

ACS Mini-Diversity Grant for Student Led Collaboration with Faculty/Staff
Southwestern University
Final Report, Fall, 2007
Report Submitted by Kathleen Juhl
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Date(s) of Project: September 2-November 11, 2007 (includes project development, writing, rehearsal, and performance time)

Amount Awarded: \$2500

Original Goals and objectives:

1. Create a theatre project which will tour to various sites (both outdoor and indoor) on the Southwestern University campus (with the audience following the actors “pied piper” or golf tournament fashion from place to place) that encourages action in a variety of ways, particularly in the areas of fund-raising for accessibility equipment and awareness about everyday life issues faced by people with disabilities on our campus.
2. Empower disabled students, faculty and staff to live joyous and productive lives on our campus.
3. Create conversations and dialogue--through providing vivid experiential theatre scenarios--about ongoing activism and interventions for the campus and beyond.

Revised Goals and Objectives

We had originally planned to invite junior high and high school students to participate in the performance. Creating the production took so much time—two and a half months—that we decided to focus on our own campus community. So we revised our third goal, above, in terms of making an impact beyond the Southwestern campus. Otherwise, we adhered to our original goals and objectives though conversations will be ongoing in terms of how the Southwestern University community and administration responds to the issues the show brought up about both the physical plant of the campus and awareness of everyday issues faced by people with disabilities on campus.

In what ways were the goals and objectives met?

1. We created the production through a collective process in which everyone, including the faculty sponsor, took on equal roles. This method of building a theatre production is one that has never been done at Southwestern, and it was quite successful though we learned a lot about how to improve the process when we do it again.

We spent approximately three weeks developing ideas for the show, doing research, and working in two four hour sessions with members of the Austin, Texas-based disability theatre company, Actual Lives, who pushed us to begin our writing process. We worked through story-telling circles and through improvisational games and exercises inspired by Augusto Boal and other Theatre for Social Justice theorists and practitioners to identify the issues we wanted to develop and write into scenarios. During this development phase, we named the show, *A Mystical Quest to Slay Normalcy*, because we wanted to focus on our original idea that it is not people with disabilities who have the problems but that it is the physical, academic, and social environment in which we live that causes problems. We decided to focus intensely on this idea of “normalcy” in what became a successful attempt (based on post-show discussions and surveys) to convince audience members that people with disabilities are simply human beings just like everyone else whose only difference is that, for certain tasks and situations, they must negotiate the world in ways that are different for people who do not have disabilities.

2. Many students who were part of the collective had visible and invisible disabilities. Three use wheelchairs, two are deaf or hearing impaired, one is blind, two have dyslexia, three have varying degrees of

disabling depression, one has narcolepsy and cataplexy, others were medicated for ADD or ADHD and other intellectual disabilities as children. We were assisted in our process by two faculty members who use wheelchairs. All members of the collective engaged in a process that was difficult at times when stories were hard to share or scenarios difficult to write because they represented problematic interactions between Southwestern's physical, academic, or social environment. But there was also much laughter and fun. In both cases, all members of the collective reported feeling supported and empowered by the project. Collective members said: "I think that it enhanced my understanding and rapport with the disability community and that, in and of itself, is joyous and rewarding." "Disability gives many gifts. It endows people with the strength to unite for a cause, with the compassion to see humanity in everyone around them, and with the boldness to speak openly about the things which frighten them most." "I believe that the show helped everyone see that we all have something that we deal with, whether it's a disability or something else. The important thing is how we deal with what we have. There are so many joys in life, sometimes you just have to look in a different way to see them." "For me personally, this show was a life changing event."

3. We created conversations and dialogue partly because we did, indeed, design the show as a touring production. The cast and audience walked all over campus, viewing scenarios both outside on sidewalks and inside buildings. As we walked, from place to place, the audience was constantly in conversation both among themselves and with the collective. I had many fascinating conversations with audience members while we traveled, many of whom said that they were seeing the campus in a completely new way.

