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International Students Social Perceptions of Persons with Disabilities

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International Students Social Perceptions of Persons with Disabilities

by

Aaron Jacob Cross

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

Saint Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Thesis Committee

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Abstract

This research project measured the social perceptions of international students from Saint Cloud State University, (SCSU), a regional comprehensive university in the Midwest, as well as, non-international participants about persons with disabilities. Participants completed the four-hour “Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY Event” held by the Rehabilitation Counseling Graduate Department at SCSU. The researcher used a pre and post-survey to determine the perceptions students and community members hold towards people with disabilities. The primary goal of this project was to evaluate if social perceptions changed by the international students, and in what areas. Areas assessed were work, relationships, and general communication. International participant responses were compared to those of the domestic participants.

The “Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY Event” had two main components: 1) Experiential Learning Scenarios (ELS) which are hands on experiences facilitated by person(s) who live with the specific physical, emotional and/or mental inconveniences, and vendors in the field of disability, and 2) a Post-ELS "Panel," lead by ELS facilitators.

It was hypothesized that international students would show an increase in all areas of the post surveys. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that all participants would show an increase in their social perceptions of persons with physical, emotional and mental inconveniences. While not all areas of the post-survey were statistically significant, overall participants perceptions changed from a stereotypical stigma to a more positive view after participating in the "Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY event!"

Acknowledgements

Thanking someone for making you do something you really didn't want to do in the first place is extremely difficult. Especially, when you completed a master's program, which did not need to include a thesis; it just ended up that way. Throughout my life, certainly the last 25 years, physical, mental and emotional challenges have come my way due to becoming a quadriplegic at the age of 15. Over the years, I have pushed, crawled, swam, shot and even puked my way to success, proving anyone with the focus can succeed at what they want in life.

August 22, 2014, a new challenge came my way: graduate school. Graduate school was never in the cards, as I had no interest, nor any reason to consider this. However, that was not the views of very close and dear friends. Before I go on with my thanks to these troublesome friends, it needs to be said that I would have never gotten to this area in my life without several key people. These include my family, Connie Cross and Michael McIntosh (mother and stepdad); Tom Cross and Jill Boitz (dad and stepmom); Jason Cross (brother); Shawn Woods (best friend); Mike Smith (confidant and friend). I cannot forget to mention the 375 students at St. Cloud Technical High School who, 25 years ago, at the ages of 15 and 16, stood by my side, fighting for their friend and his right to be a student. Also, Mike and Sandie Allen, two people, who although do not always agree with me, stand by me and are always there for support. And finally, Kristine Rauenhorst, in the beginning, you were my Vocational Counselor; now that it is over, I can say you are my colleague and friend.

I remember saying clearly to two of my dearest friends and colleagues, Katie Hartl and Annette Sobek, "I'll I ever wanted is a house and a steady paycheck." It is these two invaluable mentors I have to thank for my master's degree and the distinguished honor of being a part of the St. Cloud State University community. Katie and Annette, you looked at me and said, "You can

do this!” You also listened to me when I just needed to vent. You took it all in, you laughed at me, and then guided me back to sanity. Because of you two, I accepted the challenge of this degree. Thank you.

Finally, I need to thank four very special professors, Drs. Knopf, Kuhlman, Johnson and Lepkowski. My wheels were spinning many times. When there seemed to be no sign of traction, you gave me that traction I needed. At times you were on the receiving side of a great deal of hostility, yet you gave me a cup of coffee and asked, “Feel better now?” Normally, I said yes, but in all honesty, I was not okay but I was far better than I was a minute ago. All of you gave me experiences to which I use everyday in my profession. It is because of your guidance and belief in me graduating an impossible degree became reality.

Finally, at 41 years old, my life has been an amazing roller coaster ride that has happened because of others believing in me and showing me ways to overcome. To my cohort, Peter, Randi, Troy, Sarah, Stacy, Angela, Sam, Carl, to Rachel and all the wonderful people I have had the honor of meeting at SCSU. Thank you all for being supportive, honest friends. No piece of paper can ever give me more pride than everyone listed above; but it will seem very close at graduation.

