Accessing the Academy: The Disabled Student Movement, 1950-1973

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Civil rights marches, anti-war protests, and free speech demonstrations characterize the historical image of college campuses in the 1960s. A young generation of baby boomers, frustrated by the distance between the Cold War era’s rhetoric of freedom and equality and its reality of unfulfilled promises, challenged university administrations throughout the nation.¹ Missing from all the scholarship on student protest are students with disabilities, who began demanding their own rights and accessibility on college campuses. In the 1960s, a new generation of disability rights activists coalesced on college campuses and created institutional change.² They formed organizations, held protests, and literally dismantled campuses, taking sledge hammers to inaccessible curbs and lobbying for barrier-free environments. The work of this young generation ultimately spread beyond campuses and flourished into a national movement.³

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, most notably Section 504, for the first time in American history granted civil rights to the disabled. This legislation is a key moment in policymaking and has been regarded as the catalyst of the disability rights movement, which arose to secure the implementation of these rights in the late 1970s. But scholars have not adequately explained the passage of Section 504, attributing it to sympathetic policymakers and the momentum of anti-


² This paper is only focusing on people with physical/mobility disabilities.

³ For scholarship on disability rights activism before the 1960s see Paul Longmore’s Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003) and Audra Jenning’s With Minds Fixed on the Horrors of War: Liberalism and Disability Activism, 1940-1960” (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Ohio State University, Columbus, 2008).
discrimination legislation in general. These explanations of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 fail to account for the disability activism that preceded it and indeed contributed to its passage.

This paper examines two sources of disability activism in the 1960s that help to explain passage of Section 504 and that provide a fuller description of the disability rights movement—camps and rehabilitation centers and college campuses. From rehabilitation centers and camps for students with disabilities emerged networks of disability activists, which in turn provided a foundation for student activism on college campuses.

Distinct from other minorities, people with disabilities represent a unique community. Unlike minorities of race, ethnicity, and gender people with disabilities rarely share their minority status with other members of their families or communities, resulting in various kinds of isolation. In comparing the disability rights movement to the civil rights movement, Jonathan Young noted that the disability rights movement is exceptional in that “there were no comparable geographically-concentrated communities, strong gathering places such as churches, or unifying experiences such as child-rearing.” Yet, there were places, such as rehabilitation centers and summer camps, which fostered the growth of a disability community.

While the main purposes of rehabilitation centers were to provide medical care and physical therapy, the long stays, accessible environments, and common situations among residents were important in building a community. These centers provided identifiable role models and unhindered access, an important combination that had been unavailable at home, and this combination created a consciousness that would lead to a fight for equality and full

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citizenship rights on college campuses in the 1960s and beyond. In the brief time I have today, let me demonstrate the connections between rehab centers, college campuses, and the national disability rights movement with three case studies.

**University of Illinois**

First, the University of Illinois. Paralyzed from a fall on his family’s backyard trapeze, seventeen-year-old Fred Fay left his home in Bethesda, Maryland to go to the Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation in Warm Springs, Georgia, which Franklin D. Roosevelt had established in 1927. The Warm Springs Institute, founded by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1927, was the premiere treatment center for polio and spinal cord patients. However, the hospital, with large, white brick buildings and expansive courtyards surrounded by flower gardens and trees, resembled a hotel resort more than a rehabilitation institution. From its inception, Roosevelt was concerned with keeping the “Spirit of Warm Springs” and was determined that “it must never become a hospital.” Roosevelt boasted of the Institute’s uniqueness, and in the 1940 Warm Springs Annual Report, Roosevelt underscored the importance of a medical regime coupled with high morale and, “building of as normal a social life as is possible.”

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6 In 1927 Franklin D. Roosevelt purchased the one thousand-acre resort for $200,000. From 1928 to 1954, the center expanded its facilities to a twenty-five building complex to accommodate the victims of the polio epidemic.

7 Susan Richards Shreve, *Warm Springs: Traces of a Childhood at FDR’s Polio Haven* (Boston and New York, 2007) 45. For more information on the significance of Warm Springs to the Roosevelt administration and to Georgia, see Theo Lippman, Jr., *The Squire of Warm Springs: F.D.R. in Georgia, 1924-1945*. (Chicago, 1977) and Turnley Walker, *Roosevelt and the Warm Springs Story* (New York, 1953). A “Little White House” was constructed for President Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt to stay during their visits to Warm Springs. Lippman noted that the construction of Warm Springs was important to Georgia’s economy and unifying the North and the South.

8 Lippman, 200.

opinion,” he continued, “it would be a mistake to think of the Foundation as just a hospital.”

The perception of Warm Springs as more than a hospital created an environment among patients that was unique to this institution. While it has been criticized, like many institutions for people with disabilities, for paternalism and sexual abuse, Warm Springs’ barrier-free environment provided a place for people with disabilities to come together, rehabilitate, and form bonds.

