Autlook and Allies for Ability

Expanding Learning and Community Participation
through Social Networking

An Initiative of Engaging Abilities at the University of Michigan
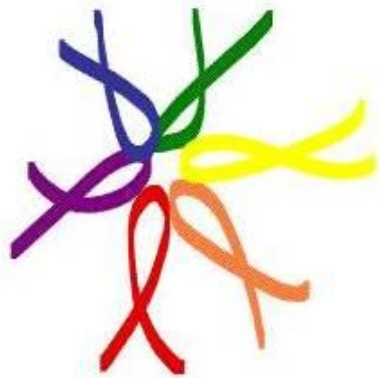
Development Committee

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Abstract

Engaging Abilities is working to create ability-friendly shared virtual, physical, and community space at the University of Michigan and in surrounding communities. Over the past year, interviews have been conducted across campus to assess the social and academic climate for students with disabilities and the findings have informed planning and development of the Allies for Ability and Autlook Projects. Partnerships have been formed with living facility leadership and student organizations across campus to promote the Allies for Ability and Autlook Projects in the upcoming academic year, and these partnerships will help to build an ability-friendly social and academic atmosphere on campus. Expansion of the Allies for Ability and Autlook Projects 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 and Autlook Projects.

Introduction

Engaging Abilities at the University of Michigan (UM) is a student group with a mission of creating more ability-friendly social and academic environments for people with disabilities at the UM and in local communities. Over the past year, we have focused on creating ability-friendly virtual and physical community spaces at UM through the Allies for Ability Program and the Autlook Project.

The Allies for Ability Network allows 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 Autlook Project is a social networking resource 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 Autlook Project will be able to interact with other people allied with disability communities for mentoring, friendship, and social support. Participants in Allies for Ability will also be encouraged to participate in the Autlook Project. 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.

Methodology

Over the past year, we have taken many steps to develop the physical, virtual, and community spaces for the Allies for Ability and Autlook projects. The high level of community enthusiasm for the Autlook Project inspired the Engaging Abilities Leadership Team to quickly recruit a development support staff for this important initiative. Several community members with the necessary computer programming, graphic design, and web design skills have also volunteered their time to establish the physical, virtual, and community infrastructure for the Allies for Ability and Autlook Projects. The Institutional Review Board process at UM has also been initiated. The need for sophisticated privacy settings and data handling procedures has extended the timeline to the autlook.org official launch to early Fall 2009.

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In January 2009, Engaging Abilities established office space in Ann Arbor, MI. This space, which includes a studio for members to produce art and a resource library, will facilitate more frequent social activities for members of the Engaging Abilities community.

Engaging Abilities has been conducting interviews on an on-going basis with students and staff at UM to guide the development of the Allies for Ability and Autlook Project and ensure their relevance to the perspectives and needs of the UM disability community. Students and staff with disabilities and/or who are allied with disability communities were identified through a snowball sampling methodology. The information volunteered by participants in the Allies for Ability and Autlook Projects 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.

Findings

The accounts of many young people with disabilities interviewed by Engaging Abilities suggest that 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 tend to keep their ability status private and this "closeting" of disability can have negative academic and social consequences. This finding underscores the importance of fostering ability-friendly attitudes across campus.

Initially, the Autlook Project was the main focus of Engaging Abilities; however, to actively respond to the needs of the community as identified in this research, the Allies for Ability program took on equal importance.

Prototype

The Allies for Ability logo will play an important role in visibly identifying ability-friendly spaces across campus. Two prototypes were considered for the Allies for Ability logo, and a community vote was conducted at the March 27, 2009 Disability Design Challenge and UM Initiative for Disability Studies events. The winning logo is featured on the cover page of this report. This simultaneous virtual and physical community building is integral to the success of the mission of Engaging Abilities.

Numerous partnerships have also been cultivated across the UM to facilitate the success of the Allies for Ability and Autlook Projects. 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. To further support these partnerships, an Ethics Board will be established over the next six months to respond to potentially challenging personal or ethical issues volunteers may encounter in their activities as Allies for Ability. Some of the established campus partnerships 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.

Future Work

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 Autlook projects across campus and in the Ann Arbor community. Additionally, Engaging Abilities has numerous extensions of the Allies for Ability and Autlook projects planned.

Issues of inclusiveness for people with disabilities are especially relevant in educational and health care settings (Terpstra, 2008; Unger, 2006). 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.

The Michigan Autreach 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 (Gill, 1997; Finlay, 1998).

As part of the Autlook Supporting Success Network, we plan to create an online Achievement Gallery, where Allies for Ability can post and share specific ways their efforts, large or small, have inspired them or had a positive outcome. All Engaging Abilities personnel, including management and members of the Board of Directors, will be encouraged to participate. Through this platform we provide a means to maintain resolve and motivation as well as strengthen the values of our organizational mission in each of our staff on a personal, internal level (Collins, 2005; Walker & Cory, 2002; Robbins, 2005). This is especially important because the challenges facing the disability community are likely to take years to change on a large scale, and these examples of success will inspire and support continued change.

Conclusion

Engaging Abilities has clear potential to transform the climate surrounding ability at the University of Michigan and in surrounding communities. The Allies for Ability and Autlook 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 Autlook projects are empowered to independently create networks to share resources and transform their communities and experiences to be more ability-friendly.

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