

Environmental Intervention Project

Priscilla Moreno

The Pennsylvania State University

Introduction

“In the U.S. students with disabilities are attending college in greater numbers than ever before. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data from the 2003-2004 academic year indicated that 11.3% of college students in the U.S. reported having a disability...” (Higbee et.al, 2010, p. 8). With this influx of students, there are and will be many seeking services, yet for one reason or another, there remain many more that do not desire assistance. The needs for the community are expansive and what makes it even more challenging is that that there is so much diversity within the “differently-abled” population. I acknowledge and address some limitations and challenges I faced in conducting this needs-assessment and I do my best to ensure that I accurately represent the population in its entirety and address each of their concerns throughout the piece. I begin this paper with a theoretical framework I feel is most applicable to understanding the environment for differently-abled people as a whole, I will then provide a bit of information regarding the needs of this population based on current literature and information I gained as a result of interviewing both students as well as student affairs professionals. And I will conclude with what I, along with the assistance of those I interviewed, developed as appropriate environmental interventions given the diversity of this group of students.

Environmental Theory

Due to the diversity of my student population, I chose a theory that focused on the constructed environment and the way one perceives a campus: The Social Climate Model. The Social Climate Model was developed by Moos in 1979 with colleagues at Stanford University.

The model describes the “nature and effects of various environmental personalities as perceived by the participants” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 94). There are three components to this model referred to as “social-environmental domains.” Within each of these domains there are sub-categories referred to as dimensions: relationship dimensions, which are people’s interaction with the setting and with each other, personal growth and development dimensions, which examine the goals of the setting and it is also where development tends to occur, and finally the system maintenance and change dimension, which is an assessment dimension focusing on the maintenance of order but also responsiveness to change (as cited in Moos, 1979, p. 14). The structure of the model does not change, but the content will look very different based on the type of environment being assessed. Moos provides a chart that outlines the major environments on a college campus: Residence environments, Classroom environments, Social/Task-oriented group environments, Work environments, and Family environments. This model focuses on all three elements described above and how each piece works together to construct an individual’s environment. In the next section I provide information regarding needs of the community based on current literature as well as interviews from students and student affairs professionals.

Needs Assessment: Literature Review and Interviews

“Because these students were largely ignored [differently-abled students] prior to the 1970’s limited research and analysis have been devoted specifically to examining their academic and social experiences. Much of the existing literature focuses mainly on the legal responsibilities of higher education institutions to students with disabilities...” (Harper & Quaye,

2009, p. 42). Acknowledging these limitations, throughout this section I supplement applicable literature with interviews from students and Student Affairs professionals.

The needs of differently-abled students vary from person to person, professional to professional, and organization to organization. Some of the needs of this population are readily considered such as reconstructing physical spaces to literally be more accessible for those with mobility impairments, extra time on exams or projects for those with learning disabilities, or providing interpreters and alternate forms communication aids in a classroom for those who are deaf or blind. Other needs are not considered as often, such as although a space may be physically accessible in terms of entry for individuals with mobility impairments, the space itself may not be, how difficult is it for students to eat in a Dining Hall if they are unable to carry a tray on their lap (Lippincott & Lippincott, 2007, p. 209)?

“One of the greatest challenges for postsecondary students with disabilities in the U.S. is that they go from a centralized support system in K-12 education...to a situation in which they must advocate for themselves through each step of the process...” (Higbee et.al, 2010, p. 10). The concept of self-advocacy is one of the top concerns Emily Burns, Disability Specialist for the Office of Disability Services (ODS) stated. Both she and Karen Port, the Exam Coordinator for ODS commented on the negative stigma attached to students who seek assistance from ODS or any advocacy office for that matter. “Some students just don’t want to come over here. They would rather fail or just barely pass their classes then be known as the disabled kid. Kids today are just so mean to each other so no one wants to get help with anything” (Karen Port, personal communication, Nov 21, 2010). Emily agreed that “If they don’t come forward and self identify we can’t help them” (Emily Burns, personal communication, Nov 21, 2010). Beyond the fear of

labeling, additional needs for this population range to perceptions of invisibility, the difficulties they encounter in their daily lives that are unprotected by ADA regulations, and subtle and overt discrimination both within the classroom and the college environment as a whole.

