

## Research Articles & Essays

### Activism Among College Students with Disabilities and the Move Beyond Compliance to Full Inclusion

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#### Author Note

*Author's additional statement on the COVID-19 pandemic:*

*“The author notes that the addition of COVID-19 to the higher education learning environment has added additional barriers to meaningful inclusion and effective activism that were not included in this article because the study was conducted pre-COVID-19. Research on how COVID-19 has impacted the inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education is needed.”*

#### Abstract

This article discusses two case studies of activism by college students with disabilities that have successfully moved disability issues beyond regulatory compliance to a conversation of equity. The two case studies are compared to identify strategies that promoted the success of the campaigns. The article concludes with a discussion of the usage of student activism to ensure equality of opportunity.

*Keywords:* students with disabilities, postsecondary education, activism

The purpose of this article is to determine what activism strategies utilized by students with disabilities have been successful and what steps Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) can take to build cultures of meaningful inclusion and equity for students with disabilities. To do this, the article closely examines two case studies involving activism by students with disabilities that successfully pushed IHEs toward building cultures of meaningful inclusion and equity for students with disabilities and moved them beyond mere regulatory compliance. Cory et al. (2010) noted that staff at IHEs often concentrate on regulatory compliance issues, without recognizing a philosophical stance on meaningful inclusion and disability, contributing to distant, unconnected disability service entities on campuses. There is often an assumption that compliance with regulations equates adequate representation of students, staff, faculty, and administration with disabilities at IHEs. The two case studies reviewed here provide examples of student activism that took place after the implementation of the landmark Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and moved IHEs beyond simple compliance to an institutional culture supporting meaningful inclusion of individuals with disabilities at all levels of the IHE. These case studies were chosen specifically because there was adequate documentation and description in the public record of both the overall events surrounding the actions taken by students and, more importantly, the specific strategies that student activists employed to succeed in their social change efforts. This allowed the authors to perform an in-depth comparison and analysis of the strategies employed by student activists that led to the success of their respective campaigns. By clearly identifying these successful strategies, the authors hope to inform future efforts of disability activists to create meaningful change in the cultures of all IHEs around inclusion and equity for students, staff, faculty, and administration with disabilities.

Kimball et al. (2016) combined several diverse definitions of activism to define it as having elements of: a) “involvement in and commitment to social change”; b) ideological motivation to resist “aggression and suppression”; and c) “emotional engagement rooted in larger senses of identity, stigma, and purpose” (p. 247). The two case studies presented in this article were selected with this definition of activism in mind. In both cases, students were committed to social change, ideologically motivated to resist suppression, and emotionally engaged based upon a sense of identity, stigma, or purpose.

It is important to note that the terms “activism” and “self-advocacy” are not used synonymously in this article. As defined by Kimball et al. (2016) “self-advocacy includes the

ability to communicate needs and wants, locate services, and obtain necessary supports” for oneself (p. 248). The key difference between activism and advocacy, particularly as used in this article, relates to the level of change on which they focus. Self-advocacy refers to a person advocating for change at the level of their individual self, while activism is focused on creating change at the broader community level for the collective benefit of a group or groups of people. Activism can still involve the communication and obtainment of needs and wants, locating services, and obtaining necessary supports, but this is done beyond the level of doing so for oneself; instead, it includes commitment to broader social change, aspects of ideological motivation, and emotional engagement at the level of group identity.

### **Disability Activism**

While there were disability activists before the 1970s in the United States, the majority of disability activism that has resulted in policy changes has occurred in the last fifty years. This can be attributed to the civil rights movement as a successful model for activism combined with the attention turned to disability rights through events such as President Kennedy forming the President’s Committee on Mental Retardation and the filming of horrific conditions in institutions for people with disabilities famously documented by Geraldo Rivera in 1972. The hallmarks of disability rights activism were the protests surrounding the implementation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the protests leading to the passage of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990.