We began in one of our theatres with a scenario about the lack of practical wheelchair seating in that space. We created a scenario about a fraternity guy who encounters a guy in a wheelchair at a rush party and calls him "handicapped" instead of asking him his name and trying to get to know him. We entered a classroom building that has extremely inconvenient wheelchair access to a large lecture classroom that forces students in wheelchairs to either sit at the back of the room or in front about two feet from the professor. We then played out a scenario in which a teacher who is in a wheelchair discusses mixing students with and without disabilities in public school classrooms. We staged a scenario in which two students who use wheelchairs and have cerebral palsy had a game show fight over who had the worst cerebral palsy. There was a disability dating game and a scenario about people with disabilities having sex based on the game Twister (PG content). In one scenario a group we called "The Superheroes of Equality" couldn't get their acts together enough to help a woman in a scooter who had dropped her pen because they were all interested in their own agendas. This scenario featured a "healing" by a preacher who claimed to have healed the woman in the scooter, played by a student who actually can walk, though slowly, and uses the scooter so she can save her energy and get to class on time. At the end of the scenario, she picked up her own pen and drove away in her scooter while the "Superheroes" argued. The show explored problems with parents who complain to administrators without consulting their sons and daughters, waiters in restaurants who talk only to able-bodied people, the trouble young disabled women have finding men to date who don't make a big issue of their disabilities, problems with bikes blocking sidewalks and push buttons on automatic doors, and a final scenario about the joys of disabled life.

Most of the scenarios were very funny. Audience members laughed and were engaged in the performance. Afterwards, we did a "forum theatre" scene (based on the techniques of Augusto Boal) that focused on normalcy—the ways in which many Southwestern students are pressured to be "normal" by being more concerned about grades and graduate schools and careers rather than enjoying life. Forum theatre invites audience members to replace the protagonist of a short scene who loses an argument in an attempt to brainstorm solutions to the problem. Audience members at all the performances engaged in the forum theatre activity after which lively post-show discussions were facilitated by one member of the collective. The fact that the "forum theatre" scene focused on issues all Southwestern students could relate to helped us focus the post-show discussion on the idea that disabled or not, students have similar concerns. Although some members of the collective and some audience members were confused by the "forum" or felt it

detracted from the disability focus of the show, it did allow us to engage audience members in discussions about the ways expectations for “normal” lives and behavior create problems for people with disabilities. The hegemonic pervasiveness of cultural expectations about “normalcy” means that such expectations are often not visible. Many people in the audience expressed surprise at their own ignorance of the issues and the ways people with disabilities are often marginalized because the culture expects “normal” bodies and behaviors.

The discussions after the “forum” also included productive conversations about how the physical plant of Southwestern can be improved to make life easier for people with disabilities and how people with disabilities and those without can interact socially in more effective ways. After the final performance, there was a very difficult conversation during which a young man claimed to have seen people with disabilities healed by Christian ministers and who dominated the discussion with his inability to understand why anyone would want to live with a disability and questioned how they could possibly be happy. One member of our collective responded by giving a beautiful speech about how blindness had enhanced her appreciation of music and her desire to be a music teacher and singer. Other members of the collective who have disabilities expressed similar sentiments. Audience members, overall, honestly expressed their naiveté about the issues the show presented prior to seeing it and expressed determination to change their behavior toward people with disabilities and to spread the word about ways the situation could be improved on our campus.

