


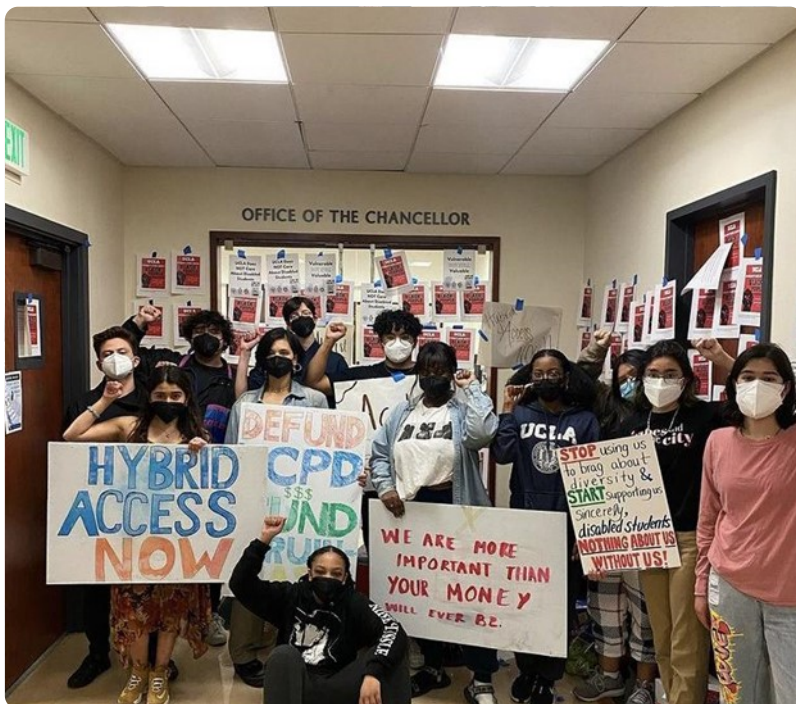
DISABLED STUDENTS ARE ORGANIZING ON CAMPUSES ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Written by Shruti Rajkumar

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Members of UCLA's Disabled Student Union and Mother Organizations Coalition protesting in front of the Office of the Chancellor at Murphy Hall on February 1, 2022. Photo credit: UCLA's Disabled Student Union. Image description: A group of students at UCLA are standing in a hallway in front of the "Office of the Chancellor." The protesters' flyers are taped all over the walls around them. To the left of the frame, a student is holding a large sign that reads "Hybrid Access Now." On their left, a student is holding a sign that reads "We are more important than your money will ever be" in bright red text. Another student is holding a sign that reads "Stop using us to brag about diversity and start supporting us. Sincerely, disabled students. Nothing about us without us."

On January 31, Quinn O'Connor was one of the many students participating at a UCLA sit-in to advocate for remote (digital) access to classes. O'Connor, a co-founder of the UCLA Disabled Student Union, recalls a special moment on the second day in which protesters shared photos of their companion animals. It was a moment of balance; she recalls savoring the feeling of shared community and activism.

Over the past year, student disability organizations across the country have been holding protests, circulating petitions, and creating initiatives to advocate for accessibility, safety, and remote access on their campuses. UCLA's Disabled Student Union, which finished their sixteen day long sit-in on February 17, are among the many disability organizations in the U.S. fighting for disability equity. In

doing so, they have often bonded into a stronger community.

"In the next five to ten years, I won't be in college anymore, but I'm really grateful to have been a part of what I see as the start of the next disability rights movement in America," said O'Connor, a senior at UCLA, in a Zoom interview.

With vaccine rollouts and declines in COVID-19 cases, colleges all over the U.S. have been loosening COVID policies, removing remote access for classes, and transitioning to full capacity in-person classes. However, many disabled and immunocompromised students say that these plans don't take them and their needs into consideration.

Sophomore at American University, Katherine Greenstein, said that throughout the pandemic, they were fed up with how people's actions were putting disabled lives in danger. In college, Greenstein—who uses the pronouns "they"—said they started working towards disability justice and community spaces through DSUs.

During the past several months, Greenstein and others have been petitioning for the university to require mandatory COVID-19 testing. The petition gained nearly 1,700 signatures, as well as dozens of letters of support from people in student organizations and support from 70% of the student government association.

"At this point, it's so beyond anything I thought I knew how to do in terms of organizing, but I realized that I just never shut up. My parents always said that once I get out of high school, I'm going to know what I'm doing in my life and be really good at it," Greenstein said in a Zoom interview. "It took COVID and being pissed and needing to find my people and needing some sort of community. All of these things kind of came together, and now it's advocacy at a university that doesn't want to listen to us."

This interest in disability culture and justice was galvanized during the pandemic and prompted Greenstein to say yes to co-founding the Disability Student Union at American University in Washington, D.C. In turn, having that community also helped them identify outwardly, proudly, and positively as being disabled.

