



National Disability Center
for Student Success

Transcript: Townhall | April 25, 2024

Accompanying PowerPoint Presentation

Executive Director Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Hello, everyone! Welcome to our first online town hall. We're really excited to have you here. I just want to welcome you and share our gratitude for all of you for being here for your support as we launch our new center.

With Gratitude

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: I want to also share that the people that you see and hear from today are representing a large team of people who have been working very hard to get this whole effort started. And I just want to express my gratitude for them and for their work.

Now I also want to say, thank you to our funders, the Institute of Educational Sciences at the U.S. Department of Education, for their support. This whole enterprise wouldn't be possible without them. We are grateful for them and their work, so thank you.

With that we'll get started.

Today's Agenda

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Just want to give you a sense of our agenda today. First, we will review our mission and tell you a little bit about us here at the National Disability Center.

We're also going to share with you some of our early data, some of the findings in our first few months in existence. We've got some information we'd like to share with you, and really give you a sense of the foundation for where we're going for the rest of this year and with this project.

And then you have the stars of our time together today: A student and faculty panel! We have one of our Student Fellows and one of the members of our Leadership Team. They will be sharing their insights both about the center and about the work that we're doing here.

Throughout, and especially at the end, we're going to welcome your feedback and your thoughts as we continue to shape our research agenda as we go through this project.

If you have any technical issues, please share them in the chat, and we will do our best to help you out. There is a link in that chat to accessibility tips, just in case you need them.

2:34 Who We Are and Our Mission

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: First, a bit of an overview about who we are here at the National Disability Center. Again, our funder is the Institute of Educational Sciences. We are a center for research that focuses on the postsecondary success for students with disabilities.

We have an ambitious agenda of 10 studies in 5 years. We've already touched on at least three of them, so we've hit the ground running. And we're looking at issues that affect the students, our faculty, and the institutions themselves. We're looking at two-year programs, technical training programs, and four-year colleges and universities — so really a broad range of higher education settings here in the United States.

One thing we really emphasize is the collaborative model of our work. We really engage with students, especially disabled students, about their perspectives and about their experiences and their insights about what makes higher education successful. We also partner with faculty from interdisciplinary areas. We have people from the School of Information, the College of Education, the Schools of Engineering and Liberal Arts, and so forth. So, it's really important to emphasize that our model is a collaborative mentoring model, where we are all learning from each other every day.

The last thing to emphasize is that we do have data partners, people who we work with their specific areas of expertise. This is either in research, evaluation, but also outreach, and how we engage with the community. I think you'll see some examples of that collaborative model as we continue today.

So, what motivates us? When I first saw this statistic from the CDC, that one in four people have a disability at any given time, it kind of took me aback as someone with disabilities myself. I didn't know that I had such a large peer group.

Some disabilities people are born with. Some they acquire during life. Some are temporary. Some are permanent. And this whole idea of what a disability is is something that's deeply personal. We focus on disability because it touches so many people in our higher education population. That one in four statistic gets you to more than four million college students in the US. It's a lot.

So that's what drives us: we want to make sure that all students, including our students with disabilities, have equal access to learning and career development opportunities. Our mission is laid out in our materials online and in our logic model.

How we design our work is to create that actionable foundation with practical, real, everyday life actions to support disabled student success in higher education. We do this through research. We collect data using mixed methods, some survey data, some secondary analysis, focus

groups and interviews, and just talking with people in higher education — students, faculty, and staff — about their experiences, and how we can make the better for disabled students.

That's why we're here. That's what we hope to do in the next four and a half years that we have left — building that foundation for our key stakeholders. When it comes to our stakeholders, I'll say there's a point that doesn't get mentioned directly but is that every stakeholder is very much a part of our environment.

First and foremost, a stakeholder is students themselves. This is research with, by, for, and of disabled students. They are an integral part of who we are and how we operate.

We also know that there are instructors across this country, faculty in higher education, that want the best for their students. They're in that classroom every day. They're in the lab. They're in the field. We want to understand their experiences and how we can best support them and their work with students in higher education.

