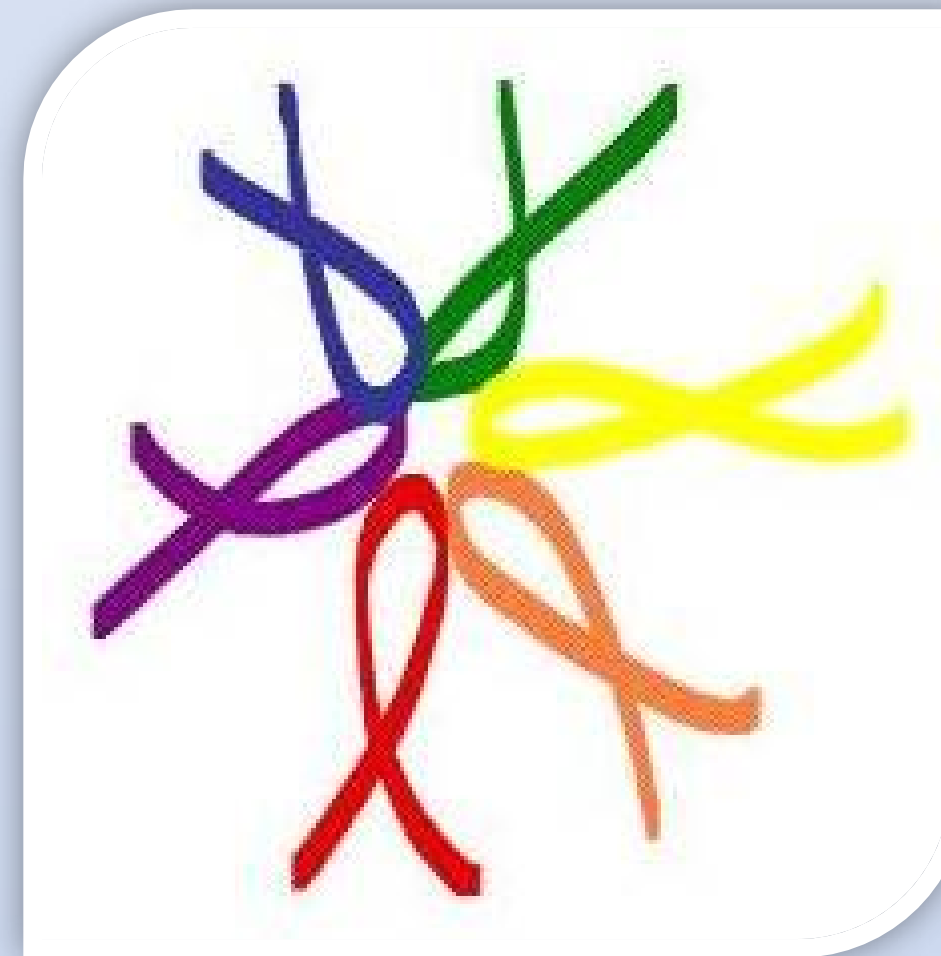
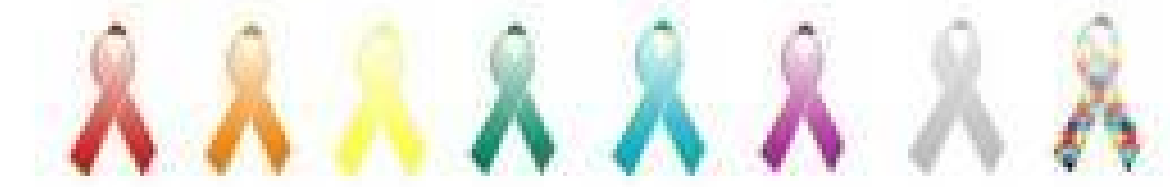




Allies for Ability

Improving Campus Climate through the Promotion of Ability-Friendly Safe Spaces

Engaging Abilities at the University of Michigan



ABSTRACT

Multiple, high-profile incidents of disability discrimination at the University of Michigan during the past few years have highlighted the need for increased education and awareness about the experiences of people with disabilities on campus. In response to these events, interviews were conducted over the past year across campus to assess the social and academic climate for students with disabilities.

Participants frequently noted feeling isolated because of their disability and found it challenging to identify ability-friendly people and offices. Many participants were afraid to disclose their disability because of a fear of discrimination and stigma, even when disability disclosure was necessary for appropriate accommodations. The findings of these interviews have informed planning and development of a large-scale social academic intervention, the Allies for Ability Program, to promote ability-friendly safe space in the University of Michigan and surrounding communities. People who complete the initial 1 day training can identify as Allies for Ability and display the Allies for Ability logo to publicly identify themselves or their office as ability-friendly.

