

# THE GENERALIST'S CORNER

## Overcoming Unintentional Barriers With Intentional Strategies: Educating Faculty About Student Disabilities

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Forrest: What inspired you to conduct research in the area of disabilities?

Fichten: There were a couple of reasons why I began researching the area of disabilities. First, one of my students who had a visual impairment was wondering what kinds of visual cues she was missing when interacting with other people who were sighted. That got us involved in studying nonverbal cues and paralinguistics. A second, more personal experience also led to my interest in studying individuals' reactions to people with disabilities. While working on my doctorate, someone close to me ended up in a wheelchair as the result of a complicated surgery. All of a sudden, I noticed that people started behaving differently toward a person who I had perceived as a very powerful and intelligent man. Some people were patting him on the head, speaking to him loudly and slowly with simple words because they assumed in addition to his mobility impairment, he was also deaf and stupid. Then I noticed that other people were very eager to help. Regrettably, some of this help was not particularly wonderful because they would try to open doors while he would still be holding on to the door. What really struck me through this experience was how people treated him differently as a function of that wheelchair. I had a brand new clinical PhD, a background in the study of prejudice and racial attitudes, and was about to have the opportunity to do research. It was 1981, the International Year of the Disabled Person and I was observing firsthand how other people's social behavior changed toward my friend. My interest was very personal when I first started out. Once



Krista D. Forrest



Catherine Fichten

I began developing the research program, I recruited research subjects from the same place many of us recruit—the college. I, like most faculty, worked registration before it became all Web based. Whenever I would see a student with an outward sign of a disability such as a cane, I would say, "Excuse me, it looks like you have a disability. Could I talk to you?" That's when I started conducting research on college students with disabilities.

Forrest: Did you find that they were open to talking with you about their experiences or did they appear apprehensive that you were asking them about this?

Fichten: At first I thought they were tentative because I was so uncomfortable. I got to talk to those who were really socially outgoing, the students who said, "Oh yeah, sure, I'd love to." Of course these students had lots of other friends because they were socially outgoing and so they encouraged their friends to talk with me as well. That's how I wound up learning about students with all kinds of disabilities. We started investigating the barriers as well as the facilitators that influenced the ability of college students with disabilities to perform well academically and socially. It has always been my goal to study the solutions as well as the problems.

Forrest: Canada and the United States have both worked to develop a more positive attitude and/or acceptance of individuals with disabilities in the workforce. In your opinion, have perceptions and behaviors of employers, teachers, and the general public changed in these countries and have there been differences between the countries in terms of outcomes?

Fichten: Although Canada and the United States have both worked toward a greater acceptance of individuals with disabilities, they have gone about it in two distinctly different ways. The United States has legislated fair treatment through the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA). This law and the subsequent amendments such as Section 508 (see <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahoml.htm> and <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/508/508home.html>) have contributed to huge changes in the United States. They required employers and universities to allow individuals with disabilities to be employed or admitted as well as required these entities to make reasonable accommodations for those persons. In Canada the decision to make accommodations was started from an "altruistic" basis rather than through legislation. As a result, many of our changes have lagged behind those of the United States. I do believe, however, that we in Canada have benefited significantly from the changes made in the United States. For example, many of the U.S. changes in technological access associated with Section 508 (e.g., [www.disabilityinfo.gov](http://www.disabilityinfo.gov)) inspired an increase in the accessibility of our own computer and information technologies.

Forrest: You have authored or coauthored several grants investigating different aspects of the academic climate for students with disabilities. Based on your research findings, what are the greatest obstacles that students with disabilities face when attending college?

Fichten: Do you want the academic answer or do you want the real answer? The real answer is transportation. Students with mobility impairments simply cannot get to

school. Adaptive transportation for students with mobility impairments is so poor that almost any question you ask about impediments to employment or schooling involves transportation. It is probably the single most important barrier that I can think of. They can't get there. In Montreal, where winters have lots of snow, it is hard to propel yourself the distance it takes to get to class if you are going to be using a wheelchair. When asked about this difficulty, students have told me, "It was just too difficult." "I was never there for a class on time." "I was always late." "When there was an exam that wasn't on one of my scheduled days the van would pick me up, I couldn't get there." "I just couldn't do it" (Fichten, Bourdon, Creti, & Martos, 1987).

