Curriculum Design for a Disability Studies Minor: An Interdisciplinary Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a model for a Disabilities Studies minor that serves students with a health and human services interest as well as students who are not typically associated with the field of disability. If we are to create communities that are inclusive of all members, we must educate not only the students within our discipline but persons outside the traditional fields of human service and health care to ensure that the systems our society creates are barrier free. This minor is interdisciplinary in its approach, involves three core courses and two electives, and relies heavily on team building, coorperative learning, case method instruction and experiential learning as its instructional strategies. Graduates with a minor in Disability Studies will enter their post graduate careers with greater confidence in dealing with an increasingly diverse world, and a proactive attitude to solving problems and overcoming barriers.

Keywords: Disabilities, creating community, team building, cooperative learning, case method instruction

Biographical Information

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Introduction

Current trends in the field of disability recognize the vital role that community life plays in the inclusion of persons with disabilities in society. Significant shifts in national policy and practice have occurred in recent years that support the full membership in our

communities of persons with disabilities. The older "social service" approach to disability has been replaced by a wider perspective often termed the "civil rights" (Hahn, 1991) or the "ecological" (Stubbins & Albee, 1984) perspective. This newer approach emphasizes the concepts of inclusion, self-determination, empowerment, and full citizenship for individuals with disabilities. This perspective challenges many earlier assumptions and creates a need for new approaches to professional practice and education regarding disability issues. It requires an infusion from and involvement with fields of study that have not traditionally been associated with disability.

Professionals not usually associated with the field of disability need to be included and made aware of the perspectives and issues generated by individuals with disabilities. Students in fields of study not directly related to human services often have no exposure to and no mechanism for gaining a broader understanding of issues that face children and adults with disabilities. Yet these individuals will soon manage key resources and systems associated with areas of community life targeted by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. They will direct our public transportation systems, design and deliver our telecommunication systems, serve in state and local government, and thus have a great deal of influence over the number and magnitude of barriers people with disabilities face, and how these barriers are overcome.

In addition to educating persons outside the traditional fields of human service and health care, this new approach to disability must be infused into the more traditional clinical preparations as well. Such personnel must have a solid understanding of interdisciplinary practice and team building (Sable, Powell, & Aldrich, 1994; Kunstler, 1995) and be cognizant of the role of social reformer within their own communities.

Leisure studies and recreation faculty, and in particular therapeutic recreation faculty, are in a unique position to design curricula that prepare students from other disciplines to gain an understanding of the world from the perspective of an individual with a disability, to create environments which are inclusive, and to ensure that our society guarantees human rights to all its members. This expertise and understanding is one of the contributions that our field has to offer the larger academic community. As reorganization and academic reconfigurations develop, Leisure Studies and Recreation Departments are recognizing the importance of clearly aligning ourselves with the missions of our schools and universities. We must address the issue of centrality to the university and be contributors to the university's mission. Through offering a disability curriculum that promotes respect for diversity and divergent views, and protection of human rights, faculty within our professional field can contribute to educating undergraduates across disciplines in the understanding of issues that face children and adults with disabilities and their families. If the mission of the University is to educate our students to be better citizens, then a curriculum designed to promote understanding and respect for differences and to create a society that is inclusive of all its members is central to the charter of our educational institutions. Our commitment and knowledge regarding inclusive services place us in a position to provide leadership to other professions in incorporating diverse needs and interests (Ward, 1994).

The purpose of this paper is to present a model for a disability studies curricula through an undergraduate minor. This model emerged from the work of an interdisciplinary group of faculty at the University of New Hampshire representing two schools, (School of Education and School of Health and Human Services), six departments (Communication Disorders, Education, Family Studies, Kinesiology, Occupational Therapy, and Recreation Management & Policy), and the Institute on Disability/UAP.

Curriculum Design

The 20 credit program of study is designed for students in any major at the university. It is not intended to replace discipline specific expertise or Masters level curricula, nor to replace diversity content as it pertains to persons with disabilities within existing leisure studies or other curricula. Rather, the program is primarily designed to reach those in fields of study not directly related to human or health services who often have no exposure to and no mechanism for gaining a broader understanding of issues that face children and adults with disabilities and their families. These individuals often make decisions that impact on the quality of life of individuals with disabilities and their ability to fully participate in community life.

