Disability Studies degree programs launch at University of Oregon in 2016

Starting in fall 2016, University of Oregon students can for the first time pursue a Minor or a Graduate Specialization in disability studies as part of their degree programs. The UO Disability Studies Initiative is excited to announce this new interdisciplinary program, which includes courses from across the university in fields like architecture, literature, law, education, gender studies, anthropology, geography, international studies, and arts administration. The program gives students the opportunity to develop a deep understanding of the social, cultural, historical, and political framing of disability. Students will engage with the disability community both on and off campus, explore how disability intersects with race, class, and gender, and consider how disability fits into diverse human experiences today and in the past.

"As a disabled person, having a disability studies minor would mean having a voice," says Finch Byrd, a second-year undergraduate comparative literature major in the University of Oregon Clark Honors College.

Disability plays a central role in human diversity, yet there are very few degree-satisfying courses at the University of Oregon where students can increase their understanding of it. The University of Oregon offers degree programs in Women’s and Gender Studies, Queer Studies, and Ethnic Studies, but until now lacked a similar program to focus on the past and present experiences of people with disabilities, and the roles that disability plays in society.

The new Disability Studies minor and graduate specialization will operate out of the College of Arts and Sciences. Associate Dean of Humanities and Professor of English Karen Ford shared that "the dean’s office is glad to foster the study of disability as a central human experience with worldwide legacies in the arts, culture, and traditions of thought and belief."

**Wider Worlds Seminars**

To help kick off the UO Disability Studies program, the Department of English, with funding by the Williams Council, will pilot an exciting new community-based course, "Life Stories: A Disability Studies Off-Campus Seminar." Slated for spring 2016, this first Wider Worlds Seminar brings together college students and members of the local disability community to learn with and from each other as peers. Such collaborative learning has the potential to transform UO students’ understanding of disability and provide access to higher education for many young community members with disabilities.

The 2016 seminar, Life Stories, developed by UO English professor Elizabeth Wheeler, will take place at Reality Kitchen, a Eugene-area non-profit cafe, performance space, and wholesale bakery that employs and provides job training to young people with disabilities. Half of the students will be Lane County young adults
who experience intellectual and developmental disabilities, and half University of Oregon undergraduates. Students will collect each others' oral histories, learn public speaking and storytelling skills, and rehearse an end-of-term public performance.

Life Stories will provide a model of disability-inclusive education at the University of Oregon and form a key part of the new Disability Studies Minor and Graduate Specialization program. "We are very excited about Professor Elizabeth Wheeler's leadership within the College," said Associate Dean Ford, "and look forward to the programs that she and her colleagues will build and the intellectual opportunities the minor and graduate certificate will create for our students and faculty."

In the Life Stories course, UO students will gain understanding of disability community they would not likely get from a typical course. Life Stories also provides rare access to higher education for students with intellectual disabilities. Many universities are only now starting programs to provide such access, and the Life Stories course serves as a pilot project for this type of disability inclusion at the University of Oregon.

Disability Studies Faculty Development Seminar

Faculty from across the University of Oregon will join national leaders in disability studies for a Faculty Development Seminar June 14-17, 2016, to develop new courses and a common core for the Disability Studies Minor and Graduate Specialization.

The seminar, organized by the UO Disability Studies Initiative, will be led by Mel Y. Chen, Associate Professor of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and Philip Ferguson, Professor of Educational Studies at Chapman University. Both exceptional scholars and educators in the disability studies field, Professors Chen and Ferguson will meet with UO faculty participants in the Development Seminar to shape the new University of Oregon disability studies program and explore techniques for full inclusion in the classroom. This seminar is sponsored by the College of Arts and Sciences, the Office of Academic Affairs, the Vice President for Equity and Inclusion, the Provost, the Department of English, the School of Architecture and Allied Arts, the Graduate School, and the Accessible Education Center.

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Visit the UO Disability Studies Initiative website:

http://studydisability.uoregon.edu.