

EDUCATION

Disability Studies 101: From Werewolves to Hephaestus

By JOSHUA HARRIS PRAGER

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

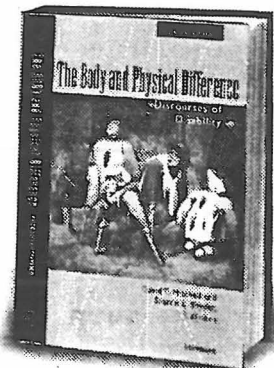
This week, some Syracuse University students will begin a course called "Representations of Ability and Disability," in which they will analyze the movies "Forrest Gump," "Rainman" and "My Left Foot." Students taking a class called "Disability and Culture" at the University of Illinois at Chicago will discuss the planned Washington, D.C., monument of Franklin Delano Roosevelt sitting in a wheelchair. And at the University of Hawaii, the "Multicultural Issues in Disabilities" course in the spring will examine, among other topics, Samoan folk knowledge of mental disorders.

Across the country, disability is fast becoming a trendy subject of scholarship. Disability studies analyze physical and mental disabilities in the context of "social practices and cultural values," according to the catalog of the University of Illinois at Chicago, where the nation's first doctoral program in disability studies will begin this week. Earlier this year, the Modern Language Association, an organization of academics that promotes the study of language and literature, held its first "Discussion Group on Disability Studies" at its annual convention.

"Disability studies teach everybody a lot about what it is to be human," says Carol J. Gill, assistant professor of disability and human development at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Disabled people are the active case for looking at how society defines people and their value."

Publishers, meanwhile, are feeding the growing interest in disability studies with books on disability in religion, history, literature and art. The forthcoming "Narrative Prosthesis," explores the depiction of disabilities in literature and philosophy

Samplings From a New Field

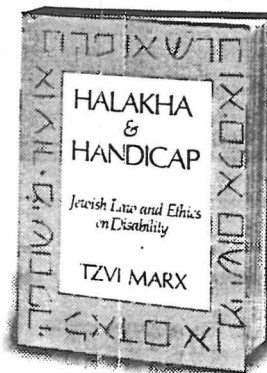


'The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability'

"There is something unsettling about handicap in the context of halakhic culture.... King David exemplifies the instinctive revulsion of able-bodied for the handicapped."

from ancient to modern times. "The Greeks, of course, had their token disabled god," says co-author David Mitchell, an English professor at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, referring to Hephaestus, the lame blacksmith to his fellow gods. "And cripples play an important role in Nietzsche, much as they did in Montaigne," says Dr. Mitchell, who has spinal motor atrophy, a progressive neuromuscular disorder.

"Overall, Richard III offers a cautionary tale in the formula of a double negative: do not distrust a natural correspondence between physical 'imperfections' and villainy."



'Halakha & Handicap: Jewish Law and Ethics on Disability'

Like their forerunners—gender and race studies—disability studies raise hackles among some academics. Doubters believe that disability studies are amply covered in psychology, education and other existing departments.

A disabilities-studies department would be feasible only "in an infinitely large institute with infinite resources," says Ezra Shahn, a biology professor at Hunter College in New York, where a professor last

year unsuccessfully petitioned to start a disabilities-studies department. Dr. Gill concedes that some people may think: "Here is yet another minority group asking for university funds, yet another sanction for political correctness."

The current flowering of disability studies stems from the Americans with Disabilities Act, a 1990 federal law prohibiting discrimination against the disabled. The disabilities act literally and figuratively opened academia's doors to people with disabilities, mandating that deaf students be provided with signers in class, for example. "Today there are more disabled students and faculty," says Richard Scotch, executive officer of the Society for Disability Studies at the University of Texas. "We're getting a kind of critical mass of interest."

The first disability studies departments take the same interdisciplinary approach as most women's studies and African-American studies departments. Students learn about disabilities in many different contexts. They might read Rosemarie Garland Thomson's book, "Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature." Or they may take a new look at religion through "The Disabled God. Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability" by Nancy Eiesland.

Until recently, college courses involving disability were almost exclusively the province of applied fields such as psychology, rehabilitation, special education and, more recently, law and business. Students were taught to treat or teach the disabled or to implement the requirements of disability legislation. Faculty and students interested in nonvocational courses on disability had to fashion individual programs. Creating a disability-studies department

Please Turn to Page B4, Column 3

Fr

has att
dents v
says St
who sta
versity,
York.

Amo
English
a speci
me, the
disabili
ities as
open yo
versity,

Kara
program
palsy a
Talker
the trad
ability s
bred. Sh
studies v

Whet
should b
bate. "I
the expe
disabled
the Hu

From Werewolves to Hephaestus

Continued From Page B1

has attracted "a totally new group of students who don't have a clinical interest," says Steven Taylor, a sociology professor who started the program at Syracuse University, which is based in Syracuse, New York.

Among them is Mair Hall, a third-year English doctoral student at Syracuse with a special focus on disability studies. "To me, the medical, clinical perspectives on disability have led to people seeing disabilities as sickness," she says. "When you open your mind to the beauty of human diversity, life becomes richer."

Kara Vander Veer will enter Syracuse's program in January. She has cerebral palsy and communicates using a Delta Talker computer. She, too, is troubled by the traditionally clinical approach to disability studies and the perceptions that has bred. She says her approach to disability studies will be "rooted in the humanities."

Whether disability-studies faculty should be disabled is another source of debate. "I want the ideology, the scholarship, the experience to come from the gut of a disabled person," says Phyllis Rubinfeld, the Hunter special-education professor

who lobbied for a new disability-studies department there. She had polio as a child and uses a scooter. But Dr. Gill, who has a post-polio-related disability, disagrees. "I prefer the synergy of disabled and nondisabled scholars," she says.

Some scholars of disability are also studying the way the disabled have been used as entertainment: freak shows, horror movies, telethons. In an essay called, "The Werewolf as Embodiment of (Dis)Ability. . ." Ellen J. Stekert, professor of education at the University of Minnesota, argues that to nondisabled people, characters like the cyborg or the Wolfman elicit the same "physical and visceral loathing" as does a person riding along a sidewalk in a wheelchair.

To keep the momentum going, Dr. Mitchell, president of the Society for Disability Studies, has asked the Department of Education to support a federal disabilities studies program. "We want to introduce disability studies into the curriculum in public education, beginning in kindergarten," says Dr. Mitchell. He hopes children will learn about the disabled "the way they learn about the Puritans and Indians at Thanksgiving."