

PRACTICE BRIEF

Infusing JUST Design in Campus Recreation

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Abstract

This practice brief highlights the collaborative work among a disability resource professional, a university architect, and students with disabilities to create a campus recreation center with universal design features. This partnership serves to illustrate that building to minimum compliance standards does not necessarily remove barriers to equitable participation for persons with disabilities. It became evident that valuing the disability experience led to high quality design for all. From this project, best practices in inclusive, usable, and equitable design can be observed and applied to future projects.

Keywords: Universal design, inclusion, collaboration, recreation

Universal design (UD) has been an approach that is receiving greater attention as institutions seek to achieve inclusive excellence in built, learning, policy, and informational environments. The Institute for Human-Centered Design (2010, as cited by Lanterman, 2010) notes that in its broadest context, UD is “an orientation to any design process that starts with a responsibility to the experience of the user.” The Center for Universal Design (2011) defines UD as:

The design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design... The intent of universal design is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and the built environment more usable by as many people as possible at little or no cost.

Longmore (1995) argues that the social construction of disability and poor design creates barriers and hinders participation of those with disabilities. From this perspective, the design of environments, along with society’s perception of disability as a deficit, serve to exclude disabled individuals. Guzman and

Balcazar (2010) explored the historical developments and principles that guide the disability resource profession. They noted that, while most disability resource professionals support the social model of disability and the principles of UD, the policies and practices of the majority of these professionals do not reflect this philosophy. Typically, practices and policies lead to a delayed, segregated, and individualized service, requiring a great deal of time, effort, and patience on the part of the disabled student. Non-disabled peers can use campus facilities and programs without undertaking these additional steps (Smith, Sartin-Kirby, & O’Connor, 2004).

An increasing number of professionals believe that designing policies, learning environments, and buildings with inclusion and diversity in mind would ultimately be more efficient, less costly, and more inclusive for all users and learners (Smith, et al., 2004).

Problem

Postsecondary education institutions provide many programs and services, all of which must be accessible and usable to everyone, including those with disabilities. Recreational buildings may meet

accessible standards, according to building codes, but programs and services must also be designed to meet the needs of a diverse group in order to be usable by all. Considerations must be made for the usability of programs, policies, and equipment, as well as the building's design. Good inclusive design considers differences in potential users and is essential in providing a successful recreational experience (North Carolina Office on Disability and Health, 2008).

Approximately 19% of the population has a disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and, as our population continues to age, the likelihood of disability will also continue to increase sharply (Administration on Aging, 2003). "Disability is not an indicator of poor health, requiring specialized programs for physical activity. Instead, people with disabilities look toward community facilities to meet their health and exercise needs" (North Carolina Office on Disability and Health, 2008, p. 4). Consequently, there needs to be more emphasis on good, inclusive design that honors the disability experience.

Student and Location Information

Missouri State University (MSU) is the second largest 4-year, public university in the state of Missouri, with a total student enrollment of nearly 20,000. There are a variety of different recreation options for students across the campus, and students at MSU pay \$80.00 per semester to use these facilities. However, it is difficult for disabled students to fully participate in activities, because these facilities are distributed widely across a large campus, and often consist of outdated and unusable or inaccessible equipment. When the student body voted to add an additional student fee to cover the costs of building a new recreation center, disabled students raised concerns about being assessed a fee for recreation services that might not be usable. The goal was to fund a new student recreation center and develop programming that all students could equitably use.

Strategy

The Campus Recreation Office and the Office of the University Architect informed the campus community of the student-led initiative and encouraged student involvement throughout the design process. The role students played was a significant one: university administration requested that a diverse group of students serve on all of the design committees. Students served on all committees from conceptualization of the

project through the design of the building, including programming and policy development. Throughout this process, disabled students were valued participants as was the director of the DRC. Within the design process, priority was placed on the usability of building features and programs that disabled users valued. Compliance played a secondary role, although it was certainly considered.

The Director of the Disability Resource Center (DRC) specifically identified and recommended two disabled students to serve on the overall, primary design committee. Their selection was based upon their academic interests and disability experiences. These students played a key role in the conceptualization of the project. One student was interested in a career in Student Affairs, the other in architecture and/or engineering. Both students had the opportunity to work collaboratively with the architects, project managers, and campus administrators, which included two Vice-Presidents. These two students shared their expertise during meetings and attended a field trip with the design team to a newly designed recreational facility at another university. During the field trip with the design team, the students demonstrated and discussed their expertise. They also discussed which design features were valuable and usable for those with similar disabilities.

