

Emma Breslend

Alicia Clark-Barnes

Persuasive Writing

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### Inclusion at UNH. Are We Doing Enough?

When you look up “disability at UNH” on Google, a plethora of search results pop up. At first glance, this could seem like a good thing; an asset to the university. Upon closer inspection however, these sites are actually rather disappointing. Almost all refer to disability services at the university: things like accessible housing and parking, classroom accommodations, and so on. There is no mention of a program for people with disabilities to get more involved with the campus community. Even when Googling “disability involvement at UNH” the search results center around physical accessibility of dorms, but not things like adaptive sport leagues or programs for people with developmental disabilities; while a search for “student involvement at UNH” brings up a ton of examples of clubs, organizations and resources to get more involved. I think that along with many other reasons, this inequality in offerings for people with disabilities is a problem that can and should be quickly fixed.

While this problem is daunting, there are ways it can be improved at the University. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, organizations that receive federal funding are required to reduce barriers wherever possible for people with disabilities (New). So, by adding as many accessibility services to dorms as possible, student inclusion would increase. Along with the residential aspect of college, the University could create a club or program that would help get people involved with campus life. Perhaps, adaptive sport nights, trips to local businesses and

restaurants, or moving big campus events to accessible areas could be a part of the program.

Additionally, a program could be created for college aged adults who have disabilities that would prevent them from physically attending college. All of these changes and programs would help solve the issue of low involvement in college for people with disabilities.

When I enrolled in school at UNH, I had to pick a dorm to live in for my first semester. There were detailed pictures, information, and floor plans pertaining to each building on the University's website. I had a lot of options. But if I had been a wheelchair user, this would have been a different story. UNH advertises many “accessible halls” but they are not accessible in the way I would have expected (Accessible). Accessibility according to UNH housing could just mean that the building has braille signage and strobe alarms in certain rooms. One of the accessible dorms is Hunter Hall, which I lived in last year. I would not have described this hall as very accessible, as there is no elevator and narrow halls and doorways. Even if a student gets an accessible room that they are happy with, they might not be able to visit friends in the halls that are not accessible. However, this is the reality for people with disabilities. While I am able to pick any building I want, any floor I want, even any room I want during housing selection time, some people would only be able to choose from a few spaces.

Another area that I think is difficult for people with disabilities to become involved with is weekend life at UNH. Going out and socializing with friends is a big part of the college experience, but this aspect of college would be extremely difficult as a person with a disability. If friends live off campus and it is later in the evening, busses might not be running to where you are trying to go. Similarly uber's are rarely accessible for people in wheelchairs. An option to fix this would make the Safe Ride bus at UNH accessible for wheelchair users. Currently, the Safe

Ride bus runs on weekends to be used as a way for students to “get a sober ride home” on weekends (Safe Rides). But what if it were updated with a wheelchair lift and expanded to help people with disabilities get to the bars or other off campus locations at night time on weekends? In no way am I promoting under age drinking, or the harmful binge drinking culture that sometimes arises on college campuses, but going out and having fun with friends (especially when you are at a legal drinking age) is a big part of how people make friends and interact with their college community. I think this should be extended to people who’s disability might make it harder for them to experience this.

This semester, I worked with an organization on campus called Wildcat Friends. They partner with a larger group called Friends in Action based out of Durham. Their mission is to, “allow young adults with developmental disabilities the opportunity to experience college” (Wildcat). Each Wednesday, I volunteered with Wildcat Friends by hanging out with the participants as they ate in the dining hall, had a recreation experience, and attended a class. I am really glad that I got to participate in this program and I thought it was a great opportunity for people who wouldn’t normally be able to attend college, to do so. The staff was great, and the participants were very friendly, and I had a lot of fun. However, I noticed two things that I thought should be fixed.

First, the lack of UNH student volunteers bothered me. I became a volunteer because of another class I am taking, RMP 501: Recreation Services for People with Disabilities. I had to complete 12 hours of community service as a requirement for this class. Otherwise, I am not sure if I would have known about the organization. I think that maybe advertising the program more would help get volunteer numbers up. I don’t think it should be a requirement, but something

that people want to do on their own accord. I had a lot of fun being with wildcat friends, and I think others would too, if the word was spread a little bit more.

The second thing that bothered me, was that this is not a UNH sponsored event. This program is put on by an outside company; Friends in Action (Wildcat). I am glad that this program exists, but I wish that the University provided some funding to help the program expand. Wildcat friends relies on participants to pay in order for the program to run. I think that UNH could provide funds for this program, like they do for other student organizations.

It is hard to be accountable for things like this. The University might not think that they should be creating programs and reducing barriers to students with disabilities, especially if those students don't attend the college. This prompted me to look closer at the American's with Disabilities Act which provides guidelines and recommendations for institutions that receive federal money as to how they must provide opportunities for people with disabilities. I talked about this earlier in regards to housing and accessibility. In section 36.203 of the ADA, it is said that, "notwithstanding the existence of separate or different programs or activities provided in accordance with this subpart, a public accommodation shall not deny an individual with a disability an opportunity to participate in such programs or activities that are not separate or different" (ADA). To me, this reads that the University should be accomodating people with disabilities not only with a special program, but actually with access to existing programs that already take place on campus.

This is difficult. There is a clause in the ADA that deals with undue burden. Undue burden includes three exceptions to involvement: administrative, economic, and fundamental Alteration (ADA). The university may argue that undue burden prevents them from creating

accessible services and programs for students with disabilities. They could say that it would take too much time, would cost too much money, or would modify their existing programs to be unrecognizable. The language in the ADA is kind of broad. It could be interpreted many ways. Colleges have to provide equal opportunity, but it doesn't say explicitly how (What Are).

A lot of times, ADA regulations are determined by case law; examples of instances of injustice that went to court and ruled in favor of the person with a disability. For that reason, I decided to look at how other universities have dealt with these issues. One of the best programs I came across addressed all of my concerns. The University of Iowa has a program called REACH (Realizing Educational and Career Hopes). This program provides students with disabilities attending the university with support in academics, student life, and career services (UI REACH). They assist students by providing extra support in classes, access to sporting events and student organizations, and support in the transition to post-college life. The University of Iowa has an endowment of 1.58 Billion dollars and has about 10,000 more students than UNH. UNH has an endowment of 776 million. For this reason, UNH might have a harder time creating a program like this. However, I don't think it is impossible.

Another example is Landmark College in Vermont. Landmark is a college specifically geared towards people with disabilities. They keep class sizes small, offer associate and bachelor degrees, and conduct research to help learn more about disability learning (Landmark). UNH has many colleges: The College of Health and Human Services, The College of Liberal Arts, etc. Could we create a new college? One specifically for people with disabilities who may require more support or accommodations. This program could start small, perhaps only a few majors and

small acceptance rate, but could grow over the years. This could be an incredible selling point for the University and would attract a broader audience to apply to the university.

Although this problem may not be relevant to the lives of many people, it is important to the lives it does affect. Some solutions to this problem are quick and immediate, and others would take time and money but I think that they should all be explored. I want to go to a University that offers opportunities to as many people as possible, and I think a lot of other people would too. By fixing small issues I've noticed, complying to ADA standards, and following in the footsteps of other Universities, we could make UNH an even better and more inclusive place to go to school!

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