



# Mentoring Circles for Disability Inclusion

## Lessons Learned From the University of Kansas' Pilot Program

By Catherine E. Johnson

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), signed by President Bush on July 26, 1990, was intended to ensure equal opportunity, full participation, independent living and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. To ensure Congress' vision is continually played out on campus, higher ed institutions must engage in proactive planning, policies and programs. Yet, disability inclusion often remains in the shadows of this important work, and many institutions are more reactive than proactive in addressing disability inclusion.

Disability inclusion is a term commonly used by individuals with disabilities and disability-rights advocates. It calls for a cultural transformation, requiring an all-encompassing focus that ensures all individuals with disabilities fully belong, experience full access and participation, are engaged in and are actively connected to the goals and objectives of society.

## **KU's Proactive Response**

Inclusion is a core value of the University of Kansas (KU), the state's flagship university with approximately 30,000 students, 10,000 employees and 200 campus units. KU's ADA Resource Center for Equity and Accessibility (RCEA) strives to ensure that current and prospective students, faculty, staff and campus visitors with disabilities feel welcomed, supported and fully included in all campus activities, programs, events and services. Proactive disability inclusion is central to its mission. In the past, the Center has created trainings and programs to develop and maintain an inclusive culture for those with disabilities on campus. Although these trainings lit the spark for disability inclusion, they didn't yield lasting results on proactive disability inclusion.

To address this, the center developed a unique and personal training approach, the Mentoring Circles for Disability Inclusion (MCDI) program, with the mission to create sustainable change that ensures all individuals with disabilities feel a true sense of belonging, experience full access and participation, and are engaged in and actively connected to the goals and objectives of the KU community.

Program participants gain a broader perspective on disability inclusion by learning from subject matter experts, receiving technical assistance and engaging in opportunities to use their new perspective to boost disability inclusion within their workplace and the broader campus.

To achieve sustainable change, the ADA RCEA set a goal for the MCDI program to teach proactive disability inclusion to at least one individual in each of the 200 campus units. Those individuals would then serve as Ambassadors for Proactive Disability Inclusion, charged with instilling disability inclusion practices within their respective units. The program also included opportunities for the ambassadors to meet regularly as a group to proactively address disability inclusion issues campus-wide.

## **Recruitment Challenges**

The ADA RCEA faced a few challenges in the beginning stages of the program with recruitment. The first step was to recruit participants who were willing to devote part of their day to MCDI training in addition to their regular job duties. The center launched an outreach and education campaign months prior to opening applications for the pilot program that included meetings with leaders on campus, campus-wide trainings on the benefits of mentoring for disability inclusion, social media promotion and individual recruiting of participants.

The result was individual recruitment of participants whose positions included campus-wide responsibilities, such as those who worked in information technology and facilities.

## **Pilot Program**

With the first cohort in place, the pilot program began in December 2018 and ran through April 2019.

To lessen the unease and discomfort that sometimes surface when discussing disabilities, the RCEA took a different approach to training by inviting participants into a mentoring setting rather than a traditional teacher-student learning environment. The mentoring approach helped foster the development of safe and trusting relationships, which created an optimal learning environment for participants to fully examine their perspectives on disability, to learn about disability inclusion and to commit to change.

The pilot cohort included 19 mentees who were grouped into one of four mentoring circles with up to six individuals in each circle. Three of the mentoring circles included a staff member from the resource center and one mentoring circle included only students. Johnson served as the primary mentor to all mentees. Mentees also served as peer mentors for each other within their circle.

Mentees met monthly for 90-minute in-class disability inclusion training, discussion, technical assistance, and professional support and development. At each meeting, each group was assigned a project to complete and share with the entire group at the start of the next class.

The campus-wide impact of the program was felt within minutes of the first class. Participants were eager to share their observations of accessibility barriers on campus and offered solutions to remove barriers throughout the duration of the program and beyond.