We also focus on our institutional leadership, on our administrators and staff. Often this will include disability service offices, but it also includes admissions, enrollment, retention programs, and career advancement.

The fourth group is a group of researchers. This is the center for research and of research. We are both building a pipeline of experienced, knowledgeable researchers with disabilities themselves, but also a knowledge base for researchers to use as they continue to investigate the disabled student experience in higher education. There's a methodological piece to this as well, and you'll see that in some of our early studies.

The fifth group that I mentioned are those families. Every student with a disability has people, families, friends — their network of parents, siblings. They're also part of the environment that fosters student success. We make sure that we remember them as well as they seek to support their young adults and sometimes older adults through their college experience.

09:55 Hot Off the Press Data | Preliminary Findings: College Accessibility Measure (CAM) Development | Poll Question One

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: I'm going to transition to findings from one of our earlier studies, you know I mentioned, we have 10 studies in 5 years. This is study one and a half in a way, and it's the campus accessibility measure (or "CAM") and it's the development process.

One thing that we really want to make sure that we do is when we develop a new survey or a new measure that we really engage with disabled students in making sure we're measuring things that matter, that they clearly understand what the measures are about and that they value what those outcomes are.

I'm going to share with you some data from our early interactions with students, both in a quantitative and qualitative approach. Here's our first data finding, talking about disclosure.

So, disclosure is when you reveal your disability to another person, just a basic definition. And when we talk about disclosure of a disability, it's a sensitive thing. Sometimes there's some vulnerability involved. There's a lot of stigma of disability in some places. Making that disclosure is something that is a decision that disabled students take seriously, and it sometimes can weigh heavily.

But it's also how you gain access to supports, to flexibility, and sometimes accommodations. So, knowing more about what students think about the disclosure process is one of the early topic areas we're going to be addressing. We asked students in this pilot measure at what level did you disclose? What did you share about your disability?

The first thing you'll see on this slide is that, of the participants in our early research, some shared information about their disability with their friends, with their peer groups, but some kept it private.

The second thing we asked about was, did you share information about disability with your instructors, or at least one instructor. And what you see here is that students in our early research said that, yes, they did share information about their disability to their instructors, but it's not much more than half. We were kind of surprised at how low that was, but also not surprised because we know the disclosure rates go down significantly when students move from high school to college, into a totally different system.

The last question we asked was, did you disclose your disability to a disability services office or an official part of the institution? Typically, this is the office that helps you get accommodations. You'll see that that number was slightly lower than the disclosure to instruction. This provides us with a couple of key insights as we go forward.

First is, students are making decisions about disclosure, and it does vary if you're talking about personal context or educational context from a measurement perspective.

If we ask students, did you go to services for students with disabilities, we know that's an underrepresentation of the disabled student population on campus. And we've seen a lot of the data and research out there right now, focusing on accommodations use. What we hope to do is to understand both accommodations use, but also how are they communicating about their disability outside of those official channels?

Now I want to share a quote with you that came out of some of our early work that really helps to capture some of these underlying issues that are happening with students.

I'm going to read this to you. "When I first came to college, I did not know that my mental health disorder was considered a disability. I also had no idea I was able to qualify for accommodations. The accommodation to help me out tremendously with my coursework."

A few key things are there. Not all students who arrive on campus know that they might have a disability. We talk about that transition period from high school to college as being one that has

many different challenges to maintaining the support and accommodations they might have had before college.

Something else there is that we talk about the mental health crisis on campus, especially since Covid. The mental health crisis has become something, that is, you know, we talk about mental health resources. But we also talk about students not knowing that there are resources to help them in their academic life. So, they may think, okay, I can go get therapy or counseling services from my campus office, but they may not be aware that there are academic supports that can be brought into their learning environment to help with mental health conditions.

I've been having conversations with different parts of our campus here at the University of Texas at Austin. They say that this is a prevalent issue, this gap between understanding what mental health is as a disability and where to go for help, not just in therapy, but also in getting through their academic program.