The minor is designed for students who do not intend to work with individuals with disabilities as a career focus. Assumptions about disability will be challenged. Students who will soon be in positions of managing key resources and systems associated with areas of community life targeted by the Americans with Disabilities Act, such as public transportation, state and local government, employment, public accommodations and telecommunications will benefit by gaining a broader understanding of how to accommodate and value a diverse membership in their communities. The minor will benefit students who have not elected a health and human service career focus to understand fundamental issues in the social sciences: notions of social distance and group norms, deviance and acceptance, prejudice and equality.

Students pursuing a Disabilities Studies Minor are encouraged to look at social issues from a variety of perspectives: personal, family, service provider, community and society as a whole. Exposure to the social issues of discrimination, social equality, and reasonable accommodation to disability is critical for any educated member of a diverse society. Graduates of the minor will secure jobs in important areas of neighborhood revitalization, family support, education, employment, housing, public policy, private business, engineering and poverty programs. Students educated through this program will be skilled in collaborating with persons with disabilities, family members, service professionals, employers and other community members. These individuals will enter diverse fields better prepared to facilitate the participation of individuals with disabilities and to understand how disability issues impact their profession and role.

Secondarily, the program benefits students whose professional preparation is geared toward a clinical focus and are not exposed to other disciplines or a broader community/ family perspective on disability. Through the use of an interdisciplinary approach and a community living paradigm, these students gain a deeper understanding of disabilities.

The undergraduate Minor in Disability Studies is composed of three core courses and two electives. The three core courses are entitled: 1) Perspectives on Disability: Family and the Community, 2) Assistive Technology: Ecological Approaches, and 3) Community Problem-Solving. To complete the minor, students must take all three core courses in sequence and elect two courses from an approved list of electives developed from existing course offerings and representing 16 departments across the university. Within the three core courses, a two hour per week seminar group discussion format and a two hour per week field-experience component is used to integrate theory with practical experience.

The three core courses were designed to give students an awareness, knowledge, and skill in the critical areas of understanding disability from the perspective of individuals with disabilities and their families, approaching disability issues from an ecological perspective, including using assistive technology as a key accommodation strategy, and finally using this knowledge within a collaborative problem solving structure to be agents of change within the community. Strategies used to generate these outcomes include exposure to instruction by individuals with disabilities; instruction in values and current best practices in the disability field related to fostering self-determination, empowerment, and inclusion; experiences in learning the personal histories and dreams of individuals with disabilities and assisting individuals to work towards personal goals on the basis of equality, respect, and shared responsibility; and collaborative problem-solving experiences relating to community-wide issues faced by individuals with disabilities.

Core Course Content

Perspectives on Disability: Family and the community. The presence and participation of persons with disabilities in communities will only be tentative and unstable until persons for whom the process of education, transition and employment is most important are making their own decisions. Therefore, the issues and problems must be viewed from the perspective of the individuals who experience them first-hand (McGuire, 1994). The first course in the sequence orients the student to this perspective. The history of treatment and perceptions of disability are presented, as well as current attitudes and public policies affecting the lives of individuals with disabilities. Guest speakers highlight current issues from a personal perspective. Issues covered in this exploratory class include labeling and stigma, family support, inclusive education, housing issues and home ownership, friendships and social relations, equal employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, recreation, self-determination and consumer empowerment, and state and federal policies affecting individuals with disabilities. It is critical that the instructor of this course be familiar with these issues from a personal perspective as well as someone who is knowledgeable regarding disability issues from a larger sociological, political, economical and legal viewpoint. Finally, the instructor must also have the pedagogical skills to teach at an undergraduate level.

Each student, as one of the course requirements, learns in depth about the plans, dreams, personal history, and support needs of one individual with a disability through

conducting informal interviews and engaging in shared experiences. Class sessions are highly participatory, demanding an integration of readings, guest speakers, films, and the field experience. Through journal writing, class discussions of divergent viewpoints and first hand experiences with individuals with disabilities, students' abilities to value individual differences and see beyond social stereotypes will challenge preconceived notions and create an environment for new paradigms to emerge. Suggested texts for the course include *No Pity* (Shapiro, 1993), *Moving Violations: War Zones, Wheelchairs and Declarations of Independence* (Hockenberry, 1995) and *Perspectives on Disabilities* (Nagler, 1993).