### *Curriculum*

Program curriculum included an overview of different perspectives of disability; disability and diversity, equity, and inclusion; history of the treatment of individuals with disabilities in the U.S.; history of the disability rights movement; microaggressions; people-first language; accommodations in an academic and employment setting; service animals; creating accessible physical spaces, digital content, social media posts and events; accessible technology; and creating proactive and inclusive environments.

### *Guest Speakers*

Several guest speakers shared their personal experience with disability inclusion. One notable guest speaker was international disability rights advocate Judith Heumann, affectionately referred to as the “Mother of the Independent Living Movement.” Heumann has been at the forefront of the disability rights movement since its inception and continues to provide education and expertise on disability inclusion. Her perspective on disability inclusion was impactful to all participants. Heumann devoted time to share her perspective with the cohort because of the significance of the work and its prospect for creating cultural change at KU. Her hope for the program echoes the center’s goals: that participants leave the program with a commitment to continue learning and to advancing proactive plans for disability inclusion across campus.

### *Capstone Project*

Participants were required to complete a capstone disability inclusion project and present it on the last day of class. Capstone projects offered participants the opportunity to make their workspace more inclusive. Capstone projects fell into three categories: training within their workplace, creating a new office policy or procedure, or marketing and outreach.

### *Workplace Training*

The workplace training capstone project asked participants to develop their own disability inclusion information packets, conduct a review of their websites to ensure inclusion, and demonstrate a commitment to include disability within diversity discussions.

### *New Office Policy or Procedure*

An example of a new office policy or procedure capstone project was the development of an Accessible Event Checklist, a campus-wide resource that provides best practices on proactively planning to host an accessible event.

### *Marketing and Outreach*

One example from the marketing and outreach capstone project was the development of a photo bank of individuals with disabilities. The purpose of the photo bank is to ensure that individuals with disabilities are fully included on KU’s different web pages and in digital communication.

Upon completion of the capstone project, participants were recognized as KU’s Ambassadors for Proactive Disability Inclusion by Carl Lejuez, interim provost and executive vice chancellor. Ambassadors were charged with specific responsibilities that promote campus-wide, proactive disability inclusion.

### **Climbing Numbers**

The MCDI program created a coalition of individuals and departments committed to change and to disability inclusion through cross-campus collaboration on disability inclusion projects.

One participant in the pilot program was the director of facilities for KU, who spends most of his day addressing campus-wide facility issues and emergencies. The knowledge, perspective and skills the director gained through the program altered his perspective and his approach to campus facilities to ensure a proactive approach to identifying and removing potential barriers to access across campus. The director stated the experience was both personally and professionally impactful to him.

The director was involved with the second cohort of the program, serving as a coach and pledging his commitment to serve as a coach for the third cohort.

At the conclusion of the pilot program, the center received rave reviews from the participants, the campus community and the provost's office. Because of this, no further campus outreach or education was required to recruit participants. The applications for the second cohort exceeded maximum capacity.

The program has been successful in creating sustainable change and a culture of proactive disability inclusion at KU. Since completion of the second cohort in March 2020, 44 Ambassadors for Proactive Disability Inclusion from 33 off KU's 200 campus units are actively assisting the Center in its mission of creating a proactive disability inclusive culture.

## **Reviewing and Revising the Program**

The pilot program was developed and adapted to creatively address and foster climate change on campus. Throughout the five-month pilot program, the center had to consistently adapt and modify the curriculum to ensure a quality experience.

In reviewing the pilot program, the center identified new topics to include within the curriculum, such as focusing more on the intersectionality of disability with other identities as a mandatory topic for the second cohort. The intersectionality of disability and race, color, national origin, sex and age are complex. Individuals with intersectional identities frequently experience multiple and heightened stigma, discrimination, isolation, lack of understanding and exclusion. Perception of disability varies by race, culture, religion, socioeconomic status and family. Understanding the intersection of disability with other identities is essential to fully appreciate an individual's complete identity and experiences. Intersectionality will help provide a framework for discussion in each class and will help participants learn theory and practice, as well as explore their intersectional identities and the impact of intersectional identities on disability inclusion.