Other noteworthy disability activism includes numerous protests around inaccessible transportation systems. In 1978, activists blocked buses with their wheelchairs in Denver, Colorado. In 1983, the group Americans with Disabilities for Accessible Public Transportation (ADAPT) began a national campaign advocating for lifts for buses that lasted seven years until the ADA was passed in 1990.

Similarly, the rally at the U.S. Capitol in March of 1990 before the passage of the ADA also garnered national attention. Activists from 30 states gathered at the capitol, and Dr. I. King Jordan, the first non-hearing president of Gallaudet College, stated “If we have to come back, perhaps we’ll simply stay until they pass [the bill]” (Eaton, 1990). At the conclusion of the rally, dozens of activists with disabilities left their assistive technology at the bottom of the Capitol steps and crawled to the top. The rally was a quintessential civil rights protest, including chanted slogans and songs, and was important in gaining public

attention for legislation that had been delayed since September of 1989 as congressional committees conferenced and reconciled the different versions of the ADA that had passed the Senate and House.

These noteworthy disability activism events provided successful examples of how people with disabilities could push for change and provided a foundation for future activism. This article examines two case studies of activism involving students with disabilities who successfully pushed IHEs beyond mere regulatory compliance toward building cultures of meaningful inclusion and equity for students with disabilities. The following case studies are examples that illustrate successful student activism that promoted equity of opportunity, meaningful inclusion, and representation for students with disabilities at IHEs.

### **Case Study #1 – Deaf President Now**

The first example of student activism at an IHE that moved beyond mere compliance is the Deaf President Now (DPN) movement at Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. in 1988. It should be noted that this case study did not focus on a strict issue of compliance. There were no regulations requiring that a university president be representative of student demographics. This case highlights complacency and tokenism regarding inclusion and representation in the spirit of ‘nothing about us without us.’

The authors also note that many members of the Deaf community do not consider deafness a disability. However, deafness meets the legal definition of disability under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA, which makes students who are deaf candidates for activism at IHEs. The authors decided to include the Gallaudet case study because of its potential to guide future activism events. Throughout the article, “deaf” and “Deaf” are both used. The term “deaf” is used to refer to hearing loss. “Deaf” is used when referring to aspects of Deaf culture or the Deaf community.

Gallaudet University was established in 1864 and is the world’s only IHE dedicated to deaf and hard of hearing students. Between 1864 and 1987, Gallaudet had six university presidents, none of whom were deaf or had a hearing impairment. When the sixth president left the position in September of 1987, the Board of Trustees set up a committee consisting of Board members, alumni, students, faculty, and staff, to search for a new president. The committee received 87 applicants for the position. By the end of February 1988, the committee announced three finalists – Dr. Harvey Corson, Dr. I. King Jordan, and Dr.

Elisabeth Zinser. Dr. Corson and Dr. Jordan were deaf and Dr. Zinser was a hearing person (“History behind DPN”).

Momentum for a deaf president had been building well before the search committee announced the three final candidates. In 1983, when Gallaudet’s fourth president left his position, he advocated for a deaf president to replace him (“History behind DPN”). Between 1983 and 1987, the idea gained more traction, and advocacy for a deaf president began in earnest. Groups such as the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), the Gallaudet University Alumni Association, and faculty groups began calling for the change. Letter writing campaigns were organized. The Board of Trustees not only received letters of endorsement for a deaf president from faculty, alumni, and advocacy groups, but from Vice-President George H. W. Bush, Senator Bob Dole, Senator Bob Graham, Senator Tom Harkin, Senator Paul Simon, Senator Lowell Weicker, Congresswoman Pat Schroeder, and the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Despite widespread advocacy for a deaf president, student activism did not mobilize until after the three finalists were announced (“History behind DPN”).