Assistive Technology. Stubbins and Albee (1984) noted that advances in the field of disability require a shift from a "clinical" to an "ecological" approach. The ecological approach defines disability in terms of the interaction between an individual and his/her environment and social context (Hahn, 1991). This is in contrast to the traditional view of disability as residing solely within an individual. This new ecological approach underlies many new and promising strategies within the disability field: the role of advocate, mentor relationships (Powers, Sowers & Stevens, 1995), peer support and self-advocacy, and disability professionals adopting a consulting approach rather than acting as direct service provider (Hagner, Murphy & Rogan, 1992).

Many of the most dynamic and promising advances in the field of disability are occurring in he area of assistive technology (Rose & Meyer, 1994). Adaptation and accommodation represent key aspects of an ecological approach, because they intervene at the level of the setting or context rather than changing or "fixing" the individual. Moreover, advances in technology are used and valued by both individuals with and without disabilities (Reinking, 1994). Through the second course in the minor, students gain first hand experience working with an individual with a disability to achieve personal goals through the use of augmentative communications, mobility or other assistive technology.

The Assistive Technology course explores the ecology of disability and the many new and promising strategies within the disability field. This course explores strategies to empower people with disabilities and family members to successfully advocate for increased choice and control in selection and procurement of assistive technology. Topics covered include: defining technology, ecological versus clinical views of disability, augmentative and alternative communication, adaptive setting design and community planning, alternative mobility and recreation equipment, characteristics of inclusive settings, peer support and other natural supports, self-advocacy and empowerment, mentor relationships, and the role of disability professionals as consultants.

For the fieldwork component of this course, students work in small groups to solve problems related to including an individual in a desired community setting through the use of assistive technology and other ecological strategies. Student groups are structured to encourage discussion and interaction across disciplines of study. Students are introduced to state and local resources which specialize in assistive technology such as the NH

Alliance for Assistive Technology, the Seacoast Community Assistive Technology Resource Center, the NH Access Expo, and the Granite State Empower and Light electronic bulletin board. Past projects have included the construction of a transfer platform for sled hockey players who need to transfer from wheelchair to ice sled while on the ice; an accessibility study of a local ski area lodge and the initial modifications; and the identification of library software and peripherals that allow students with physical disabilities to make full use of computerized library resources.

Community Problem Solving. This course is designed as the capstone experience for the minor. It calls on the students to pull from their individual areas of expertise and to build on the knowledge and understanding they have gained from the previous two core courses. This course asks students to address complex problems in an effort to resolve real-life situations that involve a matrix of issues and systems. It requires that students develop communication skills to articulate their ideas and proposed solutions to these problems to other group members while simultaneously attending to and including others' ideas and perceptions in the decision-making process.

Research supports the positive effect of cooperative learning to develop creative problem solving, decision-making, and the social skills of cooperation (Ventimiglia, 1994). Using cooperative learning also models and supports the concepts of empowerment conveyed in earlier coursework (Freysinger & Bedini, 1994). Students who learn within a cooperative learning environment grow to feel more positively about each other and will be willing and able to interact constructively when performing a collective task (Williams, 1995). As collaboration skills are particularly important to the process of removing barriers to inclusion and participation based on disability, the use of this methodology is particularly warranted. Thoughtful solutions to the problems associated with segregation, social isolation, transportation, and societal attitudes cannot be rote, but must be tailored to individuals, families and communities. Students in this course have the opportunity to solve real problems that face people with disabilities and their families by teaming across disciplines with consumers and families. The role of the instructor in this course is that of facilitator and resource liaison rather than lecturer or imparter of knowledge. This course empowers the students to look within themselves and to each other for the answers.

Electives

In addition to the three core courses, students who wish to complete the minor in Disability Studies select two additional courses to complete a total of 20 credits in the minor concentration. These courses must come from outside the student's major department. Table 1 lists examples of elective courses approved by the interdisciplinary faculty team.

