

## **S.R. 3 (2024)**

Addressing Ableism at Santa Clara University

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ADDRESSED TO:

All Members of the Santa Clara University Community



### S.R. 3 – Addressing Ableism at SCU

October 2024

#### An open letter to all members of the Santa Clara University Community:

Santa Clara University provides a Jesuit education, emphasizing *cura personalis*, the care for the whole person. However, there cannot be true care for a whole person when there is exclusion and marginalization of groups of people, including students with disabilities. The climate of our campus culture towards disabilities must change, and as students, it is our responsibility to hold ourselves and each other accountable for the harm and discrimination directed at our disabled peers.

#### **The bias and hate incidents that students with disabilities face on our campus are unacceptable.**

These incidents take many forms, ranging from subtle microaggressions to overt acts of exclusion and threats of harm, directly placing incredible burden on the emotional, social, and physical well-being of disabled students. In addition, disabled students also face barriers financially, academically, and to their fundamental safety. Too many disabled students feel unsafe on our campus, particularly in the Residence Halls where they may live. An overabundance of disabled students have to give up their rights and basic needs, such as nourishment, in order to prioritize their safety. Safety risks come in many forms and affect disabled students in a variety of ways. Whether it requires staying locked in their room for physical safety or foregoing eating because they do not have safe food that they can consume, it is both a domino effect and a lasting impact. **If basic needs cannot be met, how can disabled students meet their academic needs?** This pervasive culture of bias and exclusion *cannot* continue to go unchecked.

Discrimination also manifests in academic spaces. Too often, disabled students encounter barriers not just in physical accessibility, but also in the willingness of professors to provide *necessary and legally required* accommodations. Students have reported that some SCU faculty members have unjustifiably dismissed, challenged, and ignored the legitimacy of their disabilities, which not only violates their rights, but also perpetuates a hostile learning environment. By failing to provide accommodations to disabled students, **faculty members are choosing to neglect their legal and ethical obligations to accommodate students from all backgrounds**. It is essential for professors to be more understanding in their roles as educators and open to providing the support that students need to thrive. **Classrooms should be spaces where all students can learn without fear of being judged or discriminated against.**

At the core of these issues are the attitudes and behaviors exhibited by both students and staff. **Disabled students are often met with dismissiveness, ignorance, or outright discrimination from their peers and faculty**. These harmful attitudes create an unsupportive environment where disabled students feel marginalized and invisible. As a community, we are all equally responsible for confronting these biases

and actively working towards fostering respect, empathy, and inclusion. Disability is a natural part of human diversity, and it is imperative that we recognize and honor that.

The responsibility to change campus culture rests with *all* of us, and while there are efforts underway to improve conditions for students with disabilities, it is not enough. Able-bodied members of the SCU community have different perspectives regarding the functions of the university compared to disabled members. Those who are able-bodied may not recognize or witness ableism in the same fashion because they are not disabled. Organizations like the Disabled Students Union (DSU), Disabled Law Students Association (DLSA), and Disabilities & Chronic Illness Network (DCIN) have been working tirelessly to raise awareness, advocate for necessary changes, and provide support for disabled students and staff. Their work has increased visibility and sparked important conversations, but the weight of this movement cannot fall solely on them. **Every member of our community must take an active role in cultivating acceptance and promoting inclusion.** Whether it is through small, genuine acts of kindness or by educating ourselves about disabilities, we all have a part to play. It is time for students and staff alike to engage in this effort and ensure that differences are not just tolerated but *recognized and appreciated*. Together, we can build a campus community where **every student** feels valued, safe, and included, regardless of their abilities.

*“nothing about us without us” - James Charlton*



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