

Disabilities Course: From Awareness To Action | CPD Blog

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Who would want to take a 3-hour class on a Friday afternoon? Not many. But those students who do enroll in SPED 6500 (Interdisciplinary Disability Awareness and Service Learning) say that this class has been the most enjoyable and impactful class they have taken during all their years of study at USU...one they remember long after they graduate and move on to start a family and establish a career.

Nobody could have been more surprised than I was three years ago (January 2017) when I was asked if I would be interested in teaching this class with Alma Burgess and Gordon Richins. I did not even know that the class existed, much less what it was all about. I did not have those oh-so-impressive initials after my name that indicated I was a qualified teacher. All I had was life experience—which is what this class is all about. At some point in everybody's life they will experience a disability—whether temporarily or permanently from an accident or through the natural aging process. As they age, people often experience mobility problems with arthritis or diminished muscle ability, decreases in vision and hearing, or even dementia. Regardless of what vocation we choose in life, we are guaranteed to associate at some point with individuals who have a disability of one form or another.

The goal of this class is to give students from a wide variety of disciplines exposure to multiple disabilities through three different instructional methods.

Lectures

"Experts" in the fields of a variety of disabilities speak to the class. They are nationally and internationally known in their specialized fields. They cover such topics as disability history, civil rights, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), deafness, cochlear implants, universal design for buildings and recreation areas, mental illness, trauma and the effect it has on children with disabilities, technology for the blind, web accessibility for everyone, autism, service animals, disability policy framework, and many more.

The students take a tour around the USU campus using wheelchairs. We emphasize that this activity is not meant to let them know what it is like to have a physical disability (you cannot really know that unless you actually HAVE a disability). The purpose is so the students can experience and become aware of some of the physical barriers that individuals with disabilities encounter daily such as steep ramps, doors with no automatic door openers, no curb cuts that provide access from the sidewalk to the roads or parking lots, bathrooms with no accessible stalls, etc. They also have the opportunity to complete an ADA survey that has them out and about on the campus and in the community measuring slopes, cross slopes, doorway widths, the amount of pressure it takes to open a door, bathroom accessibility, parking accessibility, and a wide variety of other items to determine whether or not they meet ADA requirements. Then they make suggestions as to what would make them more accessible.

Service learning

We give our students hands-on service learning opportunities (now called Community-Engaged Learning) with area agencies that work with individuals with disabilities. Students spend at least 40 hours during the semester at six organizations in Logan and on the USU campus that work specifically with individuals of all ages and backgrounds who have a wide variety of disabilities. These can range from mild to moderate to severe mental, emotional, developmental, and physical disabilities.

The students participate in activities such as biking, skiing, kayaking, white-water rafting, bowling, shopping, cooking, going to movies, and servicing wheelchairs and other assistive technology devices. They help post-high school students prepare for job interviews or balance a check book. Students also have opportunities to go on home visits with professionals who teach families about nutrition or provide speech/language, occupational therapy and physical therapy to young children with disabilities. The opportunities are endless.

The students form lasting relationships not only with the administrators and service personnel of these organizations, but with the clients themselves...often extending their associations beyond the classroom.

Debates

Finally, class members participate in four lively debates throughout the semester on controversial topics such as cochlear implants, eugenics and genetic testing, sheltered workshops and 14(c) certificates (these allow big corporations to pay subminimum wages to workers with disabilities), and people-first vs. identity-first language. Students are asked to research both sides of these complex issues and then present both sides in an attempt to sway one another to change their views. These debates have proven to be very enlightening and entertaining.

Students who have taken this class have actually cried when it ended! When was the last time you heard of something like that? Most have wondered why they had not studied disability history in elementary and high schools—when they studied about American history, world history, civil rights, human rights, and women's rights. They have told us that years later they still remember what they learned in this class and have put it into practice—either with their own families or in their careers. Students have commented that they are more aware of the places they go and how accessible they would or would not be to individuals in a wheelchair. They have suggested changes to their employers that could make the environment more user friendly for all individuals. Oh, and did I mention we DON'T GIVE TESTS? The test for this class is how you put what you learn into action. This class changes lives!

How to get involved

To register for this class, you will need to complete an application (contact [Mary Ellen Heiner](#) for the application) and then register for SPED 6500 (Interdisciplinary Workshop). You can sign up for 1-3 credits (I strongly recommend registering for 2-3 credits). Students who register for 2-3 credit hours and complete all the service learning hours (a.k.a. community engaged learning hours) can apply for a small scholarship depending on availability of funds. Although this is a graduate-level class, we encourage undergraduate students to register as well. Undergraduate students will need to have a paper signed by the instructor of record, Alma Burgess, for permission to take the class. Permission is ALWAYS given.

More information about [the IDACEL class](#).