

**Integrating the Jesuit Mission in
E Pluribus Unum**
UNST100-07
“Persons with Disabilities as a Discriminated Minority”
Spring Semester 2006

Georganna Joary Miller

Mentor: Cecile Walsh,
Department of Nursing

The Opportunity:

This class titled “*Persons with Disabilities as a Discriminated Minority*” is one of the many offerings of the University Studies courses known as “E Pluribus Unum”, which is required as part of the Xavier core curriculum for students in their sophomore year. The basic intent for any section of E Pluribus Unum is to broaden the student’s understanding of cultural diversity, and hopefully an appreciation for commonality among humans or developing awareness that they are “one out of many” as the translation for the course implies. Many sections of E Pluribus Unum focus on the discrimination experienced by minorities based on racial differences.

This specific section is devoted to educating students about the minority population of persons with disabilities, who also face discrimination in their lives. “Disability is a combination of the condition, limitations in functioning, and societal prejudice and discrimination.” (Smart, J. (2001). *Disability, Society, and the Individual*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed. p. 18). Over 50 million Americans are disabled, which is roughly 20% of the population. One in five people worldwide is disabled, most of them impoverished. (Stone, K. (1997). *Awakening to disability*. Volcano, CA: Volcano Press p. 4.) The Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law in 1990 to end discrimination towards the disabled and open doors for employment and independence in community living. Yet the unemployment rate today for people with disabilities is 70 percent, the same as it was in 1990. In many cases, people with disabilities are penalized for working because they stand to lose critical medical benefits if they make more than a few hundred dollars a month.

The Challenge:

Being part of the Ignatian Mentoring Program encouraged me to examine the methods I have used in this class for three previous semesters and to search for ways to more closely align this course to reflect the Xavier mission and the goals of Jesuit education. The coursework has been intentionally based on select principles outlined in the Xavier University mission statement, including involving students in “*intelligent engagement with questions of peace and justice.*” The EPU courses are designed to “increase awareness of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination and their relation to the exercise of power in American society” (Xavier University 2004-2006 Catalog, p. 420). One goal of this specific class is to develop an appreciation for the opportunities that people who are disabled present to other individuals and to society. Class discussion includes a look at America’s cultural roots and myths regarding disabilities, as well as the history and evolution of American laws created in response to society’s perception of the needs of the population who are disabled. This design aligns nicely with the Jesuit education goal to develop a world view that is oriented to

responsible action and to recognize the intrinsic value of the natural and human values. The specific focus for this class is to have the student gain insight into their own values and views based on the myths and misinformation given to them by their culture. Course assignments and classroom projects have been designed to engage students in dialogue and critical thinking surrounding *ethical issues and values*, which is another key component of the Xavier mission.

For the Spring 2006 Semester, I wanted to evolve the course so that the student would be moved “out of their comfort zone” and allowed to personally experience diversity in their community, and hopefully inspire the student to *change society and the world for the better*. “Jesuits value self awareness ...one achieves self awareness not by reading how someone else achieved it, but through focused reflection on one’s own experience” (Lowney, C., (2003) *Heroic Leadership* Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, p. 114). I wanted to expand the course assignments to allow the student an opportunity to integrate the knowledge from the classroom with real-world situations where they could further develop their comfort level and competence *in finding God in all things*.

In order to accomplish this evolution in the course, two assignments were modified and one assignment was added. “Many people with disabilities internalize society’s view of [them] and [their] disability; a person’s response is very closely tied to the larger society around him or her” (Smart, J. (2001). *Disability, Society, and the Individual*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed. p. xiii). Two course assignments are used to expose students to stereotypes found in contemporary media that reflect society’s attitudes towards persons with disabilities. These attitudes often prevent individuals with disabilities from being given equal rights to fully participate in their communities. For this semester, students were asked to read a contemporary novel that was written from the point of view of a teenage boy with Autism. The students were then to write a summary discussing/identifying the stereotypes facing the main character as well as discussing their personal reaction to the character’s behavior, adding any personal experiences they may have had with someone in their own life that has a disability. The students were also given the task to watch a newly released movie titled “Murderball” that follows a group of young men with disabilities who play a modified form of rugby for persons in wheelchairs. The movie gives a candid and sometimes shocking examination of details in the daily lives of these men. Again, the student was expected to write summary of their reaction to the movie and to include any new information or insights gained from watching the video.

One new assignment was added to encourage the student to have direct communication and contact with a person who has a disability in hopes of dispelling myths, increasing the student’s personal comfort level and opening opportunities for future involvement and “*service in the community of mankind*.” Students choose to complete this assignment by doing one of the following:

- Participate in Natural Ties, a Xavier service group pairing college students with persons in the community who have disabilities and may have limited opportunities to socialize in mainstream activities.
- Participate in a game of wheelchair football with a local group of persons with disabilities. Wheelchair football is a weekly sports activity organized within the Cincinnati Recreation Commission.