TABLE 1

Approved Electives for Disabilities Studies Minor

Department	Courses
Communication	Introduction to Interpersonal Communication
Communication Disorders	American Sign Language
Education	Introduction to Exceptionality
English	Madness in Literature
Management	Introduction to Organizational Behavior
Nursing	Caring for People with Alterations in Mental Health
Occupational Therapy	Behavior and Development of Children
Philosophy	Technology: Philosophical and Ethical Issues
Political Science	Justice and the Political Community
Recreation Management and Policy	Leisure Services for Individuals with Disabilities
Resource Economics	Applied Community Development
Social Work	Introduction to Social Welfare Policy
Sociology	Social Change and Societal Development; Medical Sociology: Organization and Processes of Modern Medicine

Instructional Strategies

The minor in Disability Studies is designed to address a diverse student population. As stated earlier, students majoring in business administration, engineering and other fields of study not related to human services often have had little or no exposure to disability perspectives and issues. On the other hand, students from nursing, occupational therapy, therapeutic recreation and other allied health professions may be familiar with clinical issues concerning individuals with disabilities, yet have minimal exposure to an approach which is inclusive of families, fosters transdisciplinary practices, and focuses on their role as social reformer within their communities. This diversity of experiences and academic preparation is rich with potential for divergent views and perspectives. Another factor which adds to the diversity of perspectives in the disability studies courses is the active involvement of individuals with disabilities and their families. A teaching and learning process which embraces the concepts of group cohesion, inclusion, systematic collaboration, and group problem-solving are an essential component of the disability studies curricula. Students in the minor are encouraged to adopt a community living paradigm which values a diverse membership and encourages individual and collective contributions of each member of the group.

Instructional strategies that support a collaborative process of teaching and learning and are predicated on active learning, cooperation, and respect for individual learning styles are integral to the design of the three disability studies core courses. Student-centered classroom activities that incorporate cooperative learning, group problem solving, and use of real life situations with parents, individuals with disabilities, and other classmates is a central focus of instruction. Three specific instructional strategies that are highly compatible with the course content and objectives in the disabilities studies curricula include team building, cooperative learning, and case method instruction.

Team building

Future citizens must know how to analyze and deal with uncertain problems and situations, and how to communicate and share their thinking and proposed solutions with others. Collaborative team skills are particularly important to the process of removing community barriers to inclusion and participation based on disability. Community problem solving requires a collaborative team with an understanding and commitment to the goals of the community. Instructional strategies that incorporate an understanding for and skills in teamwork create the building blocks for effective community collaboration. Team building exercises are incorporated into classroom instruction early in the disability minor so that students will gain an understanding of the key elements of teamwork as well as gain experience in the application of team principles. Many of the team building strategies and activities found in the literature (Harrington-Mackin, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Lord, 1992; Nilsen, 1989; Rees, 1993; Rohnke, 1991; Rose, 1995) can effectively facilitate the practice of collaborative community problem-solving and teaming across disciplines with consumers and families. Objectives of team building exercises might include: introducing students to the value of cooperative community/team problem-solving by illustrating that within one class there exist a diversity of opinions and perspectives with the possibility of multiple solutions to a problem.

The following exercise is one example of how students can better understand the importance of team communication skills which are essential in team building. Students are made aware of the importance of individuals within a team "leveling" with their team members and expressing what may be opposing opinions or positions on difficult issues concerning individuals with disabilities. To begin the exercise, the professor marks off a space on the floor at the front of the classroom that serves as a rating scale allowing a continuum of responses; one end representing a low or "no" response and the other end representing a high or "yes" response. The professor tells the team members that they will be asked to place themselves along the scale according to their position on a specific issue, (e.g. beliefs concerning "reasonable" accommodation). A sample of potential issues might include: "Should all children have equal access to education?"; "Do you believe communities have a responsibility to provide accessible public transportation for community members with disabilities?"; or "Do you feel that communities should be required to develop a comprehensive plan for total universal design?". This exercise illustrates that people have differing beliefs and perspectives about issues concerning

individuals with disabilities. Each of these beliefs is very important and community problem-solving teams must learn to communicate their respective opinions if they are to deal effectively with communication problems that often arise because of differing beliefs. The exercise can be especially effective when parents of individuals with disabilities, students, and consumers constitute a team.

