**MEANINGFUL ACCESS: TOWARDS FULL PARTICIPATION
AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AT CUNY**

*A Report by the Disability Issues Committee of the
University Faculty Senate
January 2004*

CUNY's disability community is among the fastest growing constituencies at the University. Indeed, there are some 9,000 students with documented disabilities enrolled in credit-bearing courses at CUNY. If we assume that there is a comparable population of students with disabilities enrolled in CUNY's continuing education programs, and consider its vibrant faculty and staff with disabilities, there may be as many as 18,000 to 20,000 members of the University community with disabilities.[1]

Keeping with its mission of providing postsecondary access for groups that have traditionally been excluded from college, CUNY has made historic contributions to postsecondary opportunities for New Yorkers with disabilities. These accomplishments include a) more than 20 years of federally funded model TRIO programs at Queensborough, Kingsborough, and Queens College devoted to the retention and graduation of CUNY students with disabilities, b) programs which are nationally-regarded best practices in the continuing education of blind/low vision (CCVIP at Baruch) and deaf and hard-of-hearing students (PDA at LaGuardia), c) the establishment of a line-item in the University's NYS budget to fund accommodations for more than 9,000 students with disabilities through comprehensive programs at CUNY's 19 units, d) the creation of the CATS Project, a nationally-regarded best practice in the provision of assistive technology services to the University community, e) the establishment of a Vice Chair for Disabled Students by the University Student Senate, the representative organization of CUNY's more than 200,000 students, and e) the creation of the University Faculty Senate's Committee on Disability Issues.

However, despite this considerable progress, the University is confronted by several significant challenges to access and opportunity for people with disabilities, including barriers to its facilities, programs, curricula, employment opportunities, and information technology. The University's ability to address these challenges over the next eight years, with the support of New York State, will determine the extent to which New Yorkers with disabilities will enjoy substantive access to opportunities at CUNY. In the spirit of cultivating

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[1] Because CUNY's Continuing Education students more closely mirror the general population (20% of which has disabilities) than its students enrolled in credit-bearing courses, and because state (VESID) and federal (VA) agencies are more likely to sponsor people with disabilities for continuing education than for degree programs, it is plausible to assume that there are comparable numbers of people with disabilities enrolled in CUNY's continuing education and credit bearing courses.

such meaningful access for people with disabilities at CUNY, the UFS Committee on Disability Issues is pleased to present this report for consideration as CUNY develops its Master Plan and as the Regents develops its Statewide Plan for Higher Education.[2]

I. <u>Facilities</u>

The elemental underpinnings of access and opportunity for people with disabilities at CUNY are facilities in which they learn and work. CUNY's aging capital infrastructure poses significant barriers that limit individuals with disabilities' full participation in University life.

Barriers:

> - Many of CUNY's aging facilities were built prior to the ANSI, ADAAG, and Local Law 58's architectural guidelines and are therefore fraught with architectural barriers
> - Crumbling walkways and roadways pose particular barriers to individuals with mobility-related disabilities
> - Most CUNY colleges lack appropriate, quiet, and accessible space for the administration of exams to students with disabilities under accommodative conditions
> - Classrooms are often overcrowded, which poses barriers to wheelchair-users and individuals with other mobility-related disabilities
> - Most CUNY facilities lack ADA-mandated "Areas of Rescue Assistance", which are critical to colleges' ability to safely evacuate people with disabilities in emergency situations
> - Inaccessible signage makes way-finding for people with disabilities problematic on all CUNY campuses
> - Frequently, even when facilities are in technical compliance with accessibility guidelines, access is made available in such a way that it does not provide meaningful access to people with disabilities
> - Access to handicapped parking is problematic for many CUNY colleges; for some campuses, this involves abuses of designated handicapped parking areas by unauthorized individuals; on others, this involves inadequate access to NYC permit-authorized street parking

Recommended CUNY Actions:

> - ADA Compliance Officers should be represented on committees that develop and review plans for newly constructed and renovated facilities

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[2] Much of the data for this report was collected during a 12/16/03 focus group conducted by the UFS's Disability Issues Committee. The Committee offers its thanks to Executive Vice Chancellor Louise Mirrer for her assistance in organizing this focus group and for her active participation in the process by which the group identified key access issues at CUNY.

- CUNY should hire consultants to update its University-wide evaluation of facilities, last conducted in 1992 as part of developing its ADA Transition Plan
- All university structures, regardless of landmark status or other exclusionary status, must comply with UFAS of ADAAG Guidelines.
- Install ADA-mandated "Areas of Rescue Assistance", which are critical to colleges' ability to safely evacuate people with disabilities in emergency situations. Among other features, such safe areas include fire-rated enclosures with two-way communication devices.
- All CUNY Facilities should develop emergency evacuation plans that do not rely on the "buddy-system."

Recommended State Actions:

- Increase investment in CUNY's capital budget, since every capital project at CUNY, whether or not it is specifically earmarked for ADA compliance, results in greater facilities access at CUNY
- Obligate DASNY to have greater oversight and responsibility for the ADA compliance of facilities under their authority
- A relatively modest investment in signage could significantly improve access for people with disabilities on CUNY campuses; accessibility improvements in this area should include Braille and "talking" signage

II. Curricula

The hallmark of a truly accessible and diverse University are curricula that offer postsecondary opportunity to all otherwise qualified individuals of diverse backgrounds.