Advocates for a deaf president organized a rally for March 1<sup>st</sup>. Flyers were distributed across campus labeling the DPN movement as a civil rights issue. Over 1,000 demonstrators showed up for the rally. The crowd consisted of Gallaudet students, elementary and high school students from Gallaudet’s pre-college programs, staff, faculty, alumni, and local deaf and hard of hearing community members. Over the next four days, students began camping out in tents at the president’s home, and several hundred students briefly blocked traffic on a roadway bordering campus. The student body president wrote a letter to Dr. Zinser asking her to withdraw her interest in the position (“The Week of DPN”).

Meanwhile, the Board of Trustees met off campus with each of the candidates for a final interview. The Board of Trustees was scheduled to announce their decision on the morning of March 6<sup>th</sup>, the day after they finished the interviews. Instead, the Board of Trustees had Gallaudet’s public relation office send out a press release at 6:30 p.m. on March 5<sup>th</sup> announcing Dr. Zinser as Gallaudet’s new president. This announcement immediately opened the floodgate to student activism (“The Week of DPN”).

Students who had gathered to hear the announcement blocked traffic in front of campus and marched to the off-campus location where the Board of Trustees had met. A confrontation occurred between the protestors and Jane Spilman, the chair of the Board of Trustees, as she was being interviewed by reporters. The result of the chaos was that the

Board of Trustees agreed to meet with activist representatives that evening. There are conflicting accounts regarding statements made by Spilman during that meeting, but it was reported that she stated that “Deaf people are not able to function in a hearing world” (“Jane Bassett Spilman,” 2018). While Spilman denied making the statement, many of the activists believed she did, and Spilman was established as having a dismissive attitude towards the activists’ quest for representation in Gallaudet’s leadership. The fact that Spilman could not sign did not help her image with the activists. Throughout the remainder of the night, activists marched to the White House, the Capitol, and the Gallaudet campus (“The Week of DPN”).

On March 7<sup>th</sup>, activists drove vehicles to campus entrances, deflated the tires, and formed a human chain to block administrators from entering campus. Sporadic speeches and rallies occurred throughout the day. Most importantly, protest leaders met and formed a list of demands that they presented to the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees rejected the list of demands. The rejection of the list of demands prompted a spontaneous march to the Capitol Building where more speeches were given. The demands were:

1. Dr. Zinser must resign and a deaf president be selected;
2. Spilman must resign from the Board of Trustees;
3. The percentage of deaf members on the Board of Trustees must be increased to at least 51%; and
4. There must be no reprisals against any of the protestors (“The Week of DPN”).

On March 8<sup>th</sup>, students boycotted classes, and speeches were given across campus. By this time, the protest was receiving national media attention. On March 9<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Zinser arrived in Washington D.C. The Board of Trustees had requested that she quickly assume the role of president. She met with Dr. Jordan and four student leaders. The students urged her to not take up the position of president, and she refused. At this time, Dr. Jordan publicly stated support for Dr. Zinser. On March 9<sup>th</sup>, Gallaudet faculty and staff also met and voted to support the student-led protests.

On March 10<sup>th</sup>, in response to rumors that Zinser and Spilman were going to force their way onto campus, students parked Gallaudet owned buses at the entrances to campus and deflated the tires. Rallies continued that day, and buses brought in additional student support from the National Technical Institute of the Deaf in Rochester, New York. Businesses donated supplies and money to the supporters. In the afternoon, Dr. Jordan retracted his

support for Dr. Zinser and endorsed the four demands of the activists. He would later state that he was not expecting to be asked to speak at the press conference when he stated that he supported the appointment of Dr. Zinser. Dr. Jordan said that when he had gone home that night he thought “Sure I’m a dean and should support the Board of Trustees, but hell, I’m also deaf and will be for the rest of my life, and that’s more important” (“I. King Jordan,” 2018). That evening, Dr. Zinser announced she would resign. Afterwards she would say “My resignation was not in response to demonstrations...but to pave the way for the civil rights movement to progress” (“Elisabeth Zinser,” 2018). Her term as Gallaudet’s president lasted three days, during which she never entered Gallaudet’s campus. The activists had achieved a portion of one of their demands (“The Week of DPN”).

