more recent Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), institutions of higher education are bound to provide appropriate academic accommodations for students registered with a documented disability. Unlike the secondary school setting, accommodation services in higher education can only be made available to students who self-identify the existence of their disability. In the process of complying with these federal mandates, many institutions have not systematically identified the most critical or important problems experienced by their own students registered with disabilities, and have instead focused their own dollars on the most visually obvious access problems (Montuori, 1992a, 1992b).

Students with disabilities continue to experience substantial challenges which negatively impact their chances for academic success and personal development. Physical access to campus amenities is the most obvious impediment for students with physical disabilities (Burbach & Babbit, 1988; Albert & Fairweather, 1990). Even with the changes implemented to comply with the ADA and Section 504, students with disabilities continue to experience difficulty in acquiring basic physical and sensory access (West, 1993).

Attitudinal issues also appear to be a continued barrier to academic success as evidenced by stereotypical reactions of faculty, staff, and students when dealing with students with disabilities. Such students perceive stereotypes as negatively impacting overall access to the resources and services of campus (Burbach & Babbit, 1988; Litsheim, 1995), although most common accommodations actually are provided at a minor cost, such as priority scheduling and assistance notifying professors of a disability (Satcher & Adamson, 1995). Inside the classroom, students with disabilities generally find most faculty amenable to providing academic accommodations. Yet faculty appear to base the worthiness of such requests on arbitrary impressions of students' capabilities perceiving students who require accommodations as looking for an easier route through college (Nelson, 1990). These factors impact the lower levels of self-esteem and difficult adjustment to college typically experienced by students with disabilities (Saracoglu, Minden, & Wilchesky, 1989).

Adding to the problem, a lack of information exists concerning the definition and recognition of disabilities as well as information pertaining to currently available student service options. In a recent study, faculty reported not having

enough information about disabilities, related student services or such students' needs (Houck, Asselin, Troutman, & Arrington, 1992).

Interaction and inclusion in the social arena of campus also continue to be challenging. The disempowered sense individuals perceive from policies requiring special requests for accommodations is often interpreted as harassment (Holzbauer & Berven, 1996). These reactive policies necessarily reduce students' sense of inclusion, increase marginalization, and qualify expectations that these students are not anticipated to participate. Although it has been noted students with disabilities exhibit more demographic similarities than differences with their non-disabled peers (e.g., ethnicity, parental income, and country of origin) (Burbach & Babbitt, 1988; Henderson, l995), such students are generally less involved, experience high attrition rates, and are considered at high risk for unfulfilled academic success (Jones & Watson, 1990).

Methodology

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The First Annual Disability Issues Forum at the University of Florida was proposed by students to help promote student involvement, more effectively promote disability related issues, and provide an alternative to traditional Disability Awareness Week activities. With the assistance of the Office for Students with Disabilities, the Disability Issues Forum was organized.

Participants at the Forum were predominantly University of Florida students with disabilities. Other attendees included faculty, staff, and students. Personal invitations to attend the Forum were sent to all students registered with disabilities and all student government cabinet representatives. Select student affairs staff and academic department heads were also invited to participate.

Of the persons responding to the invitation, a total of 52 participated (17 faculty/staff, 35 students). Additional participants included three professional, disability service practitioners from the local Gainesville community trained to provide group facilitation. A complimentary luncheon was provided to all attendees.

Nominal Group Technique

Nominal Group Technique (NGT) (Delbecq, Van de yen, & Gustafson, 1975; O'Neil & Jackson, 1983) was selected as an inclusive method for soliciting critical needs and potential solutions at the Forum. NGT combines both quantitative and qualitative elements, seems well suited for use in the college setting, and can easily be incorporated into common campus activities such as forums, student conferences, or group and committee meetings (Skibbe, 1986). This structured, group-oriented methodology employs qualitative interaction, assists in quickly building group rapport, and promotes non-critical acceptance of varied perspectives and ideas. The NGT model was incorporated into the day-long Forum agenda.

Prior to the Forum, three professional disability service providers and educators were selected and trained as nominal group facilitators in the style of NGT using O'Neil and Jackson's (1983) methodology. All participants were randomly assigned to one of three nominal groups. Facilitators were also randomly assigned to a specific group for the duration of the Forum. Minor functional modifications were made to the NGT methodology to limit each group session to a maximum of two hours.

