

A Long, Slow March Toward Accessibility: Cal Poly's Effort to Eliminate Barriers for
Physically Disabled Students

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by

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The experience of disabled students in higher education is an issue that is easy to ignore. As members of a college community we see the familiar white wheelchair-bound stick figure against a blue background and we feel secure in the knowledge that our school has provided for students, faculty, and staff with physical disabilities. Other things we take for granted such as ramps, curb cutouts, elevators, and lowered sinks and drinking fountains. However, accommodations such as these have not always been part of the college campus landscape, and even with their existence, or perhaps because of it, it is easy to ignore the more complex and less visible barriers that exist for disabled students. The passage of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, the first act of federal civil rights legislation to address persons with disabilities, was the result of years of activism from individuals and groups seeking an end to discrimination against the disabled. In particular, Section 504 of this act required institutions receiving federal funding to remove barriers for disabled persons in order to continue receiving funds.¹ This section notably included public universities, putting pressure on them to take action toward compliance, despite there having been no clear guidance on what compliance would necessarily look like.

Much of what has been written on the history of disabled students in American universities has focused on the struggle to get federal civil rights legislation passed, and how the implementation of that legislation has manifested itself in university policies. Lindsey Patterson presents a particularly thorough examination of the subject showing that campus organizations, born out of community programs, created a movement that was not always supported by other civil rights movements of its time but was able to secure federal legislation. Her examination of California's disability rights movement highlights the contributions of Ed Roberts and other

¹ U.S. Department of Labor, "Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973" (Washington, DC, U.S. Department of Labor, 1973), goo.gl/tbEOJ5, accessed 31 January 2017.

disabled students at UC Berkeley.² Richard K. Scotch focuses on the inspiration that disability activists gained from contemporary social rights movements and takes the story further by examining disability advocacy after federal legislation had already been passed, including the formation of advocacy groups.³ Joseph W. Madaus, meanwhile, explains how service organizations for disabled students at higher education evolved to reflect changing views on disabilities, including broader definitions of what constitutes a disability as well as changing attitudes toward the potential for academic achievement among those with disabilities.⁴

This paper will turn the attention away from universities that were central to the larger disability rights movement and focus instead on the response by Cal Poly, a school without a history of radical political activism. I will examine how Cal Poly dealt with the task of removing physical and architectural barriers for disabled students. In particular I will focus on Cal Poly's response to the 1973 Rehabilitation Act in the decade that followed it, showing how Cal Poly's response, while passionate, was still mediocre as compared with other campuses within the California State University system. Cal Poly's efforts to create an accessible campus fall comfortably into the timeline implied by federal legislation and national trends, although the fact that 11 other California State Universities established organizations to provide services for disabled students shows that Cal Poly was far from a leader among its peers.⁵ This is not to say that Cal Poly's response to the issue to disabled students was entirely subpar, though, as Cal

² Lindsey Patterson, "Points of Access: Rehabilitation Centers, Summer Camps, and Student Life in the Making of Disability Activism, 1960-1973," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 487.

³ Richard K. Scotch, "Politics and Policy in the History of the Disability Rights Movement," *The Milbank Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (1989): 380.

⁴ Joseph W. Madaus, "The History of Disability Services in Higher Education," *New Directions for Higher Education* 154 (Summer 2011): 9.

⁵ "Campus Questionnaire," *Disabled Student Advisory Committee Report*, March 1974, 172.09 Disabled Students Advisory Committee, 1974-1975, 1980, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

Poly's spending toward the removal of architectural barriers compared favorably to any other CSU, and in fact far outstripped many.⁶

There are, however, other aspects to the issue of making a campus that is truly accessible to disabled students. Timothy M. Stagich separates the barriers facing disabled students in higher education into three broad categories, which include administrative barriers, physical barriers, and social/attitudinal barriers.⁷ The two former types are often the focus of examinations of university action as they can be more clearly addressed through policy decisions. Administrative barriers are usually easy to identify and take action against since their removal usually requires only a change in policy or the implementation of a service such as early or assisted registration. Physical barriers are readily identifiable, especially for those that know what to look for and while their removal can be costly and time-consuming, it is still simply a matter of physical action. Social and attitudinal barriers are, of course, the most difficult to address. Stagich refers to them as "the most invisible and intangible restrictions to equal educational opportunities for the handicapped and, therefore, the most difficult to identify readily."⁸ Due to this nature they cannot be legislated in the same way that administrative and physical barriers can, and thus there can be no legal obligation to address them.