After spending almost seven months at Warm Springs, Fay returned to both physical and societal barriers at home. He had to finish his senior year at home, because his high school was inaccessible to wheelchair users. This was the opposite of the “oasis of accessibility” he had found at Warm Springs, and Fay concluded that the problem was not with his paralyzed body.

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10 Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Spirit of Warm Springs,” 1940 Annual Report. Patients from all over the country spent lengths of time ranging from a few months to years in residence at Warm Springs. Many disability activists spent time at Warm Springs during their adolescence. In addition to FDR, one of the most notable patients in the early 1950s was Hugh Gallagher, credited for drafting the 1968 Architectural Barriers Act with Alaska Senator Bob Bartlett. Lorenzo Wilson Milam, a journalist and activist also attended Warm Springs in the 1950s. After the Salk vaccine in 1955, the treatment center broadened its services to include people with spinal cord injuries. Naomi Rogers, “Polio Chronicles: Warm Springs and Disability Politics in the 1930s,” Asclepio LXI, 1 (2009): 143-174, argues the spirit of Warm Springs had a history of bolstering communities of activists from its inception. Beginning in the 1930s Warm Springs created an activist community of adult polio survivors, who called themselves the Polio Crusaders and took their experiences at Warm Springs into their communities and fought for accessibility in mainstream society. However, according to Rogers this movement declined by the late 1930s with the creation of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (known popularly as the March of Dimes) in 1937, an effort by the Roosevelt administration to distance the President’s image from that of being paralyzed and to medicalize the rehabilitation center. Rogers cites the shift in enrollment procedures as a reason for the decline of the activism, from primarily admitting adult patients in the late 1920s and early 1930s, to focusing on adolescents by the 1940s. Yet, the environment of the Institute continued to shape adolescents and cultivate a community of future leaders of the movement of the 1960s.

11 Susan Richards Shreve, Warm Springs: Traces of a Childhood at FDR’s Polio Haven (Boston, 2007) 19. Hugh Gallagher’s Black Bird Fly Away: Disabled in an Able-Bodied World (Arlington, 1998) and Lorenzo Wilson Milam’s The Cripple Liberation Front Marching Band Blues (San Diego, 1983), Julie Silver and Daniel Wilson, Polio Voices: An Oral History from the American Polio Epidemics and Worldwide Eradication Efforts (Westport, 2007) all document their experiences and the sense of community at Warm Springs in the 1940s and 1950s. Susan Richards Shreve’s memoir, Warm Springs: Traces of a Childhood at FDR’s Polio Haven, highlights the familial atmosphere of the Institute in the 1950s, noting that it was “a home of their own with people like themselves, a kind of substitute family in a place where they were expected to work hard and laugh hard and to reach for their highest expectation of themselves.”

12 Milam, 89.
but with the inaccessible environment in which he lived. Counselors at Warm Springs encouraged Fay to attend the University of Illinois because of its reputation for accessibility, sizable disabled student population, and Division of Rehabilitation Education Services.

Consequently, in the fall of 1962, Fred Fay enrolled at the University of Illinois, joining future activists Mary Lou Breslin, Kitty Cone, and Sharon Mistler, who were all in their junior year. Both Breslin and Mistler had also spent time at Warm Springs. Like Fay, Breslin credited the atmosphere of Warm Springs for her involvement in the disability rights movement: “It sure did set the tone for how you want to be treated as a person with a disability.” The set of shared experiences at Warm Springs created a consciousness and a network of activists who drew on the foundation of equality and accessibility and asserted their rights at the University of Illinois.

Fay, Cone, and Breslin were politically active in the college community, participating in the anti-war movement as well as championing disability rights. In sarcastic language that signaled a sense of community, Fay referred to their group as “the wheelchair ghetto.” Although they lived in integrated dorms, the students with disabilities attended classes together, went to rehabilitation together, and rode the buses together, which they called the “gimp ship.”

13 Fay, 23.
14 Sharon Mistler, from Oklahoma, also went to Warm Springs and attended University of Illinois but left after her second year. Mistler moved to Berkeley in the late 1960s and became one of the founders of the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities (ACCD) in the mid-1970s. Both Breslin and Cone also eventually moved to Berkeley to become integral leaders in the movement in the late 1970s.
15 Breslin, Oral History Interview, 27.
16 Young, 64.
In 1949, the disabled students established their own fraternity, Delta Sigma Omicron (DSO), and two publications, the student newspaper *The Spokesman* and *Sigma Signs*.\(^{17}\) Published annually, *Sigma Signs* listed the purposes of the organization, which included promoting higher education for people with disabilities throughout the nation, furthering the social and recreational welfare of people with disabilities, and raising awareness about the discrimination faced by people with disabilities.\(^{18}\) Through *Sigma Signs*, DSO asserted that the purposes of the fraternity and the publication were not focused on campus initiatives alone, but sought to connect with the outside world. Attending one of the first universities to have a program for students with disabilities, the students were astutely aware of being in the national spotlight and used this as a way to advocate for disability rights. Slogans on each issue throughout the 1950s and 1960s underscored the idea that *Sigma Signs* had greater goals than just highlighting student achievements: “We do not shy away from this position in the limelight. Instead, we proudly stand for what we represent—the personified idea of what handicapped men and women can do if given the opportunity.”\(^{19}\) The organization saw itself as a bridge between able-bodied and disabled citizens, and DSO members felt it their duty to “educate the general