Now, it's your turn. I'd like to start a poll. What issues are most important to you, and I think you get to pick one. So, there should be a poll on your screen. We're hoping this works!

Your choices are to improve accessibility, understanding disabled experiences, reducing ableism, inclusive instruction, addressing the mental health crisis, and embracing intersectionality or the multiple identities the students hold.

I'll give you a minute.

Most folks have responded. Let's see. Reducing ableism got 38% of the vote, and that's probably the heart of the issue, but also really difficult to understand. Ableism, if you're not aware of it, is also one of the most important things that affects everything you do for students on campus. It looks like number two in votes is improving accessibility. So really, being aware of your institutions and your programs online or in person, and where those access issues might need to be addressed more proactively.

We seem to have a relatively even amount of people who are thinking about understanding the disabled experience, instruction, and embracing intersectionality. Each of these things are a part of our research agenda, and it's really helpful to see what you guys are holding as a priority. So, thank you for your input.

19:37 What's Next: Summer | Poll Question Two

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: What I want to do now is to give you a sense of what's coming up at the National Disability Center. What are some of the things that we're looking forward to as we move into the last part of our first year and into our second.

The first thing is that our national student survey just closed. We are going to be analyzing those results very quickly in the next few weeks and starting to do some of those more in depth investigations on what an accessible campus looks like.

One thing to be aware of is that we asked this question of all students whether they identified or disclosed a disability or not. The other thing that we are really looking forward to is some more interviews and qualitative experiences, being able to get a better understanding of how students with intersectional identities are experiencing accessibility on campus or in their higher education.

We're going to be releasing the accessibility measure itself, once it's been validated and the psychometric properties are figured out. That measure will be free for people to use, and we'll create some training around that – on our framework, on accessibility, and what do those measures look like?

We'll be launching some more online resources. Our website has been in launch mode, but once our findings and our research results start to come in, we will put them online. We will also be posting this town hall.

Finally, we're going to be developing a set of courses that really seek to take the findings at the disability center to those who are also working in the field, taking the literature that exists and making it digestible for our stakeholder groups.

There are also some things to look forward to in the fall. We'll be starting a new series of studies. We're focusing on faculty, really thinking about the teaching and learning enterprise. We also will be welcoming some new student fellows and expanding their experiences here at the center.

So, we have a busy few months coming up as we finish up year one and go into year two, and we look forward to sharing that with you!

Now it's time for our second poll: which of the following most interests you. Some of these I went over. Is it the online classes and resources? Is it the survey results and focus group insights? Is it the new research measures? I know we have measurement people out there! Is it teaching strategies and case studies? Or "all of the above"?

I'll give you a minute.

We have a lot of "all of the above," which we're excited to see. Thank you for that!

I'm curious to see that what came in next was the online classes and resources and survey results. We can focus on those, and our dissemination will definitely do that. Thank you for helping us look at that scope of work, but "all of the above" is a good one for us to make sure that we cover each of those things in in our different newsletters and our news feed posts, social media, and making sure that you have access to that information as soon as it's available.

24:42 Student/Faculty Panel

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Now on to my wonderful, wonderful colleagues. I'm going to be bringing on some of the folks that make this place the amazing place that it is. First, I'd like to introduce Desirée Lama.

[Desirée Lama comes on screen.]

Desirée Lama (she/they): I'm on screen.

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Are you? Alright, thank you. I can't see everything, oh here you are! So, Desirée Lama is a Ph. D. Student here at the University of Texas at Austin in the Human Development, Culture and Learning Sciences area. I met Desirée... gosh! Are we at five years now, maybe a little longer? When she was an undergraduate and a standout student. Absolute delight. I think you'll get to know Desirée more when she introduces herself, but she is one of the Student Fellows on our project and has made a huge impact by co-leading that college accessibility measure process. She's had a huge influence on our thinking.

