

Chapter 12

Beyond Handicap, Pity, and Inspiration: Disability and Diversity in Workforce Development Education and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Individuals with disabilities represent a substantial portion of the U.S. population and workforce. Yet, disability is often not meaningfully included in diversity and inclusion efforts in the workplace or in higher education. This chapter focuses on ten misperceptions that have fueled the marginalization of disability in diversity and inclusion efforts. These ten misperceptions revolve around a range of issues: Legal, human and practical. We provide an overview of each misperception and discuss implications for diversity and workforce development practitioners, with a focus on higher education settings. In conclusion, we urge readers to consider their own organizations in light of each of these ten misperceptions.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past four decades, the concept of workforce diversity has evolved (Green & Kalev, 2010). Yet, one constant has remained throughout this evolution — disability continues to be seen as the “forgotten cousin” of workforce development and diversity programming. Despite the fact that close to one in five Americans report having a disability, and that more than half of those Americans with disabilities are in their working years, ages 18-64 (Erickson, Lee & von Schrader, 2014), disability is still perceived as somehow a “lesser” form of diversity. This has been demonstrated over the past two decades as various sectors of the contemporary workforce report being inadequately prepared and equipped to address disability issues in the workforce (AACB, 1992; Anderson, 2003; Folsom-Meek, Nearing, Groteluschen, & Krampf, 1999; Muller & Haase, 1994). Others report that disability has simply been an “add-on” feature to broader diversity agendas and programs (Myers, 2009). Though disability often receives a passing reference in diversity efforts, it is rarely included with meaningful intent in implementation (AACSB, 1992; Muller & Parham, 1998).

What are the assumptions that have fueled this notion that disability is somehow a lesser form of diversity? How have these assumptions impacted workforce development efforts for people with disabilities? Most importantly, how have these assumptions impacted the field of workforce development generally? How might programming in the field itself be limited by not meaningfully including a major diversity population in our country today?

MISPERCEPTIONS FUELING THE MINIMIZATION OF DISABILITY IN DIVERSITY INITIATIVES

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, we will identify and challenge some tacit assumptions that have historically fueled the positioning of disability as a set-aside piece of workforce diversity and workforce development efforts. Second, we will discuss how each identified misperception has impacted the field of workforce development practice and what workforce development educators and professionals must do to change this misperception.

Misperception #1: Disability Is Rare

The view of disability as a lesser diversity population is surprising, given the growing prevalence of disability among the U.S. population. Individuals people with disabilities represent one of the largest diversity populations in our country, in our schools, and in our workplaces today. There are currently about 56.7 million people with disabilities in the U.S., representing nearly 20% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Further, the number of people with disabilities in the U.S. is likely to increase, largely due to the aging of the U.S. population. It is estimated that by 2040 there will be about 82.3 million older persons in the U.S., twice as many as there were in the year 2000 (U.S. Administration for Community Living, 2015).

There is a clear connection between aging and disability. While the prevalence of disability is a little over one in ten among Americans in the working-age population of 21-64, it increases to one in four for Americans ages 65-74, and half of Americans over the age of 75 report having a disability (Erickson,

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