



**National Disability Center**  
for Student Success

## Campus Accessibility Spotlight Series

# Disability Cultural Centers and Student Success

Published: December 18, 2024



**TEXAS**

The University of Texas at Austin

## Introduction: The Institutional Challenge

This Campus Accessibility Spotlight focuses on the expanding effort to create Disability Cultural Centers (DCCs) on U.S. campuses as part of a web of support for disabled students in postsecondary education. These centers strive to offer services that complement but are not the same as formal accommodations provided to students under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Using insights and data from the newly established Disability Cultural Center at The University of Texas at Austin, this spotlight explains the early stages of center development and offers recommendations for other postsecondary institutions interested in launching their own.

## Why Establish a Disability Cultural Center?

- **The time is right.** Undergraduates — in particular those who are in the traditional age group of 18 to 24 years old — are in a critical period for identity development during their college years. Many students explore aspects of disability and what it means to them during their time in higher education. Others are just realizing they may have a disability, understanding their medical disorder qualifies as a disability, or getting a diagnosis.
- **Disability can emerge from the shadows.** Disability is often a hidden topic and population on campus. A central location for the disability community to gather provides greater awareness and visibility for students, faculty, and staff.
- **Centers can build communities...** Disability is not just about individual experiences. It's a community experience. People need a space to connect and gather to avoid isolation, learn from each other, and create opportunities for conversation.
- **...and celebrate strengths.** There are expressions of disability identity through the arts, literature, sports, and media. DCCs serve as a hub to celebrate the strengths of disabled people instead of the deficit mindset that pervades many disability-oriented services and messaging.

- **They embrace difficult conversations.** Disability and ableism are often embedded in difficult (and sometimes daily) conversations. DCCs can provide skilled facilitation for disabled students to learn how to cope with those interactions — plus increase critical thinking, enhance interpersonal skills, and foster greater community engagement. These skills are valuable not only during college but also in students’ future careers.

## The Pain Points

- **Accessibility is more than accommodations.** ADA compliance offices fulfill a critical need for academic accommodations, but many institutions find it difficult to expand their accessibility efforts to include informal support, peer networking, and socio-emotional learning.
- **Disabled students are less likely to graduate.** Many students with disabilities experience mental health challenges that are compounded by isolation on campus. Connecting with others who are facing those same barriers, as well as finding ways to reduce them, is a potential protective factor for student retention and graduation.
- **It’s a whole-campus effort.** Establishing new administrative structures requires time, perseverance, and allies on campus. This can take time, and student input is an important catalyst for successful new organizational structures.

- **They embrace difficult conversations.** Disability and ableism are often embedded in difficult (and sometimes daily) conversations. DCCs can provide skilled facilitation for disabled students to learn how to cope with those interactions — plus increase critical thinking, enhance interpersonal skills, and foster greater community engagement. These skills are valuable not only during college but also in students’ future careers.

## Meet the People

Leaders involved in various campus resources at UT Austin were extensively interviewed by the National Disability Center about their work to support Disability Cultural Centers. Those leaders interviewed were:



**Emily Shyrock, MSSW**

Director | Disability Cultural Center

Role: As founding director of a DCC and a disabled woman, Emily combines her personal and professional experience to create a community for disabled students, faculty, staff, and alumni at UT Austin. She has worked in disability and access for 12 years on campus and has taught as part of the Critical Disability Studies program.



## **Samuel Greene, PhD**

Postdoctoral Research Fellow | Oden Institute for Computational Engineering and Sciences

Role: A disabled computational materials scientist, Dr. Greene is the lead author of an article in the journal *iScience*, “Accessible interview practices for disabled scientists and engineers,” written by an interdisciplinary group of disabled and nondisabled early-career scientists who care deeply about making science more accessible to all.



## **Lily Alvarez**

Doctoral Student in Human Development, Culture, and Learning Sciences | Department of Educational Psychology

Student Fellow | National Disability Center for Student Success

Role: Lily brings her lived experience as a blind woman to every project — including her research on how disability labels impact students’ academic performance and anxiety, her collaboration on cross-cultural research examining disability status and sibling relationships, and her work on a research review on definitions of disability.



## Chris Brownson, PhD

Associate Vice President for Health and Well-being |  
Division of Student Affairs

Clinical Professor | Department of Educational  
Psychology

Role: In addition to his UT Austin responsibilities, Dr. Brownson has been the director of the National Research Consortium of Counseling Centers in Higher Education since 2004 and leads several health and well-being initiatives for the UT System.

## Implementation Activities

- **Plan ahead.** UT Austin launched its DCC in the spring of 2023. But the journey formally began two years prior.
- **Engage stakeholders.** UT Austin listened to student advocates and gathered input from the campus community. A student survey also confirmed diverse needs and strong support.
- **Determine budget priorities.** Initial funding included allocations for the founding director position, a physical location, campus outreach, and programming.
- **Articulate your mission.** For UT Austin's DCC, it is to “work collaboratively with campus units to ensure that disability is respected and valued as an important part of the campus community by focusing on ways to improve accessibility in all aspects of campus life.”

## By The Numbers

> 4M

Postsecondary students are estimated to have a disability (CDC)

3,542

Degree-granting postsecondary institutions (NCES)

< 20

Disability cultural centers (UIC)

56%

Disabled students did NOT disclose their disability to peers (NDCSS)

## Fresh Insights

UT Austin's Disability Cultural Center serves as a hub for students at a time when they face a great deal of uncertainty. They need to build their own wheelhouse of advocacy skills and strategies on how to navigate their education and journey to graduation. By sharing stories and resources with each other, we offer critical missing information that young people need to be successful in college and in life.

