

APA Member Disability Inclusion Strategy Forum

Executive Summary

Disability is a crucial focus for the American Psychological Association (APA) as it aligns with its commitment to inclusivity, accessibility, and mental health equity. Efforts in disability advocacy, accessible design, and inclusive policymaking promote equal opportunities in education, employment, healthcare, and community engagement. Furthermore, this work recognizes the diverse strengths and perspectives of disabled individuals, challenging stereotypes and encouraging systemic change. Centering people with disabilities benefits everyone and fosters greater empathy, awareness, and a commitment to justice. Inclusion is a cornerstone of effective disability efforts, ensuring that disabled individuals are valued, respected, and actively involved in all areas of society. Inclusive approaches seek to remove physical, social, or attitudinal barriers that prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in education, employment, healthcare, and community life. By prioritizing inclusion, disability efforts work to empower individuals, promote equity, and foster a sense of belonging. Inclusion enhances society by integrating diverse perspectives, driving innovation, and encouraging compassion. Inclusive disability efforts contribute to a more just, accessible world where everyone can thrive.

Forum Organization and Goals

APA held the Member Disability Inclusion Strategy Forum on September 19-20, 2024. The Forum focused on advancing disability inclusion, equity, and accessibility for APA members across the association. The APA Member Disability Inclusion Strategy Forum marked a significant advancement in APA's efforts to enhance disability equity and inclusion. By gathering a group of experts, advocates, and members, the forum laid the groundwork for sustainable, impactful changes that will further APA's mission of fostering a professional environment where individuals with disabilities feel valued, supported, and represented. Key priorities of the forum are in alignment with [APA's Accessibility and Inclusion Maturity Model \(AIMM\)](#), which includes a) increasing disability cultural humility, b) enhancing accessibility at meetings and events, and c) improving digital accessibility. These priorities reflect APA's commitment to fostering an inclusive environment that respects and values the diverse experiences and needs of individuals with disabilities. By the end of the two-day event, participants aimed to co-create a clear vision statement that would solidify APA's commitment to disability inclusion and establish actionable goals for implementing equitable practices across the association. More specifically, participants were tasked with developing specific strategies for raising disability awareness among APA members, which included identifying opportunities to highlight critical disability issues within psychology and promoting resources, educational programs, and other supportive tools across the association. Additionally, forum attendees were encouraged to propose mechanisms for building a community of members with shared experiences of disability, allowing for greater connection, mutual support, and collective advocacy within APA.

Vision statement outlining the association's commitment to disability inclusion for its members.

Participants proposed a vision statement including the following concepts:

- **Commitment to Inclusion:** APA's vision should affirm a commitment to an inclusive

environment where disability is recognized as an integral part of identity.

- **Universal Design:** The vision should emphasize a commitment to universal design, making accessibility standard practice across all programs and events.
- **Empowerment and Representation:** A focus on empowering disabled individuals and ensuring their representation in leadership and decision-making roles.
- **Collaboration and Community:** Promote a sense of community by facilitating connections and collaborations among members who share similar and different lived experiences of disability and identity.
- **Education and Awareness:** Highlight the integration of disability issues within educational curricula and the importance of awareness initiatives to combat systemic barriers and advocate for rights.

Attendees called for disability to be woven into APA's identity and operations, addressing longstanding barriers such as historical invisibility, limited data, and structural exclusions at events.

Recommendations focused on integrating disability education across psychology curricula and implementing basic accessibility measures. Key values for action included a commitment to anti-ableism, fostering disability pride, and empowering disabled voices in leadership to drive meaningful, systemic change. Recommended actions included incorporating disability topics into educational curricula, creating toolkits to assist with accommodation requests, and applying universal design principles across APA programs. Core values of inclusion, collaboration, anti-ableism, and the empowerment of disabled voices emerged as foundational themes across groups.

Strategies to raise disability awareness and increase APA members' knowledge and skills to create accessible meetings, events, and professional development.

Members recommended that APA take a proactive approach to accessibility, integrating it from the earliest stages of event planning to avoid reliance on individual attendees with disabilities to request accommodations. This approach includes collecting comprehensive information on participants' accessibility needs during registration and ensuring that accommodations like screen reader-compatible platforms and apps are prepared in advance. By doing so, APA would help reduce the recurring emotional and logistical burden on disabled attendees who often need to request essential services repeatedly. Recommendations included conference layouts with wider aisles for poster sessions, adequate breaks for navigating large venues, accessible restrooms, and easy-to-operate doors—fundamental components of universal design.

Strategies to raise APA's external visibility as a leader in disability inclusion. Discuss how APA can support the ongoing professional development of members with disabilities.

The small working groups on strategies to strengthen APA's role as a leader in disability inclusion identified several critical themes, including accountability, representation, partnerships, and internal culture. Discussions emphasized the need for internal structural reforms and external advocacy, with calls for substantial action to bridge existing gaps in disability inclusion. Members shared that for APA to position itself as a leader in disability inclusion, it must address its internal cultural and structural challenges, prioritize transparency and accountability, and engage in authentic partnerships. These actions would reflect a true commitment to inclusivity and enable APA to model and advocate for

disability rights within psychology and society. Participants stressed the importance of APA adopting a more heartfelt approach to advocacy. They highlighted the emotional toll of exclusion and inadequate accommodations on disabled members and cited early advocacy efforts by figures like Alice Reiger as examples of initial but limited progress. The group called for APA to move beyond intellectual acknowledgment toward compassionate and responsive action. The establishment of dedicated mentorship programs for disabled psychologists was emphasized as critical. Participants recommended creating certification courses focused on disability issues, accessible continuing education resources, and structured mentorship programs to guide mid-career professionals. Mentorship was considered essential, particularly for those whose research interests might not align with traditional academic norms, providing support in academia and clinical practice.

Strategies and actionable steps for improving disability inclusion in APA's structure, culture, and policies.

The final working group of the Strategy Forum focused on feedback regarding enhancing disability inclusion within the APA. The working group's final discussion centered on integrating accessibility and representation into the APA's framework. Participants outlined essential themes and steps to foster an authentically inclusive environment that supports disabled psychologists. Discussions across groups reflected a collective call for APA to move beyond rhetorical commitments toward substantive, systemic change. Key actions include increasing leadership representation, adopting universal and inclusive design, expanding resources, integrating disability into equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives, and leading societal change efforts. By embedding these strategies into its structure and culture, APA can demonstrate progress toward inclusivity and sustained support for its disabled members.

Summary

The working groups at the APA Disability Inclusion Strategy Forum concentrated on developing a vision for an inclusive and accessible organization where disability inclusion is integral to APA's mission rather than an add-on or isolated accommodation. The working groups' collective vision calls for APA to take substantive, systemic steps to embed disability inclusion across its structure and culture. This includes prioritizing universal and inclusive design, establishing empathetic support systems, and elevating disabled individuals within leadership to create a model of inclusivity that APA can advocate for within psychology and society at large.

Across sessions, a clear call emerged for APA to move away from a medical model of disability, instead adopting a disability rights framework that values disability pride and identity. Participants advocated for APA to advance disability inclusion by promoting representation, supporting accessible structures, and mandating disability-friendly policies within doctoral programs and professional spaces. Key themes helped to inform the strategic areas identified as essential for APA's transformation into an authentically inclusive association.