The second person I'd like to bring on is Dr. Andrew Dillon. Dr. Dillon hails from the other side of campus, at the School of Information. I'll have him explain what that is, because it's a bit of a unique space. Andrew is a visionary. Andrew is part of our leadership team. Andrew is one of the humblest people I've ever met, and his insights about how faculty think and how we learn from our students are things that I always treasure. So, Dr. Dillon will be also sharing about himself in his introduction. I just want to say that I'm thrilled to have you both here today, and our Townhall will get very well-rounded points of view of our work here.

[Andrew Dillon comes on screen]

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Our first question is this: please tell us about yourself, your role at the National Disability Center, and what drew you to be a part of this collaborative experience? And I'm going to start with Desirée because we are disabled student-centered in everything we do, including our webinars.

Desirée Lama (she/they): Hi, everyone. I'm really happy to be here. Thank you, Stephanie, for that wonderful introduction. Like Stephanie already said, I am a second-year doctoral student here at UT Austin in the department of Educational Psychology. I'm currently a Student Fellow, but I will be transitioning to the leadership team this June, and I'm super excited about that. Mainly my role at the National Disability Center is co-leading the accessibility measure or CAM. This process started this past summer, and it's been very collaborative – from cultivating the survey questions to receiving feedback from essentially everyone inside and outside of the center.

We first piloted this survey at UT Austin, and it received rounds of feedback until we were able to finalize all the questions and all the wording in the questions to send it out nationally. That has been a very enriching experience for me as a student and as a researcher. I have learned a lot. It was my first time collaborating on something like this, so I had to put on my big boy shoes and just really immerse myself in this experience. What drew me to be a part of this disability

center is just working with Stephanie. I've worked with her for years, and I know everything she does is amazing. So, I knew this would be an amazing opportunity for me as an educational psychologist and as a person. I'm continuously learning, being a part of the center and in my personal experiences with disability. I, myself, identify as disabled, along with all my other intersectional identities, so I really want to bring that to the center, just to give us a different perspective and kind of like change the way we think about disability in higher education.

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Thank you, Desirée.

Andrew Dillon, PhD: Well, first thanks for the introduction, Stephanie, and hello to everybody. I'm really happy to be here today. I'm a psychologist by background, and my special area of interest has always been the design of new technology, particularly the user experience of that technology. I began to become very aware, through talking to students, teaching students, that there was this very significant gap in my own understanding of disability and accessibility in terms of design. I thought I really needed to do something about looking at that problem. When you realize, as Stephanie said, that one in four students may have a disability, it made me aware that I just am unable to tackle this on my own. So, I wanted to work with people who were similarly concerned and could actually educate me, and I could be part of their education so that we could actually improve this situation, because I'm very committed to our research actually having an impact in the world. When the opportunity came to work with the center and to work with Stephanie and the other fantastic people that form the team here, I couldn't wish for a better opportunity. So I'm really looking forward to the work ahead, and I really do want to have an impact.

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: I think that's something that's true for everyone who's on this team is that they want to make a difference, and they're looking for ways to do that, both small and large, collectively. Absolutely. Our second question for you today: describe how your experiences with disability and access and accessibility have shaped your thinking about student success. Specifically. Andrew.

Andrew Dillon, PhD: Well, several years ago, one of the students in my class very obviously had a disability. It raised my own awareness of the challenges that are involved in this. So at a very simple level he found access to the classroom quite difficult, because he was in a wheelchair. That was interesting because we have an ADA-compliant building, yet still he seemed to struggle with things. Getting to know him and actually walking around the building with him to see the space with his eyes, it opened my own eyes to the innumerable frequent small inconveniences that made life in the school difficult. I don't just mean learning. I don't just mean the classroom. I mean just having access to the building and having access to resources. Then you start to realize. Then, if you've ever tried a screen reader, for example, it feels like you've gone back a century in terms of technology. Yet the intent of all of us is to provide a successful learning environment, and we believe the university offers the opportunities for people of all kinds to learn. Yet the obstacles that we continue to place in people's way are invisible to many of us, but they're very, very visible and very real to anybody who's suffering

from a disability. So it was from just working and interacting with students, both in terms of them talking to me and in terms of them producing work in my class. It really was a moment where I thought, you know, I thought I understood the idea of really designing with people in mind, but I was so unaware and so naive in my assumptions about people, in the way we could improve things with design. Everything about the student experience, not just in the classroom, but in the way they even ask for an accommodation, which requires them to go through offices and procedures and forms of communication which in and of themselves can be a challenge. It made me think we have to really, really stand back and redesign the whole learner experience of student success. All student success is our goal. I think we have to do some serious soul searching and some serious research and make some serious commitments to improving the world.