Forrest: I am not sure whether faculty could address the transportation issue, but if students with disabilities are concerned that faculty are going to perceive them negatively because of something beyond their control, that's something that could be talked about ahead of time isn't it?

Fichten: Yes, it is. However, some instructors become upset when students walk into class late. I don't happen to be one of them. Regardless of whether a student has or doesn't have a disability, if the student is late, I don't mind. But some people do and it can be distressing to them. I'm not sure the issue of transportation is one the faculty can do much about. But, faculty can go and talk with the student. However, it is important to note that many faculty we interviewed were reluctant to do this because they (a) either they felt it was too pushy or too nosy and (b) that ultimately it was up to the student to approach them (Fichten, Amsel, Bourdon, & Creti, 1988a). There is some truth in this second idea. But, I believe that it also depends on whether the instructor is teaching a first-year, first-term course to a relatively new student or whether he or she is teaching an upper level course to a college veteran.

Forrest: That makes sense. Maybe one of the guidelines about whether an instructor should initiate a conversation with a student concerning his or her disability could be year of study.

Fichten: Sure. Instructors could wait 2 or 3 weeks into the course, and if they see problems and the student is not approaching them, say, "Hi. How are things going? Is there anything that could be done differently in order to make life easier for you?"

Forrest: What do you think are the most common misconceptions teachers have about providing accommodations for students with disabilities?

Fichten: Because professors are people, they share the same prejudices, the same concerns, and worries about how they should behave. For one of our studies I had the opportunity to interview several faculty members about their experiences related to students with disabilities. One professor was telling me about an experience he had with a student who was totally blind. He was reading in the classroom one day, and the student came into the room without realizing the professor was there. The student was walking into things and the professor did not know what to do. He went through the whole mental process: "Should I tell the student that I am here?"

Should I help? Will he think that I am too forward?" In the end I think he played possum until the rest of the class came in (Fichten, Amsel, Bourdon, & Creti, 1988b). He was so awkward about this. So I think the big problem is that professors are people.

Forrest: Are there other kinds of misconceptions that faculty make?

Fichten: One of them is idea that people with disabilities are very touchy about their impairments, so you have to watch what you say and how you say it. For example, when talking to a student who is in a wheelchair you should never say the word "walk" and with someone with a visual impairment you cannot say, "Well, did you see that/" When we asked the students with disabilities about whether this bothered them, one student who was blind said, "Haven't they ever heard of a metaphor?"

The other misconception I am aware of comes from some unpublished open-ended data we have concerning schemata or prototypes that nondisabled students have of students with disabilities (Fichten, Barile, & Alapin, 2001). We presented scenarios of students with a disability, without a disability, male and female to a group of respondents who were students without disabilities. It appears that students with disabilities fit two prototypes. The first is a courageous hero who works hard, doesn't swear, doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, studies hard, and is basically a good person. The second is stupid, sloppy, ill-dressed, not very smart, ugly ... and there is nothing in between. We have these two very distinct pictures, one very favorable and one very unfavorable. We didn't get what we were hoping to get—descriptions of students with disabilities that better resemble images of nondisabled students.

Forrest: So how do we go about teaching professors and students better ways of interacting with students with disabilities?

Fichten: That's a good question. In the early days when I first started doing my work, having a student with a disability was rare. In fact I had to catch many of them at registration to find participants for my research. If they had a wheelchair I figured they had a disability. Now there are many more students. Currently at Dawson, a 2- to 3-year junior community college where I work, there are approximately 150 students with disabilities who have registered with the campus office for students with disabilities. Now that most professors have had at least one student with a disability, it's not such an unusual thing. However, our research suggests that many faculty still struggle with the idea that students with disabilities can achieve (Fichten et al., 1988b). For example, we still have professors who say, "We can't have a deaf student in nursing because after all they can't hear can they?" or "This student is blind and I teach history. There is so much reading here. The student can't possibly keep up with the reading." These beliefs are still consistent with the idea that we as teachers are the gatekeepers of our professions, so let's not allow the student to get into "whatever" program because he or she will never pass the licensing exam because of the impairment.

