

Accessibility at Ithaca College

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Background

Accessibility for individuals with disabilities is a major issue in our society, especially for those seeking higher education. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 noted that “studies have documented that people with disabilities, as a group, occupy an inferior status in our society, and are severely disadvantaged... educationally,” (2010). Only 12.5% of Americans with a disability hold a Bachelor’s degree compared to ~30% of Americans without a disability that hold a Bachelor’s degree (Taormina-Weiss, 2012). Although, legislation was enacted to establish equality and to protect people with disabilities in both public and private entities which includes higher education institutions and college campuses, there are still systemic issues that pose unwarranted barriers towards people with disabilities that threaten educational success. Due to a lack of federal regulations regarding accommodations and accessibility for individuals with disabilities at higher education institutions, wide gaps are created between students with disabilities and students without disabilities.

Ithaca College is not exempt from this issue; it too has struggled with and continues to struggle to make its campus disability friendly and accessible. As of Fall of 2014, 703 students, 10.7% of the total student population, attending the College had a disability (L. Reid, personal communication, February 15, 2017). In 2015, a complaint was filed with the Office of Civil Rights against the college for failure to comply with ADA regulations. The complaint alleged that the student was treated unfairly by a residential life staff member and that several buildings/facilities on the college campus are inaccessible to individuals with disabilities.

Methods

A comprehensive literature review of disability policy was undertaken to critically analyze existing policy and propose potential solutions. A step-by-step process was employed to review both qualitative and quantitative research data such as statistics regarding the number of individuals with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions, the educational barriers faced by college students with disabilities, the number of students with disabilities enrolled in Ithaca College, and both the physical and social issues regarding accessibility on Ithaca College’s campus. Analysis of key disability legislation such as the Rehabilitative Act of 1973, Americans with Disabilities Act, Architectural Barriers Act, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act yielded the political and legal framework. Conducting an interview with Leslie Reid of the Ithaca College Student Accessibility Services Office helped to better understand accessibility issues on college campuses and to meaningfully apply the broader policy environment to Ithaca College. Consideration of the viewpoints of Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF), the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD), and Ithaca College Student Occupational Therapy Association (ICSOTA) helped to explore and to understand ethical issues of importance to various stakeholders.

Results

The Office of Civil Rights determined that numerous buildings and facilities throughout Ithaca College's campus present ADA compliance concerns and inaccessibility for individuals with disabilities – and that these needed to be addressed. Three options were offered as a result of the analysis: Option One: altering buildings on the Ithaca College campus to make all buildings accessible; Option Two: launching a faculty support and development program at Ithaca College to educate faculty with strategies to develop their courses/curriculum using accessible design; or Option Three: implementing a transition program for students enrolling in Ithaca College to educate all students about disability and provide students with disabilities with important information regarding the expectations, accommodations, programs, and services offered by the institution.

The best solution is Option Three because it helps balance OCR concerns by creating a positive environment around disability and accessibility on the college's campus while ensuring that students with disabilities understand their rights in the instance they are being treated unfairly.

Conclusions

Many students with disabilities are not provided with the support or information, regarding accessibility accommodations, to promote their success. Ensuring that higher education institutions are accessible for students with disabilities will diversify the student population while further unifying the community. This will have a profound effect on minimizing discrimination against students with disabilities and provide a mechanism to break unwarranted barriers while promoting equality and success for all students. Accessible higher education provides the means to create a more holistic workforce, allowing the incorporation of diverse perspectives, and an inclusive society.

References

Taormina-Weiss, W. (2012, February 27). Rights of Persons with Disabilities in America.

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The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42, U.S.C., §§ 126-12101-2000 (2010).