

Testimony by Syd Lefkoe

Co-Chair, CUNY University Faculty Senate Committee on Disabilities Issues

At the Joint Meeting of City Council Committees: Higher Education / Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Alcoholism, Drug Abuse & Disability Services

Hearing on Accommodation and Access for Students With Disabilities at CUNY

10/19/2004 at 1:00 pm in the City Council Chambers

Note: This testimony was delivered in a shortened form at the hearing due to time constraints, and with the idea that the students needed to be heard first. Following for the record and for your information and review is the complete prepared testimony. Thank you.

I'm Syd Lefkoe, Co-Chair of the CUNY University Faculty Senate (UFS) Committee on Disabilities Issues. I'm delighted to have this opportunity to talk with you about accommodations and access for our CUNY students with disabilities.

The UFS and our committee have held a number of programs which we hope are increasing faculty understanding of tools they can employ to make their course content and activities accessible to people with disabilities. Technology access for people with disabilities has been one of our focuses. Many of these techniques make the courses better for everyone.

Our UFS Committee on Disabilities Issues has also begun work with the University to address other ways that CUNY can help make it possible for our talented students, faculty and staff with disabilities to succeed. And another committee of the UFS is planning a booklet for new faculty, and we've discussed the importance of including information on accommodations and access in that publication.

Some of you remember when many educational opportunities were off limits to: women, to blacks --- you name the group. There were complete blockades at different levels of education for a variety of groups. As these barriers fall, we all win as our community takes advantage of a broader range of skills and talents. For these changes to be successful and become old news, there are other evidences of institutional change and changes in the broader community that must accompany the initial policy change. All of this makes the programs, the mix and the future better for everyone.

I've worked as a staff member at Queens College for 34 years, where Chris Rosa has been an effective leader and resource. I have found our students motivated and exciting because of the variety of interests skills and talents they bring --- and because so many of them are doing it the hard way. Many of our students are older, and come to us with a variety of learning styles. Many have disabilities, many have a variety of family and financial pressures and responsibilities that have made their choice to come to college a difficult one. Some can only come to us on a part-time basis. CUNY's historic mission includes them all. And they do succeed.

What do we need to do so that prospective and current students with disabilities, and their parents and families, know that college and specifically CUNY are for them? We know we can do better.

Many of us work at CUNY because of our commitment to helping make issues such as the student's finances or the student's disability --- to make these become non-issues, so students can effectively set about doing what they came to our campuses to do. We want them to be able to concentrate on

(Testimony by Syd Lefkoe... continued)

their work at CUNY, and not have to spend precious time and energy resolving foreseeable problems. I too am of course very concerned about the problems described here today.

Students with disabilities who excel are not new to CUNY. In the late 1950s, one of Queens College's students who was blind received an award from President Eisenhower. But what do we need in today's complex world to make it possible for the students we admit to succeed --- at CUNY and beyond? We don't have to invent it all ourselves... there are laws, standards and best practices we can use as a guide. Beyond that, good sense and usability are of critical importance as well. And of course we need to ask our students. Some of them are here today. I just want to emphasize some of these areas that are important.

Facilities, curriculum, advisement, employment, technology, placement, conferences and policy --- these are just some of the areas that CUNY and other educational institutions need to evaluate and address. When we do this, we assure that our students (as well as faculty and staff) with a wide range of disabilities can participate fully in all classes and programs and excel, or not, based on their abilities and interests, and not be restricted based on their disabilities.

Some of these issues, but certainly not all of them, require money. Let's look at facilities as an example. We need to assure that new buildings follow all standards and best practices, and that accessible features are installed in a way that they are useable and make sense. Issues related to computer labs, signage, wayfinding and emergency plans are also very important. Modifications of old buildings need to be undertaken to meet the same criteria. Maintenance plans and regular inspections and preventative maintenance are all part of the necessary program. This all takes money, as well as the will and the time. I understand the City Council is involved with modifications to the building code, to be published in the next few months. Perhaps these can include additional usability and common sense requirements that must be met as well.

For CUNY to be effective in its efforts in all of these areas, the City needs to take general action for all New Yorkers. Our students, faculty and staff with disabilities have to be able to get to the College by reliable public transportation whenever they need to get to us. Students have told me this is a major obstacle. And our graduates need to be able to find employment that they know will provide the access and accommodations they need in the job, so that they have the opportunity to excel as we know --- and they need to know --- they can in the field in which they have prepared themselves.

We welcome more opportunities for partnerships and to learn more --- and to help avoid and resolve problems facing our students, faculty and staff with disabilities.

Thank you for this opportunity to work together on this important issue.