Disabled deserve recognition

This is the seventh column in the Exponent’s Unlock Diversity column.

Feb. 2, an editorial column entitled "Minorities find recognition during heritage months" was posted. The author of the editorial did very well illustrating months dedicated to the recognition and appreciation of underrepresented groups. The author listed awareness months for a variety of groups, including racial and ethnic minorities, women, and the LGBT community. In addition to celebrating the contributions individuals within these groups have added to the mural of diversity in our nation, I would like to acknowledge one other underrepresented group that was not mentioned — individuals with disabilities.

The reason I noticed disability as a forgotten category in the column was because I have a particular interest in the area. My interest began while I was at my undergraduate institution. I have a chronic medical condition which sometimes limits what I can and cannot do. I was not aware that I could receive classroom accommodations from the university’s Office of Disability Services until I had met with the director of the office. While I was there, I met a number of other students with different types of disabilities. I actually met two of my best friends through interacting with people in that office. One of my friends has cerebral palsy and the other is blind. I learned a lot about their disabilities by being around them and realized in the end we had more similarities than differences.

My interest for disabilities grew even further while I was enrolled in my master’s program. Part of my Student Affairs program’s requirements was to have an assistantship and a practicum. My assistantship was in the Disability Services Office and my practicum was in the Learning Disabilities Center. Both experiences offered me even more opportunities to interact with people with disabilities and gain a greater appreciation of how they are a vital part of diversity. I also assisted in advising a student organization for students who are hard-of-hearing. I learned many things I may not have thought about unless I had advised this group. For example, you should face people who have a hearing impairment and not obstruct your mouth when you talk to them because they may read lips. The students I advised interested me in the deaf culture to the extent that I want to learn American Sign Language (ASL).

I have enjoyed my experiences interacting with people with disabilities so much that I pursued this area as a career. So, here I am at Purdue. I have started another chapter in my life, and I believe it is a wonderful start. My main responsibility in the area of disability at Purdue is to ensure that any person with a disability has equal opportunity and equal access to the programs, services, and facilities at the university.

Another of my responsibilities is to assist in the coordination of the disability awareness months. October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month in the United States. The Indiana Governor’s Council for People with Disabilities has also declared March as Disability Awareness Month for the state of Indiana. I encourage all of you to take advantage of these learning opportunities.

The number of people in our society who have disabilities may be larger than you expect. Sensory and mobility impairments are often the most noticeable disabilities because they can be seen by other people. However, many disabilities are "hidden" or "invisible," such as learning disabilities, ADHD, multiple sclerosis, lupus, and depression. The United States Census Bureau reported in 2000 that approximately 19.3 percent of the total population has some type of specified disability. It also reported that one in ten traditional college-aged people have a disability. It is probably likely that you have unknowingly interacted with a person with a disability at some point in your life. My hope is that we will all recognize and appreciate that people with disabilities are a vital part of our society and have made wonderful contributions to diversity.

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