“Globally, it is widely acknowledged that the greatest impediment to the lives of young people with disabilities is prejudice, social isolation and discrimination” (Groce, 2004, p. 16). Offices and advocacy centers for differently-abled persons such as the one at Penn State are available on college campuses everywhere advocating for students’ needs. But simple things such as the design of a building or the format for a lecture can serve as a constant reminder, and even setback, for the desire of all persons to be “normal able-bodied individuals,” this being applicable to all differently-abled persons. Although there is an increase in attention for accommodating those with physical disabilities, the “invisible disabilities” still lag in attention. “Counseling centers need to conduct an active outreach campaign to educate administrators, faculty, and staff (including academic advisers, graduate teaching assistants, and residence life assistants) about mental health problems in the college population and provide them with information about how to recognize and refer troubled students who need help” (Kitrow, 2009, p. 656).

Ian, a Junior Mechanical Engineering major at Penn State, found that his biggest struggle was parking on campus. He lives in a residence hall that is fully ADA equipped and he finds his living situation to be very conducive to easing the stress of his daily life, however he finds his strain to be in his transportation costs. He has a fully equipped vehicle and there is a parking spot right outside his residence hall just for his use if so desired, but he is required to pay the \$640 fee to use that spot. “As if my life isn’t expensive enough now I have no choice whether or

not I want to park near my building and pay all that money.” If Ian chose to park in Lot83 he would have a cheaper parking bill, but given that he also drives to each class once it begins to snow, he would be unable to do so and make it in time for his obligations. Lippincott and Lipponcott (2007) support Ian’s claim by stating that some of the most common concerns for those with physical impairments “include difficulties finding accessible parking that is close to buildings [and] insufficient time to get from one class to another...” (p. 209).

Jake, a Senior Biology major, also stated that his main issue was with transportation. He finds the bus system to be completely inaccessible, is frustrated by the lack of service available, and also feels badly when opting to use the bus. “I know it’s annoying to be that person holding up the bus when everyone is running late to somewhere. The ramp is so slow to even get on the bus, then making people move over and readjust just to fit me in...the whole process is time consuming and attention grabbing, the only reason people don’t bitch is because “he’s handicapped.” Jake finds that he often will wheel to class just to avoid “inconveniencing” others. He doesn’t find this to be too inconvenient, but did wish there was a more efficient way for him to be able to ride the bus. Although this may seem simply a minor inconvenience, the inefficiencies of the day have the ability to add up and become something larger than they need to be and “the combination of [minor] obstacles may have an overlooked or unseen effect on a student’s mental health (Lippincott & Lippincot, 2007, p. 209). Facing the same transportation issues day after day can be really taxing on any individual, especially one who faces these minor issues constantly.

Speaking with Jake tied in another concern faced by the differently abled population: invisibility. I have had informal conversations with one of my Disability Resource Center staff

members from UF for years. When I went back this last time, I knew I was going to use differently abled persons for my population so I asked him a general question, what do you think the biggest issue facing differently abled people are? He said invisibility. I was really confused by that because I could understand why maybe that was an issue for those with learning disabilities, but for people with physical disabilities, it was very obvious, not invisible. His response was "...basically there were two dichotomies of thought within the world of differently abled people: One opinion is that I'm tired of being stared at, I am not here for your entertainment. The other is that when children are taught *not* to stare because it's rude, it's almost as if I don't exist, so I actually would like you to look. So you are left with, to stare or not to stare" (R. Nelson, personal communication, October 8, 2010). I remembered when I was speaking with Ian I noticed his shirt read "if you keep starring maybe I'll do a trick." Rick also mentioned that it's pretty common for students with Physical disabilities as well, to not reach out to Centers such as the DRC, because they want to be able to do it on their own. He believed the two dichotomies do find a common ground however in that, "we're really not any different than you, please don't make a big deal of this."

