

A Unique Lens to Explore an Emerging Field

By Meg Sullivan

For Professor of English Helen Deutsch, the study of disabilities “is a way of rethinking history and culture, and their relationship to the individual.”

Deutsch and more than 30 other UCLA faculty are building the core of a new interdisciplinary field in disability studies, exploring the subject through the spectrum of history, literature, the arts, health sciences, social issues and public policy, to name a few perspectives. Beginning this fall, 23 classes taught by faculty from 20 academic units will focus on little-known aspects of disability and society, and will count toward an academic minor in the burgeoning field.

Disability studies uses a unique lens to reveal previously overlooked aspects of society and culture, as well as practices and lapses within a range of contemporary professions. At UCLA, courses in anthropology, community health, education, English, gerontology, history, nursing, psychology, social welfare, sociology and Spanish will count toward the minor. In all, 32 faculty members have thrown their support behind the program, including a world arts and cultures professor who choreographs dances with disabled performers.

“This minor comes out of a growing body of work going on all over campus,” said Deutsch, an authority on disability in 18th-century literature.

The field grew out of the disability rights movement launched by Vietnam War veterans. In making their case for equal access and rights, activists in the 1980s started pressing for disability studies programs in American universities as a means of meeting the need for research into disability and the disabled.

At UCLA, faculty in the humanities—especially English professors—formed the first significant core of scholars who are active in disability studies, after being inspired by a wealth of Modern Language Association panels on the subject. As a result, most of the nation’s disability studies programs center around the humanities.

In contrast, the distinguishing feature of UCLA’s minor will be its breadth.

“Most other places have not fulfilled that original objective of disability studies because of their limited scope,” said Paul K. Longmore, a history professor at San Francisco State University and a pioneering disability studies scholar who advised UCLA on the development of the minor. “If you look down the list of faculty affiliated with this new minor, they’re from all over the campus. UCLA really has the potential to make a significant impact in a range of fields.”

Faculty expect the minor to be of special interest for disabled undergraduates.

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UCLA has created a new program that explores the range of issues that focus on disabilities, including a new undergraduate minor.

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largely absent for disabled people,” said Christopher Baswell, a UCLA English professor who is disabled. “To supply that past to people provides them with an identity, which is invaluable.”

But faculty also expect that a field of such broad interest will be of interest to able-bodied and disabled scholars alike.

“I hope everybody will take these courses, because almost everybody is either disabled, will become disabled, or has someone close who will become disabled,” said Emily Abel, a public health professor who will lecture in the minor’s introductory course. “At one point or another, it’s a future that most of us will confront.”

Since 1995, UCLA has developed over 70 minors, most of which have been offered through specific departments. In cases where the intellectual breadth of the minor spans multiple disciplines, the minors have been established as freestanding programs under the purview of an academic dean rather than a single department chair.

The academic dean responsible for the disability studies minor is Judith L. Smith, UCLA’s vice provost for undergraduate education. The disability studies program is the second minor under Smith’s oversight. In 2006, UCLA also adopted a freestanding minor in civic engagement, which is housed within UCLA’s Center for Community Learning. The civic engagement minor served as the model for the disability studies minor.

“The structure provides a mechanism for coordinating the intellectual contributions of multiple faculty members, both in and outside of the College,” Smith said. “Undergraduates get the benefit from exposure not just to the College’s premiere faculty but also to faculty in the university’s influential professional programs.”

To receive a minor in disability studies, undergraduates will complete the equivalent of seven upper division courses. They start with “Perspectives on Disability Studies,” an introductory course that will be taught by Deutsch in the first two years, with faculty across a range of disciplines serving as guest lecturers. Students then must select two courses from a long list of electives, including “Psychology of Aging” through gerontology and psychology, “Culture and Mental Health” through psychology, “Culture, Illness and Healing” through anthropology and nursing and “History of Medicine: Historic Roots of Healing Arts” through history.

On top of this coursework, students must either fulfill a two-quarter internship with a community organization that serves the disabled or works on disability policy or complete a two-quarter research apprenticeship with a scholar conducting research related to disability issues. The minor culminates in a senior capstone project, for which students will be encouraged to create publishable-quality work.