"Over the pandemic, I got really into identifying positively as disabled and being outwardly and proudly disabled. It became my main identity. I've been queer for a really long time, I've been Jewish my whole life, but like, this is my identity [too], this is the thing that makes me the most who I am," said Greenstein.

O'Connor said that a lot of student organizations have grown out of the pandemic due to the exasperation over disability issues that disabled students have felt for decades. In the Fall of 2021, Mack Thompson founded the first disabled student organization, the Disabled and Ill Coalition, at the University of Kentucky to build a sense of community for disabled students during the pandemic as well as start activist efforts to improve the university.

Thompson and other students noticed many issues on campus that impact disabled students, from lack of accessible entrances to poor social distancing policies. They are collecting petitions protesting the difficulty of scheduling an appointment at the college's Disability Resource Center.

According to the National Center for College Students with Disabilities (NCCSD), nearly every college in the U.S. has an office that works with disabled students to make sure that campus classes, programs, buildings and other facilities, and services are accessible.

Accommodations are given to students on a case by case basis by these services. However, accessibility issues persist. For instance, in May 2021, O'Connor and UCLA's Disabled Student Union took their first steps into the greater advocacy space when the college's administration took away students' accommodations for priority enrollment without due process.

Since then, UCLA's Disabled Student Union has been pushing for increased accessibility, primarily around remote access during the pandemic. After eight months of this advocacy effort, UCLA's administrators and Academic Senate [released](#) an official endorsement of hybrid learning and dual modality for students to the entire campus community on April 4. Though the fight for hybrid learning isn't over at UCLA, this was a major victory for the Disabled Student Union.



The Disabled Student Union at UCLA protesting for remote access in front of Royce Hall in October, 2021. Photo Credit: UCLA's Disabled Student Union. Image description: To the left frame of the photo, a person is standing with their back to the camera wearing a blue cap and a white t-shirt with the Disabled Student Union logo on the back of the shirt. Other students stand along a tan and red brick crosswalk, carrying signs. In the background is a green grassy field and two brick buildings.

At UC, there is a phrase used by disabled students called "Community, not compliance," which O'Connor said resonates with them and the work that the Disabled Student Union has done. They said that being compliant is not enough to support a growing community at universities, and that disability needs to be treated as a community.

"We really strive to treat disability as an identity, and a community of people of an underrepresented minority. In hearing people's experiences with the accommodations office, and with the university as a whole, it is so clear that this university does factor in the bare minimum legal requirement of the [Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)]. I think that in our advocacy work, we've made it clear that the ADA and compliance is not nearly enough to serve an equitable education to its students," said O'Connor.

While many colleges in the U.S. have a disability services office through which students can acquire accommodations, there aren't many spaces for disabled students to come together as a community. According to [Diverse Issues in Higher Education](#), only ten disability cultural centers exist among all the U.S. college campuses.

Disabled student organizations came into existence to foster such a communal space, while also advocating collectively for accessibility and disability equity. In October 2021, Greenstein created a Discord channel for disabled students and Disabled Student Union leaders nationwide to connect, build community, and support one another's advocacy and initiatives.

"It is so freeing to be able to sit and not only identify with being disabled yourself, and to not only have pride in yourself and your own identity, but to be able to take pride in a community. Knowing people who I could talk to who shared something about our past, they were able to help me realize that I can just identify [as disabled], and that's fine. It's radical, and that it's amazing and freeing and loving and powerful," said Greenstein.



The Disabled Student Union at American University at a flea market event in Fall, 2021. Photo courtesy of Katherine Greenstein. Image description: Six students who are standing and three students who are kneeling on the ground in front of them, are posing for a photo. They are all wearing masks and dressed in summery clothes. They are surrounded by bright green lawn, and partially shaded by the trees behind them.

O'Connor said they see the disabled students who they work with, as well as those across the nation right now, as the next political leaders in disability rights. For the future of this advocacy, Greenstein hopes that colleges provide access and safety during the pandemic to keep disabled students safe, and that disabled students don't feel alone in this advocacy work.

"The [disabled] community just needs to be treated well. A lot of people think they're treating us well right now, I can guarantee to them that they are not," said Greenstein. "I feel like we for so long have been struggling. There's so much shit happening all the time that is so bad. But having moments of just disabled joy and disabled love, I just want us to be happy. I just want us to be safe and okay."

THE INTERWOVEN PASTS AND FUTURES OF SOCIAL AND DISABILITY JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Written by TC Waisman

Dr. TC Waisman is an Indigenous Pasifika, Nepalese, Southeast Asian and Asian person who is Autistic. Her work focuses on how higher education leaders, faculty members, and professional staff can enhance services and outcomes for Autistic students in higher education. TC co-founded the Autistic Researchers Committee at the International Society for Autism Research (INSAR). She developed the Autism Training Academy, which offers online asynchronous trainings about autism and neurodivergence. She is an editorial board member of the *Autism in Adulthood* scientific journal.

