

Supporting Disability Resources Systemwide: Testimonies and Recommendations by UC Students with Disabilities



The **UC Student Association** is the official voice of over a quarter million undergraduate, graduate, and professional students from all ten UC campuses. It is our mission to advocate on behalf of current and future students for the accessibility, affordability, and quality of the UC system. Learn more about our work at www.ucsa.org.

About the Report

The University of California Student Association conducted a systemwide qualitative research project regarding the ways UC supports students with disabilities and the ways students believe that support can be improved. During the 2017-2018 academic year, the UCSA Board adopted a new campaign, #WeAre3D, responding to a request from communities representing students with disabilities to advocate for disabled, neurodivergent, and chronically ill students at the UC.

Throughout this report, we will utilize the following terms:

Neurodivergent: A person whose brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of "normal."¹

Chronically Ill: A person whose illness is "chronic" rather than "acute" meaning they are ill long-term rather than short-term.²

Disabled: A person having one or more physical or mental condition(s) that limit one's movements, senses, and/or activities.³

This publication includes research and student stories about what it looks like to have a disability while attending the UC. Their narratives highlight the intersectional nature of student experiences. Strategic investments in systemwide support for disability resources is imperative. The UC must do more and better to ensure the well-being and success of neurodivergent students, chronically ill students, and students with disabilities. UCSA hopes this report encourages the university and elected officials to prioritize and create tangible solutions.

Methodology

During the Fall of 2017, UCSA outreached to Directors of the disability centers across the campuses. All campus directors were interviewed about their best practices and areas for improvement. During the Winter of 2018, UCSA sent out a call for student participation via email and social media. The survey was open for about three months to capture a diversity of experiences including but not limited to race, gender, sexuality, income levels, and campuses. 26 students voluntarily filled out the survey and described their experiences with anonymity. Out of the 26 participants, 57% of them identified as women. The racial breakdown of the participants are as follow: white (50%), Black (15.4%), Latinx (15.4%), Asian (11.5%), Indigenous/Native American (4%) and decline to answer (3.7%). Types of survey questions include: 1) What disabilities, chronic illnesses, and or neurodivergencies do you identify with? and 2) What has been your experience as a neurodivergent, chronically ill, and/or disabled student?

Acknowledgments

Thank you to every student who shared pieces of their story. Your authenticity and vulnerability is not taken for granted. Additional gratitude is due for student leaders who have been active in the #WeAre3D campaign across all UC campuses including the founders for your vision. A big thank you to University Affairs intern, Nishan Jones, for jumpstarting this research and project. Finally, thank you to the disability center staff across the campuses who participated in phone interviews and in person conversations.

This report was prepared by UCSA University Affairs Director Daniel Cano.

¹ <http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions/>

² <https://aspe.hhs.gov/glossary-terms>

³ <https://www.ada.gov/cguide.htm>

About #WeAre3D Campaign

The #WeAre3D (Demanding Disability Resources and Diversification) campaign was a year-long UCSA campaign, launched at UCSA's Student Organizing Summit (SOS) in August 2017. This campaign focused on increasing awareness of and advocating for resource allocation to disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent students on UC campuses. This includes community building spaces, cultural competency training for disability center staff, demedicalizing accessibility to academic accommodations, destigmatizing those with visible and non-visible disabilities, and providing mandatory intersectional trainings for students, faculty, and staff. #WeAre3D expects and advocates for fully accessible UC campuses for this marginalized community of students.



Accomplishments

The #WeAre3D campaign launched systemwide research on support for differently abled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent students at the University of California. UCSA presented to UCOP and disability services directors from all nine undergraduate campuses about the #WeAre3D campaign during the Fall of 2017. During the Winter of 2018, UCSA secured a commitment from President Napolitano on pushing forth campus accessibility maps,

which will aid disabled students better navigate the landscapes of UC campuses. The University Office of the President also expressed interest in conducting systemwide research for the first time on disabled student communities. This year, UCSA also supported two legislative bills on supporting mental health counselors and prevention/intervention (SB 968 and SB 1006).