This paper will examine efforts at Cal Poly to remove all three of these types of barriers using records kept from the early Disabled Student Services organization established in the 1970s, as well as student newspaper articles and some firsthand accounts. I will argue that the progress made in the removal of administrative and physical barriers throughout the 1970s was a

⁶ 1976-77 *Evaluation of Disabled Student Services in the California State University and Colleges*, September 1977, 144.03 Robert E. Kennedy Papers, Box 7, Special Collections and Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

⁷ Timothy M. Stagich, "Mainstreaming in Education: Rights, Barriers, and Administrative Alternatives," *Educational Horizons* 58, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 217-18.

⁸ Stagich, "Mainstreaming in Education," 218.

slow, but ultimately effective process that made significant gains due to the passion and dedication of the individuals involved. Cal Poly's progress in this regard, however, was continually hampered by the lack of progress in removing social and attitudinal barriers, which was unable to be addressed in any significant fashion until the end of the 1970s despite a stated commitment and apparent effort to do so.

Today Cal Poly has earned a reputation as a conservative campus, although its past is somewhat more disputed. While Cal Poly, like many other colleges, was the site of several large protests, particularly in the late 1960s, at Cal Poly these protests consistently ended without violence. In an article for the California based journal *La Vista*, Jennifer Freilach argues that while Cal Poly's history of nonviolence shows it to be a campus that has largely rejected radical protest, it was still home to prevalent liberal views.⁹ This view of Cal Poly is largely supported by Cal Poly's response to the Rehabilitation Act. In 1981 Harriet Clendenen, the acting coordinator for Cal Poly's Disabled Student Services at the time, was quoted in the student publication *Summer Mustang* as saying, "Cal Poly has actually been a pioneer in providing accessibility for disabled persons. Prior to the time the [Rehabilitation Act] was implemented many buildings had already been made accessible."¹⁰ Clendenen may be correct in her assertion that many buildings had been made accessible by 1973. A report concerning accessibility at California State University campuses compiled in 1974, shortly before Cal Poly had officially established Disabled Student Services, shows that of the 18 buildings evaluated on the Cal Poly campus ten were fully accessible with six more being classified as partly accessible. This result, however, does nothing to support the idea of Cal Poly as a pioneer among CSU campuses as it ultimately lands Cal Poly close to the middle of the field, faring significantly better than some

⁹ Jennifer Freilach, "Cal Poly: Liberal, Not Radical," *La Vista* 1 (2015): 17-25.

¹⁰ Teresa Hamilton, "\$2 Million Spent in Eliminating Campus Handicapped Barriers," *Summer Mustang*, 9 July 1981, 4, <https://goo.gl/fxK2JK>, accessed 12 February 2017.

campuses but falling far behind the true leaders on the issue.¹¹ Some of the most accessible campuses at the time, such as campuses at Hayward and Northridge, had the advantage of having been established more recently and therefore having fewer decades-old buildings such as Cal Poly had. San Francisco State University, however, was founded in 1899, two years before Cal Poly, and featured 19 fully accessible buildings among 20 that were examined, an unsurprising result given its proximity to Berkeley, the epicenter of the disability rights movement in California.¹²

This is not the only problem with Clendenen's broad claim that Cal Poly was a pioneer in accessibility. The same report also showed that of the 19 disabled Cal Poly students that responded to a questionnaire, nearly all had chosen to attend Cal Poly based on its academic reputation or its proximity to their home with none citing accessibility as a reason, a distinction shared only with campuses at Stanislaus and Humboldt, which, like Cal Poly, did not offer any services for disabled students at the time.¹³ The campuses that excelled in this area are clear. Far and away the campus most often chosen by students with disabilities for its accessible architecture was the CSU campus at Hayward now known as CSU East Bay, and at CSU Northridge 32 of the 77 disabled students that responded said that they had chosen Northridge for its services provided for disabled students. No other campus had more than 8 students provide this as a reason.¹⁴ Further, an examination of potential services for disabled students, whether or not an official organization existed, found that Cal Poly only offered some disabled health services along with early and assisted registration for disabled students.¹⁵ All this suggests

¹¹ "Campus Questionnaire."

