Statement from APA members with disabilities on accessibility and unfounded accusations

March 31, 2014

We are writing to correct unfounded accusations that the American Philosophical Association (APA) discriminates based on disability against people like us. We are three philosophy professors with disabilities who participate fully and actively in the APA. Two of us are assistant professors on tenure-track: one is legally blind and one is a Deaf American Sign Language user. The third, a tenured full professor, has severe manual and mobility impairments.

All of us mentor other individuals with disabilities, especially those younger than ourselves who are interested in a career in philosophy. Beginning as undergraduates, each of us has been proactive in making opportunities in education and employment accessible for many different individuals with disabilities, not just for ourselves. We understand that people with disabilities are very diverse and that an accommodation effective for one person may be unworkable for someone else. Having had such experiences when we attempted to participate in other organizations, we know that solutions dictated by so-called disability experts should not be imposed on individual APA members with disabilities.

The APA’s practice with regard to members with disabilities respects each individual seeking accommodation as the most knowledgeable source to identify effective solutions for that person’s circumstance. We appreciate the APA’s personalized interactive process for providing reasonable accommodation, which has served not only us but many other philosophers with disabilities well. For those readers unfamiliar with reasonable accommodation procedure, the APA’s individualized interactive process is the gold standard approach the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) endorsed after nationwide consultation with large numbers of people with various disabilities and with organizations that represent them.

We therefore are disconcerted to observe people signing on to a petition that makes claims about APA procedures that are untrue and assertions about people with disabilities suffering discrimination by the APA that do not accord with our experience. They may not be aware that harm can be occasioned by them doing so.

Many other professional associations do not meet the accessibility standard the APA has achieved. To illustrate, as one of us has stated repeatedly, “My life would be immeasurably happier if all academic/professional organizations followed the APA’s example, namely of trusting my expertise in identifying American Sign Language interpreters with the skill set for academic registry and training them in the ASL philosophical lexicon I’ve been developing since I was a graduate student.”
Unfortunately, ongoing efforts by philosophers with disabilities to obtain effective accommodation from other professional associations and academic institutions have been undermined by the misguided accusations flung at the APA. That other organizations provide ASL interpreters to the individual user, as the APA does, is an important goal. We therefore ask philosophers who signed the above referenced petition to contact organizations with which they are affiliated, urging adoption of the APA practice of respect for each ASL user in making reasonable accommodation for that person. It would be helpful to send us copies of your messages in this regard, to amplify our efforts.

Parenthetically, the APA’s own accessibility is curtailed by professional association community practice. The much praised renovation of the APA’s website makes use of a common “association” software package; features inhospitable to screen-readers are embedded in that package and can be modified only by the software vendor. In the interim, work-arounds of various sorts that will be effective for different members’ adaptive software can be obtained by emailing the APA National Office.

The second kind of damage caused by the misleading message is fear and discouragement induced in young people with disabilities who are considering philosophy as a career. Disability discrimination is deeply embedded across the entire spectrum of workplaces; the individuals we mentor rightly worry about whether they will obtain employment despite being disabled. But it is both ludicrous and counter-productive to identify the APA as causing the disability discrimination in employment that affects every type of work, especially as the APA has provided sign language interpreters for interviews, quiet interviewing rooms, interview scheduling alteration, and other accommodations upon individual candidates’ and interviewers’ requests.

The APA Taskforce on Diversity and Inclusion, chaired by Elizabeth Anderson, will consider the matter of affirmative employment programs to increase employment participation by people with disabilities in our discipline. But your working with your institutions and organizations to achieve affirmative opportunity for employment of philosophers with disabilities is the most effective way, in our experience, to improve inclusion in the workforce for people like us. Here again it would be very helpful if those who are committed to improving conditions in the profession for people with disabilities could share with us the actions they are taking. Your action is crucial, especially because ongoing disability discrimination in the workplace can make revealing a disability imprudent, so those with what are called “invisible” disabilities sometimes are not counted in data about employment of people with disabilities.

Every few years an individual accuses the APA of discriminating against people with disabilities. For example, in 2011, an accusation was circulated that the Central Division meeting site was not wheelchair accessible. Of course, APA members who are wheelchair users have been attending meetings at that site for decades. The accusation
was not based on the personal experience of wheelchair users or on other reliable knowledge of the site. In accord with APA practice, however, the APA Ombudsperson for Nondiscrimination did a thorough investigation that confirmed the site’s accessibility, discovering that the factual claims were not true. Further, the executive director and the Inclusiveness Committee chair wrote to all members who had been induced to contact the National Office to ask for accessibility; their responses indicated that none had found their own participation in APA activities to be inaccessible due to a disability nor could they identify any APA member for whom this was true.

Nevertheless, accessibility arrangements that accommodate some, or even most, may not be effective for everybody. Therefore, if you are not sure whether particular APA activities will be accessible due to your disability, please inquire about reasonable accommodation. APA members may send email to any of us, or to the APA Ombudsperson for Nondiscrimination. Be assured your request will be followed up with immediate action and also, of course, that confidentiality will be maintained.

Signed,

Teresa Blankmeyer Burke
Disability Member, APA Inclusiveness Committee

Adam Cureton
Member at Large, APA Inclusiveness Committee
President, Society for Philosophy and Disability

Anita Silvers
Immediate Past Chair, APA Inclusiveness Committee

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i We will be happy to provide a further more detailed discussion of specific accommodation, with data and illustrations, to anyone who cares to write to one or all of us with questions. We want to point out that, of course, we neither can speak for nor have expertise about other individuals with disabilities; achieving effective accommodation for philosophers with disabilities should be premised on the idea that each of us is the best source of knowledge about our own accommodations.

ii See “The Interactive Process” in EEOC guidelines for Procedures For Providing Reasonable Accommodation For Individuals With Disabilities.

iii This is not to say that travel and other societal conditions have no effect on participation by APA members. For example, the enormous deterioration of airline service over the past decade has made traveling to APA meetings much more difficult for those with certain disabilities.