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, rallies continued. It was also the first day of the students’ spring break, and they vowed to stay on campus. Another march was held to the Capitol Building. This was the only planned march of the DPN movement and the only one to obtain the required permits.

On March 13<sup>th</sup>, the Board of Trustees convened an emergency meeting. That evening they held another press conference where they announced that all of the demands of the activists would be granted. Spilman resigned, and a new chair was named to the Board of Trustees. A taskforce was set up to implement the request to have 51% of the Board of Trustees be deaf. It was guaranteed that students, faculty, and staff would have no reprisals for their participation in the protests. Finally, Dr. Jordan was named as the first deaf president of Gallaudet (“The Week of DPN”).

It is important to note that the DPN activists carefully formulated the protest as a civil rights movement and not a disability rights movement. The flyers that were distributed for the first rally on March 1<sup>st</sup> were framed with a civil rights lens (“History behind DPN”). The flyer announcing the rally stated that Notre Dame had its first Catholic president in 1842, Wellesley College had its first female president in 1875, Yeshiva University had its first Jewish president in 1875, and Howard University had its first African-American president in 1926. It was clearly time for a deaf president at Gallaudet (Armstrong, 2014). The flyer distributed during the rally further outlined the lack of representation at Gallaudet for the population it served by outlining that only 22% of Gallaudet staff were deaf, some faculty members could not sign well but met minimum teaching requirements, and only 19% of the Board of Trustees were deaf (“Rally Flyers”). The actions of the activists were also quintessential of civil rights



protests. The letter writing campaigns, boycotting of classes, marches, blocking of traffic, rallies, and speeches were all peaceful means of protest previously proven successful by civil rights activists.

It is also important to note that the DPN movement embodied the idea of meaningful inclusion. A letter of support for the DPN movement written by the president-elect of the American Society for Deaf Children stated “You have said that the President you appointed is a ‘caring’ person. Deaf people do not wish to be ‘cared’ for; they need a Deaf President who respects and empowers Deaf people” (“Notable Quotes,” 2018). This statement embodies much of the spirit of the DPN movement. It was a push for representation and inclusion of students with disabilities at the leadership level and to fully install a climate of empowerment and equity at Gallaudet.

### **Case Study #2 – Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee**

The second case examined is the formation of the Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee (BCCC) at Syracuse University in New York (Cory et al., 2010). The BCCC case study provides a comparison of similar activism activities that students at Gallaudet employed, albeit in a less publicized format. It contributes to the discussion by helping to identify successful activism strategies and steps taken by an IHE to build a culture of meaningful inclusion and move beyond regulatory compliance.

The BCCC was formed in 2001 by five doctoral students in the Disabilities Studies program at Syracuse. According to the website of Syracuse’s Disability Studies program, “the program is designed to help students examine disability as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon” (Foley, 2018). Three of the five students identified as students with disabilities. The events that precipitated the formation of the BCCC was the continual failure of the Office of Disability Services (ODS) at Syracuse to provide accommodations for two of the students with disabilities. One of the students, who was blind, needed assigned readings converted to e-text. The ODS continually failed to provide the e-text versions of course readings in time for the student to read before class. One of the other students was deaf and had struggled with the ODS providing Computer Assisted Realtime Translation and classroom interpreters. ODS maintained in both situations that the services they were offering were legally compliant although they perhaps did not meet the expectations of the students. This response is evidence that a climate of legal compliance existed within the ODS at that time. When the students met to discuss these events and take action, they decided that as long as ODS was focused on



meeting regulatory requirements “there was no possibility of equality of opportunity and meaningful participation in the academic community of the university” (Cory et al., p. 30). This led them to include “Beyond Compliance” in the group’s name. Including “Coordinating Committee” in their name was a tribute to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which had a prominent role in the civil rights movement (Cory et al., 2010).

