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## **Enhancing Diversity On our Campuses: Colleagues With Disabilities**

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Are attitudes the real disability? When college *students* with disabilities were asked to reveal the keys to communicating comfortably with them on the college campus, their advice emerged in three reoccurring themes: **respect, comfort, and awareness** (Myers, 1994). So do college *professionals* with disabilities feel the same way? How do college professionals with disabilities perceive the attitudes and comfort level of their colleagues without disabilities? How do they think they are perceived by their colleagues without disabilities? What advice would our colleagues with disabilities like to give to their colleagues without disabilities?

We posed these questions to our colleagues with disabilities on the ACPA Disability Task Force listserv to gain insight into this topic. Although the responses were limited, the information gathered from our colleagues with disabilities is invaluable. We are appreciative of their participation and grateful to be able to share their views with you.

Persons responding to our questions have physical, visual, mobility, neurological, and psychological disabilities, and all are affiliated with 4-year institutions. In each case, access to and on campus is favorable and appropriate. So what did they think about attitudes on their campus? Here are their responses.

**"How do you think you are perceived by your colleagues without disabilities?"** Most believe that their colleagues are accepting of them and see them as competent. Several said they believe it takes longer for their colleagues to gain confidence in their abilities compared to the time taken for a new employees without disabilities. Colleagues and supervisors tend to be skeptical of their abilities until proof is provided over a period of time and on various occasions. Although colleagues and administrators seem to be accepting, faculty, on the other hand, are less accepting and much more doubtful of the person's capabilities. In fact, according to several respondents, faculty tend to avoid the disability issue altogether. In the case of "hidden" disabilities (e.g., psychological, neurological, learning), faculty express disbelief that the disability exists even though appropriate documentation is provided.

**"What do you want to tell your colleagues without disabilities about working with colleagues with disabilities?"**

The responses are quite similar to those given by students with disabilities in the study mentioned above

(Myers, 1994). Respect, comfort, and awareness once again emerge as communication themes.

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## **Respect**

- Please keep an open mind.
- I am capable of doing the same quality and quantity of work as my colleagues without disabilities
- Please be inclusive.
- I appreciate the efforts you make toward access.
- Please include me in (or at least invite me to) outside activities (e.g., lunch, parties, social gatherings, etc.)
- Please consider access in activities that are open to all staff (e.g., staff meetings, professional development seminars, recreation centers, opening week activities, alumni events, etc.) This goes above and beyond access in the person's primary office of employment.
- Please see me as a person and remember that my disability is only a part of me.
- Please treat me as you would anyone else or as you would like to be treated.

## **Comfort**

- Feel free to ask questions.
- Do not be afraid to ask me about my specific needs and accommodations.
- Do not be afraid to talk to me

## **Awareness**

- Be aware that there are many disabilities both visible and hidden
- Be aware of what you say and how you say it.
- Avoid comments such as "You don't look disabled." Hidden disabilities are just as real as visible ones.
- Become familiar with disability law regarding equal treatment and equal access both inside and outside of the classroom and workplace.

As a result of the Americans With Disabilities Act more people with disabilities are becoming employed in higher education settings. As we embrace diversity on our college campuses, it is important to examine attitudes toward colleagues with disabilities in the same ways as we examine our attitudes toward other underrepresented groups. One of the goals of the Disability Task Force is to increase awareness and support for persons with disabilities on campus, including students, colleagues, and alumni. Respect, comfort, and awareness are important to all persons, and need to be the ideals guiding our actions toward students and colleagues.

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Myers, K. A. (1994). Preferences of communication styles and techniques of persons with visible visual

disabilities: Implications for higher education. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Illinois State University, Normal, IL.

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