

Vote YES to Amend ACPA Article IX Bylaws: Perspectives from two ACPA Members with Disabilities

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Should you vote YES to change Article IX of the ACPA Bylaws? Yes, you should!

The Task Force on Disability has been working diligently over the past several years to become a Standing Committee. By voting YES to amend Article IX of the ACPA Bylaws, the Task Force will be given the opportunity to more cohesively represent the needs and interests of ACPA members with disabilities.

The Task Force on Disability has served as a vehicle for members with disabilities to work within the Association to increase student affairs professionals' knowledge of disability-related issues. Joined by ACPA members without disabilities who are interested in learning more about disability, we seek to join together to more knowledgeably advocate for disability issues on our campuses and in the Association.

Primary Focus: ACPA Members with Disabilities

Some Task Force members serve as Disability Support Staff on their respective campuses. This is similar to the situation of members of other Standing Committees. For example, some members of the Standing Committee for Multicultural Awareness hold positions focused specifically on racial/ethnic diversity. The primary focus of the Task Force on Disability has been on the needs of ACPA professionals with disabilities with disability support provision as a secondary focus, informed by the individual experience of professionals with disabilities and the knowledgeable support of professionals without disabilities.

Distinctive Missions: Standing Committee vs. Commission

So, why should you vote YES to amending the Article IX of the Bylaws? For clarification purposes, let's first compare the purposes of a Standing Committee and a Commission. A Standing Committee is designed to represent a constituency within ACPA. A Standing Committee as defined in the Bylaws has two purposes: (1) Education of the Association, and through the Association, education of higher education in general, and (2) advocacy for that constituency. By contrast, a Commission is organized around specific program areas focused on services to students.

Professionals with Disabilities: a Growing Group

Implicit in some arguments we have heard that support the Task Force "growing up" to be a Commission, rather than a Standing Committee, is the assumption that there must not be very many professionals with disabilities within ACPA or higher education in general. Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the number of professionals with disabilities in all areas has increased. People with disabilities are seeing advanced degrees and the careers associated with those degrees as much more attainable for them.

Our Experiences

While a recent ACPA Affirmative Action survey showed that 6% of the respondents had a disability, it is not possible at this point to have an accurate knowledge of the number of professionals with disabilities involved in ACPA. When we reviewed our first membership form to join ACPA, neither of us were asked if we identified as a person with a disability. In addition, the membership form through which each of us originally joined ACPA did not mention any Association group related to disability issues. Hence we did not identify ourselves as persons with disabilities, leading, perhaps, to a certain "invisibility" for people with disabilities within the Association. We did not know about the Task Force until we attended or made plans to attend our first National Convention. We wonder how many other ACPA members with disabilities are looking for a group with whom to identify?

Neither of the two authors of this article have a primary responsibility for serving students with disabilities on our campuses. We are not involved in programming for students with disabilities on a regular basis. However, disability issues are a very important part of our lives as we are both visually impaired. We are two examples of professionals with disabilities who see education, advocacy, creating an accepting climate for professionals and students with disabilities as important issues.

ACPA has demonstrated its awareness and sensitivity to the needs of persons with disabilities by appointing an Access Coordinator to serve on the national convention Planning Committee. It is the Access Coordinator's responsibility to ensure that all participants have equal access to the convention's programs and services. One of the authors of this article had the privilege of serving in this capacity for the 1998 ACPA National Convention in St. Louis, a role that proved to be quite beneficial not only for the Coordinator but also for convention participants as well. Although ACPA is making strides toward disability awareness, it has been said that many people interested in disability issues are members of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) because it takes a more proactive approach to disability concerns. There also appears to be a stronger disability focus in the American Counseling Association (ACA). One of the authors of this article is a member of both ACPA and NASPA; the other author has been a member of both ACPA and ACA. Our primary professional interests, however lie with ACPA; therefore, we would like to think that ACPA can create a knowledgeable and supportive climate for professionals with disabilities not only at its national convention but also within its organizational structure (i.e., Standing Committees, equity, and voting privileges) as well.

Structure and Voice

There are valid concerns within the Association about the voting structure and the equity of Standing Committees and Commissions. We should not confuse issues of voting structure and equity with issues of giving voice to an underrepresented group of members within ACPA. ACPA has a proud tradition of enriching the professional practice of student affairs practitioners in many functional areas by providing this essential voice to other groups, among them the Standing Committee for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Awareness, and the Standing Committee for Multicultural Issues. The Task Force on Disability Issues is asking that we continue in the tradition of acceptance and encouragement of a diverse campus climate by recognizing the constituency of student affairs professionals with disabilities as well.

Closer, Mutually Enriching Collaboration

In addition, the Task Force on Disability joins with other groups, including those within the Commissions, in calling for an integrated approach to professional development and advocacy for the commissions and standing committees. There is much within both groups that could be mutually enriching. The practice within functional areas of student affairs, the province of Commissions, could be enriched by greater knowledge of student characteristics in race/ethnicity, ability/disability, gender, and sexual orientation. By the same token, an understanding of these important areas of student diversity, the province of Standing Committees, could be enhanced by applying that knowledge in multiple settings, to include but not be limited to career planning, community colleges, residence halls and student activities, etc.

For further information, please see the proposal written by the Task Force at <http://www.msu.edu/user/corcora1/acpa/proposal.html>.

In addition, please see our ACPA web page under construction at: <http://www.acpa.nche.edu/comms/disab/>

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