“We’re very proud that the minor requires students to complete a rigorous capstone project,” Smith said.

While disability activism at UCLA can be traced to the Vietnam War era, the roots of disability studies go back at least 15 years, when disabled UCLA students started asking

for an academic unit that would address their own histories and concerns. But without broad support at the time, the quest withered.

The late UCLA history lecturer Jayne Spencer, who was quadriplegic, is credited with laying the groundwork for the minor in the late 1990s. The chair of the precursor to today’s University Committee on Disability, Spencer personally identified more than 100 UCLA courses that related to disability studies and recruited many of the faculty now behind the minor. The momentum slowed after Spencer unexpectedly died in 2003. But Deutsch and Lucy Blackmar, assistant vice provost for undergraduate education initiatives in the Division of Undergraduate Education, soon stepped into the breach, writing a proposal for the minor and shepherding it through the requisite Academic Senate committees.

“When this went through, a lot of people said, ‘Oh, I wish Jayne were here—she would’ve been ecstatic,’” Blackmar said.

Few express surprise that UCLA made the step into disability studies. In 1969, the federal government chose UCLA for one of its first centers for excellence

Christopher Baswell, professor of English



Surveying the Disabled in History

Research and teaching about disability topics focus not only on present-day issues. The explorations of disability extend into the study of major figures from history and literature—here are a few examples:

King John of Bohemia (1296–1346) was blind. In spite of being sightless, John fought in battle and died fighting with his French allies at the Battle of Crecy.



Pope

The 18th-century English poet **Alexander Pope** used his status as a hunchback as both his trademark and as an inspiration for his signature literary form—the heroic couplet.

Samuel Johnson, perhaps the most celebrated author of the 18th century and best known for his *Dictionary of the English Language*, was partially blind and deaf, scarred by scrofula, and is now thought to have had Tourette's Syndrome, which manifested itself in a variety of nervous tics and mental obsessions and compulsions.



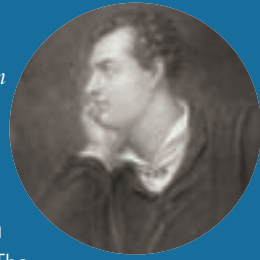
Johnson

A monk named **Hermann of Carinthia**, also known as Hermann the Cripple (Hermannus Contractus), had profound motor disability, and he could not move about at all without assistance. In spite of his extreme physical limitations, he was a scholar, composer and one of the most learned men of the eleventh century.

In the mid-1400's, a deaf Spanish nun, **Teresa de Cartagena**, wrote a sophisticated religious treatise, *The Grove of the Infirm*, in good part about spiritual benefits of illness.

Blind Harry, a Scottish poet and prose writer in the 15th century, wrote works about William Wallace and his ultimate defeat—an account that became the background story for the movie *Braveheart*.

Byron



Lord Byron, the Romantic era's biggest sex symbol, had a club foot. Lord Byron wrote an unfinished play, "The Deformed Transformed," in which a deformed hero opts to trade his body for that of Achilles, with tragic consequences.

John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost*, linked his blindness to that of the original epic poet Homer, and to divine inspiration.

William Cowper, one of the greatest poets of the late 18th century and author of the mock-heroic epic *The Task*, suffered from intense bouts of melancholia, heard voices and attempted suicide as a young man before retiring to the country. Nature and rural life became the subject of some of his best poetry.

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in developmental disabilities. UCLA's Tarjan Center for Developmental Disabilities is now part of a network that extends to every state in the union. In 1986, UCLA became the first campus in the nation to appoint a Section 504 compliance officer to ensure accessibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act. As a result, the campus is now considered a showpiece of integrated accessible design.

“UCLA has a strong and early history of addressing disability issues on campus,” said Joan Earle Hahn, chair of UCLA's Committee on Disability and an associate adjunct professor of nursing. “So it's natural that we'd be the ones to take this next step.”



Helen Deutsch, professor of English