Partnerships have been formed with living facility leadership and student organizations across campus to promote the Allies for Ability Program in the upcoming academic year, and these partnerships will help to build an ability-friendly social and academic climate on campus. Expansion of the Allies for Ability Program into Michigan communities, the development of career area specific ability-sensitivity trainings, and a focus on supporting success within the Allies for Ability community will further support the promotion of the cultural ideological transformation that underscores the Allies for Ability Program.

INTRODUCTION TO PROGRAM

The Allies for Ability Program will allow people and organizations to identify themselves as being socially supportive to the issues facing people with disabilities or chronic illness. Allies will receive a logo sticker for their office or dorm door or window which will help to create visible safe spaces and opportunities for constructive dialogue.

Ability-friendly spaces enable all community members to have access to positive representations of diversely-abled people, which promotes the development of more inclusive attitudes toward all people regardless of ability status.

The Outlook Project is a social networking website that will facilitate direct connections between and among people identified with disability communities and students interested in learning more about or volunteering within disability communities. Through individual and organizational profiles, participants in the Outlook Project will be able to interact with other people allied with disability communities for mentoring, friendship, and social support.

The Outlook Project is considered the digital equivalent of the Allies for Ability Program, so participants in Allies for Ability will also be encouraged to take part in the Outlook .org networking resource. The research embedded in these projects will be utilized to inform the development of positive practice guidelines for creating inclusive academic spaces for people with disabilities at all academic levels.

METHODS

To guide the development of the Allies for Ability Program and ensure their relevance to the perspectives and needs of the UM disability community, on-going interviews are being conducted with UM:

- Students
- Staff
- Faculty

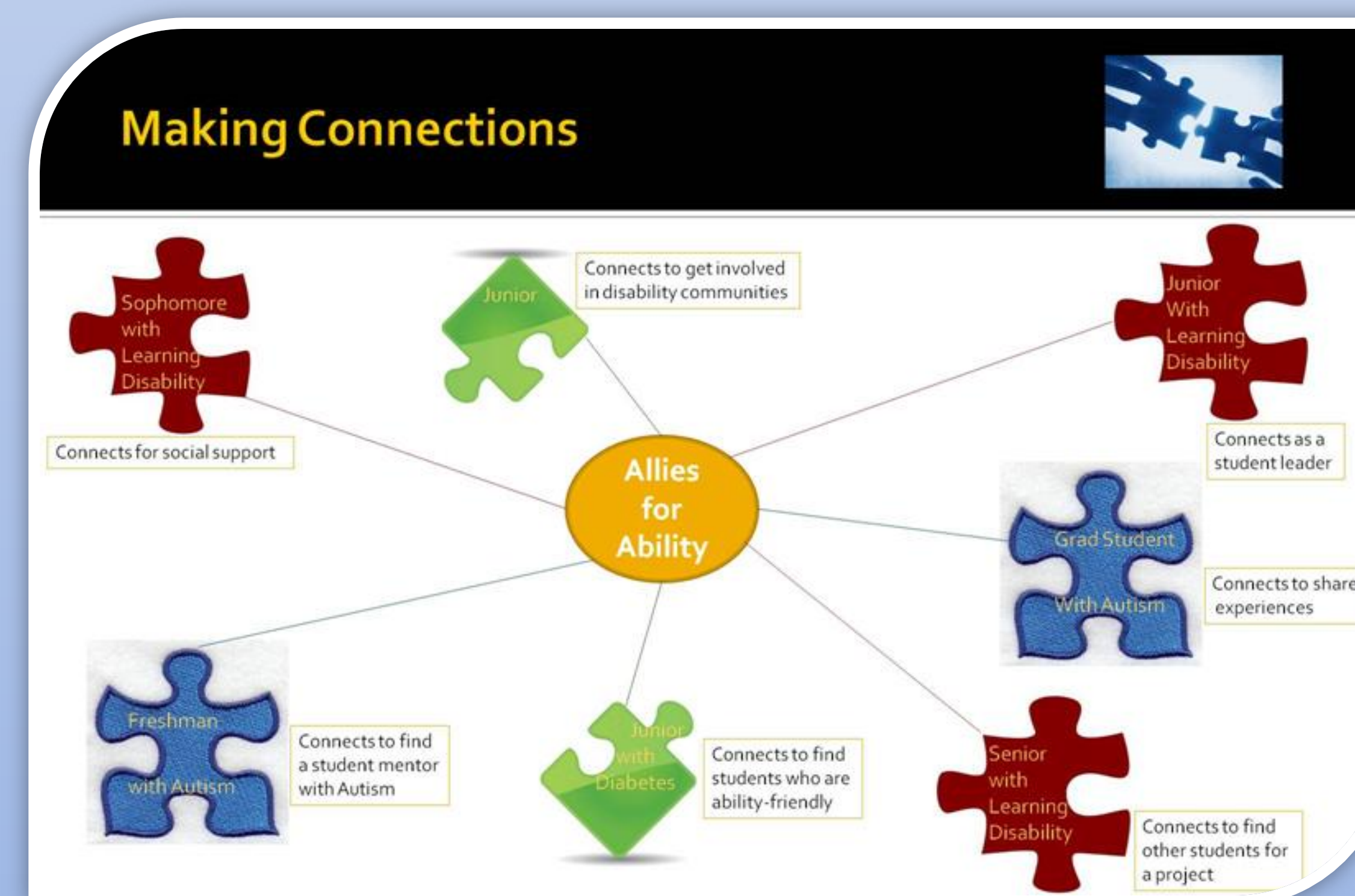
Students and staff with disabilities and/or who are allied with disability communities are being oversampled and identified through a snowball sampling methodology.

