

Disability Studies Quarterly  
Fall 2002, Volume 22 No. 4  
pages 224-229 <www.cds.hawaii.edu/dsq>  
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One Example of a Policy Entrepreneur  
in Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

Students with disabilities have begun to attend postsecondary education in increasing numbers during the past decade, partially due to the changes brought about by the American with Disabilities Act of 1990. This article is one student's story from the beginning of the 1990s and what she did to find and create accommodations at a college. Participant observation and focused interviews were used to obtain the information. Several theoretical explanations are given of her actions and conclusions drawn.

Molly grew up in a nice family in a suburban town in the Northeastern United States. They wanted what was best of her so when it came time for Molly to go to high school they listened to her special educators and sent Molly to what they thought was the best school for her. Molly has cerebral palsy and uses a motorized wheelchair, communicates with a voice synthesized computer and a head wand. Her parents sent her to a residential school for people with physical disabilities in a nearby state. Molly did get state of the art assessments and instruction in assistive technology, but she wanted more. Most of the students from her home area went on to college and she expected to go. No students from her residential school went to college.

Fortunately, Molly had met some receptive and visionary people through her associations at the school. It was through these relationships and through relationships with others later that Molly's life began to take the shape she intended. Molly had impressed a teacher at the school with her clarity of purpose, her dignity and expectations for life after school. This teacher went on to work for the state's Department of Labor and when it was time for Molly to plan her 'transition' or life after school, Molly's old teacher sent a representative of the Department of Labor to her school. This man, Sam, acted as an advocate for Molly, introduced her to a Dean of Students at a college and facilitated her acceptance.

The college really could not reject her because the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) had just passed and she was qualified to attend. But there were barriers. There was no 'program for the disabled' at the college and there was honest fear and ignorance among the faculty and administrators of just how to accommodate students with disabilities. Not only was Sam convincing, but also both the Dean and Molly were brave and willing to try something new. Molly was accepted, moved to a nearby Independent Living Center, and many meetings were planned.

There was only one meeting. The Dean gathered all of Molly's the out-of-college support people: Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Labor, Independent Living staff and college instructors and Student Affairs staff. The Dean was trouble-shooting, but there was no trouble. People had been shocked, but challenged. Molly had what she needed, she went to class, did her work, and went home. Actually, there were no problems for the Dean or this interagency committee to handle. Molly did need extra help, accommodations, but was in the process of facilitating them herself.

Molly reported what she had done when she returned to give a faculty training at the college a few years later. She had made personal connections with the instructors and support staff. She was an able student wanting to learn and people responded. In class Molly needed some assistance in note taking. She liked it best when someone else took notes for her and she had a friend in some classes that did just that. In some other classes the instructor came to her after class and embellished her notes. Molly did suggest that notes be distributed to all by all instructors, that students receive tape recorders and be allowed to use computers to take notes. And calculus was difficult. Molly used the typical peer-tutoring program where 'A' students are matched with students needing academic assistance and she passed calculus. There were also some curricular modifications. Molly went right into computer-assisted drafting instead of starting with the typical drafting table.

Molly needed some additional physical accommodations. She used the computers in the library and staff from the college built her a computer stand that was accessible. Molly said that there would have been a year delay and a high cost if she had gone through Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) for this accommodation, but VR did fund a personal attendant. The attendant came daily and helped her with lunch and a bathroom break. Late in the afternoon, Jean, the receptionist, helped her on with her cape and waited for the bus with Molly.

It all worked well until one day the attendant was sick and no replacement was sent. Jean was out to lunch. There was no one to feed Molly lunch except the Dean. He did, and he was changed, and it affected supports for students with disabilities in that state for years to come. In that short, intimate time with Molly the Dean understood in a very visceral way the nature of disability for that young woman and

most likely many students with disability in postsecondary education. He began to develop programs for students with disabilities. He hired line staff. He sought and received state grants and he participated in federal grants. And when he went onto another, higher status college, a representative approached him from a research program to admit a student with substantial disabilities. The Dean's response was, "This College needs this student!" The student was admitted and earned the certificate that she sought.

