

DISABILITY STUDIES

Disability Studies refers generally to the examination of disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon. In contrast to clinical, medical, or therapeutic perspectives on disability, Disability Studies focuses on how disability is defined and represented in society. From this perspective, disability is not a characteristic that exists in the person so defined, but a construct that finds its meaning in social and cultural context.

Disability Studies is a vibrant and diverse “field” or “area of inquiry.” First of all, it is interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary. No single academic discipline can place a claim on Disability Studies. Rather, the field is informed by scholarship from such different disciplines as history, sociology, literature, political science, law, policy studies, economics, cultural studies, anthropology, geography, philosophy, theology, gender studies, communications and media studies, and the arts.

Second, Disability Studies covers an incredibly diverse group of people. People who are blind, deaf, use wheelchairs, have chronic pain, learn at a slower pace than other people, and so on have vastly different experiences and perspectives. Does it make sense to lump such different human beings under a simple category such as disability? It does—not because they are the same in any biological or philosophical sense, but because society has placed them in this category, with consequences for how they are viewed and treated by the majority presumed to be nondisabled.

Finally, it is usually easier to define what Disability Studies is **not** (not medicine, rehabilitation, special education, physical or occupational therapy, and professions oriented toward the cure, prevention, or treatment of disabilities) than to specify what it **is**. Although Disability Studies scholars generally subscribe to the “minority group model” of disability—the view that the status of people as a minority shapes their experiences in society, they agree on little else. For example, some scholars view disability in terms of culture and identity, while others see disability as a label and a social construct.

Scholars even use different language to refer to the people at the center of inquiry in Disability Studies. “Disabled person” is used to draw attention to the centrality of disability in individual identity; “person with a disability” or “people first language” conveys the idea that having a disability is secondary to the people’s identity as human beings; “person labeled disabled” (mentally retarded, mentally ill, and so on) focuses on how disability is a socially constructed definition imposed on people. Within sub-groups, minor variations in language and spelling can carry tremendous significance. Thus, “deaf person” and “Deaf person” mean very different things, with the latter emphasizing membership in a culture defined linguistically.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Disability Studies: Information And Resources (November 2003) edited and compiled by Steven Taylor, Bonnie Shoultz, and Pamela Walker is an extensive revision of the information package produced in 1998 and reflects the diversity of the field of Disability Studies and includes contributions representing different disability groups, perspectives, and disciplines. The information package is divided into nine sections: Disability Studies Books, Chapters, and Articles; Films and Documentaries; a listing of Academic Programs in Disability Studies; Periodicals; Special/Feature Issues of Periodicals; Organizations; Special Interest Groups of Professional Organizations; Internet Resources; and a special section, Resources for Teaching Disability Studies, which identifies books and readings on Disability Studies that can be used in courses in various academic disciplines. (113 pages). To request a copy, please call 1-800-894-0826.

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Disability Studies at Syracuse University

<http://disabilitystudies.syr.edu/what/disabilitystudiesatSU.aspx>

Disability Studies applies social, cultural, historical, and philosophical perspectives to the study of disability in society. Building on the tradition of Syracuse University's School of Education in the area of disability, Disability Studies is designed to help students understand and work to overcome the barriers to full participation of people with disabilities in society. Consistent with the Syracuse tradition, Disability Studies stands at the forefront of change and new ways of thinking about and accommodating people with disabilities. While it adopts a cross-disability perspective, it devotes special attention to people who have been labeled as developmentally disabled or mentally retarded. Current graduate students have interests in people with a broad range of disabilities. The Cultural Foundations of Education (CFE) program offers a concentration and a Certificate of Advanced Study (CAS) in disability studies. Students enrolled in the master's and Ph.D. programs in CFE can concentrate in disabilities studies as part of their graduate program. The CAS in Disability Studies provides formal recognition of advanced graduate study in this area to students in programs outside of CFE, including students who are not enrolled in any master's or doctoral program at Syracuse University.

For further information about Disability Studies at Syracuse University, please contact: Steven J. Taylor, Ph.D., Coordinator, Disability Studies at 315-443-3851 or via email at staylo01@syr.edu

NEW JOINT DEGREE PROGRAM AT SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Dean Hannah Arterian of the College of Law and Acting Dean Emily Robertson of the School of Education are pleased to announce a new Joint Degree Program between the College of Law and the School of Education. This new program will enable students interested in law and education, particularly disability studies, to complete their studies towards a JD and MS in Education in three years, the same amount of time it takes now to complete the JD alone.

The new joint law and education program is the result of efforts by Professor Arlene Kanter of the College of Law, who is also the Director of Clinical Legal Education at the College of Law, and Professor Steve Taylor, Coordinator of Disability Studies in the School of Education. According to Professor Kanter, "This new joint degree program is unique and will build upon the well-established and nationally and internationally renowned strengths of Syracuse University in the disability field. Few universities have such a long and successful track record in research, academic programming, advocacy, and faculty productivity in the disability field than does Syracuse University."

The origins of disability studies at Syracuse University can be traced to before disability studies was recognized as an area of scholarly inquiry, when the late Burton Blatt established the Center on Human Policy in 1971. More recently, in 1995, Syracuse University became the first university in the country to have a formal academic program in disability studies. This graduate program has attracted Masters and Ph.D. students from around the world. According to Professor Taylor, "This new joint degree program will strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration on disability law and policy between the Law College and School of Education."

For more information about this joint degree program, please contact Professor Arlene Kanter at kantera@law.syr.edu, or by phone at (315) 443-4582.

This fact sheet is available in alternate formats upon request.
Prepared by Steven J. Taylor, November 2003

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