

**Working Group on Disability and Access**  
**Preliminary Report**  
**19 August 2016**

The Working Group on Disability and Access was convened in May of 2015 as one of the Campus Climate initiatives begun by President Marvin Krislov. Our Working Group is comprised of students, staff, faculty, and administrators. All of the following Oberlin College community members, named here in alphabetical order, served for a portion of the Working Group's existence or in its entirety:

1. Melissa Cabat
2. Sammie Jo Concilio
3. Andrés Fernández
4. Janet Fiskio
5. Elizabeth Hamilton
6. Kimberly Jackson-Davidson
7. Chris Jenkins
8. Rebecca Klein
9. Isabella Moreno
10. Meredith Raimondo
11. DJ Savarese

We met 21 times since the Working Group was first convened, primarily in weekly meetings during the 2015-16 academic year. We volunteered time that none of us really had to spare. We looked for and found barriers to full participation in the work and life of the campus, just as we looked for and found excellent resources already in place that can mitigate or remove those barriers. We ended the year on a hopeful note, confident that we could create even better access for all members of the Oberlin community.

Our work was a true exploration. Our methods of gathering information and drawing conclusions were not systematic or empirical, but conversational and interpretive. We asked broad questions in a range of formats, and we received multi-layered responses.

We heard from 994 Oberlin community members through our online survey. We met with 30 Oberlin community members in listening groups. We invited student writers and editors from *The Grape* to one of our meetings, and we enlisted the support of student and staff members from the Oberlin Center for Dialogue to help us listen to our peers in listening groups.

We found ourselves questioning the longstanding view of disability as a deficit and looking instead to models of neurodiversity and access. We quickly found ourselves linked to the entire campus in all sorts of large and small ways. We found that there is an "access angle" to everything we do here, linking our work to every diversity and inclusion initiative at Oberlin. We took first steps in making those links visible by offering written responses to the Strategic Plan and to the draft proposal for the HHMI grant.

Our work was well received and our efforts were warmly encouraged. Oberlin is ready to continue this conversation in even greater depth and to turn the rich insights detailed below into actions.

### **Insight into experiences of people with disabilities in Oberlin**

Access and inclusion are significant issues for Oberlin students, staff and faculty. We emphasize that our report does not limit its focus to students. While staff and faculty members concerns may differ from those of students, they may also overlap.

Hundreds of comments from our online survey express:

1. **confusion** about how disability is defined. We are undergoing a cultural shift from deficit-based definitions to viewing competency as the starting point, yet laws and educational practices have not kept up. We saw a great desire for self-advocacy and self-definition, despite systemic reliance on definitions from medical and legal authorities.
2. **resentment** about barriers to participation, including bureaucracy and financial costs of access. Students in particular report that time and money pose significant barriers to everything from documentation to accommodation.
3. **puzzlement** about, but increasing openness to regarding disability as an issue of diversity. Our survey revealed a wide range of ideas about the relationships among ability, disability, and diversity. Many respondents expressed little to no understanding of how disability could be a diversity issue.
4. **awareness of enormous stigma** among students, staff, and faculty alike. Widespread and resistant, stigma adds another layer of barriers to living and working with disability. Faculty members expressed a fear of disclosing disability because of judgment and impact on tenure. Negative reports from peers can keep people from seeking support.
5. **inadequate understanding** of the relationship between disability and mental illness. There was little clarity on how mental health challenges present themselves or how best to respond. Many complained of inadequate understanding and inadequate resources for dealing with mental health challenges.
6. **frustration** with campus policies and practices. We received many calls for greater flexibility in all policies within all divisions. Without necessarily naming it as such, these were calls for Universal Design: planning from the outset for the widest range of users. There was a clear call for greater flexibility in leave policies among employees. Respondents made clear that they were not asking to be excused from work, but would be able to do their work better. This notion was itself challenged: is a leave of absence a reasonable accommodation or an unfair lightening of a person's workload?
7. **a passionate call for change** in teaching practices, especially for change in due-date policies and attendance policies. Again, this was a call for Universal Design.
8. **desire for change** in our community's understanding of agency. There is perceptible pushback against the notion that disabled people must "overcome" or prove themselves as competent instead of being presumed to be competent. More people are identifying barriers and insisting on equitable access. The agents of change are partners and no longer the "heroic" disabled person or the "charitable" caregiver.
9. **need for central source** of information about access and accommodation, as well as about scholarships, fellowships, internships, and career networks. A central location would be a place to get and share information outside of the supervisor-employee role, which sets up formal procedures, including litigation, as immediate responses to disclosure.