We had a productive meeting with the Senior Administrative Staff of the university on November 26, 2007 which included Mr. Richard L. Anderson, Vice President for Fiscal Affairs; Mr. Gerald D. Brody, Vice President for Student Life; Dr. James W. Hunt, Provost and Dean of the Faculty; Mr. C. Richard McKelvey, Vice President for Institutional Advancement; Dr. J. Eric McKinney, Interim University Chaplain; Mr. Tom Oliver, Vice President for Enrollment Services; Ms. Francie Schroeder, Executive Assistant to the President; Dr. Jake B. Schrum, President of the University; and Dr. Ron Swain, Senior Advisor to the President for Assessment and Strategic Planning. Dr. Mike Leese, Associate Vice President and Dean of Students and Mr. Robert D. Mathis, Associate Vice President for Facilities and Campus Services were also in attendance. Our major question was whether or not the university could initiate a special fund-raising campaign to encourage donors to give money to improve issues of physical accessibility on campus including more push button doors, more improvements in rest room facilities, key cards for residence halls and apartment doors (a plan that is already underway with completion scheduled for 2009), door threshold accessibility for all downstairs apartment doors and other doors on campus, more ramps to make buildings and inside spaces such as the chancel of the chapel wheelchair accessible, a major renovation of the Jones Theatre to provide convenient wheelchair seating and auditory enhancement equipment for deaf and hearing impaired audience members, and repairs on uneven sidewalks all over campus. We also asked that a university van be equipped with a wheelchair lift so that students who use wheelchairs could go to off-campus parties and events or simply have access to the van for impromptu social events. President Schrum said that he and the Institutional Advancement Office would begin to identify donors who would be interested in giving the university money for such improvements. When the collective told the administrators that one of the members of the Actual Lives disability theatre company wanted to donate her ACS funded honorarium to begin a fund specifically for accessibility enhancements, President Schrum and Vice President for Fiscal Affairs, Mr. Richard Anderson agreed that such a fund could be created. To help with these efforts, President Schrum asked if the collective could work on a short DVD that would illustrate accessibility problems on campus and could be shown to donors who could not visit campus to see the problems for themselves. In a meeting of the collective on November 27, 2007, student members offered to do the filming for the DVD during the weeks of December 3-14, 2007 and one member of the collective volunteered to edit it over the Winter Break. Since no members of the Center for Academic Success who provide books in Braille and on tape and note takers for blind students and students who have learning or hearing disabilities were present, Provost Hunt took notes about those issues which will be communicated to the staff in that office. Finally, Mr. Bob Mathis, Associate Vice President for Facilities and Campus Services said that he was planning an audit of

the campus to identify accessibility problems and asked if members of the collective would accompany him on a tour of campus in January of 2008 to help identify specific issues. Overall, the meeting was very successful and I received an email from President Schrum which said, “Warmest thanks to you and our students for your presentation to the Senior Staff. The students' concern for making Southwestern more accessible clearly was evident and their presentation crisp and straightforward.”

Informal conversations after the performances of the show have been, in only two weeks, fairly prolific. One member of the collective spent a good deal of time at a fraternity party discussing issues of disability with friends and acquaintances. One student approached a member of the collective and told her the show made her feel guilty. This led to a productive conversation about the fact that there is no need to feel guilty but there is a need to understand the issues, interact with disabled people as human beings and not focus on their disabilities. The roommate of another member of the collective has had several productive conversations with friends about disability issues. Several students asked members of the collective how they could become advocates and activists for disability issues on campus. One young man was so affected by the show that he is determined to become an activist for disabilities and other issues and has set up a meeting with Southwestern's Associate Vice President for Facilities and Campus Services to talk about how he can help make Southwestern a more accessible campus. All of the members of the collective who attended the post-show meeting on November 27, 2007 reported that students, faculty, and staff who saw the production had engaged them in conversations about the issues and wanted to know more.

