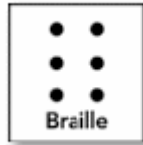

Disability Access and Inclusion at Smith College: Mission, Principles, Overview, and Priority Recommendations.



Disability Access Advisory Committee

February - 2007

DISABILITY ACCESS AND INCLUSION AT SMITH COLLEGE: MISSION, OVERVIEW, PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

February, 2007

At the start of the 2005-06 academic year, President Carol Christ constituted and charged a **Smith Disability Access Advisory Committee** to evaluate the challenges and opportunities at the college for individuals with disabilities, in conjunction with the college-wide strategic planning process. The Advisory Committee examined efforts to improve physical, communication, and academic access at Smith, considered current challenges and existing structures that support students, staff, and faculty, and learned about emerging approaches to meet the needs of a changing and expanding disability population. As part of this evaluation, the Advisory Committee worked to define a mission for accessibility for Smith that reflects the mission and priorities of the college while communicating our commitment to access, inclusion, and non-discrimination for individuals with disabilities. This Mission for Access and Inclusion embraces the diversity vision for the college as articulated in the 2006 Common Ground report:

“As a central element of its commitment to excellence, Smith College seeks to provide an environment that fosters the recruitment and success of a diverse student, faculty and staff community.”

The Disability Access Advisory Committee prepared this report to advance an understanding of disability access and to help provide a framework for progress toward the Mission of Access and Inclusion. Five priority recommendations and eight areas for further review were developed based on principles that can begin to give substance to the vision of accessibility and inclusion embraced in the following mission.

Smith Mission for Access and Inclusion

Smith College is committed to providing an accessible, inclusive, and equitable educational and work environment that:

- *supports excellence, personal growth, and high achievement for all students, staff, and faculty, including those with disabilities,*
- *assures equal opportunity in all programs and services, and*
- *values each individual’s unique contributions to the classroom, the Smith community, and society.*

Toward this mission and to further Smith’s commitment to diversity the Disability Advisory Committee recommends the college take the following five priority steps:

- I. Establish and communicate a mission for access and inclusion of people with disabilities for the college.**
- II. Develop an organizational plan outlining policies, procedures and structures necessary to support compliance with relevant disability non-discrimination**

laws throughout all college programs.

- III. **Conduct an updated accessibility audit of facilities and an access review of college programs in order to inform the organizational plan for compliance as well as for planning and priority setting for renovations and program development based on program needs and new strategic directions.**
- IV **Identify needs and implement appropriate enhancements to the current system of supports for students with disabilities that impact learning through increased access to evaluation, expertise, training, and staff support within the Jacobson Center, Educational Technology Services, the Office of Disability Services and the Smith College libraries as appropriate.**
- V **Offer ongoing opportunities and support for faculty to expand knowledge and utilization of inclusive instructional strategies and technology that increase access to the curriculum for diverse learners, including students with disabilities.**

These recommendations were developed based on the following principles that should guide further review and assessment of access at Smith to inform efforts toward realizing the mission for access through the development of a plan for equal access at the college.

- **Mission and Infrastructure:** Establishing the institutional infrastructure needed to support equal access at Smith requires vision, commitment, planning, coordination, and leadership at all levels.
- **Strategic Planning:** Accessibility must be an essential component in the design and development of all new programs, products, and opportunities created to address the college's new strategic directions.
- **Access to Facilities:** Campus facilities should be accessible by design and support natural human interactions, equitable utilization of the facilities, and integrative participation in college programs.
- **Access to the Curriculum:** Instruction and related supports should be provided in a manner that fairly and effectively supports learning, inclusion, and evaluation of diverse learners, including students with disabilities.
- **Access to Information:** Information should be communicated in an effective, accessible, and timely manner to reach the largest possible percentage of the target audience, including people with disabilities.
- **Access to Technology:** Technology and related support services should be accessible and sufficiently available to allow students, staff and faculty to meet the demands of coursework, teaching, and job requirements.
- **Access to College Services and Supports:** Services should be provided to students in a holistic manner which recognizes and attends to the individual needs of diverse students without segregating, labeling, or stigmatizing them.
- **Employment:** Information about equal opportunity policies and procedures for requesting job accommodations on the basis of a disability should be readily available to supervisors, job applicants, and employees.

Overview

Since passage of the non-discrimination provisions of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, a variety of philosophical and practical approaches to meeting the needs of an increasing number of college students with disabilities have emerged. These models continued to evolve to meet new obligations under the broad civil rights protections of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Expanding efforts over the last 30 years at public and private colleges across the US, including Smith, represent higher education's attempt to articulate and realize the vision of full inclusion, participation, and equality embodied in both the letter and spirit of the ADA. Smith is committed to meeting its obligations under disability non-discrimination laws and pursues efforts to assure equal access for people with disabilities in the context of a broad institutional commitment to embracing and valuing diversity. Smith's engagement in a Strategic Planning Process provides an impetus to examine our current challenges and resources as well as those needed to support the college's capacity to assure equal access as it takes on new directions.

