
The University Senate

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Disabilities Issues Committee

November 20, 2024

Minutes of the Meeting

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[In these minutes: Students with Disabilities Services and Support Discussion; Harm Reduction Plan for Twin Cities and Affiliate Campuses; Action Steps for Disability Visibility/Access/Inclusion Campaign; Student Concerns]

PRESENT: Jennifer McComas (chair), Jeff Baier, Tayler Bryant, Aaron Corfield, Erin L Durban, Enjie G Hall, Jeremy Jenkins, Kristina Krohn, Meryl S Lucchesi-Freyberg, Elizabeth Martinez-Podolsky, Jess Neau, Madelyn Saner, Jody E Tracy, Jessica Grittner

REGRETS: David Fuecker

1. Students with Disabilities Services and Support Discussion

McComas highlighted the struggles of student-led groups like the Disabled Students Cultural Center (DSCC), which receive minimal financial and institutional support. She noted the significant contributions of a former student leader, who managed operations despite being a double major with disabilities, before graduating and raising concerns about sustainability. Issues such as outdated websites and broken organizational links were also raised.

Hall clarified that the DSCC is rebuilding with new leadership and liaising with the Disability Resource Center (DRC), though active programming remains limited. Durban emphasized the importance of a broader cultural framework, citing examples like the University of Arizona's disability cultural center, which integrates staff, faculty, and students.

Lucchesi-Freyberg and Baier stressed the lack of adequate spaces for testing and accessibility on regional campuses. Specific incidents, such as inaccessible library doors and printed non-functional braille, underscored the daily barriers disabled students face. The committee debated its role in supporting these groups and advocated for systemic solutions, such as consistent funding, better coordination, and a centralized disability cultural center.

2. Harm Reduction Plan for Twin Cities and Affiliate Campuses

McComas introduced the topic by acknowledging the lack of a unified plan and limited existing measures, such as on-demand training available through partnerships. The discussion emphasized the need for naloxone emergency treatment accessibility and training, referencing policies at comparable universities like the University of Wisconsin.

Legal and policy-related barriers emerged as challenges, with the university's general counsel opting not to formalize a policy. Instead, they suggested leveraging informational resources, akin to other institutions' approaches. McComas proposed that those interested consider drafting a proposal for review.

Baier shared his campus's proactive measures, including naloxone training in collaboration with local counties and organizations like the Steve Rumler Network. He noted the importance of engaging with counties distributing opioid settlement funds to ensure investments in recovery-focused programs. Baier also highlighted successful partnerships with local mental health providers and law enforcement.

Participants, including McComas and Baier, committed to advancing the initiative by collaborating with stakeholders across campuses and counties. McComas concluded with plans to organize the next steps, involving key individuals and addressing local county-specific logistics to implement effective harm reduction measures.

3. Action Steps for Disability Visibility/Access/Inclusion Campaign

The discussion, led primarily by McComas, focused on an ongoing initiative to enhance visibility and access for individuals with disabilities across campus. McComas highlighted the importance of reframing the campaign beyond mere awareness, emphasizing action and inclusion. The initiative sought to address physical, behavioral, and attitudinal barriers, with the ultimate goal of creating equitable spaces that support success for everyone.

Participants, including Tracy, Martinez-Podolsky, and Durban, contributed suggestions. Tracy proposed a dual-approach model that could balance public and private elements, ensuring that both broad advocacy and individual experiences inform the campaign. Durban stressed the necessity of avoiding reductive portrayals of disability, such as "inspiration porn," advocating instead for authentic, diverse narratives. Martinez-Podolsky highlighted the potential for aligning the campaign with existing institutional programs and events to increase visibility.

The group deliberated on forming an advisory committee that was predominantly composed of individuals with disabilities to guide the campaign. However, Baier and Saner expressed concerns about overburdening disabled members of the campus community, who already face significant challenges. This led to a consensus that the institution must allocate sufficient resources to lighten the load on these individuals while ensuring their voices are central to the campaign.

Digital accessibility emerged as a significant focus, given impending compliance deadlines. Participants saw this as an opportunity to integrate systemic changes with the campaign's messaging, reinforcing the importance of inclusive practices.

The discussion topic concluded with McComas acknowledging the collective insights and committing to further action. Plans included consulting with institutional offices and leveraging her role as a faculty fellow to secure resources and move the campaign forward.

4. Student Concerns

McComas highlighted severe accessibility failures, such as classrooms in inaccessible buildings and dormitories that violate basic safety protocols. She stressed the urgency of addressing these systemic issues and involving student feedback in creating actionable policies.

Tracy echoed these concerns, pointing out fire code violations and the impracticality of existing accessibility measures, like wheelchair-accessible showers accessible only via stairs. Alves raised questions about regular accessibility audits and ADA compliance, emphasizing that legal grandfathering of older buildings is not an acceptable justification for ongoing accessibility failures. Hall clarified that while compliance to standards is monitored during construction and renovations, functional accessibility often remains unaddressed.

Baier described his self-initiated disability audits, revealing systemic neglect and citing issues with external city-owned spaces impacting university accessibility. He also stressed the need for emergency protocols, such as designated safe haven locations for individuals unable to evacuate buildings independently. Hall confirmed efforts to improve emergency planning and reporting systems, including creating confidential avenues for reporting accessibility concerns.

5. Adjournment

With nothing additional, and after McComas was excused early from the meeting, Barker adjourned the meeting.

Deena Barker
University Senate Office