Themes of Student Testimonies

Faculty Fail To Accommodate

One very prevalent theme that emerged from student testimonials is the lack of support from faculty. Seven students mentioned lack of faculty support as a constant challenge. For example, a student who is hard of hearing expressed, “[my professor] said because I wear hearing aids, [that] I should be to hear as good as other students.” This complete invalidation reflects that attitudes and behaviors about a disability hinder academic performance and not a disability itself. Common reactions to invalidations like the example above are loss of concentration, interest withdrawal, and internalizing negative thoughts about oneself (i.e, self-victimization). A graduate student discussed their experience as, “**rigid and lacking in compassion; faculty lack empathy and ability/desire to connect with the needs of graduate students; [they] see us as walking brains for use in their projects rather than whole people.**”

A subtheme is the misconception that accommodations means unfair treatment. One student said, “**some professors believe or are under the impression that students who are asking for help and request accommodations want to be given a "break" or want to be treated and graded "easier" than the rest of the students. This is obviously not the case. We just want comprehension on some of the issues we face like severe fatigue, for example, which at time can interfere with [class attendance].**” Leveling out the playing field by providing accommodations is not unfair. It is providing equity.

Another student expressed that faculty accommodate when it's a high risk situation. For example, a student wrote, “**it seems like professors are only willing to make accommodations for mentally ill students when a student is actively suicidal, and nothing less than that.**” This approach to accommodation is dangerous. Many times, a high risk situation is preventable and accommodations should serve a method of prevention. By accommodating a student with a disability, chronic illness, or neurodivergence, you are recognizing their humanity and being a support system to their academic journey.

Policy Recommendations

Mandatory Faculty Training on Disability Awareness & Accommodations

- This recommendation was the most repeated through student testimonials. The UC should instruct campuses to create training for faculty on how to provide accommodations. Multiple students referenced faculty discounting a student's need for accommodations. These trainings should also be grounded in an equity framework to debunk the notion that accommodations is unfair to other students. Trainings should be given in-person or online at minimum.
- Graduate students also expressed difficulty working with faculty and their advisors. It would be important to also include graduate instructors in the training since they tend to interface with students more.
- There are some campuses that provide a similar type of training. At UC Santa Cruz, for example, the Disability Resource Centers participates in all new faculty orientations. Institutionalizing this practice systemwide can be a solution.

Diversify Faculty

- Hire faculty who represent students from disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent communities.
- UCOP should also highlight its current faculty who are uplifting this work and break the stigma behind disabilities.

House Disability Service Centers Under Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- Across the UC campuses, disability service centers are housed under different divisions including academic affairs, wellness, and student affairs.
- Consistency is important in achieving systemwide support and success for students. By integrating disability centers under this division, campuses shift towards prioritizing the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Mixed Level of Staff Support

Over half of the students' responses mentioned staff support and their respective campus disability center. About a third of the total participants described staff support being helpful. One student wrote, **"The campus has been largely supportive. It was a bit hard finding a good specialist to treat my condition but I think that is because the campus health center does not know which providers are good and which are not."**

Another student mentioned feeling supported but expressed concerns for their peers and noted, **"[My campus] has been very accommodating...but I have wheelchair bound friends who have issues getting around campus so I believe that can and must be improved upon."** Inaccessible pathways and facilities on campus were brought up by three other student testimonials. This is critical to address especially as the UC redevelops campuses with new capital projects.

From the individual phone conversations with disability center directors, there were also mixed thoughts about supporting one of the campaign goals: 24 hour transportation services for students with disabilities. Concerns brought up included cost, necessity, and who would run the services. In addition, disability center staff lacked awareness on which buildings on their campus were not ADA compliant. ADA compliance refers to Americans with Disability Act (ADA) which prohibits discrimination based on disability from employers and public spaces. Administration must better communicate and provide these updates to disability center staff and students.

A subtheme within staff support is the lack of awareness of where student disability centers are. One student described their hesitancy in visiting their disability center, **"I didn't even know there was a [disability center] until my second year on campus and my first experience made me afraid to go back in order to seek assistance."** Another student disclosed a lack of trust with staff, **"I am hesitant to [seek] any on-campus support because I'm not sure what accommodations or resources would help."**

Policy Recommendations

Shift from Trauma Informed to Healing Centered Engagement Framework

- Based on these findings, administration must repair severed relationships that may have provoked a retraumatizing experience. Staff, especially health providers such as counselors and disability center administration, should focus less on being trauma informed and focus more on being healing centered.⁴
- Healing centered engagement requires moving away from viewing students as damaged and more towards viewing them as whole. Healing centered engagement holistically integrates civic action, culture, spirituality, and collective healing.

Create a Systemwide Symposium for Supporting Disabled Communities & Disability Resources

- After individual phone conversations with disability center staff, there is a clear disconnect between what disability centers need and the resources the UC administration is providing them with.
- The Symposium should occur yearly and convene students, staff, and faculty to discuss sound practices that can then be prioritized systemwide. This can assist issues like getting active engagement with the campus community to bring forth awareness that resources exist and how to seek them.