I went to a few different social and networking opportunities for this project throughout the *Diversity* Month. One of those programs was Wheelchair Basketball, which is run by the Ability Athletics Office and the Athletics Department at Penn State. When I arrived at wheelchair basketball for the second time, I was pretty alone in the stands; this is probably because it was later in the semester, the first time I went it seemed to be almost beyond capacity. Because I was no longer anonymous, I was singled out and asked to participate. I was there with the intention of trying to get more information and hopefully conduct another

interview, because I was having such a hard time trying to piece together each part of this community. I realized that if I didn't play, but asked for an interview, I would be doing just what I had been told not to do, "they are no different than I am...they are not here for my gawking" so I participated. And as I played, stories came out, lives were revealed, diseases, surgeries, and pain was discussed and all of it was so authentic. All the players knew why I was there, and they had seen me earlier in the semester asking others questions. But it was different this time. I met two new people, Jay and Mike, and I actually was able to engage with this population in a way I couldn't at other social events. The game was hard and I struggled, but the interaction I gained topped off a month's worth of information gathering.

Jay is a non-traditional student for many reasons. He is 32 years old and physically handicapped by diabetes, cancer, and a mix of other ailments. He is weak, but lively. He has taken two semesters off school, but plans to return in the spring. Mike is a wounded veteran who just began postsecondary education for the first time this fall. He is 25 and seems to be bitter about his new identity as "disabled." Mike is not only trying to return to the civilian world, but a college campus, and as someone with a physical disability. "I just want people to not feel sorry. Sometimes people stare, other times people avoid looking at me, they all feel bad for me because I'm in a wheelchair. But I made a choice to fight for my country, and I knew what the possibilities were. I just need to make the most of what I have now." Jake finds that his main need in the college environment is quick and what I inferred to be 'discrete' services; whether that is on the bus, in the classroom, or in the community, he actually *wants* to be invisible and "not get in anyone's way." Both Jay and Mike talked about the need for more social outlets. Mike enjoys the competition and group dynamics of the Ability Athletics Program

but also wants other opportunities to socialize. Jay mentioned needing a more active support system on campus and just more friends in general, outside of the Ability Athletics program. I decided to see if there were any other opportunities, and as it turns out a student organization just started within the last month called Adaptive Outreach. Below is an excerpt from their constitution:

“The Purpose of Penn State Adaptive Outreach is to provide leisure and social activities for people with and without physical disabilities...will host forums to serve as a support group for people with disabilities or a learning tool for those who want to learn more about people with disabilities...The Club will host social events like tailgates, movie nights, and recreational fitness activities...”

When I return to wheelchair basketball next week, I will bring this information along!

Environmental Intervention

I turned to the literature when I began planning my environmental intervention. “The major themes [needs] that emerged from students in 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities across the state were (a) seeking services from the DSS Office and college services available to all students; (b) forming relationships with professors and instructors; (c) developing support systems on campus with friends, support groups, and the DSS Office; and (d) gaining a self-awareness and understanding of themselves to persevere” (Getzel & Thoma, 2008, 81). The literature and interviews provide a broad frame of understanding the needs of the population I studied and as already stated I did not solely examine persons with physical disabilities, but also those with learning disabilities, and psychological/emotional/behavioral

disabilities. Each population has a different set of needs and it seemed that each person I spoke with had a different interest in mind. Based on these expressed needs, I came to the conclusion that the services being provided were great, they just needed enhancing. Rather than attempting to reinvent the wheel and come up with a new intervention for my population to receive their environment differently, I focused on three separate aspects mentioned and what they were lacking, in an effort to help support what was already being done. These interventions I believe are necessary for the holistic approach to improving the campus physically as well as the perception of those who receive services from either ODS and/or another campus department. I believe these approaches will also develop beneficial relationships between differently abled persons and their University environment.

My first environmental intervention is tailored to those specifically with physical disabilities. The relationship with ODS and Parking and Transportation Services needs to be enhanced in order for students to be able to go about their daily functions. The Transportation Services website displays a variety of links regarding the application process for receiving a permit and also has other information such as the access map which is a guide for campus accessible buildings and routes at University Park. Although helpful, these efforts do not alleviate the burdens that some students may face. A suggestion would be for Transportation Services to reduce the cost of the “near building” permit to that of a regular Lot83 cost for those persons who are logistically unable to park at a farther distance. There is a \$360 difference between these two decals per academic year. I believe this would enhance the relationship between physically impaired persons as well as the perception and value they feel

