

Monday, September 14, 2020

Dear Members of the Syracuse University Community:

As we work to create a safe and healthy community in challenging circumstances, we are asking a lot from each of you and each other. Today, I am writing to ask for your help in intensifying Syracuse University’s commitment to creating a welcoming, equitable and accessible community for every individual on our campus. This important work begins with me and other University leaders, and your support is especially critical.

This year we commemorate the 30th anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. As we observe this milestone, we must also honestly and transparently assess where we are and where we need to go as a University. More than two years ago, I commissioned a Disability External Review Committee, comprised of faculty, staff and students, which hired a contractor with deep expertise in the area. This process was spurred by a realization that, while our university has been a pioneer in disability studies, disability rights and inclusive education, in meeting the needs of our own community, there are areas where we have lost focus on our commitment to access and inclusion. Together, we must refocus our efforts.

This commitment requires that we recognize the diversity that lies within disability, equity and access. Our students, faculty and staff have a broad range of experiences. These experiences may differ depending upon whether a disability is visible or invisible; on gender, gender identity or expression; on sexual orientation; on race or nationality; or on the individual’s role at the University. Disability impacts each person in a unique way but also creates commonalities in how individuals experience Syracuse University.

The Disability External Review occurred over the course of the past year. The process was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but I am pleased that the Disability External Review Committee, chaired by Joanna Masingila, dean of the School of Education, and Michael Schwartz, associate professor of law, has presented me with a set of Phase One recommendations. I fully endorse each recommendation in the Phase One plan and have directed the appropriate leaders to implement them with urgency. This includes immediately establishing an Office of Disability Access and Inclusion with a full-time director and ADA/503/504 coordinator who will report to the chief diversity and inclusion officer and the chief, equal opportunity and Title IX officer. Importantly, the office will include the accommodation specialist and provide for the disability accommodation needs of all staff and faculty.

This is just one part of the Phase One recommendations, but this structure underscores the seriousness with which I take our commitment to the disability community. Fulfilling this commitment will take cross-unit collaboration, resolve and determination to find the right solutions—not just the easy solutions. It will take cultural change. It will take leadership, creativity and innovation. Fortunately, these are things that we have in abundance.

I ask our entire community to renew and intensify our focus on ensuring that Syracuse University is truly the national leader that we aspire to be in the area of disability culture, policy, education and advocacy.

Sincerely,



Chancellor Kent Syverud