Engage with Disability Centers and Student Communities Regarding Renovations

- Multiple students and staff reported that campus renovations make physical accessibility more difficult.
- New capital projects should consult with disability centers and student communities to best design accessible and inclusive models especially as campus enrollment grows.

Facing Microinsults on Campus

About five students reported facing a microinsult while on campus. A microinsult refers to a subtle snub, sometimes unknown to the perpetrator, that convey hidden negative messages to the recipient.⁵ Microinsults tend to be spoken in terms of power dynamics of racism. In this case, microinsults refer to the power dynamics of ableism. Ableism is the dominant set of beliefs and practices that assign an inferior worth to people with disabilities, a chronic illness, and neurodivergent communities.⁶ For example, a student described their experience of a microinsult within the classroom, **"I noticed students are not very clear about keeping disabled seats in class open. They are usually the first seats taken because students want the extra space or want to be in the front of the class. Asking for someone to move often leads to a snobbish remark. I feel like the general student population just has no understanding how difficult they make life for their peers who already have to live a difficult lifestyle."** Another student confided about campus climate and specified, **"I do not feel welcomed on campus other than by other people with disabilities."**

An environment can also either provide support or perpetuate microinsults. For example, a campus that says it's accessible but has no operating elevators or ramps sends negative messages to students who rely on them to navigate campus. One student shared their frustration with campus barriers and recommends, **"Don't put street light poles right in front of wheelchair ramps! Ask disabled people if something is accessible!"** This is example also reflects the social model of disability.

The social model of disability asserts that disabilities are caused by the way society designs and organizes mainstream activities that add barriers.⁷ For example, a disability staff member said if society eliminated stairs, then physical accessibility would be less of a problem. This is different than the medical model of disability which proclaims that people with impairments must be treated and thus, "fixed."⁸ The medical model tends to operate from deficit based thinking, restricts autonomy, and ignores socially created barriers.

Policy Recommendations

Create More Programming on Ableism & Visibilizing Invisible Disabilities

- Campuses should work to address ableism within their campus community. They should acknowledge the ways in which campus climate has been hostile towards students with disabilities, chronically ill, and neurodivergent students. A disability is also an identity that students hold.
- Several students expressed feelings of isolation and invalidation because their disabilities are hidden. The UC can dedicate a week during the academic year to spread awareness about visibilizing invisible disabilities.

Invest in Building Disability Cultural Centers

- Two students noted that they only feel supported by other students with disabilities and described not having a sense of community. The UC should allocate funding to creating safe and inclusive community spaces for students who identify with a disability, chronic illness, and/or being neurodivergent.
- These centers should include information about the history of disability rights activism.

Mandate Campuses to Produce Accessibility Routes Maps

- Inaccessible pathways and non-functional elevators were common experiences described in student testimonies. The UC should mandate campuses to create accessible route maps. These maps should be updated every 2 years.
- The UC should also work with students and disability centers in creating an interactive and accessible phone app to help students navigate campuses.

⁵ <https://www.dds.ca.gov/HealthDevelopment/SARC/RacialMicroaggressions.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.stopableism.org/p/what-is-ableism.html>

⁷ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4596173/>

⁸ <https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/our-brand/social-model-of-disability>

Conclusion

Challenges	Recommended Solutions
Faculty Fail to Accommodate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Require Mandatory Faculty Training on Disability Awareness & Accommodations ◆ Diversify Faculty to Represent Disabled Communities ◆ House Disability Centers Under the Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
Mixed Level of Staff Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Shift from Trauma Informed to Healing Centered Framework ◆ Create a Systemwide Symposium for Supporting Disabled Communities & Disability Resources ◆ Engage with Disability Centers & Student Communities Regarding Renovations
Microinsults On Campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Create More Programming on Ableism & Visibilizing Invisible Disabilities ◆ Invest in Building Disability Cultural Centers ◆ Mandate Campuses to Produce Accessibility Route Maps

While there are many challenges that students described, there were also quotes of empowerment. One theme was on reclaiming one's disability. One student acknowledged that because of their college journey they **"finally [are] comfortable identifying with [their] disability."** Another student closed out their testimony by articulating, **"Being neurodivergent enables me to move past mental health stigma and embrace every aspect of my being. I am strong. I am brave. I am a fighter. But I am not fighting with myself anymore. I am proud of who I am."**

As the #WeAre3D campaign sunsets as the highest UCSA priority campaign, UCSA will continue to advocate for accommodations and resources, uplift the needs of students with disabilities, chronic illness, and neurodivergent students by coalition building through UCSA's new effort ACQUIRE (A Campaign for Quality in Resources & Education). To read more UCSA research and publications, please visit <https://ucsa.org/category/research/>