Cooperative learning structures

According to Slavin (1989-1990) cooperative learning is, "one of the most thoroughly researched of all instructional methods" (p. 52). The research base for cooperative learning as an exemplary pedagogy has been solidly grounded at the K-12 level and more recently (Cooper, Prescott, Cook, Smith, Mueck,& Cuseo, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991) at the college and university level. Johnson et al.(1991), Manning & Lucking (1993) and Slavin (1992) reported that student achievement, student empowerment and cultural diversity have been impacted positively when cooperative learning strategies were used. Williams (1995) and Norman and McGuire (1992) have documented the benefits of cooperative learning in undergraduate courses in leisure studies. Cottell and Millis (1994) stated that:

> Cooperative learning can have a dramatic impact on classroom climate because students involved in structured small group work usually develop a liking for the subject matter as well as a liking and respect for their fellow group members and classmates (p. 286).

Millis (1994) emphasized that cooperative learning is a structured form of small group learning based on the assumptions of positive interdependence and individual accountability. Thus, students work together and yet are accountable for demonstrating specific skills and knowledge on exams or other forms of individually prepared assignments. The structures used in cooperative learning are content-free tools that allow the instructor to create student interaction within the classroom while conveying content-specific information based on course objectives. Cooperative classroom environments are built on the foundation of structured learning teams. Structured activities designed to facilitate course learning promote interaction within and among teams throughout the semester. Heterogeneous teams of three (Johnson, et al., 1991) or four (Cottell & Millis, 1994) are recommended.

Unlike many collaborative groups, structured learning groups require intense support, yet non-intrusive involvement by the instructor. Initially, groups require considerable direction with activities and careful monitoring of group dynamics (Cottell & Millis, 1994). To insure that all team members are contributing and benefiting from the learning environment, roles of team members are carefully defined by the instructor and the interactions within and among teams are delineated. Assigning roles emphasizes the value of all team members and can help to raise self-esteem and build group cohesion. Cottell and Millis (1994) suggested rotating student roles to encourage the development of social teamwork skills.

This emphasis on rotating roles prepares all students for success not only in the cooperative learning classroom but also in the real world of adult life where teamwork is essential (Cottell and Millis, 1994, p. 291).

Cooperative learning strategies are especially well suited for teaching students to develop an ecological perspective of service delivery for individuals with disabilities and their families. Students are challenged to become inquisitive about what can be. Learning becomes a change strategy, and the use of collaborative methods encourages reflective thinking (MacGregor, 1990). They are asked to accommodate and adapt their ideas and solutions based upon multiple perspectives and diverse needs. For example, *Send/Pass-a-Problem*, a cooperative structure recommended by Millis (1994, p. 301) provides students with an opportunity to focus on their own issues while experiencing the problem solving process in the context of community.

The basic steps in *Send/Pass-a-Problem* are (1) Each student team (approximately 3-4 students) is given a description of a current problem or concern identified by a parent or individual with a disability; (2) Each team discusses its problem and generates as many solutions as possible within the given time frame, records these solutions on paper and places them in an envelope with the problem clearly stated on the outside of the envelope; (3) The envelopes are passed clockwise to another team; (4) Without opening the envelope, this team sees only the problem stated on the outside of the envelope and generates possible solutions, records them on paper and places these solutions in the same envelope; (5) The envelope is passed a third time to another team and this team opens the envelope and reviews the solutions generated by the other two teams; (6) The third team may add their own ideas to the solutions, however, their main task is to select what they believe to be the two or three solutions that most clearly address the problem; and (7) The third team reports the problem addressed and the solutions chosen. This cooperative class exercise can serve as a tool for meaningful class discussion. Involvement of individuals with disabilities and their families can provide a broader perspective of the issues and a reality check to effective synthesis of information. Viability of the solutions are less of a concern at this point with the focus of instruction being on the effective synthesis of information and the multiplicity of the solutions generated.

Case method instruction

The design of the capstone course, *Community Problem Solving*, promotes student participation in stimulating, experiential, real-world scenarios through a cooperative, case method of instruction. Such an approach encourages active problem-solving, open communication, cooperation and critical thinking. It is concerned with teaching students to think for themselves, attend to and incorporate the ideas of others, and to recognize that often there are several alternative solutions to a problem (Bruhn, 1992; Shinn, Haynes, & Johnson, 1993). The cooperative case method of instruction integrates the key elements of case method instruction with cooperative learning strategies.