The Allies for Ability educational program will commence this fall as a productive response to many of the themes identified in the interviews, and the Outlook Project is under development for potential unveiling the winter 2010 semester. Survey and interview data will be utilized to evaluate the success of the Allies for Ability Program and the Outlook Project.

INTERVIEW THEMES

Interviews revealed several common themes:

- Often negative experiences of disability are embedded in social and academic contexts, rather than a negative experience of the disability itself.
- Due to stigma and fear of discrimination, students with “invisible” disabilities (such as dyslexia or chronic illness) tend to keep their ability status private unless disclosing for specific accommodations.
- Many students choose not to use the accommodations necessary for their academic success out of fear of discrimination.
- Concealing disability status can have negative academic, social, and health consequences.
- Many students with disabilities indicated feeling disconnected from an ability-friendly community on-campus.
- It was frequently noted that social and emotional supports are limited for students with disabilities.
- Having a disability or chronic illness often limits students’ social and academic opportunities to a more significant degree than necessary due to the disability alone



UM OUTREACH PLAN

Numerous partnerships have also been cultivated across the UM to facilitate the success of the Allies for Ability. Since our goal is for Allies for Ability to be visible in each living facility on campus, this community building is essential. Each of the partnering groups will participate in ability-sensitivity training to help Allies understand the experiences of students with disabilities and how to create an ability-friendly social and academic climate. Partnering with other organizations that support social justice issues broadens our reach significantly and can catalyze change on campus most quickly.

CAMPUS PARTNERSHIPS

Some of the campus partnerships for the Allies for Ability Program include:

- Peers Utilizing Leadership Skills in Education (PULSE), a student-led and University Health Service sponsored organization for the promotion of health in residential communities through peer interactions. PULSE also works with residential hall staff and Greek organization leadership to promote health and social justice.
- The Health Sciences Scholars Program, a living and learning community at UM for students interested in careers in health care.
- Outbreak, the School of Public Health Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender student organization.
- Luther Buchele Cooperative House, a living facility for approximately 50 people, primarily students.
- Pi Kappa Alpha, a fraternity dedicated to developing men of integrity, intellect and high moral character.

To further support these partnerships, an Ethics Board will be established in the Engaging Abilities group over the next six months to respond to potentially challenging personal or ethical issues volunteers may encounter in their activities as Allies for Ability.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH PLAN

The work of the past year represents the first stage of a multi-year initiative to transform the social and academic climate surrounding disability at UM. Over the next few years, we will work through community building and education to achieve visibility for the Allies for Ability and Outlook projects across campus and in the Ann Arbor Community.

The Michigan Outreach Program will enable the Allies for Ability program to dynamically integrate with community organizations that have supportive missions. Increasing safe spaces for people with disabilities in the community is essential to catalyzing a movement of increasing social acceptance for people of diverse abilities.

Issues of inclusiveness for people with disabilities are especially relevant in educational and health care settings. Over the next 2 years, career tracks will be developed for volunteers so that they can maximize the integration of their knowledge gained through volunteering into their future careers. This is an especially effective way to help increase opportunities for success for people with disabilities outside of the UM. When Allies for Ability enter the workforce, they will be more confident about how to create an ability-friendly social climate in their workplace.

CONCLUSION

The information volunteered by participants in the Allies for Ability Program will provide important, currently unavailable information about the academic and social climate for and needs of people with disabilities at UM and in local communities. The lack of this empirical information currently creates an often anecdotally noted disconnect between the service needs of disability communities and service provisions to disability communities.

The Allies for Ability and Outlook projects will increase awareness about ability-related issues, create social and service opportunities, and establish ability-friendly spaces on campus and in surrounding communities. This emphasis on both physical and virtual safe spaces arose in response to the clear feedback from the community. By dynamically connecting physical and virtual safe spaces, participants in the Allies for Ability and the Outlook Project are empowered to independently create networks to share resources and transform their communities and experiences to be more ability-friendly.

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