UT Disability Cultural Center Survey Report

OVERVIEW

Disability Cultural Centers (DCCs) serve as spaces of connection, gathering, and collaboration for students, faculty, staff, and community members with disabilities. This DCC survey was collectively created by the Disability Advocacy Student Coalition, SG Disability & Inclusion Agency, Natural Sciences Council, Liberal Arts Council, and Senate of College Councils to gather student feedback and support towards establishing a DCC on UT Austin's campus. The survey was conducted from March to April 2021, with questions seeking to understand experiences of disability, access, and inclusivity at UT.

Over 90% of survey respondents expressed support for a campus DCC. Responses to open ended questions focused on common themes including: 1) limited campus conversations about disability identity and community, 2) a need for systems of support and community engagement that extend beyond SSD, and 3) the importance of DCCs as a welcoming hub for students with disabilities. While most responses were centered around the undergraduate experience, some also indicated a distinct lack of disability support resources at the graduate-level. In sharing this summary, our hope is to continue addressing key issues of accessibility at UT.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- [ ] Total of 855 survey respondents: 680 undergraduate students, 159 graduate students, 16 classified as "other" (alumni, staff, admitted students, etc.)
- [ ] Top three colleges with the highest number of respondents were the College of Liberal Arts (44.43%), College of Natural Sciences (21.56%), and Moody College of Communication (9.01%).
- [ ] Of the surveyed participants, 626 individuals indicated that they have/had a disability, 393 indicated that they do not have a disability, and 45 preferred to not disclose.

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1	Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD/ADD)	12.03%	128
2	Autism	3.95%	42
3	Blind/Visually Impaired	0.66%	7
4	Deaf/Hard of Hearing	1.97%	21
5	Learning Disability other than ADHD (Dyslexia, etc.)	3.38%	36
6	Medical Disability/Chronic Illness	7.89%	84
7	Physical Disability (Mobility Impairments)	2.26%	24
8	Psychological Disability (Mental Health Disorders)	23.03%	245
9	Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)	0.94%	10
10	Temporary Disability	1.13%	12
11	Other	1.60%	17
12	I do not have a disability	36.94%	393
13	Prefer not to disclose	4.23%	45

DEMOGRAPHICS (CONT.)

When asked how they self-identify, respondents indicated the following. The purpose of this question was to respect and understand people's self-identified labels. Examples of different language specified by respondents included neurodivergent, chronically ill, differently abled, or no label at all.

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1	Disabled student	6.45%	58
2	Student with a disability	15.35%	138
3	Unsure	15.68%	141
4	I had a disability, but do not anymore	1.89%	17
5	I use different language:	3.23%	29
6	Do not have a disability	50.95%	458
7	Prefer not to disclose	6.45%	58

CURRENT CAMPUS SENTIMENTS

- 34.7% of respondents somewhat agreed that UT is an inclusive and welcoming space for all students, faculty, and staff.
- 48% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that UT campus and buildings are accessible for all people.
- Among respondents who self-identify as a "disabled student," "student with a disability," and/or use different language, 23.3% somewhat disagreed with the statement that they feel accepted and comfortable expressing themselves as a disabled person/person with a disability in a classroom environment. Additionally, 49.2% somewhat agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed that they feel accepted as a disabled student/student with a disability in a social space (i.e.: student organizations, extracurricular activities).
- 586 respondents (82.07%) believed that UT does not currently prioritize disability as an aspect of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on campus, whereas 128 respondents (17.93%) indicated that they do believe disability identity is prioritized.

Quotes from select responses are included below:

"There's not much awareness spread about disabilities in general or different types of disabilities and most abled students still have a pretty fundamental misunderstanding of disability in general and what it's like for disabled students to attend school and need accommodations."

"The campus itself is hard for people who are not able bodied to move around easily around campus...Lectures and learning need to be accommodating for all students and it hurts to hear professors say things like 'I can't change my whole course for ONE student.'"

"I think that UT's SSD program, Disability Awareness and Inclusion Month, scholarships, and

outreach program are some of the most important ways that UT can continue to *prioritize disability as an aspect of DEI efforts on campus.*"

"We *don't see disability being celebrated or accepted* anywhere except in the student services building in the disability office. If you compare it to other groups UT students are involved in like the gender and sexuality center where there are events and club meetings for people to engage in that aspect of their identity, there is not a similar space or club for students with disabilities."