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Thank you, Andrew. A call to action there, right at the heart of it. Desirée?

Desiree Lama (she/they): So my personal experiences with disability really have shaped the way I think about student success. I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2016, but I experienced my first symptoms around 2013 or 2014. So, I've been living with this condition for well over 10 years. but it wasn't brought to my attention that MS is considered a disability until 2 or 3 years ago when I was filling out a job application. At the end, it asks you questions like if you have a disability, and if you're a veteran. Under the disability question, it listed examples, and I saw that MS was on there. So I was like, huh! I never knew that. No one ever told me that. I never knew that there were resources out there to further support me in my personal life, and as a student.

So that was a really pivotal moment in my life in general in all regards. I really thought about how many other students are out there that don't know that their conditions are considered a disability, from that lack of knowledge. They don't know that there's resources and support for them. I'm a big advocate for support systems, and that doesn't necessarily always have to be family and friends. It can be a support system at your work at school wherever you need support. I think that lack of knowledge is similar to the mental health crisis. I've had friends and family who don't know that there's more accommodations out there for them for whatever they need. So it really just kind of pushed me and thinking like, Wow, like, disability, is very broad. And I think when we're talking about higher education, we need to let students know all of the disability categories and everything that falls under them. Just so they know that they can receive accommodations. They can get support to succeed in college and beyond that. I think that is also a key aspect of the center.

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Thank you. One of the comments in the chat says there's a gap between ADA-compliant and true access. We need the ADA, but we also need true access.

Andrew Dillon, PhD: Yes.

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Both are true. Thank you for that comment. So as you think about the center launch, and we know that there are just a few months to consider, but what's something about the work of the National Disability Center that you would like people to know? Desirée?

Desirée Lama (she/they): Yes, I can go first. I just want to reiterate this, because I think it's so important that this center is student centered. We really focus on the experience of the disabled student, and I've always loved that about Stephanie's work, because outside of this I never really saw that. It was always faculty and instructor-centered. But with research, we're trying to help the students, so it's important that we hear from the students themselves, because if we don't understand what they're going through, how can we give them the support that they need?

Even in the campus accessibility measure survey, there were a lot of questions that were sensitive. We needed to use the wordings that made the student feel comfortable enough to share their experiences with us, because we wanted to let them know that we're a safe space, and that we're going to use the information to help them at the end of the day.

Another aspect of the center that I really like is how collaborative it is. With the campus accessibility measure, that was the most collaborative work I've ever been immersed in. We got feedback from everyone, and it was down to simple wording that we didn't really think about. But then other people were like, hey, maybe you should use something else. Maybe this makes more sense. So I just really want to focus on how collaborative the center is. There are so many people from different backgrounds and experiences, and I think that's what gives us such enriching conversations and moments in the center.

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: I'm going to follow up with another question, Desirée. Do you have any words of advice for students, you know, a few years behind you? Things that you didn't know that you wish you had? Any words of advice?

Desirée Lama (she/they): Yeah, I think again of support systems. I think just finding your people that you can disclose information to and feel safe around. I think that's really helped me throughout college, throughout undergrad and getting into this PhD program, just having a group of people behind me. That just helps me get through the days. Also, I have a huge support system here at the university. So I think that's just something that's really, really important, and I always like to hone in on that.

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Well, you support others, and so they support you. It's definitely a two-way street. Andrew, what would you like people to know about the National Disability Center?