Disability Civil Rights Protections: 504 and the ADA

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provide a clear set of expectations and legal requirements for society and its institutions to become accessible, inclusive, and welcoming to individuals with disabilities. Smith College is subject to the requirements of both these laws and has actively engaged in a variety of compliance efforts since their enactment. Section 504 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability and requires recipients of federal funding to provide equal access and equal opportunity to participate in all programs offered by the college. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 similarly prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability but provides a more comprehensive set of civil rights protections for individuals with disabilities. Private colleges, covered under the ADA Title I: Employment and Title III: Public Accommodations must make modifications to policies and practices that tend to discriminate on the basis of disability and provide auxiliary aids and services as appropriate to eliminate disability discrimination and provide an equal opportunity to participate.

Defining Disability: Redefining the Problem

Civil rights laws define disability as a "mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life functions." The laws go further in defining those protected by their non-discrimination provisions to include individuals with a record of a disability and those who have no disability, but are regarded as having a disability. This three-pronged definition of who is protected under the law addresses that fact that prejudice can result in discrimination even when there is merely the perception of disability. The scope of who is protected under these laws recognizes that disability is not solely a problem that resides in the individual, but is the result of physical and communication barriers and limiting social expectations and attitudes. Disability civil rights laws are thus shifting our view of disability from an individual problem affecting a few people to that of a broad

societal challenge that impacts us all and which must be addressed through institutional, environmental, economic, and social change.

Given the history of segregation and exclusion experienced by people with disabilities and the diminished social and economic status which still endures for so many, the Americans with Disabilities Act calls upon both the public and private sectors of the U.S. to make reasonable efforts to remove barriers to opportunity and success for people with disabilities. Smith responded to this call with significant efforts during the 1990s to improve the physical accessibility of campus facilities, enact institutional non-discrimination policies and practices, and establish the Office of Disability Services as a central point of evaluation and coordination for services and accommodations needed by students, staff, and faculty with disabilities. Services and supports offered through the Jacobson Center, Educational Technology Services, Libraries, the Class Deans, Counseling Services, Human Resources and other programs have also contributed to building a network of support across campus.

Disabled Students: Changing the Face of Higher Education

Data from the 2000 U.S. Census show that approximately 52 million Americans have a disability and about half that number, 24 million, have a disability that significantly interferes with activities of daily living. According to its most recent and frequently cited publication, College Freshmen with Disabilities: A Biennial Statistical Profile, the American Council on Education reports that the number of students with disabilities is growing each year (Henderson, 2001). Nearly 6.4% of students entering four-year colleges disclose a disability. Students with learning disabilities in particular, including dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, attention deficit, and other non-verbal learning disabilities have risen from 16% of the total in 1988 to 40% in 2000. This increase in the number of individuals with disabilities who are academically prepared and able to function successfully in higher education is a welcome result of special education and civil rights laws as well as educational, technological and medical advances. These national trends are reflected in increases in the demand for services by students with disabilities at Smith and across the Five Colleges.

Disability at Smith

Approximately 300 students are registered with Smith's Office of Disability Services, with 160-180 actively receiving accommodations and services at any one time. Learning disabilities comprise the largest group, estimated at about 50%, with mobility and chronic health conditions (30%), and neurological and psychological challenges (10%) making up the majority of the rest of the total. Sensory disabilities comprise the smallest percentage, although services to support these students are among the most sophisticated. The total number of students, staff, and faculty with disabilities at Smith is unknown, because registering with the Office of Disability Services is optional. The number of visitors and alumnae with disabilities who use campus facilities that are open to the public such as the Campus Center, Art Museum, and our many performance spaces is also increasing, but difficult to track. It is important to note that information about the

specific number of students at Smith does not represent an easily understandable picture of the funding and staff support needed for each individual or group. The cost and staff support necessary for one individual or one group is influenced by a combination of an individual's functional difficulties and the existence of barriers to facilities, information, technology, and to participation in the classroom. Attitudes and perceptions about disability can also enhance or detract from the successful participation of students in academic and extra-curricular activities at the college.

Traditionally, the Office of Disability Services has served students, staff, faculty and visitors with a wide range of disabilities, including physical, sensory, learning, and psychological conditions. In recent years, three particular cohorts of individuals with disabilities are reshaping the face of disability services and accommodation in higher education and at Smith:

The first group, individuals with physical and sensory disabilities such as deafness, blindness, or wheelchair users, are successfully entering and completing college in larger numbers each year.