One of the first actions of the BCCC was to form a platform focused on ways Syracuse could change to increase equality of opportunity. The platform included:

1. Reshaping Syracuse’s conception of disability to promote an understanding of disability as a form of diversity;
2. University recognition and funding of the Disability Studies program;
3. Creating model accommodations exemplifying the University’s commitment to equality of opportunity for students with disabilities; and
4. Hiring faculty and staff members with disabilities within departments across the University (Cory et al., 2010).

The BCCC expanded by recruiting more graduate and undergraduate students. The assistance of the Director of the Center on Human Policy was also solicited, which resulted in the formation of a list of faculty members who were willing to offer assistance to the students. In conjunction with the expansion of the BCCC, the group was able to meet with the Dean of the School of Education. After hearing the BCCC’s platform, the Dean invited the group to share their platform at a faculty meeting (Cory et al., 2010).

In the spring of 2002, the BCCC formally solicited the Office of Disability Services (ODS) for change. Many BCCC members were taking a reading seminar. During this course, the ODS again failed to provide a student with a visual impairment with the course readings in time for class preparation. In response, the entire class boycotted reading the materials for the course, and the students penned a letter to the ODS Director outlining the grievance. The letter was signed by all students enrolled in the reading seminar. Copies were also given to the Syracuse Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Vice President of Undergraduate Studies/504 Compliance Officer, the Associate Vice President of Undergraduate Studies, the Director of Student Service and Retention, and the Dean of the School of Education. The following week, the ODS Director telephoned the student to inform him the course reading for that week was not ready, but that she would be willing to read him the material. The student refused the offer. A response to the letter was also received from the Vice President of Undergraduate

Studies/504 Compliance Officer stating that he was not willing to investigate the grievances against the ODS (Cory et al., 2010).

The BCCC replied to the letter from the Vice President of Undergraduate Studies/504 Compliance Officer with documentation of the grievance that included the ODS policy, a timeline of events showing a policy violation, samples of poorly scanned documents provided by ODS that would not work with the software the student used, and all correspondence between ODS and the student. Again, copies of the letter were provided to school leadership. Following the receipt of this letter, a meeting was set between the BCCC and the Vice Chancellor, Vice President of Undergraduate Studies, and the Dean of Graduate Studies. Again, the BCCC presented its platform (Cory et al., 2010).

Following this meeting, the Undergraduate Studies/504 Compliance Officer sent a letter to three students stating that a pilot plan would be put in place for the next academic year to ensure that accessible materials would be provided in a timely matter. The letter stated that the plan would be shared with the students who had written the original letter. When no plan had been shared with the group a month and a half later, the BCCC penned another letter, this time addressed to the Vice Chancellor. This letter expressed frustration with “the arbitrary way that ODS creates policy that impacts students with disabilities” and asked the Vice Chancellor to “develop a formal means for students and faculty to be active participants in the crafting of disability policy” (Cory et al., 2010). Following this, the ODS Director was put on administrative leave, and an Interim Director who would later be hired as the Director was appointed. The new Director was recruited as an individual “who had a deep knowledge of disability and who would develop rapport with the students” (Cory et al., 2010, p. 32).

The work towards meeting the BCCC’s platform continued in the fall of 2002. Syracuse formed the Working Group on Disability, which included BCCC members, the Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Studies, the ODS Director, and the Office of Design and Construction. The purpose of the Working Group on Disability was to resolve accessibility issues across the campus and establish a means of communication between students with disabilities and Syracuse staff, faculty, and administrators. Cory et al. reported that the Working Group on Disability reviewed the ODS policy manual, snow-removal procedures, and physical accessibility issues.