Barriers:
- Some curricular barriers are rooted in the University's culture. Faculty must challenge their assumptions about and expectations for students with disabilities; these new perspectives must be reflected in the ways faculty advise students. Faculty and students with disabilities must be educated about dramatically expanding opportunities in every field.
- Principles of universal design must be integrated into the planning, implementation, and evaluation of curricula, programs, and instructional resources (e.g. labs).
- Libraries that are accessible in the design of their programs, facilities, and information technologies are crucial to curricular access.
- CUNY's assessment exams, like the ACT and CPE, are presently not equally accessible to all University students.

Recommended CUNY Actions:

- ➢ Conduct a full accessibility evaluation/audit of the University's programs and curricula
- ➢ CUNY's assessment exams, like the ACT and CPE, must be accessible to all University students.
- ➢ Provide additional support from CUNY's Central Administration (*i.e.* sign language interpreter funding and\or staff) to address disability access issues for Deaf students.

Recommended State Actions:
- ➢ Sponsor faculty training opportunities that cultivate the development and replication of best practices in universal curricular design

III. <u>Technology</u>

As instructional technology becomes a central feature of curriculum design, the accessibility of technology becomes increasingly important to University programmatic access.

Barriers:
- ➢ Library electronic databases are largely inaccessible to people with print disabilities
- ➢ Most campus general usage labs are inaccessible to people with disabilities
- ➢ Online instruction is largely inaccessible to people with print disabilities
- ➢ Most CUNY and college web resources are inaccessible to people with print disabilities
- ➢ Non-computing technologies and equipment (e.g. copy and fax machines, etc.) are largely inaccessible to people with disabilities
- ➢ Instructional video materials lack captioning for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals

Recommended CUNY Actions:
- ➢ CUNY should adopt Section 508 acquisition and online development guidelines promulgated by the US Access Board
- ➢ Textbooks and other non-print instructional material chosen for classroom and lab use must be available in accessible electronic formats from the publisher (in compliance with Chapter 219 of the laws of the State of New York) prior to their inclusion in CUNY curricula.
- ➢ Provide additional support from CUNY's Central Administration (*i.e.* staff to provide technical assistance and coordinate compliance, *etc.*) to address disability access issues in all instructional and information technology purchasing, management, maintenance, and training

- Increase faculty and staff development opportunities that emphasize the principles of universal design in online instruction and web development
- Integrate accessibility concerns into all University and college IT plans
- Integrate accessibility concerns into all college Technology Fee plans and ensure that students with disabilities have appropriate representation on these committees
- Provide support for captioning, sign language interpretation, and audio description for online videos, live lab instruction, and online events; ensure that TTY's are available in key offices and strategic locations on campuses, and that staff are trained in their use

Recommended State Actions:
- Model the California "High Tech" Centers at SUNY and CUNY community colleges to produce alternate media and act as assistive technology training units for New York State's postsecondary institutions. These Centers' responsibilities would include the provision of:
  1. faculty training on online, inclusive, accessible curricular design
  2. Section 508 acquisition and development training
  3. training and recommendations for computer labs, libraries, as well as additional technology accessibility
  4. video captioning services as well as descriptive video services
  5. information on and development services for alternative format material such as textbooks and other university publications

IV. Employment

CUNY's workforce should mirror the diversity of its student population. Towards this end, there must be greater employment opportunities for otherwise qualified individuals at CUNY.

Barriers:
- Lack of an affirmative approach to outreach to qualified candidates with disabilities
- Absence of dedicated funding to support the provision of reasonable job accommodations to CUNY employees with disabilities

Recommended CUNY Actions:
- Student aide and college assistant employment opportunities for CUNY students with disabilities must be expanded beyond campus disability services offices
- Provide training opportunities for human resource personnel, career development professionals, and faculty advisors regarding civil rights, resources, and opportunities for people with disabilities
- Better disseminate information on CUNY's reasonable accommodations policies and procedures for faculty and staff

- Model CUNY's sexual harassment education program for education and enforcement of ADA compliance
- Require the inclusion of outreach strategies for qualified candidates with disabilities in all search plans for faculty, staff, and administrative positions

Recommended State Actions:
- Provide a line in the CUNY budget to fund reasonable job accommodations for faculty and staff

V. Policy

All CUNY policies should reflect the core principles of equal access and opportunity for people with disabilities. The policies that govern the University and its colleges should reflect that accessibility and inclusion of qualified individuals with disabilities is simply a constituent feature of the way CUNY conducts business.

Barriers – Explicit references to CUNY's policies on accommodating individuals with disabilities are conspicuous by their absence in most CUNY policies and administrative procedures

Recommended CUNY Actions:
- Adopt reasonable accommodations and alternate format statements for all college and University documents, including publications, syllabi, and other communications.
- Access and inclusion of individuals with disabilities must be established as criteria for evaluating CUNY's success in pursuit of all facets of its mission; these criteria should be featured in all CUNY plans and reports
- Replace the recently phased-out 504/ADA Annual Compliance Report with a report that collects meaningful data which will allow CUNY to more effectively monitor its disability compliance efforts
- Adopt University-wide guidelines for acceptable disability documentation to ease the transition of students with disabilities from CUNY's community colleges to its senior colleges and to ensure that students are eligible for comparable accommodations and services from one CUNY college to another; this measure will ultimately improve the retention of students with disabilities
- Adopt minimum standards for college student disability services programs to ensure that eligible students with disabilities receive comparable levels of service and accommodation at all CUNY colleges
- Ensure that reasonable accommodations are considered in the planning of all CUNY meetings and conferences