Facilitators were instructed to charge their morning session nominal group to "identify the critical issues and needs facing students with disabilities at the university." Afternoon sessions focused on developing potential solutions to the needs previously identified by the group. As per NGT methodology, uncritiqued qualitative responses were solicited followed by a rank-ordering of the problems within each group.

Identified Needs and Suggested Action

The information received from the three nominal groups was combined and examined for content similarities and thematic relationships. Categories were established based on the responses, professional literature and general aspects of campus life. All the identified problem areas and suggested solutions in each of the content areas were generated by the participants, predominantly University of Florida students with disabilities.

The responses were grouped into the following content areas:

- Physical and Sensory Access (Table 1)
- Service Provision (Table 2)
- Information Access (Table 3)
- Social Inclusion (Table 4)
- Attitudinal Barriers (Table 5)
- Hidden Disabilities Issues (Table 6)

Physical and Sensory Access (Table 1)

Responses for Physical and Sensory Access (Table 1) emphasize transportation difficulties navigational problems due to vehicles on the campus impeding access to everyday student services. Suggested solutions in this category accentuate the desire for increasing usage of current services and creating effective interaction the with administration.

Identified Problem Areas	Participant Suggested Solutions
1. Inadequate and inconsistent enforcement of handicapped parking spaces creates access difficulties.	1. Educate parking attendants. Emphasize conflict resolution techniques. Continue to document and report incidents.
2. Administrative vehicles inappropriately parked on sidewalks throughout campus create a risk of injury. Lack of response to filed complaints has been noted.	2. Improve accountability, including ticketing agencies.
3. Students with physical disabilities have a difficult time navigating campus.	3. Report specific access and navigational complaints to ADA Office.
4. Access to telephones, vending machines, and copy machines is inadequate.	4. Increase funding for access adaptations. File ADA complaints.
5. General inequality of access to all aspects of campus life (i.e., physical, social, sensory).	5. Lobby to re-organize priorities to better take a proactive approach to specialized student needs. Include disabled in research for new methods of access.
6. TDD users cannot access offices. which use automated answering services.	6. Establish direct TDD lines in all department offices with TDD answering functions. Take advantage of new fax/TDDs with smart boxes to meet varied needs.

Service Provision (Table 2)

Service Provision responses (Table 2) focus on the problems experienced when students interact with campus services, highlighting specific areas of difficulty such as registration, financial aid, and academic advising. Solutions for service-related problems strongly suggest increased individualized interaction by the administration with students and the creation of student liaison committees.

Identified Problem Areas	Participant Suggested Solutions
1. Campus-based disabled transportation service available only during limited hours.	1. Work with students to identify appropriate schedule for public transportation.
2. Lack of accessible public transportation.	2. Create university owned and operated (accessible) public transportation system for all students.
3. Equal access to financial aid services, pre-registration process, assistive technology, and academic advising is not provided.	3. Individualize accommodations. Clarify federal and state regulations and review interpretation with administration.
4. Personal care assistance is not available to students who require this service.	4. Lobby or protest to have state funds allocated for this use.
5. Student choice is limited due to the reactionary model of providing accommodations.	5. Create representative committee to serve as liaison to administration for providing service.
6. Necessary disability-related expenses (i.e., medications, treatments, equipment) are not readily considered during application for financial aid.	6. Lobby financial affairs to anticipate and include appropriate expenses related to disability as part of calculation of aid for all students. Assign "minority status" to students with disabilities.

Information Access (Table 3)

The responses shown here in Table 3 relate needs of Information Access and highlight problems regarding the poor dissemination of disability-related materials and information to students, staff, and faculty. Solutions in this content area focus on top-level administrative mandates to alter the campus environment, such as improving signage and centralizing information. Once again, a solution for creating a student-based group is suggested to include students in accessibility assessment of the campus.

Identified Problem Areas	Participant Suggested Solutions
1. Inadequate dissemination of information regarding accessible transportation services on campus.	1. Centralize materials and dissemination of materials.
2. Faculty, staff, and administration lack information regarding disability issues and their responsibility to accommodate disability issues.	2. Mandate workshops similar to sexual harassment workshops for all university employees.
3. Lack of information available in terms of the social and recreational activities available and accessible to students with disabilities.	3. Solicit support of Student Government. Improve curb access and signage in all locations.
4. Students with disabilities are generally not involved in the process of accessibility assessment and as such, do not have adequate channels to report problems they experience on a regular basis.	4. Create independent student-based assessment process of accessibility utilizing affected users. Ensure information is used in planning.

