

Creating DST 100 Introduction to Disability Studies

2017-2018 Provost Diversity Curriculum Development Grant Statement of Completion

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Project Goal: The goal of the project was to collaboratively develop an interdisciplinary, sustainable introductory course for the Disability Studies academic minor, which was approved for the 2017-2018 Academic year.

Process: During Summer 2017, the Disability Studies steering committee (the submitters listed above) met to begin planning and coordinating the course. During the initial meetings, we discussed the identity of the minor, and what skills, knowledge, tools, and frameworks we felt were most essential for students to gain through the course.

We agreed on a course description:

This course is required for the proposed Disability Studies Minor. It provides students with an overview of the ways disability is positioned within a number of intellectual frameworks, including the political, rhetorical, social, educational, historical, and legal.

The outline of the course content was collaboratively built, and we worked together to generate a list of resources, readings, course materials, and other course content; the outline of the course is listed below:

- Course Introduction
- Disability Studies as a Discipline
- Disability as/and Identity and Social Status
- Disability Law
- Barriers to Participation and Inclusion
- Universal Design
- Representations of Disability: Disability in Art, Literature, Film, and Sport
- Historic, Current, and Future Issues in Disability
- Course reflection

We also generated learning objectives and outcomes:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the historic, social and rhetorical constructions of disability.
- Explore the theoretical frameworks of disability studies.
- Develop a fundamental knowledge of foundational texts in the field.
- Apply critical and nuanced awareness of disability to local and global issues and events.

The discussions and meetings allowed us, as a committee, to better understand what we most wanted to accomplish through the course, and what types of learning experiences we wanted students to have.

We also agreed that it was essential that course be universally designed, in order to ensure we were providing full access, inclusion, and participation opportunities, and to model for students some of the best practices of universal design. As such, we worked to account for learner variability, to provide options for students to engage in the learning process and to demonstrate their learning, and to make sure all of our course materials were accessible. Part of the funding, then, was used to purchase resources, tools, and materials on universal design. Additional support and funding was provided by the Office of Disability Services, Justice Studies, Sociology and Anthropology, the Hart School, and WRTC. The remainder of the funding was used to provide faculty stipends for work over the summer, and/or work overloads.

After agreeing to common objectives and descriptions, as well as brainstorming together, individual steering committee members further designed their assigned section of the course. The faculty generated course readings, films, and other materials; provided lectures, notes, or other self-generated instructional content; designed assignments and other learning activities for their unit; and imported content into the course on Canvas.

Before the semester started, we met again to look at the course as a whole, and ensure that it was meeting the intended objectives.

In Fall 2017, the course launched, with Matt Trybus serving as the primary course administrator, but with the other members of the steering committee participating in and observing the course. The first iteration of the course had 10 undergraduate students, many of whom were declared Disability Studies minors. However, several other students with compelling academic, career, or personal interests in disability were granted admission into the course. In addition, KT Vaughan,

Associate Dean in Libraries and Educational Technologies, asked to participate in the course as a student based on her own professional interests and projects.

Overall, we felt the course was successful. We are confident that we built strong course materials and learning activities for students. The ongoing frustrations, from our perspective, have to do with the online nature of the course. It was the administrator's first time teaching an online course, so there were some issues that arose related to technology, and some of the unique challenges of online courses, such as clear communication in an online setting, and course rhythms in an online format. It was a challenge establishing a sense of community in an online format, and, truly, we all missed having face-to-face interaction with students. On the other hand, the comments we were reading on the discussion boards were heartening: it was clear to us that students were gaining valuable new questions, tools, and frameworks. It was exciting to see students applying and connecting the course materials and concepts to their own lives and futures. The course administrator brought valuable perspective, and we appreciated the way the collaboratively designed course allowed students access to diverse areas of expertise and insight.

At the end of the semester, student feedback was solicited through several means:

- Course evaluations: while participation was low, students did report positive experiences in the course, including indicating that the course gave them entirely new frameworks for understanding and approaching disability; few concerns were expressed, but many of them related to difficulties with the online format, such as self-motivation, and frustration with the lack of face-to-face interaction
- Student reflections: all students submitted reflections on the semester; reflections likewise indicated that the course raised new questions, and offered new and exciting perspectives for students
- Informal conversations: many of the students who were DST minors were also taking other courses with DST faculty; as such, we were able to discuss with students what their learning experience was like; the positive feedback had to do with developing new tools for thinking about disability, and the negative feedback was related to the nature of online courses, such as meeting deadlines independently, and the lack of feeling of genuine interaction with peers (while discussion boards are a feature of the class, some students felt it was hard to invest the time, or authenticity, in discussion boards when there is a lack of face-to-face interaction)

The DST steering committee met again at the end of the semester, to discuss the course, including some minor revisions to be made to the course. We also submitted a proposal to the JMU Diversity Conference, which was accepted.

We ran another section of the DST 100 in the Spring. This time the launch was much smoother, and our confidence in the course was higher. Seven students participated in the Spring section of the course. We were able to make some changes in communication and workflow that improved the course, and we were also able to include Disability Awareness Week in March in our learning activities.

Also in March, the steering committee, plus two Disability Studies minors, participated in the session, Meaningful Access and Inclusion: Reflections on Year 1 of the Disability Studies Minor at JMU. At the presentation, we discussed the building of the course and the minor, shared information about Disability Studies as a minor and field, offered faculty and student perspectives, and opened up opportunities for collaboration and discussion. Students reiterated the idea that Disability Studies has changed how they think about disability, and have offered them valuable and applicable skills and knowledge for their academic, personal, and professional lives.

Prompted by the positive response at the Diversity Conference, the steering committee proposed a May Symposium session, which was accepted. In May, we presented “Crippling the Curriculum: Infusing our Work with Disability Studies.” The committee is in conversation about other ways that we will continue the work we have begun, including by building partnerships across campus.

The committee would like to thank the Provost’s Faculty Diversity Council, as well as the Provost, for support of this project. We feel it has had an important impact diversity at JMU, including by highlighting the importance of the inclusion of disability in conversations about diversity.