Case method instruction may vary considerably in the procedures used, however, there are common key elements that differentiate it from other forms of class discussion. According to McWilliam (1991) these key elements are: (a) emphasis on teaching problem-solving and decision-making skills, (b) students actively participating in the learning process, and (c) the use of case studies that reflect real life problems or situations. McWilliam's emphasis on teaching problem-solving and decision-making skills is highly compatible with the course objectives of the disability studies *Community Problem-Solving* course. Once students master certain theories, facts, and skills in other courses they must be capable of applying this knowledge to real life situations encountered by individuals with disabilities and their families. As McWilliam's describes, problem-solving requires sorting through the facts, identifying the problems, analyzing the factors that contribute to the problems, and then making a decision as to the course of action to follow. McWilliam also recommends that students not be provided with implicit or explicit solutions to case study problems. In fact, good case studies allow for several alternative solutions.

The most commonly used case discussion format is the whole-group method developed by the Harvard Business School. This method usually engages the entire class in an active and stimulating teacher-directed discussion (Christensen & Hansen, 1987). This method has the advantage of eliciting multiple viewpoints drawing from a wide range of experiences. Integrating case method instruction with cooperative approaches creates structured teams of three to four students per team, offering an environment that is more conducive to interaction from less vocal students. It can be implemented with small, structured learning teams in large classes of over thirty students, and provides an opportunity to receive peer feedback within a relatively safe environment (Millis, 1994). Multiple teams also provide an opportunity to view the same example or case from more than one perspective and teams tend to generate multiple solutions showing students that there is more than one way to explain a situation or "solve a case."

Cases used in the *Community Problem Solving* class are developed based upon real life problems that have been encountered by individuals with disabilities and their families. These real life problems can be obtained from a number of sources. For example, various family support networks, real case stories experienced by the faculty and staff at the Institute on Disability, and families who agree to serve as class facilitators can provide a wealth of information when developing case studies.

Millis (1994) suggested the facilitator begin a cooperative case discussion with one or two general questions about the case that can be explored within a whole class format. Once students have had an opportunity to share these general perspectives, Millis recommended that the facilitator provide each cooperative team (4-5 students) with focus questions. These questions relate specifically to the case being studied and are designed to help students develop their analytic and critical thinking powers so they are better able to understand situations that impact on individuals with disabilities, identify and frame these issues, evaluate possible solutions and begin to evolve general principles

that apply to other situations. To reinforce the value of divergent opinions in critical thinking, the facilitator may give the same focus question(s) to each group with potential for alternate viewpoints and solutions from each group.

Conclusion

Students prepared through the Disabilities Studies Minor will be skilled in collaborating with persons with disabilities, family members, educators, employers, health service providers and other community members. They will experience working within an inclusive community living paradigm and gain an understanding of the concepts of inclusion, self-determination, and consumer empowerment.

The competencies students will gain are varied and address awareness, knowledge and application. Students will understand the role of assistive technology and the value of increased choice and control on the part of the consumer in the selection and procurement of assistive technology. Students will be able to articulate the value of employing adaptation and accommodation strategies which embrace an ecological perspective to services for individuals with disabilities. Consistent with this perspective, students will gain an appreciation for the effectiveness of such strategies as: the role of advocate, peer support and self-advocacy, consultation vs. direct service, and establishing mentor relationships. Respect for the importance of family involvement and support will be central to the knowledge and experience students gain in the minor.

Students will participate in a model of cooperative learning with classmates, as well as with individuals with disabilities and their family members to develop open communication skills which encourage articulation of individual and group ideas and require developing skills in consensus building. They will gain an understanding of the magnitude of barriers people with disabilities face and how these barriers can be overcome through community problem-solving. By applying problem-solving and decision-making skills to real-life problems of individuals with disabilities and their families within a context of community, students will obtain personal experience in effecting positive change.

Graduates with a minor in Disabilities Studies will enter their postgraduate careers in their chosen field with a broad range of competencies, greater confidence in dealing with an increasingly diverse world, and a proactive attitude to solving problems and overcoming barriers. These individuals will enter diverse fields better prepared to facilitate the participation of individuals with disabilities and to understand how disability issues impact their profession.

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