Evaluation/assessment process

We created a pre-show survey to assess the campus community's knowledge of and attitudes toward disability issues. We distributed this survey approximately one month prior to the performance of the show. One-hundred people responded to the survey. Overall, the survey showed that prior to the show, members of the campus community had some experience in their own lives with disability (40% had friends or family members with disabilities). However, 35% of those who responded to the survey reported feeling discomfort when interacting with disabled people. Most respondents felt that invisible disabilities like dyslexia and mental health issues had as much impact on peoples' lives as physical disabilities (76%). Respondents claimed that they do not leave objects like bikes in the middle of sidewalks or in front of push buttons for automatic doors; however, this is still a common occurrence on our campus. People who responded to the survey were most likely people who are more educated about disability issues and do not engage in these behaviors. 16% of respondents admitted that they often forget to make accommodations for people with disabilities when they plan off campus events; 29% of respondents claimed they always make accommodations. This result does not match the experience of students, faculty, and staff with disabilities who spoke with the collective. Rarely are wheelchair accessible vans made available for disabled students who want to attend off-campus events, and one faculty member who uses a wheelchair reported that she has been excluded from official university meetings held at faculty members' houses that are not accessible even when she pointed out the problem and requested a change of venue. 20% of respondents reported that Southwestern was a friendly place for people with disabilities, 66% reported that Southwestern is an “okay” place for people with disabilities, and nearly 10% felt that Southwestern is either not a friendly place for people with disabilities or that it is not a good school for students with disabilities to attend. When we asked respondents to rank the most challenging issues for people with disabilities on campus, accessibility (ramps, Braille, and sound amplification systems in classrooms) was ranked first by 49% of respondents. Living in the residence halls and apartments was ranked as the second most challenging issue by 33% of respondents. Other issues that were ranked second by significant numbers of respondents were that students with disabilities were often left out of social events both on and off campus (22%), that the university does not provide enough financial resources to meet the needs of people with disabilities (21%), and that policies that guide faculty and staff that affect students' with disabilities living and learning situations were not adequate (18%). Several other issues were ranked as significantly affecting the lives of disabled campus community members, particularly students, such as a lack of awareness by faculty about how to meet the special needs

of people with disabilities, the fact that able-bodied students often do not include them in social events, disabled students' personal perspectives about their disabilities, and a lack of adequate support by administrative staff.

The post-show survey was designed to determine whether or not the show, forum theatre presentation, and post-show discussion provided audience members with new ideas about how to approach disability issues and people with disabilities on campus. For seven out of the ten questions we asked, audience members indicated that the show gave them ideas for how to deal with issues like the language they use in everyday life (such as calling people "retarded" or "lame" because they made a mistake) and in their interactions with people with disabilities. The audience reported being enlightened about making generalizations about people with disabilities like "people with disabilities are brave or nice or amazing or never have sex or aren't normal." Faculty members got ideas about how to include disability issues into the curricula for their classes and students got ideas for ways to include disabled students in social activities. A large percentage of the audience reported learning new facts and knowledge about people with disabilities and their issues. They also reported learning new ways to address pejorative and culturally insensitive name-calling, jokes, and behavior toward people with disabilities when they hear or experience them in everyday life. 71% of respondents found the show helpful in raising their awareness, 42% reported that the discussion was helpful, and 27% found the forum theatre presentation helpful. (The survey asked audience members to circle all elements of the experience they found helpful accounting for the more than 100% response).

Written comments in the post-show survey (which nearly 44% of the audience took the time to write) were generally positive though there was lots of constructive criticism. Many praised the show with comments like "This is one of the most revolutionary things I have seen in a long time;" "Keep talking about it [disability]. Make it impossible to ignore;" "Southwestern University needs to actively recruit more individuals that are differently-abled. This show was an amazing testament to the courage, challenges and joy of dealing with normalcy;" "This show was an eye-opener;" "The show was helpful at continually reminding me about my biases;" "Loved the humor; and "Loved the show. Loved that it moved. Loved the discussion and the forum...It opens your eyes to problems around campus." Audience members also pointed out disabilities that were not featured prominently in the show like intellectual and emotional disabilities. Three or four audience members felt that we stereotyped able-bodied people. Several pointed out that they wanted the show to provide more solutions to problems. All of these were valid, constructive, and helpful criticisms.

Lessons Learned

In the post-show meeting of the collective, several suggestions were made for improving the process. The primary lesson was that we needed to start the writing process sooner. Collective members felt that the time we spent getting to know one another, building trust, and educating each other about disability issues could have been condensed. Students in the collective felt that the faculty member who was part of the collective should have acted as an expert consultant and should not have been a member of the collective, that she should have been empowered to more formally organize and lead workshops, improvisations, exercises, and actor-training sessions. While the faculty member did do a great deal of organizational work such as getting the Actual Lives Disability Theatre members to work with the collective and did organize several workshops, the collective felt they needed more of this kind of assistance, particularly in the realm of focused work that would have led to the development of the script in a more efficient and effective way.