These individuals are clearly protected by disability non-discrimination laws and have a legal right to equal access in the classroom, reasonable accommodations at work, and to inclusive participation in all aspects of campus life. While these individuals represent a limited number of students, staff, and faculty at Smith, significant commitments of staff time and expertise, access to technology, consultant services, and other expenditures are necessary to provide accommodation and assure equal access for this group. An individualized approach to assessing and meeting the need for accommodation and services is required by law. However, concurrent institutional efforts to break down environmental, communication, and attitudinal barriers to participation across campus reduces the overall need for individual accommodation. Meeting the needs of this group into the future is likely to require more training, effective use of resources, and expanded collaboration across many college departments. A specific initiative to assess access to facilities and programs was submitted as part of the strategic planning process in collaboration with the Common Ground Diversity Committee.

The second group includes individuals with a range of learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, non-verbal learning disorders, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and Attention Deficit Disorder.

Disability non-discrimination laws, require the college to provide specific disability-related accommodations to students with learning disabilities in the classroom to the extent that they do not compromise the academic standards of the college. Accommodations are determined on an individualized basis to support the ability of students to learn and demonstrate their mastery of a subject. This individualized approach to academic accommodation clearly supports the success of these students, but only partially serves their needs. Solutions to learning challenges are often best found in creative and flexible teaching methods and through the availability of specific learning support services and assistive technology. Faculty members are responding to the

educational needs of an increasingly diverse group of students in the classroom by employing a range of inclusive teaching strategies. Inclusive approaches anticipate and strive to reach a range of diverse learners, not through specific accommodations, but rather by using creative and flexible strategies for teaching and evaluation of student learning. A specific initiative to address these concerns was submitted for consideration through the college's strategic planning process.

The third group (increasing in numbers) is comprised of students, staff, and faculty who have less visible physical or psychological conditions that create functional challenges and for whom adjustments in the classroom or on the job can allow them to maintain their productivity.

An increasing number of people with various learning, physical, or psychological difficulties are referring themselves or being referred to the Office of Disability Services for evaluation and assistance because they are unsure how to address the challenges they are experiencing and are seeking resources. These individuals often do not yet have documentation of a disability or their physical or psychological conditions may not be severe enough to meet the strict disability definitional standards under civil rights law. Many of these individuals are aided by general improvements in campus access, minor adjustments on the job, access to assistive technology, or creative and flexible educational and evaluation methods. Identifying resources and providing support specifically for assessment of undiagnosed learning disabilities is particularly important to effective and efficient use of the college's services as well as for appropriate referrals to additional community supports.

Challenges and Opportunities

The Disability Advisory Committee identified several areas where advances, expectations, and opportunities have been emerging that underscore the need to enhance our disability compliance efforts at Smith.

- ***Technological Advances:*** Developments in the area of assistive technology have enabled greater success and personal independence for people with disabilities. Technology is facilitating greater functioning in and out of the classroom, but it also generates new demands for access to the college's information systems, training, expertise, and the availability of assistive technology resources and support.
- ***Higher Expectations for Access and Participation:*** As society becomes more accessible in response to ADA requirements and advances in technology and design, colleagues, students, speakers, alumnae, and visitors come to Smith expecting to encounter a reasonably high level of accessibility. Students arrive at Smith having received substantial support services and access to technology through their school systems, some through special education, that have enabled them to achieve higher levels of academic success. While Smith cannot provide every kind of needed

support, we must be committed to meeting the challenge of supporting success for the talented and promising students we have admitted to the college.

- ***Commitment to Diversity:*** Diversity among the student population, staff, and faculty as well as colleagues and visitors highlights the need for the college to recognize and welcome diverse populations and perspectives. Greater awareness and recognition of the presence and accomplishments of people with multiple cultural and social identities includes the need to recognize and highlight the accomplishments of people with disabilities in our community and our society through programs, lectures, events, performances, and other activities that enhance the curriculum and build a positive campus climate.
- ***Community and Alumnae Involvement:*** Increasing openness to the community and to alumnae through our museums, libraries, fitness center, performance facilities, Alumnae House, and the Campus Center, has resulted in new demands for accessibility. Smith alumnae who live with disabilities or develop disabilities as they age expect that the college will be able to welcome them by accommodating their needs when attending reunion and other events. While specific accommodations for individuals may always be necessary, many needs can be anticipated and planned for. Smith has taken positive steps in this direction, but further anticipatory efforts toward providing seamless access that normalizes human interactions and doesn't single people out will help to eliminate barriers to participation in college activities and events. The college must continue to develop its ability to anticipate and attend to the needs of alumnae and members of the broader community, whose participation and contributions to the college are invaluable.
- ***Advances in Accessible/Universal Design:*** Meeting the needs of people with disabilities in an integrated, anticipatory fashion whenever possible promotes equal access. The concept of universal or inclusive design, first introduced in relationship to architectural accessibility, supports flexible design solutions that strive to anticipate the widest range of users of facilities, products, information, or instruction as is possible. Universal or inclusive design is linked with national and international efforts to enhance environmental and social sustainability by understanding and addressing the interrelated environmental and human factors that both protect the environment and support participation and productivity for people of all ages and all abilities. Universal design as a concept offers a promising proactive approach to design and construction of facilities, but also has applications in the development of instructional strategies and the delivery of information. This is a growing area of research and design that provides a broad environmental and social change lens on accessibility from which many promising solutions are emerging.