Following the formation of the Working Group on Disability, the BCCC continued to focus on accessibility issues and the perception of disability at Syracuse. A major focus of the

group was universal design. The group successfully lobbied to gain equitable physical access to the corporate-owned university bookstore for students with disabilities. This effort included the rejection of a separate entrance for people with disabilities. Other issues the BCCC tackled included parking assignments, website accessibility, holding an annual film festival to promote campus-wide disability education, and writing position statements (Cory et al., 2010). Another effect of the BCCC was the formation of a similar organization, the Disability Law Society, at Syracuse in the College of Law. The goals of the Disability Law Society include raising awareness about disability, supporting students who have disabilities, providing information regarding disability, and providing opportunities for students to volunteer in the disability community (“Disability Law Society,” 2018).

In order to ascertain if the changes prompted by the BCCC were sustained at Syracuse, a review of the Syracuse website was performed in 2018. This review failed to find mention of the Working Group on Disability. An email to the ODS prompted responses from the ODS Director and Syracuse’s Disability Cultural Center Director. They affirmed that the Working Group on Disability was no longer structurally functioning, but that several other groups had taken its place. These included the following: (a) a Disability External Review Committee whose “objective is to address the cultural and structural dynamics of ableism and look toward institutional change to improve the lives of disabled students, faculty and staff”; (b) the Disability Cultural Center, which is overseen by an Advisory Board that includes students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members; (c) a Disability Studies Consortium; and (d) the Task Force on Digital Accessibility, which resulted in a full-time Accessibility Analyst position and the formation of a campus wide policy on accessible communication and technology (D.R. Wiener, personal communication, November 13, 2018 and P. Possenti-Perez, personal communication, December 12, 2018). In 2018, the co-chair of the Disability External Review Committee was one of the BCCC’s founding members. The current ODS Director explained that in 2004, ODS staff, Syracuse leadership, and the BCCC worked together to develop the *Office of Disability Services Policies and Procedures Manual* (P. Possenti-Perez, personal communication, December 12, 2018). According to the Director, this manual is “viewed as a ‘work in progress,’” and input from faculty and students is solicited annually to ensure the policies and procedures at ODS “reflect ‘best practice.’” It is apparent from these organizations and actions that the BCCC’s platform prompted systemic change that has been sustained at Syracuse.

The success of the BCCC can partially be attributed to the formation and focus on their platform and their group cohesion. While the BCCC was formed as the result of ODS' failure to meet accommodation requirements, BCCC members were able to push past compliance issues to promote a climate of equal opportunity at Syracuse through the breadth of their platform. Another important aspect of the BCCC's advocacy was their group cohesion. The letters sent to Syracuse administration were sent by an entire class, instead of just the student whose accommodation hadn't been met. By acting as an activist group, they were better able to push past one grievance and advocate for Syracuse to commit to equality of opportunity for all students with disabilities.

### **Comparison of Case Studies**

While both the DPN and BCCC are successful examples of students with disabilities advocating at the IHE level, the two movements have important differences in their approach to activism. The DPN was macro focused, involved national politicians, and received heavy media coverage while the BCCC was contained to students and faculty in a specific program and did not receive media coverage. Responses to the activism in both cases were markedly different. The early letter writing campaign and advocacy in the DPN movement resulted in a "hard no" when the hiring committee announced Dr. Zinser as the appointee. While the BCCC did receive a negative response from the Vice President of Undergraduate Studies/504 Compliance Officer, for the most part, their letters were met with a willingness to collaborate. This is likely one reason why the DPN escalated in strategies, which moved the activism to a larger scale and greater publicity while the BCCC did not. As it grew, the DPN movement received extensive support from outside groups – alumni, advocacy groups, elected officials, students on other campuses, and businesses. In contrast to this, the BCCC's support did not extend outside of Syracuse. With the support of Syracuse's administration and its willingness to work with the students, activism stayed localized and never reached the point of national attention. These variances show that outside support can be helpful but may not be necessary when IHE leadership is open to change.

