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## **"WHERE DO THEY BELONG? MINORITIES WITHIN MINORITIES: PEOPLE OF COLOR WITH DISABILITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION"**

**William Olubodun**

Assistant Director, Student Involvement, Culture Center, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

**"This presentation explores strategies to make institutions more welcoming to students of color who have disabilities and how to effectively include them in the mainstream minority students organization programs and activities."**

The enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as well as the benefit of other federal access legislation has facilitated the presence of people with disabilities on college campuses. Among this new minority are people of color who have embarked on the quest for knowledge and all of the rights and privileges of learning, aspirations, hopes and dreams the same as everyone else. For this new minority, learning becomes a drama of life with intricate twisting plots as they face insurmountable odds in their everyday existence within the citadel. Their learning experience is limited to all they could access, chiefly in the classroom. They are systematically excluded from the rest of available opportunities for learning outside the classroom. Official justification for such exclusion has primarily focused on insufficient financial resources, rather than creative strategies to enable institutions and programs to develop all-inclusive campuses and learning environments.

People of color with disabilities face more than one obstacle and certainly multifaceted social stigma when color and disabilities are intertwined in one individual. It would be rare, even in this day and age, to find a faculty or staff of color with disability appointed as faculty or staff advisor to majority students without disabilities. Such institutional and covert discrimination and alienation function only as a retardant and not inspiration for persons of color to aspire to careers in the academe. Programs and activities are planned, and student staff positions advertised without much thought to the possibility that qualified students of color with disabilities would be interested in the position. The same applies to academic and managerial positions in institutions of higher education. The very few professionals of color with disabilities in higher education face more alienation both from students and their colleagues. They are rarely involved in programs and activities where they would otherwise be able to provide useful input and leadership. On occasions when they are included, few people pay attention to their comments, for disabilities are seen first not the intellectual individuals.

While most learners with disabilities would be content with an environment that allows effective learning to occur, the prejudices of doubt, insecurity borne out of insensitivity, and discrimination borne out of fear constitute larger portions of out of classroom learning experiences. Discouraging as this may be, students of color with disabilities encounter the additional burden of racial issues. They are members of distinct racial minorities, they are members of the disabled community, and they are students and

intellectual beings, yet are rarely taken seriously in any of these affiliations. They have no access within their racial identification because of their disabilities, and are unwelcome within the larger disabled community because of their color. In the classroom, they are generally considered burdensome in a society that worships at the altars of perfection.

The discourse on people of color in predominantly white institutions, as most other popular issues of national and academic imports usually fail to include disabled members of society. People with disabilities are neither represented in the arts or popular culture, nor featured in the mainstream institutional and organizational management. They do not participate in sports, for the sports fetishes require physical perfection. They are rarely seen in campus social events inside or outside the institution, for those who make the efforts to speak with them openly on campus, would prefer not be seen with them outside the classroom or off campus. Their primary ethnic group meetings are inaccessible to them because of the presence of disability and the majority student population is inaccessible to them because of color. Where do they belong? They are usually seen not in the social environment or interacting in the mainstream, but rather in two notable places on campus: their classrooms where they are regarded as novelties and in their dormitory rooms and cafeteria, where they are regarded as nuisances, and generally avoided by their co-tenants.

This presentation will explore strategies to make institutions more welcoming to students of color who have disabilities and how to effectively include them in the mainstream minority students organization programs and activities.

### **Presenter:**

**William Olubodun** is a doctoral student at UNL's Department of Educational Administration. He is currently working as assistant director at Student Involvement, working with minority students and supervising the UNL's Culture Center. William Olubodun served as the coordinator of Multicultural Student Programs and Assistant Professor at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology from 1994 to 1998. His publication includes a chapter in *Civic Discourse: Multicultural, Cultural Diversity, and Global Communication* (Ablex, 1998) and *The Third Millennium Africa: Disability and Rehabilitation* (Ablex in press).