The Outcome:

To examine the effectiveness in attaining the goals established for this course, it is first important to review the “Course Objectives” as outlined in the syllabus:

1. Examine the history of America’s treatment (and mistreatment) of citizens who are disabled and increase personal knowledge of current laws and legislation designed to enable independent living for the disabled. (*QUESTIONS OF PEACE AND JUSTICE*)
2. Increase self awareness of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination with the intent of forming new attitudes towards individuals with disabilities based on knowledge of factual information rather than myths. (*ETHICAL ISSUES AND VALUES*)
3. Develop a sensitivity to the subtle (and not so subtle) prejudices towards disability inherent in everyday life, including messages communicated in film, literature, mass media, architecture, and healthcare practices. (*ETHICAL ISSUES AND VALUES*)
4. Develop an appreciation for challenges facing the disabled and recognize opportunities for personal influence in effecting positive changes in society’s treatment of those who are disabled. (*QUESTIONS OF PEACE AND JUSTICE*)

Outcomes for this course were measured in two ways:

1). Use the Attitudes towards Disabled Persons Scale as a pre-test/post-test evaluation. Results: ALL students showed some degree of change in attitudes towards persons with disabilities at the end of the course as evaluated by the Attitudes towards Persons with Disability Scale. Total results for students who completed both the pre-test and post test are as follows:

- One student showed a 46.6% change in answers.
- Three students showed a 53.33% change in answers.
- One student showed a 56.66% change in answers.

One student showed a primary shift in thinking/attitude on 6/ 30 questions on the post-test. This could indicate the student gaining insight and awareness into the human attributes shared by both able-bodied and individuals with disabilities. On question # 19, which asks for the student’s attitude regarding “*Most disabled persons do not get discouraged easily*”, four out of five students changed their attitude from a degree of agreement to a level of disagreement, which could imply that the students gained a better understanding of one typical emotion that is common in all human beings, disabled or able-bodied. Only two questions on the scale showed no change in student responses, keeping their rating of “I disagree very much” on both the pre-test and post-test evaluations. Those specific questions are as follows:

- Question # 27 “*Physically disabled persons are often less intelligent than non-disabled ones.*”
- Question # 30 “*The way disabled people act is irritating.*”

2). Ask students to reflect on “Lessons Learned”. A few key responses from the students are as follows:

“This course really opened my eyes to a world that I probably would have only had limited contact with had I not taken this class. I understand and recognize how society and public places are what make people handicapped, and there are solutions to these problems.”
-EPU Student D.R.

I used to think that sympathy was the answer. I thought that all I could do, and all I needed to do, was show pity and compassion. I disguised those emotions as support and concern for the disabled. Now, however, I realize that sympathy was the entirely wrong approach. I know it is not my fault, though, because I was uneducated and unaware. Instead of sympathy, I now realize that empathy and genuine understanding through education is the reaction that not only I, but also society, should have in regards to people with disabilities. Our concern and support for this population needs to be proven through interaction, knowledge, and action. It takes courage to step out of our comfort zones and associate with people ‘different’ from us. However, if we overlook the differences, much could be learned from people with disabilities.” -EPU Student C.M.

“...I think the basic message [is persons who are] disabled can lead full, happy, health lives. This class has made me a lot more conscious of the things in my life that I look at as normal but a person with a disability sees as an obstacle that has to be overcome before they can move on with the rest of their day.” -EPU Student E.R.

“One thing that impacted me the most is learning about all the loopholes in the government system that prevents people with disabilities from getting the things they need to live a normal life. I did not realize that such a large number of disabled live in poverty, and I didn’t realize that the social security disability program barely covers the expenses of these individuals. I am extremely disappointed to learn that the equipment necessary to provide a good quality of life for people with disabilities is so expensive, and not covered by disability benefits – especially after all the money working Americans put into the system through taxes.”
-EPU Student C.R.

“I learned that it is the environment that is the main barrier for individuals with disabilities not the individual’s limitations. One is only limited because of the limitation society puts on the individual. I know that I will take an extra moment to think twice about the disabled, whether it be when I am voting for issues to help the disabled, or taking the extra time to mention to others about making sure things are accessible...I will speak to the principal at my mother’s school about making sure the children learn more about disabilities because they are our next generation and they too can make a difference.” -EPU Student J.S.

“Unfortunately, laws will never be completely fair or entirely perfect. The only thing that we can do is try to make them better... by trying to break stereotypes and crush stigmas; we may just have a fighting chance at living in the world everyone dreams of. By teaching our children that everyone deserves love and respect, perhaps one day that perfect world we dream of will be at hand.” -EPU Student M.M.

Appendix

Other assignments for this course:

Write two pages on one movie you watched from the list below. In your paper, reflect on what you experienced or learned from watching the movie. (You can get these movies from the MacDonald Library, a local public library, Blockbuster, or from the class instructor). If others watched the movie with you, what was their reaction and how did it differ from yours? What in the movie shocked you or impressed you? What stereotypes, prejudices, attitudes or myths were conveyed in the movie? What one point did you find it hard not to think about for the rest of the day or week?

Mask (1985)	My Left Foot (1989)	Regarding Henry (1991)
Shine (1996)	Door to Door (2002)	Molly (1999)
I am Sam (2001)	The Other Sister (1999)	Sling Blade (1996)
One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975)		Radio (2003)
The Man without a face (1993)		House of D (2005)
What's Eating Gilbert Grape (1993)		

Obtain a wheelchair from the course instructor or from the guest services desk at a local shopping mall. Spend *at least* two hours in the wheelchair (propelling the wheelchair with just your arms). Go into at least four different stores in the mall. Try to “shop” and eat something in the food court while seated in the wheelchair. **DO NOT CHEAT** and get out of the wheelchair to reach things or get yourself “unstuck” if you run into an obstacle. (You may want to take a friend along with you to assist you for these situations). Make mental notes about the experience, focusing especially on how you felt, what frustrated you, how often you had to ask for help, what were others reactions towards you, and how anyone who may have gone with you reacted to you while you were “shopping.” Reflect upon the experience in a two page minimum summary after you have completed the two hours in the wheelchair.