¹² "Campus Questionnaire."

¹³ "Campus Questionnaire."

¹⁴ "Campus Questionnaire."

¹⁵ "Campus Questionnaire."

that there is little to no evidence to support the idea that Cal Poly was in any way a leader in the movement toward making California's public universities accessible.

While Cal Poly may not have been a pioneer, there does seem to have been a strong, committed effort toward accessibility by certain individuals at Cal Poly. As noted above, Cal Poly was among the last of the California State Universities to formally establish a disabled student service organization. However, there were proponents of such an organization years before its inception, including the eventual coordinator of Cal Poly's Disabled Student Services, Robert Bonds, who envisioned "handicapped students having a total educational experience, including recreation and social events, tutoring, counseling, housing, health services, parking, and braille materials."¹⁶ Bonds, a standout multi-sport athlete and state-champion hurdler while in college, as well as the older brother of Major League Baseball All-Star Bobby Bonds and uncle of home run king Barry Bonds, worked tirelessly at Cal Poly to create an accessible environment for disabled students. His efforts helped to identify architectural barriers and without him the year and a half long process of establishing Disabled Student Services at Cal Poly may have taken even longer.¹⁷

So while Cal Poly may not have been among the leaders of the effort to remove barriers, we cannot discount the passionate individuals who worked toward accessibility, nor can we claim that Cal Poly's efforts toward accessibility were based solely on the legal obligation to comply with the Rehabilitation Act. Further, we can see that from the very beginning the goal of Cal Poly's DSS was to remove all types of barriers for disabled students. This can be reaffirmed by some of the initial statements of the intent of DSS adopted at its inception: "The purpose of

¹⁶ "Disabled Students Find Campus Help," *Mustang Daily*, 28 November 1973, 4, <https://goo.gl/qB5Qjf>, accessed 4 February 2017.

¹⁷ "New Program for Disabled at Cal Poly," *Mustang Daily*, 5 December 1974, 4, <https://goo.gl/xDVxBy>, accessed 14 March 2017.

Disabled Student Services is to ... make the Cal Poly campus physically, socially, and academically accessible to all physically-handicapped students.”¹⁸

One more way that Cal Poly showed itself to be a positive force in the journey toward accessibility was through the amount of funds put toward removing architectural barriers. An evaluation of disabled student service organizations at California State Universities in 1977 found that Cal Poly spent more state funding on the removal of architectural barriers through 1977 than all but one other CSU campus, behind only San Diego State.¹⁹ Most of the funds used at Cal Poly went into the sort of improvements that do not garner much attention such as curb cutouts, access ramps, retrofitting of restrooms and offices, and lowering of telephones and drinking fountains. While this speaks to the attention to detail that was given to the process of accessibility at Cal Poly, it may also hint at just how inaccessible Cal Poly was as a campus before the 1970s. As Clendenen correctly notes, however, “Architectural barriers are fairly easy to eliminate ... but sometimes attitude barriers are even harder to break down.”²⁰ Even if a campus works passionately to eliminate physical barriers, attitudinal barriers can remain, and can take on many forms. Jennifer Allen-Barker was a student at Cal Poly from 1973-1977 with a disability and she recalls interactions with faculty that illustrated some of these barriers:

I had I an instructor who I approached, she wanted us to write a journal on
unlined paper, well If I do that my lines are going to be tilted and some are going
to run into the others because I can’t see from margin to margin while I’m writing.