On the other hand, we have some faculty who do a great job of teaching students with disabilities. The

downside to this occurs when college and university service providers continue to recommend the same professors to their clients and as a result those professors become overloaded. This can be especially taxing if several students with various disabilities, each requiring different kinds of accommodations, are all enrolled in the same class. One example that comes to mind is of a faculty member who was teaching a class in which she showed video clips. During the video she would periodically make comments. This professor truly struggled with how to make this activity work for the majority of the students who did not have disabilities and needed the lights dim to best view the video, the student who had a visual impairment and needed verbal description of the action, the student who had a hearing impairment and needed to read the teacher's lips as she was making comments. She asked, "How can I do this in a way that's fair?"

Forrest: At our university, students who have learning disabilities or physical disabilities meet with a member of the counseling department and they bring in their documentation and fill out a letter of accommodation. Is that what you have?

Fichten: Pretty much. But I should tell you that only 25% to 50% of students register with campus offices for students with disabilities. That means that 50 to 75% of students at Canadian colleges and universities choose not to negotiate accommodations (Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, Robillard, et al., 2003). I don't think there is one single reason why students with disabilities do not inform their professors. Some students decide, "I'm going to do it despite my disability." "I do not want to be different," "I don't want special anything." "I don't want anybody's pity." "I don't want to be singled out." "Others do not need any accommodations." As you can see, students report many reasons for why they choose not to register.

Forrest: How do you feel about students who have disabilities choosing not to register or if registered, refusing to use the accommodations that have been recommended for them?

Fichten: I think it is their right. I'm not referring to a student who has had a bad experience in his or her attempts to use accommodations on the university campus. I would talk to that student. I'm referring to a student who arrives at the college and decides not to use accommodations. I have been quoted more than once in saying that students with disabilities have the right to make the same decisions as other students, even when these seem to be poor choices. They even have the right to fail. I always encourage students and yet recognize that students have a variety of attributes. For example, I live and work in downtown Montreal. This is a seriously multiethnic town. When I walk into class I think I have Noah's Ark. I have two students wearing the traditional dress of their Muslim countries, two students who are black, two who appear Asian, two students who are Jewish, two who speak French as their primary language, and so forth. When I look around, this is definitely not a homogeneous looking group. When I think of disabilities, it is just one more form of diversity in my classroom.

Forrest: What are the most common mistakes teachers make in their attempts to assist students with disabilities?

Fichten: Some do too little. Others do too much. It bothers me when faculty members inflate student grades because of their disabilities or pass them altogether, not because they have earned this, but simply because they have a disability. This devalues the work of all students when instructors inflate the performance of any subgroup.

Forrest: When it comes to getting students to understand the similarities that exist among students with and without disabilities, what techniques were successful? Which ones were not?

Fichten: That's difficult to tell. I don't do that much teaching and when I have a student with disabilities, generally I go with what the student does or doesn't want. It really depends on their personality. Some are outgoing and gregarious and there was nothing I needed to do. Because I teach an academic stream of students (they see each other for this one class and then leave to go to their four or five other classes), they are not a cohesive group of students who travel together. I do put students into all kinds of groups within the classroom and I have not found any difficulties. Once when we had a student with a hearing impairment, we used an interpreter because it was difficult for the student to work in a group with multiple people speaking. But, frankly there have not been any difficulties or issues of acceptance or lack of acceptance.

Forrest: I was also thinking about the research you conducted related to the contact hypothesis. You had participants read scenarios describing students with disabilities and examined whether participants with previous familiarity with individuals who have disabilities rated the actors in the scenario as more positive than did participants with less familiarity. Previous contact did not seem to be very successful.