The case studies also share important similarities that may speak to their successes. Both the DPN and BCCC activists set up a four-part, formal platform. While three items of the DPN's list of demands were directly related to personnel, their demand for the majority of the Board of Trustees to be people who are deaf closely relates to the desire of the BCCC to see people with disabilities represented in staff and faculty appointments. Both groups also

consistently advocated for their platforms. After Dr. Zinser announced her resignation from Gallaudet's presidency, protestors began wearing pins that said "3 ½" on them, showing that they only had three and half items on their demand list left, and they were committed to gaining all four demands ("The Week of DPN"). Members of the BCCC consistently explained and reiterated their platform in meetings with Syracuse administration and in many of their letters. In discussing actionable leadership, including that of Martin Luther King Jr., Simon Sinek stated that great organizations don't just know what they do, they know why they do it (Sinek, 2009). This statement aptly applies to activism. Student activists who do not develop and adhere to platforms and missions that clearly state why they are pushing for change will be less likely to succeed.

The methods employed by the DPN and BCCC are also related. The DPN movement was initiated with a letter writing campaign. While the work of the BCCC didn't include letters of support from advocates outside of Syracuse, the main method employed by the BCCC activists to communicate their expectations to school leadership was letter writing. The letters penned by the BCCC were also signed by multiple students. This showed an increased base of support similar to, although not as large as, the multitude of letters received by the Gallaudet Board of Trustees. Both groups also included some form of boycotting. During the DPN movement, Gallaudet students boycotted classes. BCCC members boycotted reading assignments as a sign of solidarity for their classmate. Boycotting services has been a hallmark of civil rights movements for decades.

Self-advocacy was also an important aspect of both case studies. The protests at Gallaudet were largely advocacy for Deaf people, by Deaf people. Moreover, students and alumni played a major role in building momentum and attention for the movement. Similarly, three of the founding members of the BCCC were students who identified as having a disability. It was their experiences with the disability support services at Syracuse that prompted the formation of the group and action.

An additional important aspect of both case studies was the collaboration of students, faculty, and school administration. By ensuring that there was advocacy for change at many layers within the IHE systems, both movements were able to establish necessary support from multiple stakeholders within the system. Without collaboration between students, faculty, and IHE leadership, change would have been more difficult to initiate. The failure in the system at Syracuse that precipitated the formation of the BCCC was that the ODS failed to see itself as

an advocate for students with disabilities. Instead of doing so and forming collaborative partnerships across campus, the ODS was limited by a compliance-based approach. Similarly, the Board of Trustees at Gallaudet failed to act as an advocate for students, alumni, and staff. In both cases, activists were able to achieve an outcome that aligned students, faculty, and administration as allies and advocates.

Additionally, both case studies were carefully crafted as civil rights activism. As discussed with the DPN movement, the student rally on March 1<sup>st</sup> was framed in rally flyers as a civil rights protest, and the actions taken by activists mirror other civil rights strategies. Cory et al. noted that the disability studies program that BCCC members were engaged in was taught by faculty that “based their teaching in the notion that disability studies, as a discipline, necessitates action” (p. 29). With this educational basis, the BCCC framed their platform around the notion of equality of opportunity for students with disabilities and then used the necessary action to promote an equitable climate at Syracuse. While the BCCC did not use the term “civil rights,” the language of equity coupled with their choice to partially name their group after a well-known student civil rights group speaks to their civil rights mindset.

In summary, the successful strategies utilized by the DPN and BCCC included:

1. Seeking outside support when IHE leadership was not open to change;
2. Setting up a formal platform;
3. Consistently advocating for the platform;
4. Communicating expectations to IHE leadership in writing;
5. Utilizing boycotting;
6. Including aspects of self-advocacy;
7. Collaboration between students, faculty, and school administration; and
8. Crafting their activism as civil rights issues and maintaining a civil rights mindset.