The broad array of responses makes clear that definitions of disability and mental health vary widely and are contingent upon context. Disabling conditions are often invisible or temporary. Disability and mental health are most often talked about in terms of pain, stigma, and shame, and less often in terms of strengths, skills, insights, creative talent, or personal identity. Identification with other people with disabilities can happen when people collaborate and offer respect and support; more frequently, group identity emerges in response to social exclusion and systemic disrespect. Although blindness, paralysis, depression, ADHD, pregnancy, or PTSD might appear to have little in common, we have learned that people living and working with these conditions share vulnerability and exposure to misunderstanding, discrimination, and even the threat of violence.<sup>1</sup> Yet when they—that is, when *we*—are shown sensitivity and respect and when barriers are removed or mitigated, we are able to succeed and thrive at Oberlin.

The work of care is vital to sustaining our community. In addition to the Office of Disability Services (ODS) and Human Resources (HR), many offices and individuals are already dedicated to enhancing access across campus:

- Student Accessibility Advocates (SAAs), a peer mentoring program through ODS
- OSCA access coordinators
- Class Deans
- Counseling Center
- Title IX Coordinator

We encourage the strengthening of these resources as well as improved communication and cooperation within and across divisions.

In tandem with dedicated offices and committees, we encourage the campus community to regard access as an issue of good pedagogy and good employment practice, and not simply as a legal mandate or an additional service that Oberlin provides to select individuals. To this end, we recommend the principles of Universal Design as an approach to planning. Rather than designing instruction or policies for an average student or employee and retroactively accommodating particular individuals who might need alternative supports, Universal Design asks planners to think from the outset about the widest range of abilities. By initially removing or bridging barriers, UD aims to facilitate all participants' fullest access to their work while maintaining rigorous standards and high expectations. UD moreover fosters a welcoming

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<sup>1</sup> We did not learn of any reported violence against people with disabilities on Oberlin's campus, nor did we study the question of violence as a focus of this working group. Our anonymous survey yielded a few references to surviving sexual assault, though we do not have the means to know whether the respondents regarded this trauma as the singularly disabling condition or whether it intersected with another disabling condition. We nonetheless retain the reference to potential violence here, mindful that the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that people with disabilities are more likely to experience violence than their non-disabled peers. See <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=4884>. Few national studies examine the prevalence of violence against college students with disabilities per se, though growing awareness of disability as one of many intersecting identities of vulnerable populations is resulting in calls for study. An often-cited 2015 report by Azmat Khan investigates disabled students as "hidden victims" of campus violence. Drawing upon interviews and national studies of sexualized violence at several U.S. colleges and universities, Khan examines reporting patterns and Title IX officers' cultural competencies for assessing reports of violence by disabled students. See <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/2/12/the-hidden-victims-of-campus-sexual-assault-students-with-disabilities.html>. We identify this as an area that warrants further study at Oberlin.

social and emotional climate and thus reduces stereotype threat that can arise when students or employees are simplistically thought of as “normal” or “other,” i.e. “disabled” or “not.”

We believe that our community must also engage in a comprehensive conversation about ableism, an often-silent force at the root of much misunderstanding and many disability-centered injustices. We cannot afford the self-silencing that results from a perceived obligation to pass as able-bodied rather than be accepted as we are. This phenomenon is not merely speculative, as the following example makes clear: Neurodiversity Week events last year drew audiences of 100-200 people, up from 1-25 people in the previous year, when Autism was represented in terms that did little to question the able-disabled divide. Despite the near-capacity crowd in Dye Lecture Hall for a presentation on *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, only 3 students attended a meeting with author, Steve Silberman, arranged exclusively for students receiving support services. The more restrictive lens drew very few people who were willing to self-represent and engage in open dialogue, in stark contrast to the large audiences for Mr. Silberman’s talk and the nearly 1,000 people who responded to our anonymous survey.

With the knowledge gained last year, the Working Group now recommends that Oberlin establish an ongoing, campus-wide advisory group or task force made up of students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Its charge would be to build community and reduce stigma. Additionally such an advisory group would help to establish a proactive, responsive community capable of addressing questions and needs before they become grievances. An advisory group might undertake the following projects:

- create training programs for all students, faculty and staff
- create dedicated training programs for academic advisors and supervisors
- create and promote resources for wellness
- host a symposium to educate the campus community about neurodiversity
- sponsor arts events to learn about and learn from the perspectives of people with a range of abilities
- encourage more representation of people with disabilities in all spheres of campus life
- assist in the creation of guidelines for reasonable workloads, reasonable time frames, extensions, and leaves of absence
- strengthen education as a primary tool in the grievance system
- advocate for new positions or responsibilities, including an access coordinator for major divisions such as Campus Dining Services (CDS) and Residential Education (ResEd)
- serve as a liaison to the Equity and Diversity committee

Our work has revealed that access is an issue that can unite us and not divide us. We hope that the Oberlin community will take up this opportunity to reimagine all the differences that we bring and regard them not as deficits but as rich sources from which we each contribute to our complex, dynamic community.