Equal Access and Inclusion: A Proactive Approach to Institutional Compliance

A broad vision of accessibility, equal opportunity, inclusion, and full participation is embodied in both Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and in the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. While fulfillment of this vision requires compliance with legal standards and architectural access codes, it also requires awareness and intention at the planning and design stage to assure that the programs we create, the courses we teach, and the buildings we construct provide access for individuals with disabilities. An anticipatory approach to compliance considers whether or not we are creating programs, developing courses, and designing spaces that allow people with disabilities to function independently or inadvertently erecting barriers that later necessitate accommodation, support services, or costly modifications that could have been avoided.

The current individualized approach to equal access requires students or employees to identify themselves, document their disability, engage in an interactive process with the college, and agree to specific accommodations that the college has determined are reasonable and do not compromise our standards. This individualized assessment and interactive process is required by law and represents an important component of the college's response to the needs of people with disabilities. However, an individualized, reactive approach is not sufficient to assure compliance across all college programs, given evolving demands. New applications of instructional technologies, expanding research opportunities, access to electronic print materials, and the rigor and richness of Smith's curriculum continually raise the bar and redefine accessibility in new and challenging ways. It is increasingly prudent and necessary to anticipate, plan for, and integrate accessibility at the design and development stage as accommodation after the fact can be expensive, require duplicative efforts, and may not always be technologically feasible.

Excellent examples of collaboration and anticipatory planning to provide access for individuals with disabilities already exist on campus.

- Commencement and Reunion planners have worked with Disability Services to develop an anticipatory approach to planning for attendance by people with a wide range of needs. Arrangements are routinely made for sign language interpreters, accessible seating sections are designated, information about access is available in print and on the web, and accessible transportation is provided around campus during commencement and throughout Reunion.
- Faculty members using multi-modal approaches to teaching offer broader access for students with diverse learning needs. Incorporation of auditory, visual, and kinesthetic strategies for learning allows multiple forms of engagement with course material. These strategies benefits many students, but are critical for students with disabilities that create learning challenges in one or more areas.

- Housing Renovations Planning Committee is examining access challenges and setting goals for future renovation that allow all students to benefit from and participate fully in the rich residential experience at Smith.
- Academic support and tutoring services available through the Jacobson Center and establishment of Assistive Technology Labs on campus have offered students with disabilities access to individualized support for learning as well as essential technology that makes reading and writing easier. These supports empower many students to work and study more independently.

Looking broadly and creatively at proactive approaches to compliance with non-discrimination obligations does not automatically mean spending more money. In some cases additional initial investments may be necessary, but often compliance and cost savings can be achieved by doing things differently from the start. Creating programs, designing instruction, and constructing facilities with awareness of the full range of users allows for sensible and proactive adjustments from the outset. These can reduce the long term need and cost for renovations, accommodations, and ongoing services to facilitate equal access after the fact.

Summary and Conclusion

Smith College is guided by shared principles valuing excellence, achievement, and diversity, which frame a vision for accessibility and inclusion for all. Smith has made many efforts to date designed to support equal access to education and employment for people with disabilities at the college. However, as we look to the future it is important to reassess these efforts with the new strategic directions in mind and be proactive in addressing new challenges and seeking opportunities to enhance access and inclusion for students, staff, faculty, alumnae, and visitors. Strategic planning offers a unique opportunity to design facilities, instruction, information systems, residence life and new college programs to meet a wide range of needs from the outset. An anticipatory approach is essential to integrate equal access and inclusion as a priority in every program of the college. Intentional choices at the design and development stage can reduce the financial and administrative costs of modifications or accommodations to compensate for avoidable architectural, programmatic, or communication barriers over time. Assuring equal access is in line with Smith's principles and values and furthers the core mission of the college, including its commitment to excellence and diversity, by promoting equality, participation, dignity, and independence for all members of the Smith Community.

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