¹⁸ “Disabled Student Services Code 68,” ASI Collection, Box 27, Folder 19, Special Collections and University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

¹⁹ “1976-77 Evaluation of Disabled Student Services in the California State University and Colleges,” September 1977, 144.03 Robert E. Kennedy Papers, Box 7, Special Collections and University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²⁰ Hamilton.

I said, “I want lined paper,” and she said, “Ok.” So I did my journal on lined paper. I turned it in and said “You’re going to get an ‘F’ on this because I told everyone to use unlined paper,” and I said, “No, I talked to you and you gave me special permission, because of my vision, to use lined paper.” [She said,] “I don’t remember that.” Fortunately I had my two girlfriends with me that had heard the conversation and they said, “No, we were here, we heard you say that.” So she accepted it, but she wasn’t going to.²¹

This experience goes beyond a simple misunderstanding and, unfortunately, is not uncommon for disabled students in higher education. Allen-Barker states that attitudes from many faculty members at the time were that they were doling out special treatment by modifying assignments in order to make them accessible.²²

Cal Poly’s DSS did attempt to tackle these, and other types of attitudinal barriers, but not always with high degrees of success. In 1977, two classes were introduced to Cal Poly with the aim of improving the experience of disabled students as well as raising awareness of disability in society, however both ran into problems. A physical education class specifically designed for students with disabilities required an office visit to an office without a door of sufficient width to accommodate a wheelchair, and a sociology class that examined disability was held in an entirely inaccessible classroom.²³ The organization also suffered from lack of interest among much of the student body, in some cases leading to significant drawbacks in the removal of physical barriers. In one instance, recorded in DSS’s year end report for the 1976-77 school year, plans for the installation of a map designed for use by students with vision loss were abandoned

²¹ Jennifer Allen-Barker, interview by author, February 13, 2017.

²² Allen-Barker.

²³ “Classes For and About the Disabled,” ASI Collection, Box 27, Folder 22, Special Collections and University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

due to lack of volunteer hours committed to the project.²⁴ Allen-Barker also recalls that in her time as a student at Cal Poly her vision loss prevented her from even realizing that there was any such organization like Disabled Student Services since signs were placed out of her range of vision and information concerning the organization was buried too deeply within the printed material provided by the university for a student with vision loss to reasonably be expected to find.²⁵

Two programs in particular can be highlighted as DSS's most successful attempts to eliminate social and attitudinal barriers. The first program was Disabled Awareness Day. This program, which would eventually become an annual event including film screenings, guest speakers, and informational booths for various services provided by DSS, initially consisted simply of administrators, including Cal Poly president Robert E Kennedy, being assigned a "disability" for the day. Each person would have to deal with their assigned disability while performing their daily tasks. This would continue to be a part of Disabled Awareness Day in the following decade, and it seems, based on the participants' evaluations as reported in the *Mustang Daily*, that it may have raised interest among Cal Poly administration for the swifter removal of physical barriers and helped identify the most areas in most dire need of improvement.²⁶ Media coverage surrounding the event, however, took on a well-meaning but ultimately insensitive tone. The same *Mustang Daily* article that reported participant feedback from the first Disabled Awareness Day in 1974 used the headline: "Officials Journey on Cripples' Path."²⁷ A quick look at a comparison between the words "crippled" and "disabled" on Google's Ngram Viewer, which

²⁴ *Disabled Student Services Year End Report 1976-77*, Box 27, Folder 22, Special Collections and University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

²⁵ Allen-Barker.

²⁶ "Officials Journey on Cripples' Path," *Mustang Daily* 26 September 1974, 4, <https://goo.gl/LKCPMm>, accessed 12 February 2017.

²⁷ "Officials Journey on Cripples' Path."

compares the usage of words or phrases within English publications over time, shows that the word “crippled” experienced a fairly sharp decline in usage in the late 1950s. This trend continues to this day and, probably not coincidentally, coincides with an even sharper increase in the use of the word “disabled.” The usage of this word in a student newspaper in 1975 may not seem too shocking to a contemporary reader, but it was clearly running counter to more progressive ways of describing disability, and suggests that Cal Poly may have been behind the curve as it relates to attitudes towards students with disabilities.