To President Earl H. Potter, III, you will never truly understand the effect you made on my life, your leadership never went unnoticed and your vision, belief and unwavering support for the disabled community was far beyond the reaches of many; you are missed and your paths you created will be forever fortified.

Table of Contents

	Page
List of Tables	6
Chapter 1: Introduction	7
Researcher Perspective	11
International Context	13
Researcher's Mantras	15
Chapter II Literature Review	17
Chapter III Methodology	20
Process of event	21
Chapter IV Results	26
Chapter V: Conclusion.....	29
Limitations	29
Benefits	31
Implications for future research	32
References	33
Appendix A: Pre-Test	35
Appendix B: Post-Test.....	39

List of Tables

	Page
Table 1: Results of t-test for Pretest and posttest of View Towards Persons with Disabilities.....	26
Table 2: Results of t-test of International Student's Feelings Towards Persons with Disabilities.....	27

Chapter 1: Introduction

Throughout most of my life I have been guilty of seeing others with a disability in the light of what they cannot do. Most times I focused on what I could do to help, but what I did not notice was how able those individuals really are. People with disabilities overcome so much more than the eye can see, and my attendance to the ABILITY event at St. Cloud State University showed me this amazing truth. We all have strengths and weaknesses, and people with disabilities are no different. This is especially true with how sometimes our strengths help us overcome our weaknesses. The ABILITY event made it very clear just how able people with disabilities are, as well as shedding light on many misconceptions and difficulties that they go through on a daily basis (student response to the 2016 ABILITY).

Perceptions are a learned trait. These traits effect how we see and view ourselves as well as how we view situational experiences, cultures and others, including people with disabilities. Over time perceptions create a conscious and unconscious sense of how we can or should deal with lived experiences. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, disability is defined as:

The condition of being disabled, limitation in the ability to pursue an occupation because of a physical or mental impairment; also: a program providing financial support to one affected by disability went on disability after the injury lack of legal qualification to do something, a disqualification, restriction, or disadvantage. Merriam-Webster, (n.d.)

With language such as Webster's dictionary, in conjunction with constant messages of historical values from a world vast in cultures and heritage, it's reasonable to understand why society views people with disabilities as unable, disabled and less than worthy. This social perception towards disabilities is a global issue. For example, Chinese culture has one of the four

oldest civilizations in the world and a written history of 4,000 years. Part of Chinese civilization includes Karma, the Buddhist belief of “What comes around goes around.” This belief is one of the foundations, which promote traditional, negative perceptions of persons with disabilities in China according to Gloria Zhang Liu (2001).

Chinese people tend to believe an extension of Karma is, if you have a disability, you have done something wrong, and therefore deserve to have a low quality life or death. In fact, in Mei-Ying and McConkey’s, (2008), research referring to Karma as, “Each violation of moral axioms causes ‘seeds of revenge’ in the form of misery in the new-being... This brings societal stigma and hence parents may not want relatives or friends to know about their child who has an intellectual disability.” At the same time, Buddhism teaches another fundamental of Karma is that if you can tolerate the painful situations or happenings, you will have a better life in heaven after death. However, in Zhang Liu’s research, she wrote, “In many areas of China disability is viewed as a punishment for the disabled person’s parental or past-life sins.” A life changing, nonnormative event can happen to anyone, at anytime, positive leaps forward or negative catastrophic limitations, all of which can be filtered through perceptions. As mentioned in Dantan & Ginsburg, 1975, as cited in Broaderick & Blewitt, (2007):

Just as history-graded changes can significantly affect the development of a whole cohort, individual lives are also changed by unexpected events. These events are called nonnormative “bolts from the blue” experiences that we don’t anticipate, yet that can have powerful developmental effects.