Fichten: No, it isn't. For example in one study conducted by Emerton and Rothman (1978), students with hearing impairments and hearing students were assigned to the same dormitory. Living in an integrated dormitory did not appear to be very successful in fostering favorable attitudes. When the authors examined why, it appeared as though the hearing students talked to each other and the students who were deaf signed to each other. It was almost as if there were two separate linguistic groups living together and they didn't speak each other's language. So this wasn't integrated in any social sense of the world because there was no real chance for students to interact in any meaningful way.

One of the reasons contact alone may not work is that the development of attitudes toward individuals may be more complex than first thought. In the late 80s, Dr. Lindsay Gething and I were involved in two separate projects. She was investigating attitudes toward individuals with cerebral palsy in Australia (1985), whereas my colleagues and I were investigating job strategies for individuals who used a wheelchair (Tagalakis, Amsel, & Fichten, 1988). Both studies had significant outcomes, however in completely opposite directions. We started a dialogue and even worked together because this opposite finding intrigued us. We

came to the conclusion that although we both used measures of attitudes, one assessed the notion of equality or similarity between people with disabilities and nondisabled people (Yuker, Block, & Campbell, 1960) and the other evaluated the extent to which nondisabled individuals feel comfortable around individuals with disabilities (Gething, 1985).

Fay Schipper of the Mackay Center and I have recently taken this idea one step further by evaluating both of these attitudes in a new study examining how volunteers' attitudes toward individuals with disabilities change as a function of their experience. The hypothesis that we are currently testing is that after spending a year volunteering in a school for individuals with disabilities, people would be a lot more comfortable when around individuals with disabilities but they would not adopt more egalitarian attitudes toward adults with disabilities (Fichten & Schipper, 2002). A student assistant, Neil Cutler from British Columbia, is currently helping us analyze the data.

If I had to come up with an overall idea about why contact alone doesn't work, I would probably turn to Muzafer Sherif. Do you remember Sherif's experiments on intergroup conflict (Sherif, 1956)? I keep thinking maybe that's the ticket. Contact will only work if students with and without disabilities share equal status and work together to accomplish superordinate goals. Yet, it rarely happens.

Forrest: What major changes have you made in your teaching as a result of your research findings?

Fichten: Well, I announce to all my students at the beginning of each semester that if a student needs special accommodations or adaptations, to come see me. I stopped teaching the blackboard and started facing the class and teaching the students—an overhead projector or PowerPoint can do this. I learned to put class notes and a variety of materials on the Web for my classes as early as possible. These changes benefited all of my students, not just my students with disabilities.

Forrest: Do you think teachers are intimidated by or resistant to the idea of adjusting or modifying their curricula for students with disabilities?

Fichten: I do not think they are intimidated or resistant. I think they just do not know what to do. For whatever reason, they haven't attended workshops about teaching students with disabilities and although many are trying very hard they still struggle with "doing the right thing." That is, they go through an internal dialogue (Should I? or Shouldn't I?) every time a student approaches them for an accommodation. Even worse, they struggle with what to do about a student who hasn't approached them and yet clearly needs help. It's like the instructor who didn't know what to do when a student who was blind stumbled in his classroom. When we don't know what to do, we do nothing.

Forrest: In 1997 you served as a visiting professor at Keio University in Tokyo, Japan and you also served as the Keynote speaker at the Second Japan Conference of the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). Do you find that there are cultural differences related to academia's willingness to address and

resolve issues related to equal access for students with disabilities?

Fichten: Japan appears to be behind both Canada and the United States in their acceptance of individuals with disabilities. For example, individuals with any kind of disability are often kept at home rather than educated in any formal way. To give you an idea of how serious this is, in 1997 I was introduced to a mother who managed to get her 17-year-old daughter who was in a wheelchair enrolled in a regular school. The words that were used to describe this woman included brave and courageous—just for enrolling her daughter in school. Individuals with disabilities are considered a family shame in Japan.