from the University. If Parking Services is concerned with the revenue drop, they could reduce some of the handicapped parking available on campus and reallocate them to general parking. The website proudly displays that “Penn State has more disability parking spaces than the law requires. We always try to stay a step ahead.” The amount of revenue generated from an additional parking spot would more than cover the costs of two individuals reduced rate. These additional spots are a great stride towards promoting inclusivity, but I believe the focus should be on supporting the students’ needs of those already on campus, not as much those who may come to visit. As an aside, I think it’s a bit ironic that the website uses the term “step” in the same place as describing a service for those with mobility impairments. In addition to the parking spaces, Transportation services would do well to assess the efficiency of their wheelchair services on the CATA bus system. Two students addressed this as a need simply because of the amount of time it takes to be adjusted in as well as the perception they receive from other students and the driver due to the “inconvenience.” An assessment of their systems as well as research on up and coming technology and hopefully incorporation of new systems would be a great step towards meeting the needs of those with physical disabilities.

A second environmental intervention focuses on the environment of the Office of Disability Services. From a physical environmental perspective, their office is separated not only down the hall or somewhere relatively close by, but on a separate floor. Originally all of ODS was located on the first floor of Boucke, however their examination room housed only six students and quite uncomfortably from Karen’s description, not to mention it was well beyond the maximum capacity of three. ODS was given the opportunity to partially relocate to the second floor thus rendering more space available for the proctoring of exams, however the

physical separation of the office is simply not conducive for the learning environment ODS as an advocacy unit would like to facilitate. This separation has been an expressed hassle by professionals, students, and secondary sources (professors) alike. My proposition for a second environmental intervention would be a reallocation of space. I am not necessarily asking for a new campus space, or even more, just redistribution so that all of ODS would be able to be housed together. Having all staff in one area would be beneficial for any person needing services or even simply information, making it less confusing for students and professors and it would also be easier for the staff to provide better resources and assist each other in a way that they are currently unable to do. Given that ODS feels one of the main issues for students is the stigma associated with seeking services, I would suggest having ODS relocate to the second floor. I think this would allow a bit more anonymity for those students seeking services and hopefully ODS could see an increase the rate of usage.

My third and final intervention focuses on both the constructed environment as well as human aggregate, and it calls for a more visible and active support system. "Students with disabilities continue to be segregated or excluded throughout the college experience; institutions and individual educators still need to pursue more inclusive approaches to all aspects of college life" (Higbee et.all, 2010, p. 8). Social outlets are essential for any student's development, integration, and sense of purpose on a college campus. We learn about theories and pillars of the profession every day who say this. The same is applicable if not more so, for those who are differently abled. "Young people with disabilities have needs very similar to the needs of all other young people...They need a safe and supportive environment, education health services and access to sport and recreation. They also need to develop skills that will

serve them well in the community and the workplace” (Groce, 2004, p. 17). I had the privilege of attending and participating in wheelchair basketball, one of the many programs in place by Ability Athletics. The athletes are dedicated, and the support systems they receive from each other and their coach are solidified, some athletes from Penn State are even Olympic medalists! As a testament from personal conversations, this is also an outlet for returning/wounded veterans. For those who do not seek physical outlets, clubs such as Adaptive Outreach may be the answer. My last environmental intervention calls for the financial and physical support to enhance these programs as well as create more. With over 700+ clubs and student organizations, to only have ONE for specifically for those interested in differently abled issues that only started a few weeks ago is appalling. As a University we should be doing more than just allowing a few departments to host a month of programming (Diversability Month) Penn State as a whole should sponsor large scale events within that time frame to bring awareness to this population that is so prevalent on our campus and college campuses across the U.S. Seeing widespread effort and attention as well as being able to have a visible representation or human aggregate similar to your own identity is an important aspect that contributes to a sense of belonging. Focus on creating additional social outlets will increase visibility for those who identify similarly and will also make knowledgable the support in the community from allies and advocates. Knowing you have support in your community is essential, and enhancing these groups are my final intervention.

Conclusion

I began this assignment focused on what I assumed would be obvious environmental needs for differently-abled persons. I end it however, humbled by the knowledge I have gained from the personal experiences, struggles, and triumphs of the individuals I have had the privilege of meeting over the last month and a half. This assignment has been one of the most beneficial tasks I've been asked to complete as of yet simply for the fact that as a result, a large assumption I had was disproven and I had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of some amazing individuals. I hope the information provided was as beneficial to the reader as it was for the writer.

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