Another effort by DSS, the Speakers’ Bureau, was an impressive program designed to eliminate attitudinal barriers. Established in the 1979-80 academic year, the Speakers’ Bureau was an effort to get students with disabilities to give presentations sharing their experience. The idea behind this effort was that by being seen and heard in this way the students would be able to make some significant headway in the effort to remove attitudinal barriers. Students that presented as a part of the Speakers’ Bureau reported that audiences were able to engage in the question-and-answer sessions that followed their presentations with questions that greatly contributed to their own, and others, understanding of disability.²⁸

Although the Speakers’ Bureau was able to make progress on the removal of social and attitudinal barriers, there were still plenty of these barriers left to overcome in the community at large. If the student newspaper’s coverage of Disabled Awareness Day in 1974 had been insensitive toward describing students with disabilities, San Luis Obispo’s local newspaper took things a step further in 1981 by using language that could even be considered destructive. On February 28 of that year, San Luis Obispo’s *Telegram-Tribune* printed a story with the cringe-inducing title: “Deformed Girl Faces Life Squarely.” This article highlighted Tammy Hopper, a

²⁸ Beth Currier, “Disabled Speakers’ Bureau,” *News & Views* 2, no. 1 (September 1979), 8, ASI Collection, Box 28, Folder 1, Special Collections and University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

high school student at the time in Hanford, CA who had been born without arms and with shortened legs. The article was generally in praise of Hopper's determination to take part in high school life the way that any other student would, however the use of language such as "deformed" and "deformities" throughout the article give it a troubling tone.²⁹ Cal Poly's DSS, by then known as Disabled Students Unlimited, responded in a measured and mature way by thanking the *Telegram-Tribune* for their positive sentiments toward the woman who was the subject of their article, but making it clear that the choice of language such as "deformed" was undermining the supposedly positive intentions of the article.³⁰ This incident speaks to how the attitudes of the community surrounding a university, and not simply the university itself, can affect the experience of students with disabilities. There is little to suggest that the attitudes toward persons with disabilities in San Luis Obispo generally, or at Cal Poly specifically, were particularly malicious. However, attitudinal barriers remain barriers, whether or not they are well-intentioned.

Cal Poly, like every other public university in the nation, was obligated to respond to the passage and implementation of the Rehabilitation Act, and despite not having been a major source of activism in the movement leading up to 1973 there are many things to admire about the way it responded. The Rehabilitation Act set no specific guidelines on what accessibility should look like or how it should be attained, yet Cal Poly chose to strive for fully accessible buildings and took measures such as Disabled Awareness Day in order that administrators might realize just how important accessibility was and also discover some less obvious inaccessible features. This process was slow, and Cal Poly cannot be seen as having been on the forefront of the effort within the California State University system, but thanks to dedicated individuals like

²⁹ "Deformed Girl Faces Life Squarely," *Telegram-Tribune*, 28 February 1981.

³⁰ Beth Currier and Ellen Cox, Letter Editor of *Telegram-Tribune*, 26 March 1981, ASI Collection, Box 28, Folder 2, Special Collections and University Archives, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, CA.

the first DSS Coordinator Robert Bonds, there was energy and passion that created progress. Finally, Cal Poly showed a commitment toward the elimination of social and attitudinal barriers in addition to physical barriers. This commitment should be admired since there was no legal obligation under the Rehabilitation Act to make this kind of effort.

Unfortunately, as those involved with the fight for accessibility knew, these barriers are not easily overcome and Cal Poly struggled with finding ways to do so. There is nothing to suggest that DSS was able to make any significant impact on the removal of attitudinal barriers until the implementation of the Speakers' Bureau at the end of the decade, and even that was little more than the first step of getting a group of nondisabled students to interact with their fellow disabled students in a comfortable environment, listen, and have their questions about disability answered. Ultimately, Cal Poly's actions in the decade following the passage of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act reflect on the nature of Cal Poly as it has often been perceived. Cal Poly took action quietly, followed rather than led, and slowly achieved something worthwhile, if not ideal.

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