And what about Molly? She went on and earned a degree in architecture from another university. The last that I knew she was in an internship in Boston. She wanted an education, she wanted to be self-sufficient and she had the tools to do that. I do not believe that she was a conscious activist or that she wanted to be a change agent, but she was. She affected the way that college, its faculty and staff and many who went after her perceived and interacted with people with disabilities. Now, 10 years later, many students with disabilities and faculty and staff are participating in the educational process in an expanded way in that college and that state.

### Analysis

There are several theoretical terms to describe the situation of Molly and her college experience. Taking the ecological systems approach, there was a transaction between Molly and the college environment (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Molly, as an individual, was accepted as a member of a community that respected human diversity. The college as a whole is interdependent and therefore building on its strengths found in one part (e.g., building/construction division) accommodating Molly's need for a computer stand. A goodness of fit was sought between Molly's need for calculus tutoring and an existing program for all students. And synergy was found when the Dean spent intimate time with Molly and went on to develop more supports for students with disabilities (Craig & Craig, 1974; Hobbs, 1966).

Developing the ecological systems approach further we can ask, was Molly a policy liaison, one who works to enable social systems to function well and contribute to the growth and development of persons affected by those systems (Wheeley, 1981)? Certainly, Molly did not intend to take such a role. And although she was in need of supports herself, she did come before many students who needed supports and service.

It can be argued that through her actions she enabled the college and system it is within to function and develop. The policy liaison is between those in need of supports and those providing supports and as such is in a unique place to advise policy makers and form policy (Newbrough, 1977; Docecki, 1977). Because of Molly's place in time, entering college just as the ADA was enacted, she acted as a policy liaison in the implementation of that law. Certainly, being the first made her the leader, the policy maker. Her actions shaped and formed not only her supports and services, but those of

others.

I propose the more descriptive term of policy entrepreneur as one who sees the opportunity to develop policy and implements those actions. Policy entrepreneur captures the fact that Molly was not only connecting supports and services from the system to consumers of those supports, but that she was a consumer of the system of supports and developing it to meet her's and others' needs.

Certainly there are other interpretations of Molly's actions at college. One could say that she was oppressed, that she was reacting to the establishment that was using its influence over her, a representative of an emergent group, i.e., people with disabilities. That they, the oppressors, had gained control of her through her acquiescent behavior of her attending college and that she was about to suffer from the control of the elite (Bableur, 2000). And some disability self advocates say that well intentioned special programs wreak havoc in the lives of people and that do-gooders are out of touch with the system that they operate (Golfus, 2001).

An intervention from this perspective is revolution, perturbing the ecological system until it breaks into chaos. A functioning ecological system accommodates its members and their needs and strengths (Wheeler, 1981). Another interpretation of Molly's college career is that she attended college because she wanted to learn more, have more skills, because she wanted entre into the earning power, status and valued role of a professional life. And in that process she formed something greater than herself.

#### Method

Maanen (1988) wrote, "Impressionist tales, with their silent disavowal of grand theorizing, their radical grasping for the particular, eventful, contextual and the unusual, contain an important message." (Pg. 199) This piece is a result of participant observation over two years in the college that Molly attended. There were three telephone calls with the focus person and one day long visit. Consent was given for the writing of this article.

#### Conclusions

Students with disabilities or anyone can be a policy liaison in a system given the transaction, cooperation, leadership and support of the system members. There is value to be a member of a typical human ecological system for the benefits that it brings to all of its members. Any ecological system is richer and fuller with the actual integration of diverse members. To be a policy entrepreneur one must be an effective actor in this human ecological system. Care needs to be taken by any disenfranchised group member in joining such a typical group for processes of oppression exist and exert powerful forces. A level of awareness needs to be held by all system members to successfully include all members and to

create and to maintain a healthy human system.

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