Emily Shyrock, MSSW





It is one thing to offer tangible support through an accommodations office, but it is quite another and important thing for institutions to provide a space where students can foster their own disability identity and build community. These social networks are how disabled students build critical skills and strategies that go beyond the tangible.



Lily Alvarez

I appreciate that the Disability Cultural Center is for everyone on campus with a disability, from undergraduates to postdocs to staff to faculty. Everyone is invited. All you have to do is show up, and you are welcome. The discussions and events held here are essential and connect people in everyday interactions that I have not found elsewhere on campus.



Samuel Greene, PhD

We have an opportunity here to connect some critical dots related to support for students with disabilities, mental health conditions, and chronic health conditions. The Disability Culture Center fills an important gap in the larger framework of wellbeing and community that we know is central to student connection and that supports their academic journey.



Chris Brownson, PhD



## Unexpected Revelations



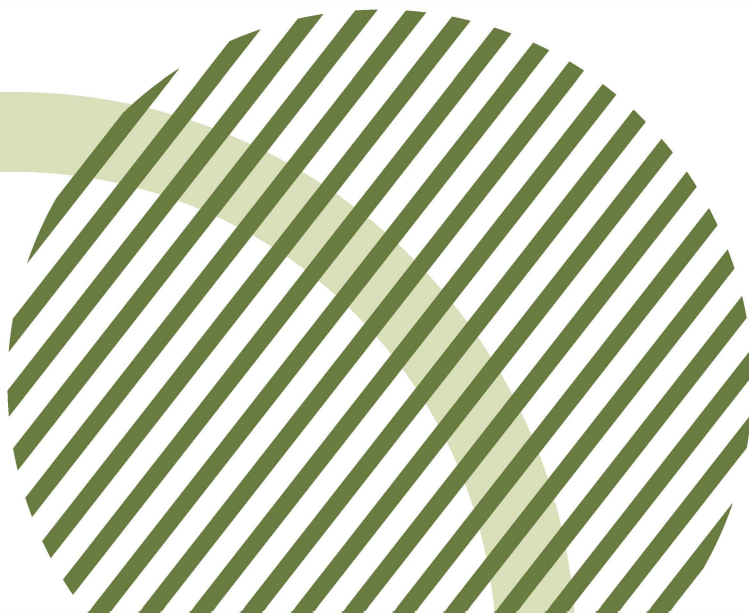
DCCs truly serve the entire campus. Their events, community-building, and informal learning engage not just students but also faculty and staff, who can now co-mentor each other through the opportunities and the challenges of having a disability in postsecondary education — bringing to life the benefits of cross-generational mentorship.



Accessibility is something that touches on all parts of higher education, both inside and outside of the classroom.



Because formal disclosure is typically not required to participate, the resources and activities provided by DCCs have few barriers to entry and can be models of accessibility by design.



# Strategies For Success on Your Campus

## 1. Institutional options abound.

Think about where your DCC might be housed at your institution. Some examples include student organizations, residential life, or offices of student success. Where they are housed may reflect different administrative structures at your institution.

## 2. Make outreach campuswide.

Through programming and events, help students connect with the larger culture of disability, including adaptive sports, book clubs with books by disabled authors, networking events, and guest presenters.

## 3. Collaboration is key.

Work in partnership with units across your institution, including athletics, career services, student health, student orientation, faculty development, libraries, and more! Building these relationships takes time, but they can be powerful leverage points to reach students who might otherwise fall through the cracks.

## 4. Be the resource.

Offer support to units within the institution who are interested in learning more about accessibility and how to improve the experience for students, faculty, and staff in their unit. Show the value added by the universal design perspective on both academic and social student experiences.

## 5. Don't be timid.

Be both proactive and responsive in resources and services for disabled members of your community. This includes strong outreach, so be sure there are personnel and budget available to promote and educate campus members about disability and accessibility.

## **6. Leverage the desire to do good.**

Disabled students want to give back to their communities! Think about how community engagement can further tighten bonds between all students and raise the level of awareness about the strengths of disability and the value of accessibility for all.

## **7. Get social.**

A strong social media presence for DCCs and their focus on disability and accessibility can serve as a way to recruit new students with disabilities to apply to your institution.

## Additional Resources and References

Disability Cultural Center (DCC) Symposium at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

National Center for College Students with Disabilities (NCCSD) | Offers a wealth of information on disability services in higher education, including resources and best practices for DCCs.

Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) | Provides resources, advocacy, and professional development for those working in disability services at colleges and universities, including best practices and information on DCCs.

Chiang, E. S. (2019). Disability cultural centers: How colleges can move beyond access to inclusion. *Disability & Society*, 35(7), 1183–1188.

Disability as an Identity: Disability Cultural Centers in Higher Education. Saia, Toni. The University of Arizona ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2019. 22616844.

Disabled Students' Experiences With Disability Cultural Centers and Disability Culture in U.S. Higher Education. Kulshan, Trayle. City University of Seattle ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2023. 30691055.









© 2024 National Disability Center for Student Success. This document was developed with grant #R324C230008 from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). However, its contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the IES or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. Project Officer: Akilah Swinton Nelson, PhD.