The disabled students on this design committee were perceived by others as the experts on the disability experience. They educated the committee on what features should be included in the design of the building, programs, and equipment procurement, not the DRC Director (though the Director did review with the administration the inaccessibility of the current recreation facilities and programs). The students spent time with the Director, discussing what they wanted to see in the building, programs, and equipment selection, but while the Director became the resource or consultant for the students, they took the lead. The Director educated the students on the roles each administrator played, discussed strategy, and provided educational materials regarding UD. Following some of the design committee meetings, the Director met with the students to recap what had occurred and considered what steps might be taken to strategize for the next meeting.

In addition, the campus President's Council on Disability, which is comprised of faculty, staff, and students with disabilities, provided suggestions throughout the project. Open forums were also held

for the entire campus community to provide feedback. The National Center for Physical Activity and Disability ([NCPAD], 2004) web resources were helpful in identifying building design features, equipment procurement, and programming ideas. The Campus Recreation Office also developed an advisory council to drive best practices in programming for all student desires regarding campus recreation. Disabled students also served on this council, and the DRC Director provided resources when requested.

The design team established six objectives that would serve as the University's scorecard to gauge the level of success in designing, constructing, and operating a new recreation center. It was clear that the disabled student experience had been validated when the design team included UD as one of the six objectives. The third objective read as follows: "Be designed, using universal design concepts, to be accessible to all individuals of the University community" (Hastings & Chivetta Architects, 2006, Goals and Objectives, p. 2).

One factor the students stressed for the project from the beginning was sustainability. Developing a sustainable building was important enough to the students that the Student Government Association voted to share the cost of registering the project with the United States Green Building Council with the University. With the support of the students, the University is pursuing a LEED certification at the Silver level for this project. The desire for sustainability, which can also be understood as inclusiveness in UD terms, did not end with the construction of the building, however. The design and selection of equipment for the facility, as well as of the programming, were understood to lead to an inclusive environment. Because of this focus, there are no segregated areas or equipment, nor is there a segregated entrance.

Observed Outcomes

Many observed outcomes have surfaced from this proactive, collaborative project. Students with disabilities perceive that the University values them and their experiences through the opportunity to work with designers and administrators. Disabled students have verbalized to University staff how they felt their input was valued and included in the design of the building and programs (personal communication, August 14 & 17, 2012), and have reflected on the importance of being represented as an independent stakeholder group.

They noted that having disabled students physically present at every meeting made it impossible for others to unintentionally exclude and overlook design features that were important to them. They reported their favorite part of participating in the project was touring the other campus recreation centers with designers and campus administrators. There, students enjoyed sharing their own experiences, considering what design worked best for them, and learning new ways they could be further included in recreation. The DRC staff was perceived as instrumental in giving students the opportunity to participate in the process and effectively share their stories. More specific outcome data will be collected following the full completion of the project and will be reported using the six points identified on the scorecard developed by Hastings & Chivetta (2006, Goals and Objectives, p. 2).

Through their work on this project, MSU disabled students have been part of the paradigm shift on their campus that has put the focus on inclusion and equity rather than minimum compliance. It was recognized that student voices were powerful and were valued even more than that of the DRC Director. The most powerful messages were those observed on the field trip to another campus recreation center when the design committee was able to see firsthand what equipment, building, and program design features worked for those with disabilities. The design committee members developed a relationship with the disabled students and witnessed the barriers they experienced, and only then did they appear to fully value inclusive design elements in their work. After this, it seemed that design committee members grasped the importance of usability and inclusion, and they seemed to become motivated to incorporate suggested design features rather than to simply meet minimal compliance requirements. Value was then placed on good design, not meeting code requirements.

The disabled students who served on the design committee identified that being part of the committee enhanced their personal and professional development. The two students had the opportunity to network and collaborate on a venture with professionals related to their future careers, as well as to gain exposure to the design and student affairs professions. One student reported:

I recognize I am up to the task of being the voice for those with disabilities, which I believe is a fundamental responsibility as someone with a

disability...I know I have the power to make things better for others...The experience helped me to find my voice in other environments. It gave me the confidence to know that I have a right to advocate for myself in many different situations. As a student it is hard to take on that advocacy role (personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Non-disabled students on the committees learned about the disability experience from the disabled students and embraced the need for UD features after recognizing the positive impact of UD. These students became allies and advocated for inclusive design alongside their disabled peers. It is hoped they will continue to be advocates for inclusion and equity in their future careers.