There have been some very slow changes since the mid 1990s. For example, at Keio University where I served as a visiting professor, there was one student with a disability. He had originally started school without a disability and later had to use a wheelchair as a result of an accident. The University decided that because one of their faculty, Dr. Yoshikazu Tomiyasu, was a developmental psychologist interested in intellectual impairments, he would be the best person to learn about accommodations and the process necessary for implementing them at the university. Dr. Tomiyasu toured North America to better understand how the United States and Canada were providing accommodation for individuals with disabilities. He was transformed. After returning to Japan, he created the Japanese conference of the Association on Higher Education and Disability and invited me to be one of their guest speakers.

Forrest: One of your larger projects has been your involvement in the Adaptech Research Network (<http://www.adaptech.org>). What was the goal of this project and why is it important?

Fichten: In 1996, a colleague who was writing a grant asked if we were interested in technology and disabilities. One of the research assistants with whom I was working, Jennison Asuncion, was a graduate student in educational technology. He was blind and used a lot of technology in school. We thought the project would be interesting. That's when we started shifting some of our work away from social cognition and attitudes, away from professor-student interaction, and toward the role of technology. We received a huge grant of \$1.25 million and we learned a great deal about the use of technology in the postsecondary classroom. ADAPTECH as a name got started when we had to come up with a DOS-based file name for our web page and it could only be 8 characters. It is currently called the Adaptech Research Network and can be reached on the Web at [www.adaptech.org](http://www.adaptech.org).

There were many objectives associated with this project but a few of the main ones included (a) evaluating what computer, information, and adaptive technologies students found helpful; (b) reporting how students were using technology; and (c) determining whether there were financial as well as physical limitations preventing students from using this technology. The first final report is available at [www.adaptech.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/pubs/olt99fin.pdf](http://www.adaptech.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/pubs/olt99fin.pdf).

One of the first things we learned from our research is that students with disabilities use computers in a variety of ways. They use them the same way any other student would, but they also use technology to help cope with their impairments. So in our first study, with a sample of over 1000, we realized there were really three uses for technology (Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, Fossey, & Robillard, 2001). The first involved the use of general use equipment for what it was intended (e.g., computers for word processing). The second was the use of adaptive technology for what it was intended (e.g., Openbook; Freedom Scientific, 2003) is software created for individuals who have a visual impairment that scans the printed page, turns this into electronic text, and then reads this aloud using voice synthesis). The third using existing general use technology as an adaptive aid (e.g., scanning a document to enlarge diagrams or text for easier reading). We also found that students "cross used" technology by using technologies intended for individuals with different disabilities (e.g., students with learning disabilities using voice synthesis intended for students with visual impairments).

What was important about this study was the discovery that many students were frustrated not by the actual availability of the technology, but by their access to the technology. Many of the adaptive technologies are very expensive, which puts them out of reach to many students. Also, it became clear to us that many students were not aware of the financial resources such as government grants that could assist them in acquiring much of this technology. Smaller, more isolated colleges were struggling to keep up with the available resources suggesting that they needed to plan the acquisition of adaptive resources in a way similar to the universities (Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, & Fossey, et al, 2003). On a more positive note, we were amazed at the ingenuity our respondents demonstrated in using general use software and hardware for adaptive purposes.

Forrest: Consider the last 25 years of your academic career and specifically the work you have conducted on the perceptions and experiences of students with disabilities. Do you see yourself primarily as an educator, researcher, clinician, or advocate?

Fichten: Of the three roles, the one I could not live without is the role of researcher. I have been fortunate to work on many grants and projects with other individuals who play the advocate role and play it well. The first name that comes to mind for me is Maria Barile. In truth, to ask me if I see myself as one or the other is like asking a working mother if she is a career woman or a mother. It's not an either/or answer.

Forrest: Where can teachers go for more resources or information concerning modifying course materials for students?

Fichten: Several years ago I put together both a faculty guide (Fichten, Goodrick, Amsel, & Libman, 1989b) and a student guide (Fichten, Goodrick, Amsel, & Libman, 1989a). These guides were the result of several years of research and the belief that I should give back to my research participants in a meaningful way. What I find amazing is this happened in 1989 and I still get re-

print requests for it. A text-only version of the student guide is available on my Web page at <http://omega.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/cfichten/STUGUIDE.rtf>. There is also another article that others may find helpful that provides several recommendations for students with disabilities and their professors (Fichten, Goodrick, Tagalakakis, Amsel, & Libman, 1990). Finally, for those professors interested in the issues of technology and students with disabilities, there is an article that provides several empirically based recommendations for faculty (Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, & Genereux, et al., 2001).