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\(^{17}\) Delta Sigma Omicron was established in 1949 at the University of Illinois. It is now a national fraternity dedicated to issues of accessibility, employment, sports, and rehabilitation. A Beta Chapter was established at the University of Florida and a Gamma Chapter at the University of Southern Illinois University in the early 1960s.

\(^{18}\) In addition to the annual publication distributed to benefactors, potential students and sponsors, and state and local vocational rehabilitation offices, DSO also printed *The Spokesman*, a bi-monthly newsletter. Delta Sigma Omicron, By-Laws and Statement of Purpose, Delta Sigma Omicron Records 16/6/19 Box 1, Folder National Board of Directors 1948-1971. UIA.

\(^{19}\) Jim Seybold, *1960 Sigma Signs*, UIA.
public toward accepting the disabled as successful citizens, capable of doing a good job in both the business and social world.”

Fay and sixty other students with disabilities evaluated every classroom on campus for accessibility, compiled lists of necessary curb ramps, and lobbied administrators and local business owners. While some of their demands were met quickly, curb ramps were not built until construction on a sidewalk was necessary. Forcing the issue, in the middle of the night, Nugent and a small group of students with disabilities took sledge hammers to “high priority” curbs to force the university to rebuild the curbs with ramps.

Fay continued his activism off campus. During his summer vacations, Fay started the Opening Doors Campaign in Washington, D.C. Opening Doors worked with architects and planners to make D.C. more accessible and created travel guides to D.C. attractions, documenting their levels of accessibility. It lobbied Congress with the phrase “no taxation without transportation” and recruited sixty different groups to testify before the House and Senate on the importance of making mass transit accessible, achieving one of its main goals with the passage of the Urban Mass Transportation Act in 1964. This law authorized grants for developing urban transit systems and required accessibility. In 1966, Fay graduated from the

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20 Delta Sigma Omicron, By-Laws and Statement of Purpose, Delta Sigma Omicron Records 16/6/19 Box 1, Folder National Board of Directors 1948-1971. UIA.

21 Fay, 36.

22 Fay, 37.

23 Opening Doors also provided peer counseling to people with newly acquired spinal cord injuries. One of their most famous clients was George Wallace who was paralyzed after an assassination attempt in 1972.

24 Fay, 37.

25 ibid.
University of Illinois with a B.A. in Psychology and returned in 1969 to get his doctorate. These were the first steps in a lifetime of disability activism.

New York

A second center of campus disability activism in the 1960s was in New York. Born there in 1947, Judith Heumann contracted polio at eighteen months old which caused quadriplegia.26 As a teenager, Heumann spent her summers in Hunter, New York at Camp Jened, one of the few camps for teenagers with disabilities.27 It was at Camp Jened that Heumann met her first boyfriend and her closest friends and future activists, Bobbi Linn and Freida Tankus. With fondness Heumann recalled the freedom and accessibility she experienced at Camp Jened, a place that contradicted the social isolation and inaccessibility of her everyday life in New York City and gave her a “little bit of a charge for wanting to change the world out there.”28 Linn echoed Heumann’s experience, stating, “I think of Camp Jened as the training ground where people learned that they had the same rights as everybody else and a lot of the original people were people from Jened.”29 In 1965, Heumann enrolled at Long Island University, because it was close to her family. Heumann joined a sorority her freshman year and was elected to the student government her junior year. In 1968, she began working in the newly established Disabled


27 Ibid.

28 Heumann oral history, 41.

Students Program at Long Island University to make campus more accessible and advise other students with disabilities. Heumann and other students involved in the program then established the Handicapped Integration Movement (HIM) to demand equal rights and accessibility at the university. Heumann continued to keep in close contact with her friends from Camp Jened, who promoted accessibility on their own campuses, Linn at Hofstra University on Long Island, and Tankus at Brooklyn College. It was from this network of women who met and formed friendships at Camp Jened that disability activism emerged on college campuses in New York. Students at Brooklyn College created Student Organization for Every Disability United for Progress (SOFEDUP), and at Hofstra they organized People United in Support of the Handicapped (PUSH). In 1969, as many of these students were finishing their undergraduate careers, members from all three campuses came together to form Disabled in Action (DIA). One student from Brooklyn College recognized the need for an organization outside of the college environment, stating “if I ever want to leave the campus and be able to participate in the community, we had to change the community too.”