The center also identified the need to include more focused time for mentoring for the second cohort. The amount of material in conjunction with the limited training time did not allow the anticipated mentoring between ADA RCEA director Catherine Johnson and the mentoring circles. To address this, the center added a Mentoring Circle Coach to each circle for the second cohort. All coaches participated in the pilot program and are program ambassadors. The coaches provided support, mentoring and resources to their circle throughout the second cohort's training period.

Additionally, the center identified the need to extend the training time. The second cohort participated in a seven four-hour in-class trainings that ran from January 31, to March 20, 2020.

A skills-building workshop component was also added to the program for the second cohort. This training provided an opportunity for the participants to use the technical knowledge gained in simulated exercises. They created an accessible document and an accessible photo and video on social media platforms toured campus buildings and identified barriers to accessibility; and hosted a proactive accessible event. Participants also had the opportunity to navigate KU's accessible path Hawk Route in an alternative manner. The program provided participants with mobility aids such as a wheelchair, a walker, crutches, and sleep masks to use with the audio description of the path.

## **Lasting Impact on Campus**

The campus-wide impact of the program was felt within minutes of the first class. Participants were eager to share their observations of accessibility barriers on campus and offered solutions to remove barriers throughout the duration of the program and beyond. Further, the MCDI program created cross-departmental partnerships that allow optimizing of resources and expertise. These partnerships continue to thrive.

In each cohort, participants had the opportunity to meet and learn from individuals with disabilities. Participants shared that these opportunities both broadened and forever changed their perspectives of disability. The quality of the program is best demonstrated through participants' feedback. One participant shared, "Seeing activism in action and also just being part of a group of people working to become more helpful to others was healing and inspiring for me."

Participants shared that the most valuable parts of the program included the focus on disability awareness, learning from the perspectives of others, building a community and learning about each other's capstone projects. The MCDI program has proved essential to the growth and support of students and employees and has created sustainable change on campus.

**COVID-19 update from the author:** *The week leading up to March 20, the University of Kansas was rapidly adapting to the new world of COVID-19. On March 16, the ADA Resource Center for Equity and Accessibility, along with many offices on campus, began teleworking due to the crisis. Out of an abundance of caution, Catherine E. Johnson, director of the ADA Resource Center for Equity and Accessibility and the Mentoring for Disability Inclusion program, made the early decision to switch the in-person graduation for the MCDI program to a virtual event. The original plan was for Barbara Bichelmeyer, the new provost and executive vice chancellor, and Jennifer Ng, interim vice provost for diversity and equity, to join the graduation ceremony where they would give a message regarding the impact of the work of the program on campus, present certificates signifying each participant's new role as Ambassador for Proactive Disability Inclusion, take photos of the individuals receiving their certificate. Derek Shields, our national expert on mentoring for disability inclusion, planned on joining via Zoom to share his congratulatory remarks. Derek was able to Zoom in as originally planned.*

*While the change in format was initially disappointing, the increased interaction and individual capstone feedback were unexpected benefits. During the virtual event, each participant prepared a short presentation of their capstone project to be shared virtually with the entire group. The change to the Zoom meeting increased participant interactions with each other and our guests of honor. There was lively discussion, great feedback and praise for each participants' capstone project.*

*While the integrity of the graduation was maintained, it was difficult for some of the participants to complete their capstone projects. The participants have committed to completing their capstones as their ability to return to campus, conduct research, connect with individuals and resources resumes in the future. The ADA Resource Center for Equity and Accessibility has committed its resources to assisting the participants in completing and implementing their capstone projects. It is our hope that all capstones will be implemented by the spring of 2021. An in-person graduation ceremony will be held in the new ADA Resource Center for Equity and Accessibility Offices in the fall semester.*

**About the author:** *Catherine E. Johnson is director of the ADA Resource Center for Equity and Accessibility at the University of Kansas.*