Also of note, Julian Bond (2014) outlined five guidelines utilized by previous civil rights activism that were also successful in disability rights movements. These guidelines include:

1. Starting with a precipitating event;
2. Using a preexisting social organization;
3. Having catalytic leadership;
4. Tapping outside resources; and

5. Developing a strategy.

Both the DPN and BCCC movements fit within Bond’s framework. Table 1 compares which guidelines each of the case studies met. The precipitating event for DPN was the failure to offer the position to a Deaf person. The preexisting social structure of Gallaudet and the larger Deaf education committee was utilized. Several students and faculty members took on leadership roles. Outside resources were used in the form of letters of support and donations from supporters. Finally, DPN activists developed a list of demands and continually met to strategize their obtainment. For the BCCC, the precipitating event was the failure of the ODS to provide accessible materials. The preexisting social structure of the Disability Studies program was utilized. Leadership was provided by students and the school administrators who assisted them. The BCCC formed their platform and developed a letter writing strategy to make their points. The only one of Bond’s guidelines missing from the BCCC mixture is the tapping of outside resources since the BCCC did not extend beyond the Syracuse campus.

**Table 1**  
*Comparison of activism guidelines across the case studies*

	Case Study #1 – DPN	Case Study #2 – BCCC
Starting with a precipitating event	X	X
Using a preexisting social organization	X	X
Having catalytic leadership	X	X
Tapping outside resources	X	
Developing a strategy	X	X

**Discussion**

Students with disabilities at IHEs advocating for a climate of equity would be well served to engage in actions similar to the students at Gallaudet and Syracuse. Proven strategies such as seeking outside support, setting up a platform, advocating for the platform, communicating expectations in writing, boycotting, including aspects of self-advocacy, collaborating with faculty and administration, and maintain a civil rights mindset should be used with Bond’s guidelines in mind. Both the DPN and BCCC case studies provide examples of students with Deafness or disabilities advocating for an IHE to move beyond tokenism and legal compliance to meaningful inclusion and equity according to successful activism strategies. Further, the students in each example demonstrated their “involvement in



and commitment to social change,” ideological motivation to resist “aggression and suppression,” and “emotional engagement rooted in larger senses of identity, stigma, and purpose” as described by Kimball et al. (2016) as hallmarks of focused activism. These are important examples that can be used by other students with disabilities to ensure equality of opportunity and change the climate at IHEs.

While the legal requirements of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the ADA, and the Higher Education Opportunity Act have set up excellent parameters to promote the success of students with disabilities at IHEs, legal compliance by itself will not ensure true equality. That can only be provided by a climate of meaningful inclusion where students with disabilities are provided with equal opportunities. Just as it is necessary for students with disabilities to advocate for themselves in IHEs, it is necessary for students to advocate for broader changes within their IHE to the benefit of all students.

Another important conclusion of the two case studies is the role of faculty and administrators at IHEs. In both cases, faculty and administrators were able to support student activists and work with them to achieve their platforms. This is especially true in the BCCC example. Besides affecting immediate change, the BCCC activism sprouted a cultural shift in which faculty and administrators continue today to work with students with disabilities at Syracuse to establish meaningful inclusion. IHE administrators that are proactive in moving beyond compliance and include students with disabilities in decisions regarding disability service policies and program structures will do more to promote equality of opportunity than IHEs merely focused on compliance. Many IHEs are missing opportunities to improve outcomes for students with disabilities because legal compliance takes administrative precedence over meaningful inclusion. It is hoped that the DPN and BCCC case studies will promote further successful activism by students with disabilities at IHEs and that IHE faculty and administration will work as partners with students with disabilities to promote important cultural changes. Interest in moving IHEs beyond compliance to support the meaningful inclusion of students with disabilities will continue to grow as students with disabilities find their voice. As IHEs see greater leadership and activism by students with disabilities, the hope is that IHE faculty and administrators will recognize the benefits and evidence for fostering inclusive decision making. Raising awareness in disability studies research is a start, but a greater impact will occur when this awareness reaches a broader audience among IHEs.

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