"By demanding extensive psychological paperwork from students, such as myself, without health insurance and who have utilized the full extent of the psychiatric care UT offers at low cost, UT *gatekeeps who can and cannot ask for accommodations.*"

"I think that in general *UT doesn't particularly prioritize 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' as much as they probably should.* I know that some people in my department have had issue[s] with getting accessible parking that is actually close to the building that we work in, and/or getting access to what they need for teaching with a physical disability."

Efforts to prioritize disability identity are made "through introducing freshmen at orientation to disability-related resources that UT offers like SSD, StuGov [Student Government], and accessibility maps of campus. However, I *don't think it is something that is regularly addressed and publicly supported by the administration.*"

SUPPORT FOR A CAMPUS DCC

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92.7% of respondents (635/685 responses) believed that having a Disability Cultural Center (DCC) on campus would be beneficial. Moreover, 62.7% (401/640 respondents) indicated that they would use a DCC space. Excerpts from salient quotes are included below, explaining primary reasons behind students' support for a DCC.

Demonstrations of student support:

"I think disabled students need a *permanent space to foster community* and have access to resources at UT. I have personally seen how the GSC [Gender and Sexuality Center] and the MEC [Multicultural Engagement Center] have helped..."

"…It's *easy to feel alienated in able-bodied spaces,* so to have an accommodating space where you can feel safe I think would help so many students. If I had access to a Disability Cultural Center as a freshman I think I would have done so much better socially, mentally, and academically."

"Coming from *previous campuses with disability cultural centers,* I understand the importance of these spaces to fostering inclusive, safe spaces."

"Resources on ableism and disability are difficult to find on campus and are not centralized for those who want to make use of them. *Students who belong to the disabled community need a community space outside of institutional spaces* like DASC [Disability Advocacy Student Coalition] and SSD [Services for Students with Disabilities].

"...*Increasing visibility increases acceptance* and over time reduces barriers."
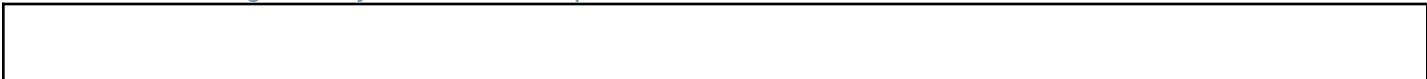
"This would honestly mean so much to me…we are constantly told that our disability is a bad thing, something to hide, and the problem…If there was a space where we could have pride in our identity and meet together, that would be so amazing."

"I'd feel more welcome on campus - I guess it gets tiring trying to find a place to belong in a neuro-typical, abled campus."

"I think having a DCC [Disability Cultural Center] would be helpful because it would make tremendous leaps in normalizing a culture that accepts and is inclusive of disabled folks. Students currently don't have a center or hub for their specific disabilities, and the closest thing would be SSD [Services for Students with Disabilities] with specifically services, not any form of cultural or community engagement. Having a DCC would allow UT students and staff to become better educated on disabilities, create a sense of unity within the longhorn family and community, and better serve the needs of an underrepresented minority on campus."

"As a disabled student, I don't feel like simply having a disabilities services department is enough. I crave having a community of disabled people with which I am able to connect and share experiences with. I crave that kind of camaraderie and support. Giving us a community space where we are able to support one another *is* a disabilities service in a way; one that would strengthen, empower, and enable us to take our education even further…"

DCC RESOURCES & SUGGESTIONS

- Popular programming and resources that respondents hoped to see within a DCC included: 1) workshops and/or trainings focused on topics such as Disability Justice and intersectionality, 2) study/hangout spaces, 3) various community building opportunities, 4) assistive technology resources, and 5) a Disability Resource Library. Other suggestions included a quiet room for individuals with sensory disabilities, student advocacy programs (such as a leadership board or peer program), advising resources, town halls, and partnerships with UT RecSports to coordinate athletic and exercise programs. Importantly, a mix of in-person and online programming should be offered to provide broadest access.

- Suggestions for potential DCC locations provided by respondents included the WCP (formerly SAC), SSB, and Texas Union. Students noted the importance of housing the DCC in a centrally located building with a main accessible entrance on relatively flat terrain. The center would ideally be located near a bus stop to increase accessibility for commuting students who use public transport.

NEXT STEPS & CONTINUED ADVOCACY

- Meet with the Faculty & Staff Working Group and other campus partners to create a formal DCC support statement to present to university leadership.
- Write a Joint Resolution based on the survey's findings to showcase student interest and support for a campus DCC. Research grants and additional external funding sources.
- Additional information about the DCC campaign can be found here: Daily Texan article and op-ed feature.