At twenty-two, Heumann became the first president of the DIA, whose board of directors consisted primarily of women, including Bobbi Linn and Frieda Tankus. DIA networked with other grassroots organizations to form a coalition on multiple fronts to advocate for civil rights for people with disabilities and then focused their efforts on passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

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30 Young, 52-53.

31 Five of the seven members of the board of directors were women.
University of California Berkeley

The third case study is the University of California, Berkeley. At Berkeley the community that nurtured activism among students with disabilities stemmed from their common residence rather than from previous connections at rehab centers.

Ed Roberts, whose polio left him a quadriplegic and required at least twelve hours a day in an iron lung, had to sue the University of California, Berkeley for admission.\textsuperscript{32} In 1964, he enrolled there, the same semester that the Free Speech Movement began and James Meredith was admitted into the University of Mississippi. Roberts was permitted to attend classes and reside in the university’s Cowell Memorial Hospital, dividing his time between the iron lung and classes. By 1966, seven more students with disabilities joined Roberts, occupying a wing of Cowell Memorial. These students formed a coalition, the Rolling Quads, to push for accessibility, a residence outside of the hospital, and financial assistance.\textsuperscript{33}

Hale Zukas, one of the first students with a disability to be admitted to the University of California, Berkeley, described the experience in a 1971 grant application that he and many of his peers shared while living together in a hospital: “Having been in close contact over the years, they have been able to discuss common problems and give each other mutual support on a continuing basis. Through this process they have supplanted the isolation and alienation with a sense of unity.”\textsuperscript{34}

In 1969, the Rolling Quads, now twelve members strong, lobbied the university administration to establish a Disabled Students Program (DSP) on campus. Led by Roberts,

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\textsuperscript{32} An iron lung is a large metal cylinder that regulated breathing for paralyzed respiratory muscles.
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\textsuperscript{33} Edward V. Roberts Papers, Carton 1, Folder 1, (Berkeley: Bancroft Library Archives).
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\textsuperscript{34} Hale Zukas Papers, Introduction to the State of the Center for Independent Living, 1973. (Berkeley: Bancroft Library Archives).
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Herb Willsmore, and Hale Zukas, they applied for a grant from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare under one of President Johnson’s Great Society initiatives, the Higher Education Act of 1965. The grant supported salaries for a director of the DSP, counselors, wheelchair repairs, student financial support, accessible vans, and funds to travel to conferences, including the President’s Committee on Handicapped Persons. By 1977, the Disabled Students Program had just fewer than four hundred students with disabilities.

The Rolling Quads also pressed to make Berkeley’s campus more accessible. They worked with faculty and administrators to make buildings accessible to wheelchair users and to provide interpreters for deaf students and braille readers for blind students. As a result of their efforts, the corner of Bancroft Way and Telegraph Avenue, the heart of campus, marks the site of the nation’s first curb cut.

After their successes on campus, the Disabled Students Program continued their initiatives for accessibility and civil rights off campus. Roberts recounted: “We soon realized that our struggle could not be confined to the campus. As the years went by, our struggle moved from city to county to state to national politics.”  

The Rolling Quads joined forces with the California Association of the Physically Handicapped to connect with larger community organizations. In July 1971, they wrote to the Mayor of Oakland, demanding curb cuts for sidewalks and lobbying for accessible drinking fountains. The following month, the Oakland City Council resolved to make the city accessible to people with physical disabilities, creating curb cuts at major intersections and mandating that future buildings be accessible.

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The original members of the Rolling Quads continued the struggle for rights and accessibility after graduating from the University of California, Berkeley. Roberts, Willsmore, and Zukas created the Center for Independent Living (CIL), the first center for independent living in the country, on the outskirts of Berkeley’s campus, which provided similar services as the DSP but for the larger community.

These three vignettes have demonstrated a pattern of community formation and disability activism. The shared experiences at rehabilitation centers, such as Warm Springs, Camp Jened, and Cowell Hospital, created a network of future activists and had a far-reaching impact on their understanding of accessibility—both physical and social—that played out on college campuses in the 1960s. The student activists from these colleges became the leaders of the major organizations in the disability rights movement in the 1970s, as traditionally described by historians. But these stories make clear that the roots of disability rights activism lie much deeper.37

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37 Breslin established the Disabled Rights and Education Defense Fund (DREDF), Fay and Mistler established the American Coalition of Citizens with Disabilities (ACCD), Heumann founded the Disabled in Action and worked with Ed Roberts to establish the World Institute on Disability.
Selected Bibliography