This project has also helped increase recognition in the design world that sustainable, equitable, usable design equates to good design. The project has already earned the respect of architects across the Midwest as evidenced by two awards for design excellence. The American Institute of Architects, Central States Region, awarded this project a Merit Award for design in the Unbuilt category as the project construction was beginning. In addition, the St. Louis Chapter of the American Institute of Architects awarded it an Honor Award in the Unbuilt category. This recognition by fellow architects validates the idea that good design does not come at the expense of UD. In addition, we believe that the success of this project means that future building projects and programs will be more likely to consider and value the disability experience. This will happen through the utilization of disabled students and DRC staff in creating the design of buildings, programs, and services.

Throughout this project, the DRC was viewed as a campus consultant and was sought out for other resources and ideas related to disability as well. One example was a collaboration that came about with the campus Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning (FCTL). The DRC Director worked with the Director of the FCTL to host a faculty book club in which faculty were provided a book regarding disability history and culture to read and discuss throughout one semester. This was a faculty driven program with select faculty members assigned to lead discussions on each chapter, and rather than the DRC Director educating faculty regarding these topics, the DRC took on a consultant role, merely providing resources and guidance for

the book club. In a survey administered at the end of the semester, book club faculty expressed a better understanding of disability issues. They also reported greater comfort with teaching disability as a part of their diversity curricula and better understanding of how disability intersects with their field of study. This outcome holds the promise of developing future leaders in differing fields of study.

Another example was a collaboration between the DRC and the Division of Student Affairs. The DRC was sought out by Student Affairs to provide a division-wide professional development program on the value of the disability experience and how this intersects with student development theory and work. The DRC Director worked with a Student Affairs professional to provide this session. Here, the collaborative work that went into the recreation center was highlighted and discussed with regard to how the project enhanced development for all students at the same time that it enhanced a student service. It is hoped that this collaborative process in which DRC staff acted as consultants will become a pattern in the Division of Student Affairs.

Implications

In all of these examples, valuing the disability experience and full inclusion are the focus, not minimal compliance with the law. The disability community is seen as a valued, integral part of the University experience, and good, inclusive, usable design of our buildings, programs, and services is recognized as key. People with disability experience are perceived as a valued identity group, and full inclusion is achieved through partnerships and collaborations in which they are actively included. Inclusion is not the sole responsibility of the DRC, but the desire of everyone.

As the disability resource profession transitions through a paradigm shift, embracing a social justice approach and reframing disability as a social construct, we need to further assess and examine how this new way of thinking can be applied to our work. In this project, the DRC staff did not dictate how things should be done by quoting law and regulations and leaving out the student voice. Rather, the DRC staff worked collaboratively to be a resource to disabled students, staff, and administrators. The process allowed all participants to contemplate barriers to full participation in a meaningful way. The agent of change was not the DRC staff but the entire campus design committee,

which enabled understanding of what is necessary for real inclusion to occur. This led to work that will reduce the need for disabled students to go through a burdensome process to obtain what is typically a delayed, segregated service, or accommodation. This kind of work should be explored further as it can be applied to many other areas of campus.

While postsecondary educational institutions must provide equal access to their programs and services, the manner and processes through which an institution provides equal access are not necessarily defined. When achieved through collaboration, UD offers a seamless, transformative approach to providing access which allows the University to be in compliance while implementing approaches to design that are more usable by everyone (Thornton & Downs, 2006).

Loewen and Pollard (2010) reinforce this reflective, social justice approach to inclusion by noting:

Service professionals must explore a more enlightened view of disability and social justice in their work. If the movement towards social justice and the strengthening of community and culture are still for the most part elusive to the disabled students they serve, it is incumbent on service professionals to develop strategies which will educate and inform the campus community, including students, that full participation is a right, not a privilege (p. 13).

Loewen and Pollard (2010) also identify the need for disability resource providers to create a paradigm shift in their work to include collaboration:

Disability Service professionals must increase individual and collective efforts to educate students, the campus community, and other disenfranchised groups that disability is not an isolated issue of social welfare, but must be acknowledged as a struggle for human dignity, non-discrimination, equal opportunity, and personal empowerment through independence (p. 14).

Collaborative consultation efforts continue at MSU regarding building projects and programming ideas. As a result of this particular project, relationships have been established that will hopefully lead to further collaborative work, and more students and administrators better understand the importance of universal, inclusive

design and full, equitable participation. Through these collaborations, our campus community is increasing our cultural competence regarding disability and diversity. By changing the way the campus perceives disability and the impact of design on disabled people, the University has created a recreation center that is usable, inclusive, sustainable, and equitable. Further collaborations based in this social justice approach should lead to more inclusive, equitable environments and programming on our campus.

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