

*Developments* article

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## **YOU GET MORE THAN YOU PAY FOR: Advantages of Hiring and Accommodating Student Affairs Professionals with Disabilities**

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Student affairs professionals value personal development in their employees as well as for their students, colleagues and themselves. This article will examine Chickering's seven vectors of development as they apply to the employment and accommodation of student affairs professionals with disabilities. The vectors considered are: mature interpersonal relations, developing competence, establishing identity, interdependence, managing emotions, developing purpose and developing integrity. It is often clear that a colleague with a disability may need some accommodations, but it may also be useful to consider what advantages this same colleague may bring to the work situation. This is not to say that an employee with a disability is "better" than one with no disability. However, as people have learned in other multicultural contexts, different perspectives may enrich us all.

### **MATURE INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS**

Exceptional individuals with disabilities have been employed in the student affairs field for many years. However, over two thirds of people with significant disabilities remain unemployed, even with high levels of training and education (Vobejda, 1998). Almost ten years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, this is still true. Such a high level of unemployment of people capable and wanting to work indicates a reluctance of potential employers to see beyond the problems and accommodation needs to the possibilities of gaining something more by employing a professional with a disability. The literature surveyed for this article also reflected this bias, with many articles about accommodation and overcoming negative attitudes but very little about advantages and benefits of including a professional with a disability on the work team. Research has shown that negative attitudes towards people with disabilities, e.g., less competent (Cook, Kunce, & Getsinger, 1976) and less influential (Miller, 1991) correlate with similar attitudes towards other minority groups (Hollins, 1989). However, as equal status contact occurs between workers with and without disabilities, stereotypes decline and initial strained interactions become more comfortable for all (Selby, & Calhoun, 1980). This does not mean that the disability is ignored, but rather that the interaction involves "honest seeing and speaking...the ability to be with the actual truth including flawed bodies and flawed responses" (Tolafson quoted in Fries, 1997 p.106). Doesn't this sound like Chickering's vector of mature interpersonal relationships, with the development of tolerance and the appreciation of differences (Chickering, 1993)?

### **DEVELOPING COMPETENCE**

Or, consider the relevance of the competence vector to employing a student affairs professional with a disability. An employee with a disability has had to develop competencies in additional areas in order to achieve his or her education. For example, a deaf employee may have learned two languages, both American Sign Language and spoken English. An employee with chronic fatigue or any of a number of disabilities that affect energy level, has had to learn to prioritize energy expenditures in a way that employees without these disabilities have not had to learn.

## ESTABLISHING IDENTITY

Another of Chickering's vectors is establishing identity which includes acceptance of one's physical self. When persons with visible disabilities arrive for job interviews or any new situation, they are quite aware of other's reactions to them, i.e., noticing their differences. They have learned to handle these reactions with a smile, a joke or a comment to diffuse the discomfort. One of the authors calls herself "the six-legged counselor" to tacitly acknowledge her blindness and her Seeing Eye dog, both of which are parts of her identity.

## INTERDEPENDENCE

Interdependence is a vector with which professionals with disabilities have had more experience than those without disabilities. A blind employee learns to ask the secretary to read messages when it's not quite so busy. Or a wheelchair-using employee with an attendant learns to supervise the attendant successfully so they don't have to train a new one every two weeks, interdependence is a living reality to those of us with disabilities.

## MANAGING EMOTIONS

For those of us with disabilities, managing emotions, includes finding ways to deal with the additional stresses of accommodating our disabilities as well as with the stereotypes and discrimination we may encounter at any time. No wonder research has shown that the nondisabled have the belief that those with disabilities may be more empathic with their struggles. [OMIT THESE CITATIONS?] (Brabham, & Thoreson, 1973; Cook, Kuncce, & Getsinger, 1976; Fletcher, & Nystul, 1993; Miller, 1991; Mitchell, & Frederickson, 1975; Mitchell, & Allen, 1975; Selby, & Calhoun, 1980) with their struggles.

## DEVELOPING PURPOSE

The student affairs professional with a disability has often had to overcome extra obstacles and may well have done much introspection about Chickering's vector of developing a purpose in living. This purpose may well include making it better for the next generation of students with disabilities for example. Students interacting with this vital professional may challenge themselves to overcome their own obstacles and move forward in their own lives. Other employees have teased one of the authors that "I knew you'd get to work in this blizzard so I figured I'd better too." Wordless examples often work much better than exhortations.

## DEVELOPING INTEGRITY

Chickering's last vector of integrity between values and actions is clearly shown by the college or university that employs professionals

with disabilities across campus. Meeting the needs of disabled students is appropriate, but routinely employing more than a token person with a disability sends the message that there is a reason to get a higher education; e.g. a job. Estimates are that one out of seven Americans has a significant disability. If the student affairs professions employed people with disabilities in these numbers, it would reflect the "real world" in this way. The next time your job pool happens to have a well-qualified applicant with a disability, a second look at this candidate may be in order. A look beyond the necessary accommodations to how might this candidate enrich our unit because of his/her disability could vector all concerned towards more successful student affairs practices.

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