

# College psychology classes lack curriculum about disabilities

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Psychology classes are among the most popular courses on college campuses today, but new research shows that many of them lack important information about the largest single minority group in the U.S. - people with disabilities.

A review of hundreds of undergraduate course offerings from top-ranked universities found that many types of disability are underrepresented in [psychology](#) classes, including chronic health and [physical disabilities](#), said Kathleen Bogart, an assistant professor of psychology in the College of Liberal Arts at Oregon State University.

"About 57 million people in the U.S. have a disability, and it's likely we will all interact with someone with a disability on a regular basis," Bogart said. "Yet in terms of minority groups, we teach about disability the least. We are not properly preparing students to interact with this group."

The findings, published in the latest issue of the journal *Teaching of Psychology*, indicate that students may not be learning valuable lessons about how to interact with people with disabilities as they move throughout life, she said.

"The goal of psychology education is to generate psychologically-literate citizens, people who are prepared to interact with, work with, educate or provide treatment for people of all types," said Bogart, a co-author of the study. "When we design these courses, we want to make sure we are designing them to teach students how to respect diversity and understand

differences."

Researchers on this study included Bogart and co-authors Nicole Rosa of Worcester State University and OSU graduate and undergraduate students Amy Bonnett, Mariah Estill and Cassandra Colton. They analyzed the titles and descriptions of nearly 700 college psychology courses from 98 top-ranked undergraduate psychology programs in the U.S.

They found that all 98 colleges offered a course on psychiatric disability, but only eight offered courses in physical disability, even though it is far more common. Few colleges offered courses that represent a variety of disabilities.

In addition, psychology coursework appears to focus more on the least-common disabilities, including psychiatric disabilities and cognitive disabilities, rather than the most common disabilities, such as chronic health and physical disabilities.

"Ideally, disability should be infused throughout the psychology curriculum, and, in particular, it should be included in introductory, social and health psychology courses," Bogart said. "And we should be seeing more course topics that reflect the most common types of disability."

The researchers also found that psychology curriculum involving disability tends to focus on the medical model of disability, with a focus on diagnosis, treatment and cure. But a significant shift is underway in the psychological approach to disability, emphasizing a social model that focuses on coping, acceptance, reducing prejudice and social policy, Bogart said.

"The social model is a burgeoning area of research, so now is the time to

begin making a shift in our curriculum and teaching," she said.

Reworking psychology course content, particularly for the introductory classes that may be the only psychology course a student takes while in college, would help to address the deficiencies in current offerings, Bogart said.

Not all psychology faculty are experts in the area of disability and may need training or resources on incorporating disability into their classes, she said. A best practices manual, or in the longer term, new textbooks that include disability more prominently would also help.

"The goal is not to try to educate every person about every disability," Bogart said. "The reasonable approach is to begin conversations around common experiences and concerns and use a range of examples, including a variety of [disabilities](#)."

Provided by Oregon State University

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