Andrew Dillon, PhD: Well, in a nutshell, I'd like them to remember that they are part of it, and they can actually invite people to be part of it. It's a *national* disability center. It isn't the UT disability center. The goal is really to change the way higher education looks at, treats, understands, and responds to the one in four students that we're talking about. If you told any

faculty member that 25% of their students had a particular need that was being unaddressed, I think most of us would be shocked that we had such an oversight or such a blind spot. But that is the reality of it. For many reasons, there is a lack of disclosure and a lack of awareness.

But most of us in the world are well disposed. We actually do want to improve the situation. And the first part of doing that is to acknowledge that we don't actually have the answers. So when I say, I want to invite people in, it's because parents know more about this through their children. Students know more about this than the faculty administrators, who need to know about this. The staff and universities need to know about this at all levels, from housing up to canteens, to interfaces where people are actually gaining information on how to register. We have a complete environment that needs to be adjusted and redesigned.

I would say we can't do it alone. We need people to be involved, so I encourage people not to sit there and think "Okay, let's just see what these people tell us and what they throw out in terms of reports." Come in, and participate whenever you can come in, and ask us questions, tell us stories, and feel that you're part of this, because this is a moment where a center like this can have a huge impact. I personally want people to know that their involvement is welcome. So there's a gap between the intentions, the good intentions of faculty and staff and universities, and their ability to actually resolve it. And the center is trying to bridge that gap. But I want people to participate and help us do it.

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Thank you, Andrew. I am just reminded that I had a conversation this morning about studying abroad. One of the things that college students look forward to is a chance to experience other cultures. At the end of the hour someone said, do we have to think about access? And of course, if that's part of what we are doing here, this institution, we do need to think about access. As I was chatting with the leader of the project, I told them I was really glad you asked that question on your checklist of things to add. Could you put that higher in the list earlier in the hour, so it doesn't get rushed and overlooked at the end? So there are lots of folks who are working in different ways, and I really think that there is a movement towards a pivot and a shift that can happen. I want to say thank you to you both, too. Thank you so much for joining us. I know that you are the highlight of this Townhall hour, but we have to wrap up the panel and say goodbye to our panelists.

Andrew Dillon, PhD: Bye.

Desirée Lama (she/they): Bye.

43:43 Your Feedback | Evaluation Survey

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Okay, another way we are collaborative is with our evaluation team at the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk, or "MCPER", as we work together throughout this process. We have a logic model that we co-developed that you can find on our website. We're together in every leadership team meeting, thinking about not just the activities of the center, but the iteration and improvement that we can engage in.

So we're gonna ask for your feedback and to take a survey. It's quick, maybe a minute or so. There's a QR code on your screen. There is a link in the chat. We ask you to just take a minute and let us know what you thought of this Townhall. If anyone has a question or something that we can answer while we wait, please put it in the chat or the Q&A box. We are happy to address it either here or outside of here. Love to know what's on your mind. If you have something you'd like us to address.

47:29 Connect With the National Disability Center

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD: Finally, we want to let you get a sense of what you can do to engage with us, as Dr. Dillon said. Here are some ways you can stay in touch. I would remiss not to say that social media is a way to join us. In particular, Instagram and LinkedIn are very strong places to find us. You can find our addresses at the website. Please also subscribe to our newsletter if you've not already. I know a lot of you did during the registration process. That's awesome.

I want to point out the Communications Network. I know some of our members are here, and I'm really grateful for your presence. Thank you for being here. There's a link in the chat where you can check out the Communication Network, which is a group of organizations and individuals where we agree to share out information both from you to us and from us to you. It has an expanded newsletter that you'll get every month, but it includes language and logos and spotlights of other centers of other folks who are in the network. Again, it can be individuals and or organizations doing the work that you're doing. It's kind of our ambassador program, if you think of it that way. We'd be happy to have you. Please do join in the chat.

You'll also see our links to LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram. And we do engage with folks in that way, so we're really looking forward to also seeing what you're up to.

And then, lastly, we plan on having another Townhall in the fall, and we look forward to seeing you there. Thank you so much, and have a good rest of your afternoon.