Collective members admitted that they did not always prioritize the project and thus were often late for script development sessions and rehearsals. For future projects, they agreed that a schedule should be set up ahead of time and that potential collective members should agree to follow that schedule. In other words, potential participants need to decide whether they will commit to the project or not and then honor that commitment.

Collective members also felt that the “forum theatre” presentation which followed the show and preceded the post-show discussion, was ineffective. They understood the concept, described earlier in this report, of focusing on normalcy, but felt the scenario was too long and distracted the audience from the issue of disability and what they felt would have been more productive and engaging post-show discussions. Collective members also felt that the post-show discussion should have been more carefully planned and more audience-centered. They felt that they as collective members they did too much of the talking in the discussion and did not plan ways to make sure the audience had plenty of opportunities to speak and ask questions.

There was also some disappointment expressed concerning audience turn-out. Despite the fact that the campus was blanketed with publicity about the project including posters, email notices, Facebook and My Space sites linked to a You Tube video presentation (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ7xBTqxlpk>), announcements in classes and to nearly every campus organization including all the fraternities and sororities, only 245 people attended the five performances. In the future, we decided we needed to spend more time asking specific faculty members to require their students to attend performances.

Dissemination of Results

We have not shared the results of the project with ACS colleagues beyond this report although our Provost, Dr. Jim Hunt is chair of the ACS Diversity Committee, saw the performance and participated in the post-show discussion and will hopefully share his experience with ACS colleagues. Faculty sponsor and collective member Kathleen Juhl is willing to share her experiences with ACS colleagues as well. Kathleen Juhl is planning to develop a presentation with three student collective members for the Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed National Conference in Omaha, Nebraska in May.

Next Steps

Southwestern’s Theatre for Social Justice student organization is planning a series of “invisible theatre” performances focusing on issues of disability that will be presented during the spring semester. These will include creating obstructions on sidewalks and in front of push button doors with people in wheelchairs stuck near them, unable to move down the sidewalk or open doors. Students in wheelchairs may show up to attend off-campus events for which they know organizations have not planned accessible transportation and insist that they want to attend. These invisible theatre scenarios are still in the early planning stages and many more ideas are being generated.

Students plan to continue conversations with administrators about the fund for disability access improvements that was promised at the November 26, 2007 meeting with the university’s senior staff. Conversations with the staff of the Center for Academic Success about obtaining Braille books, books on tape, and note-takers will be undertaken by the Provost and students plan to initiate conversations about those issues as well. The Provost is talking about ways of disseminating information to faculty about how to accommodate students with both visible and invisible disabilities. Associate Vice President and Dean of Students Mike Leese plans to continue his efforts to accommodate individual students to the best of his ability but hopes that our show will raise consciousness on campus so that accessibility will become the norm rather than the exception, making it easy and efficient to accommodate any student who has a disability and enrolls at Southwestern.

Dr. Leese encouraged us to keep the issues in the campus cultural conversation on an ongoing basis. To that end, the Theatre for Social Justice student organization is planning to develop a show in the fall of 2008 for First-Year Orientation that will be Lindsey Smith’s Senior Capstone Project and will include scenarios about disability and ableism along with other issues such as racism, sexual assault, homophobia, alcohol abuse, socioeconomic class, and other issues first year students need to be informed about. The plan is for this show to be performed during orientation and then a second time, during the first week of classes, for the

entire campus. Administrators will be invited and faculty will be asked to require their students to attend. Our plan is to create a show for First-Year Orientation every year from now on to inform first year students of a variety of social justice issues including disability and to keep these issues in the forefront of the campus community consciousness.

