

Report of the Student Affairs Committee's

Subcommittee for Students with Disabilities

April 5, 2019

Introduction

For three years the Subcommittee for Students with Disabilities (SSD) has been working to improve the quality of life for students with disabilities at Columbia. The Student Affairs Committee (SAC) created SSD in spring of 2016 in response to the Quality of Life (QoL) survey results from spring of 2015, which revealed that students who identified as disabled were less satisfied with their Columbia experience than any other group. SAC is happy to report that the most recent QoL survey indicates an overall increase in satisfaction among students with disabilities. Under SAC leadership, SSD has been instrumental in a number of large-scale improvements and changes at Columbia regarding disabilities services and accessibility on campus. After conducting extensive research into departments for disability services at peer institutions, an increase in staff in the Office of Disability Services (ODS) was one of the major changes that SSD helped initiate. However, there continue to be obstacles that students with disabilities face, obstacles that SSD has continued to learn about and address this year.

Updates - Ongoing Projects

In Spring 2018, SSD issued a report that explained the subcommittee's most recent findings and provided recommendations for follow-on action. In summary of those findings SSD recommended the following:

1. An accessible online portal where registered students could make ODS accommodation requests.
2. Permanent academic testing spaces that would better accommodate the growing number of proctored exams, which currently ranges from 100-250 per day.

Regarding the online portal, ODS has recently made many necessary forms (the Disability Registration Form, Testing Accommodation Request Forms, etc.) available online in PDF format, and these forms, once completed, can be emailed to ODS. These changes have helped to create a more streamlined process. Although Columbia does not yet have an online portal, SSD continues to work with Columbia Health on the development and launching of accessible online tools to support students with disabilities, and new resources are expected in the coming academic year.

Regarding the second recommendation made, permanent testing space, SSD is happy to be able to report that additional dedicated testing space has been secured in Chandler and, soon, in Havemeyer. These additional spaces will increase the total available testing spaces by a capacity of 93 students. Furthermore, the facility will also have a testing center and on-site staff. This additional dedicated testing

spaces will help to significantly reduce the person-hours ODS requires to facilitate testing accommodations, and represent significant progress on this important issue.

Students with Disabilities Town Hall

On April 3, SAC partnered with the General Studies Student Council to hold a town hall event for students with disabilities and allies, the second town hall of its kind. At the town hall, students discussed obstacles, shared concerns, and provided feedback that will be extremely valuable for the Subcommittee for Students with Disabilities to use moving forward.

Disability Representation in Education

In recognition of the fact that representation in education is important, and having heard complaints from students about a lack of representation of disability topics in education, in January 2019, SSD searched the Columbia Course Directory of Classes to identify courses available that are about disability or that include disability topics. Unfortunately, the results were sparse. The following are search results from the January registration period. The results pertain to keyword searches of different identity subjects, and the number listed is the number of search results found with that keyword. (Some categories, such as race and ethnicity, may overlap).

- Ethnicity - 53
- Sexuality - 247
- Race - 291
- Gender - 409
- Religion - 449
- **Disability - 11**

As is apparent, whereas other keywords obtained dozens, if not hundreds, of search results, “disability” resulted in less than a dozen findings. Of those finding, only 7 classes were available to undergraduates; of those 7, only one appeared to be an introductory course; and regarding that one class, disability issues were only one part within a broad spectrum of public health issues the course discussed. SSD believes that these are not satisfactory findings. **According to census data, the disabled community comprises approximately 19 percent of the U.S. population, or over 56 million people; approximately half of those reported that their disability is “severe” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).** This community has its own vast complexity, long history, unique obstacles, and sense of identity. Furthermore, issues pertaining to persons with disabilities often intersect with other identities in ways that are complex and that deserve to be understood. And yet these issues are simply not sufficiently represented within Columbia’s course offerings, particularly in undergraduate education.

SSD recognizes that an increase of representation of disability topics in education - whether that be in discussions of history, public health, law, economics, or many other topics - would be beneficial to

students with disabilities as well as to the broader community. We will continue to work to identify ways to accomplish this, including by working with administrators to have American Sign Language provided as a course offering to more students (an initiative we have been working on this year).

Conclusion

Students with disabilities are a too-often overlooked population, and their obstacles are many. The recent town hall event hosted by SAC and the GSSC helped to give a clearer picture of concerns that students from across Columbia face, which will help to inform work on SSD. Furthermore, SSD will provide recommendations for adjustments to questions on the next SAC Quality of Life Survey that will help to further identify and quantify students' concerns. Addressing the issues that Columbia's students with disabilities face - whether they have to do with physical accessibility, campus community, representation, or otherwise - is an ongoing process, and will continue to be a priority for the SAC Subcommittee for Students with Disabilities.

Work Cited: U.S. Census Bureau Public Information Office. "Nearly 1 in 5 People Have a Disability in the U.S., Census Bureau Reports - Miscellaneous - Newsroom - U.S. Census Bureau." *Census.gov*, United States Census Bureau, 25 July 2012, www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/miscellaneous/cb12-134.html.