

Giving People who Experience Disability a Place at the Speech and Debate Table

A Philosophical Perspective on Equity and Inclusion—Part One in a Three-Part Rostrum Series on Promoting Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities in the Speech and Debate Community

by Victoria Freeman and Jan Pizzo

As the National Speech & Debate Association works to integrate their mission of inclusion, the organization endeavors to confront discrimination in all forms and to heed and learn from the experiences of marginalized populations in order to strive to eliminate barriers to participation for individuals who have historically been excluded or under-represented in our activity.

One such population includes students, coaches, and judges who experience a disability. As a group, such individuals are extremely diverse. While some disabilities are obvious, many others are not. This split in public knowledge causes some individuals to be seen for their disability first, while others are forced to “out” themselves to be perceived as having the right to request accommodation.

A three-tiered process can help members of the speech and debate community learn to take proactive action toward providing for, and hearing, the voices of persons with disabilities.

The first step involves an examination of the

assumptions and beliefs that lead to both intentional and unintentional discrimination against those who experience disability.

The second phase is to incorporate concrete actions that signify teams, tournaments, state organizations, and the NSDA are committed to welcoming those with disabilities.

Finally, our activity can benefit from engaging with additional resources that promote a deeper understanding of the challenges facing persons with disabilities who want to be a part of the speech and debate community.

In a fully inclusive world, one should not need to ask for accommodation. The information should be both readily available and accurate. In this world, when someone checks off the ADA accessible room box while registering, the tournament administrator knows that the room is truly accessible and not up a flight of stairs, two blocks off campus, or down a long hallway.

To understand step two, coaches, tournament hosts and other speech and debate leaders

must consciously think about access issues as a regular practice. Effective integration starts with understanding step one, the assumptions and beliefs that can often result in discrimination.

The inequity experienced by persons who identify as experiencing a disability is often the result of ableism. According to the explanation of ableism written by Leah Smith on the website of the Center for Disability Rights:

Ableism is a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be ‘fixed’ in one form or the other. Ableism is intertwined in our culture, due to many limiting beliefs about what disability does or does not mean, how able-bodied people learn to treat people with disabilities and how we are often not included at the table for key decisions. Just like most forms of discrimination, ableism often shows its ugly face from nondisabled people with good intentions.¹

The article goes on to explain:

The best way to de-root ableism in our everyday lives, is to ensure that there’s always a seat at the table for those who are like you and those who are not, but also checking ourselves on how we treat people with disabilities once they are at the table...de-rooting ableism is often as simple as just treating disabled people like you would anyone else.²

Ableist thinking leads to a related form of discrimination that results from an unintentional place and that has been less discussed and understood than more obvious forms of bias. This issue is the tendency of many people and groups to refer to disabled people as inspirational. While this observation may seem strange at first consideration, the reality is, people with disabilities want to be people first—flaws and all—nothing more and nothing less.

In the April 15, 2015, article “7 Reasons to Stop Calling Disabled People Inspirational,” published in the magazine *Everyday Feminism*, author Erin Tatum states, “When an able-bodied person calls a disabled person inspirational, they’re usually applauding


“The problem with being called inspirational is that it attempts to make our disability our defining characteristic.” — Erin Tatum

them for existing—and in turn, patting themselves on the back for realizing how difficult disabled life must be.”³ Tatum further explains, “The problem with being called inspirational is that it attempts to make our disability our defining characteristic.”⁴ The inspirational label has further deleterious effects, as the article points out. “[...]alling a disabled adult inspirational almost always comes off as patronizing... when you tell someone with a disability that they’re inspirational, you’re sending the message that the only thing you’ve gained from meeting them is a cursory perspective on disability.”⁵

Finally, the essay discusses the damage referring to individuals with disabilities as inspirational does to the diversity in the community. “Suggesting that all disabled people are inspirational just because we’re disabled robs us of the cultural

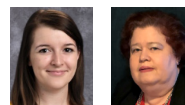
and socioeconomic contexts that have created and continue to foster our diversity.”⁶

By reflecting on both the conscious and subconscious beliefs informing the common perceptions of people who experience disabilities, the speech and debate community can take positive and meaningful action toward promoting equity and fostering inclusion. Structural change can be superficial without a deeper understanding of the root issues underlying discrimination.

In the second part of our three-part *Rostrum* series, the authors will provide tools and checklists for teams and tournaments to facilitate the practical aspects of inclusion. Our hope is this information will be a guide that will generate other ideas and strategies to be shared within the NSDA community. 

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- ▶ Am I comfortable talking to persons with disabilities?
- ▶ Do I let my students with disabilities advocate for themselves?
- ▶ Do I direct students with disabilities toward literature about disabilities?
- ▶ How do I feel about students without disabilities performing material about disability?
- ▶ Am I afraid of taking a student with a disability to a tournament, especially out of town?
- ▶ Do I actively reach out to persons with disabilities to be a part of my team, my coaching, and my judging pool?
- ▶ Do I discuss inclusion with my team?
- ▶ If I have team members who experience disability on my team, do they feel comfortable and a part of the group?
- ▶ Do I actively address any bullying or inappropriate behavior directed at individuals who experience disabilities?
- ▶ Do I use these situations as educational opportunities for all students/team members?
- ▶ Do I understand the legal protections afforded students with disabilities within the education system?
- ▶ Am I prepared to help a student/team member who experiences discrimination find their voice and advocate for themselves instead of taking the responsibility for redress away from them?
- ▶ Do I have personal beliefs about disabilities that impact how I treat people?
- ▶ Do I believe that persons who experience disability want to be “cured?”

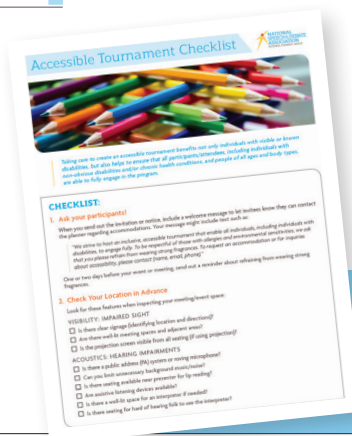


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Caucus this past June. Jan also served as an equity officer for the National Tournament.

End Notes

- ¹ Smith, Leah. “#Ableism.” The Center For Disability Rights. <http://cdnrns.org/blog/uncategorized/ableism/>
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Tatum, Erin. (2015, April 15). “7 Reasons to Stop Calling Disabled People Inspirational.” *Everyday Feminism*. <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/04/stop-calling-disabled-people-inspirational/>
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Ibid.



LEARN MORE

DOWNLOAD OUR ACCESSIBLE TOURNAMENT CHECKLIST!

www.speechanddebate.org/inclusion