Social Inclusion (Table 4)

Responses categorized under Social Inclusion (Table 4) highlight problems of separatism and disjuncture experienced by persons with disabilities due current methods of providing access to buildings and events. Both problems and solutions in this category emphasize the non-welcoming nature of activities which demand forewarning of attendance by persons with disabilities. Once again, suggested solutions accentuate the desire for inclusion in commonplace campus events, including planning and assessment of activities and policy.

Identified Program Areas	Participant Suggested Solutions
1. Participation in and access to are student organizations, activities, and intramural sports is difficult and highly limited.	1. Highlight and promote activities which welcoming to students with disabilities.
2. Accessible seating at campus activities, although functional, separates persons with disabilities from other participants in the activity.	2. Provide inclusive accommodated seating. Investigate methods of altering structures at low-cost. Include persons with disabilities in planning and assessment.
3. The number of social and recreational opportunities outside of classroom activities for students with disabilities is limited.	3. Provide adequate services to assist students with disabilities to become included in activities.
4. Campus event coordinators do not consider the needs of students with disabilities in their event planning. Campus events are generally not welcoming, nor emotionally accommodating.	4 Develop campus policy requiring common accommodations (e.g., interpreters, assistive equipment, etc.) at all campus events. Train all campus event coordinators in accessibility expectations. Involve students with disabilities in the planning of events.

Attitudinal Barriers (Table 5)

The category of Attitudinal Barriers (Table 5) focuses on the behavior of the persons without disabilities toward those with disabilities, causing a sense of harassment and discrimination. Problems in this area underscore the frustration caused by the perception of necessary and appropriate accommodations for disabilities, not as equalizing, but as reducing standards for achievement. Suggested solutions in this area include sensitivity education for persons without disabilities and improving the representation of those with disabilities on the faculty.

Identified Problem Areas	Participant Suggested Solutions
1. Only the "symptoms" of needed accommodations appear to be addressed in providing services to students with disabilities.	1. Address complex informational and attitudinal problems at the core of disability issues on the campus.
2. Stereotypes held by many professors and employers promote the idea that persons with disabilities should not be on campus or pursuing certain types of careers.	2. Mandatory workshops on disability issues involving misperception. Emphasize need for faculty to assist in main-streaming students via focusing on ability over disability.
3. Attitudes toward persons with disabilities is poor. Frequently, students with disabilities feel discriminated against by able-bodied faculty, students, and other members of the campus community.	3. Require academic class for students on disability types and awareness. Provide recognition of achievements by students with disabilities. Emphasize disability issues with school aged children.
4. Poor representation of persons with disabilities exists within faculty, staff, and administration.	4. Hire more people with disabilities.
5. Faculty, staff and administration are often not receptive to the appropriate accommodations requests communicated to them.	5. Improve interaction with students. Rather than a model of informing faculty of accommodations, anticipate and cooperatively provide accommodations. Educate faculty on disability rights and noncompliance penalties.

Accommodating Hidden Disabilities (Table 6)

Issues of Accommodating Hidden Disabilities (Table 6) were specifically addressed. The problems listed emphasize the difficulty students are experiencing obtaining accommodated services when disabilities are not immediately apparent, such as learning disabilities. Solutions suggest preparing persons without disabilities to anticipate the needs

of students with disabilities through education designed to raise awareness of invisible needs.

Identified Problem Areas	Participant Suggested Solutions
1. Alternative housing accommodations are generally not provided for students with hidden disabilities.	1. Anticipate accommodations before building. Improve system for making individual adjustments, including priority housing for students with disabilities.
2. Students with disabilities not visible to the casual observer have difficulty receiving appropriate accommodations due to misperception.	2. Provide sensitivity classes on disability awareness for student affairs and academic affairs which emphasize hidden disabilities significantly different from physical or sensory disabilities.

University of Florida Summary Data

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Disability Categories at the University of Florida

Numbers of Registered Students by Academic Year

The number of students with disabilities registering at the University of Florida has increased steadily over the past seven years. As is the case nationally, the number of students who self-identify with a learning disability is increasing at a higher rate than ever before and now accounts for more than 50% of the total number of registered students with disabilities.