Forrest: Based on our conversation, it seems clear that many pedagogical changes have taken place to facilitate the learning of students with disabilities. Are we done? If not, what is left to do?

Fichten: Well, we have certainly come a long way since the 1980s when I first started studying what happens to postsecondary students with disabilities. But done? No, we are not done. There are still some very notable problems. One of them has to do with accommodating students with disabilities in the sciences. For reasons that are not completely clear to me, there are relatively few students with disabilities enrolling in science programs. If universities would facilitate access to science programs for these students, it would send the message that science is an appropriate and acceptable discipline for all students to pursue.

Another thing that would help is to make it clear that the college does not discriminate against qualified students with disabilities. This could be done by advertising the availability of the services provided by the office for students with disabilities as part of the recruiting materials disseminated to all potential applicants. We have the expectation for nondisabled students that they will go on to postsecondary education. This is usually communicated by their families, their teachers, and their peers. I am not sure that the same message is reaching students with disabilities.

One of the most important changes we could make is to stop discouraging students with disabilities from going to college under the guise of being "realistic." Social psychologist Beatrice Wright, a pioneer in this area whose work I respect enormously, once asked, "What is the point of being realistic?" (cf. Wright, 1983). We are not realistic when 8- and 9-year-old children say they want to be police officers, fire fighters, and astronauts. We do not tell the hordes of marginal students in our introductory psychology classes, "Don't even think about it" when they ask us about what is involved in becoming a psychologist. Most of us simply tell them the requirements, without discouraging them from even attempting this career path. Will most of them make it? No. Will many of them make it? No again. Some? Definitely. Why do we have to be "more realistic" with our students who have impairments?

On a similar note, as professors we are not the gatekeepers for our profession. It is not up to me to say that someone with a hearing impairment cannot become a clinical psychologist because, after all, he or she cannot hear. There are many ways of accomplishing the same goals. Instead of stressing realistic goals and taking on

the role of gatekeepers to our professions, we should be encouraging enthusiastic students with disabilities who have a dream to try. The presumption of success is not a prerequisite for trying for our nondisabled students. Why should it be different for students with disabilities?

In terms of electronic media and computer and information technologies for postsecondary students ... these are getting more accessible. But we need to make sure that accessibility issues are high on the instructional technology agenda. There is a chance that the new technologies could become technologies of exclusion if accessibility issues are not addressed early enough in the development of postsecondary computer infrastructures. Universal and inclusive design are nice catch phrases for college Web sites that are designed with accessibility in mind. But what about course Web sites? Unfortunately many faculty are barely managing to scrape together enough technical know how to get their courses up and running on the Web. In most cases there are no accessibility features built into their learning materials. I think that whoever is teaching faculty to become computer literate or to manage their courses on the college Web site should also be instructing them in universal design as a matter of course. Universal design should not be an option, but an absolutely mandatory component. Frankly, I like policies that say, "If it is not accessible, it will not be hosted on the college's Web site." Of course, there will be exceptions. But then it will up to the Web page's creator to show that accessibility was not possible and to indicate what steps he or she would take to ensure access for students with disabilities. This would create a "corporate culture of accessibility."

Finally, I think we need to remember that a student with a disability is, first and foremost, a student. In fact, our most recent findings indicate that not only do students with disabilities at my college graduate at the same rate as nondisabled students, but that the same variables predict success for students with and without disabilities (Jorgensen et al., 2003). So we need to provide all of our students the opportunities that allow them to succeed. If somebody says it takes too much effort or it costs too much for just one student, suggest to them that they look down the line at the costs and the benefits, both in human and economic terms. Spending the money now improves the lives of students and results in future taxpayers. I think we owe it to our students, we owe it to ourselves, and because it is cost effective, we also owe it to our society to educate students with disabilities in the same way we educate the rest of our population.

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