Financial Statement

Original Budget

\$1500	Fees and transportation for expert consultants
\$700	Production costs—props, sets, costumes, lights, sound
\$200	Publicity
<u>\$100</u>	Copying expenses
\$2500	

Revised Budget

\$2194.78	Fees and transportations for expert consultants
\$103. 59	Props
\$54.90	Costumes
\$9.99	Scenery
\$59.91	Food and Beverages
\$50.00	Copying expenses
<u>\$26.83</u>	Research materials and DVDs for collective members and administrators
\$2500	

The Fees and transportation for bringing in our expert consultants cost more than we had anticipated mostly because so many members of the Actual Lives Disability Theatre Company wanted to be involved. Ten members of the company worked with the collective for a total of eight hours. In addition, many of Actual Lives members live in the south part of Austin and Southwestern University is located 26 miles north of Austin so transportation costs were more than anticipated. Since many of the Actual Lives members need to eat and drink during long workshop processes because of their physical disabilities, we had to provide food and beverages to meet their needs. We also had many long rehearsals during which collective members who often came right from their classes without eating dinner needed snacks to sustain them. Finally, the show was taped and we decided to provide DVDs for members of the collective and for Southwestern University administrators and one for ACS.

Summary of the Project for the ACS Diversity Website

During the Fall Semester, 2007, Dr. Kathleen Juhl of Southwestern University's Department of Theatre and student Linsey Smith gathered a collective of fourteen people to create a show focused on issues of disability on the Southwestern University Campus. The collective consisted of students with and without disabilities. The purpose of the project was to incite activism and raise awareness among members of the Southwestern University community about a variety of issues including architectural accessibility, academic and work accommodations, and social interactions among students, faculty, and staff with and without disabilities. The show was called *A Mystical Quest to Slay Normalcy*, and actors and audience traveled around the campus pied-piper style to scenes and scenarios staged in a variety of locations both inside campus buildings and outside on the campus sidewalks and mall.

Once we identified the issues to be addressed and came up with the title, our more specific goal became to educate our audiences about the fact that people with disabilities are, indeed, normal, and that they simply have to negotiate the world in specialized ways which often mean that physical environments and able-bodied people create problems and discomfort that make life less than optimal at times. We also wanted to

emphasize, however, that life with a disability is not constantly fraught with problems but is more often joyful and productive.

We met regularly to research and develop material for the show through using theatre for social justice techniques such as story-telling circles and Brazilian Theatre activist Augusto Boal's games and exercises. Our ACS Mini-Diversity Grant primarily funded two writing workshops with members of the Austin, Texas-based disability theatre company called Actual Lives. The Actual Lives company members helped us turn the material we had generated into a script which we then rehearsed in October and performed November 7-11, 2007. Following each performance, there was an interactive "forum theatre" (a Boalian technique) presentation which focused on issues of normalcy and a post-show discussion.

Audience enthusiasm and pre-show and post-show surveys indicated that the project was successful in raising awareness about disability issues on campus. A meeting with the Senior Administrative staff of the university yielded a commitment from President Jake Schrum to start a special fund to raise money to continue projects which have already been started at Southwestern which will improve architectural accessibility. These include adding more automatic doors, creating a key card system for all student housing because some students have difficulty using keys to open doors, building more ramps for access to buildings, re-modeling a theatre on campus that has problematic wheelchair seating, fixing uneven surfaces on sidewalks, expanding elevators that are too small for motorized wheelchairs, expanding the number of accessible restrooms, and equipping a university van with a wheelchair lift so disabled students can attend off-campus social functions. Provost Jim Hunt is committed to help our Center for Academic Success speed up the process of providing Braille books, note-takers, and books-on-tape for students who need them and to educate faculty on ways they can more successfully accommodate disabled students. In addition, the Theatre for Social Justice student organization on our campus will be following up the *Mystical Quest to Slay Normalcy* with a series of Boalian "invisible theatre" events around campus during the spring semester, 2008 to remind the campus community of the issues the show brought up about disability and to expand on those issues and offer more concrete solutions.

Finally, Lindsey Smith, the student who collaborated with me on this grant, is designing a theatre for social justice project for her Senior Capstone Project, required of all Southwestern students. With my help and consultation, she will be piloting the development of what we hope will become a permanent theatre for social justice performance for Southwestern's first year student orientation program. This performance will include scenarios based on issues of disability, race, class, sexual orientation, sexual assault, alcohol abuse, and other issues important for first year students to think about as they enter college. This project, inspired both by this year's disability project and last year's ACS funded project on racism, will be initiated during the 2008 First Year orientation program.