

Disability Compliance

for Higher Education

Successful Strategies for Accommodating Students and Staff with Disabilities

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LEGAL ROUNDUP

Review agency rulings and court cases related to disability. **Pages 10–15**



2016 Winner

Specialized Information
Publishers Association Awards

Best Newsletter

OF COUNSEL

Get ready to respond to requests from students with disabilities

By Marc Charmatz, Esq.

A new school year is about to begin, and you and your colleagues are no doubt busy getting ready for students with disabilities — new first-year students and transfer students who may be making requests for auxiliary aids and services and reasonable modifications of school policies and procedures. Here are some hopefully helpful hints in processing student requests.

Review definitions

Colleges and universities recognize that the definitions of “disability” and “auxiliary aids and services” are broad. An individual with a disability is defined to mean an individual with a physical or mental impairment that

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DISABILITY & IDENTITY

Disability representation creates cultural change on college campuses

By Joseph A. LoGiudice, L.C.S.W.

On Sunday, June 9, 2019, Ali Stroker, who uses a wheelchair, won the Tony Award for best supporting actress in a musical for her role as Ado Annie in *Oklahoma!* She is the first person who uses a wheelchair to be nominated and win this prestigious award. But why should disability services professionals care about this historic moment?

International disability rights leader Judy Heumann writes in *The Hollywood Reporter* that this is a historic moment for people with disabilities because it is about *disability representation*. Disability services professionals need to pay closer attention and broadcast these pivotal moments in American history at their respective colleges because they help in reshaping the culture, policies, and practices.

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According to disability studies scholars, the historical representation of disabled people in the public discourse, literature, media, TV, and film has centered excessively on pity, deviancy, medicalization, mockery, queering, and othering. Leonard Davis, a disability studies scholar, reported that these descriptives and perceptions are derivatives of disability going against the notions of normalcy in America; those notions entail a person's ability to be independent and to live up to the able-bodied experience.

In the last decade, minority identities have become a popular topic on college campuses coupled with the dialogue on diversity and inclusion. Despite the urgency to address minority identities on college campuses, disability has remained an outsider because of its assumed antithesis to independence and the types of images it conjures up — physical deviancy, darkness, and even violence.

Stroker winning the Tony Award represents a cultural shift in the understanding of disabled people in terms of their abilities, their meaningful participation in life, and the staggering importance of disability inclusion. In her acceptance speech, she said, "This award is for every kid who is watching tonight who has a disability, who has a limitation or a challenge, who has been waiting to see themselves represented in this arena — you are." When interviewed on winning the award, she indicated her appreciation for her family and friends who wheeled her around New York City for auditions, encouraged others to manifest their talents even in the face of adversity, and, most importantly for theater owners and producers, urged the theater community to make backstages accessible.

Stroker is also the first wheelchair user to perform on Broadway, first appearing in *Spring Awakening* in 2015. Nonetheless, both the nomination and win demonstrate an impactful cultural shift for people with disabilities, because the American public is beginning to recognize disability as part of the diverse fabric of society (this is an *ongoing effort*).

Cultural shifts of this kind are not to be taken lightly on college campuses because they elevate the status of disability from other to normal and move disabled people toward integration and recognition. As a disability services professional, I am profoundly aware of the enormous obstacles we are challenged with: exponential increases in students registering for services, greater attention to case-by-case accommodations, involvement in disability

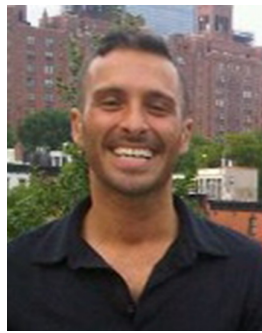
access conflicts in policy and practice, and more investigations of discrimination while having limited staff and resources. To turn your attention away from these problems seems counterproductive, but I urge you to take baby steps in focusing on cultural shifts rather than disability compliance.

When you pique the interest of the campus community with communications about historic moments like Stroker's nomination and win, it changes perceptions and

attitudes toward disabled people. The impact it will make on the campus climate may be subtle in nature, but continuous news being drawn to the accomplishments of disabled people will eventually create a culture of inclusion and accessibility.

Recommendations for coverage can include film festivals like hosting the ReelAbilities Film Festival, partnering with campus offices to host disabled speakers and show documentaries, and having a newsletter online that keeps a tab on the accomplishments/experiences of disabled people. The time and effort you spend on disseminating information about the positive images and figures in disability to the campus community will reshape policies and practices to become naturally inclusive.

As a fellow disability services professional attending to these new duties of circulating positive representations of disabled people in the media, I have hosted the ReelAbilities New York Film Festival, and have bulletin boards that display pioneers in disability history and walls adorned with posters of proud students with disabilities indicating their academic/career aspirations. All of these efforts have given my college community an education to creating an inclusive culture for people with disabilities. ■



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About the author

Joseph A. LoGiudice, L.C.S.W., is a licensed social worker, an educator from New York City, and a member of the advisory board for *Disability Compliance for Higher Education*. He is the director of The AccessAbility Center/ Student Disability Services of The City College of New York. He is a seasoned professional

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