As of the date of this printing, the total number of students with disabilities at the University of Florida who are actively registered with the Office for Students with Disabilities has exceeded 525 students for the 1996-1997 academic year.

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University of Florida

Students with Disabilities

Current Student Statistics (as of 1/10/96)

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Disability Categories	1989-90	1990-91	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96
Hearing	12	22	22	29	27	20	21
Visual	17	18	23	27	30	30	30
Physical	66	89	88	87	86	83	95
Learning	25	104	123	139	179	206	257
Other	81	77	73	57	59	43	53
Total	202	313	333	342	387	382	435

For more information about disability-related topics, please consult the University of Florida publication titled, *Reasonable Accommodations Faculty Guide: Teaching College Students with Disabilities and Accommodating Faculty*

with Disabilities. This booklet is available at the Office for Students with Disabilities (P205 Peabody Hall; 392-1261) or the ADA Office (31 Tigert Hall; 392-7056).

Discussion and Conclusion

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Evaluation of the Forum

In order to provide improved service, all participants at the First Annual Disability Issues Forum were asked to complete rating forms to help the staff better identify the positive and negative aspects of the program. The evaluation form was presented in three categories: usefulness, relevance, and organization.

The mean score for each item is presented. All ratings were above average.

Overall Mean Rating (1 low - 5 high): 4.3

Overview of Forum Results

The **First Annual Disability Issues Forum** at the University of Florida sought to identify critical needs and solicit potential solutions from the perspective of students with disabilities. The inclusive and qualitative techniques used to engage students produced responses which appear to be critical, developed, and specific, providing in-depth, individualized results. This methodology was useful in determining local issues and potential solutions expressed by students with disabilities.

An **overall interpretation** of the students' responses suggest that students with disabilities should be challenged in and out of the classroom at the University of Florida to develop competent skills which translate beyond the postsecondary setting. Strategies are warranted which provide inclusive evaluation of services to students with disabilities. Such techniques are critical to identifying specific problems and assist in examining the relationship of student services to overall college success for students with disabilities. Follow-up studies of the impact of accommodations on success in the workplace will assist in the refocusing of services to positively impact student learning.

Many of the reported needs and solutions fall outside of the ordinary responsibilities of offices for students with disabilities, yet well within the traditional rubric of student affairs. **Improved advocacy for and organization of students with disabilities** is clearly indicated. Indeed, the development of student organizations was specifically recommended by the participants. The repetition of this suggested solution can be interpreted as a lack of inclusion and sense of voicelessness. Possibilities for developing student organizations around the issue of disabilities include but are not limited to accessibility and accommodation assessment groups, peer mentoring programs, and learning strategies coordination.

The depth and broad range of reported emotional and social needs suggests the feasibility of facilitated **student peer support groups** (cf. Orzek, 1984) and related mentoring programs. In such programs, students are provided with the unique opportunity to emphasize "what works" through a process of sharing success strategies, adaptive techniques, coping methods, and learning styles. Utilizing student groups with clear and purposeful missions, it is highly conceivable that specific, measurable, disability-related academic needs can be met while concurrently increasing student involvement, improving social support, raising recognition of common difficulties and solutions, and creating access to information.

The reported needs and solutions specific to **hidden disabilities** (see Table 6), such as learning disabilities, correlate with the trend of increasing numbers of students self-disclosing such a disability in higher education (Henderson, 1995; Suskin, Spitznagel, & Costello, 1995). As this self-identifying trend accelerates, the demand for hidden disabilities services will continue to increase, requiring adaptive strategies on the part of students affairs. As services are reconfigured to meet these changing needs, an opportunity is presented re-conceptualize these disabilities as variations on learning styles, rather than personal learning deficits (Porter, 1994). Viewed from the social contructivist perspective (Jones, 1996), it is the shared responsibility of students, staff, and faculty to promote the environmental

changes which emphasize capability and effective student learning by a broad array of individuals.

It is clear that the needs of students with disabilities are immediate and changing, and students are interested in taking an active role in helping to ameliorate the problems. As overall postsecondary demographics continue to change, including the characteristics of students with disabilities, selecting and applying efficient assessment techniques becomes critical to providing effective services. As programs promoting student learning continue to increase in number and popularity (American College Personnel Association, 1995), care must be taken to account for the learning styles of all students. Inclusive assessment and evaluation of the college experience of students with disabilities will help provide concise direction for these expanding and changing services.

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