To address the negative stigma that is often associated with persons with disabilities, “Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY Event” was designed to increase the awareness regarding people with physical, emotional and/or mental inconveniences. “Embracing the

Difference: The ABILITY Event” is an event that has been hosted at SCSU since 2013. The event has been researched and evaluated in the past, according to research by Briant (2015). This annual event was inspired by, “In My Shoes” which was developed by Steve Anderson. Mr. Anderson is the director of disability services at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota. He created the program to give first-hand knowledge with regard to living life with cerebral palsy, a neuromuscular disorder that limits messages from the brain to the rest of the body. Moreover, “Even though cerebral palsy affects muscle movement, it isn’t caused by problems in the muscles or nerves. It is caused by abnormalities in parts of the brain that control muscle movements” (What is Cerebral Palsy, n.d.). “In My Shoes” allowed a life changing, “nonnormative” experience to happen. Changing social perceptions about disabilities with people is exactly what “Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY Event” is all about. The overall goal of The ABILITY Event is to counteract negative persona of physical, emotional and/or mental disabilities, engraining positive views and beliefs that each person, regardless of culture, creed and capability, has the ability to live a meaningful, quality of life. “In My Shoes” focused on one specific disability, but The ABILITY Event provides a broader frame of reference in regard to disability.

The main aspect of the event is the Experiential Learning Scenarios facilitated by people with disabilities. This event hosts several ELSs which are hands on experiential learning. They may consist of: Mobility, Cerebral Palsy, Mental health, ADD/ADHD, Autism/Asperger’s, Visual impairment Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

Vendors’ are included in our ELS rotation and add crucial insight into the world of all the possibilities of technology and resources. Some examples of these are daily living equipment, including durable medical equipment, organizations for advocacy, housing, transportation and

travel. Vendors also showcase different types of technology, simple changes that allow people with disabilities to live a more independent life.

ELS participation immerses participants in positive social perceptions and dispels negative stigma. The facilitators of each ELS create a stage in which negative perceptions are broken down and replaced with positive views and attitudes. Finally, these ELS stations allow participants to think of and ask personal question(s) in a safe space, allowing them to obtain a deeper understanding of how life can be easier with the right mindset and tools.

Each “ABILITY Event” has either a motivational speaker or a panel discussion to wrap up the conclusion of the event (collaboration of station facilitators). This is a time where the audience and participants can ask in written or oral form questions or thoughts which they were not able to discuss during the ELS. The panel allows the community members to challenge their own preconceived ideas about people with disabilities. In other words, they comprise the real people, their experiences, and the perceptions and attitudes illuminating that all people have abilities.

Given the overall goal of transitioning the negative stigma(s) associated with disability and create a reality of positive perceptions it is reasonable to assume the event will also be effective with international participants as well. Therefore, this study seeks to ask the following question, “Does participation in “Embracing Difference: the ABILITY Event” change social perceptions towards persons with disabilities in international students?” The study hypothesis is, “Participation in “Embracing Difference: the ABILITY Event” will positively increase social perceptions towards persons with disabilities in international student populations.”

Researcher Perspective

As the primary researcher and living with quadriplegia for 25 years, I felt it was important to tell my own story of global experiences which led to the outcome of wanting this study to be investigated. I have had the privilege of traveling around the world, representing my country in three Paralympic games and performing motivational seminars and lectures for dignitaries and thousands of people around the world. I have met, loved, lost and experienced a life people only dream about due to my wheelchair and my perceptions and beliefs of what I can do. While traveling around the world and even in the United States, I've observed that accessibility, views and rights seem to be hindered by skewed perceptions of people with disabilities. From my experience, it appears people often don't have a full or clear understanding of the limitless capabilities a person with disability possesses. This lack of understanding is often found in the person living with the disability themselves.

For example, one of my greatest honors was representing the United States three times at the Summer Paralympic games. Many people do not even know the Paralympic games exist. Moreover, when I discuss it at seminars, one of the main misconceptions people have towards the Paralympics is that they think I am referring to the Special Olympics. The Paralympics and Special Olympics are two, very different and distinct events. The Paralympics are called the Paralympics, not because you are paralyzed, or a paraplegic, it is because they are parallel to the Olympic games. In addition, wherever the Olympics are held, the Paralympics follow two weeks after, inclusive to both summer and winter games. The Paralympics is the world's second largest sporting event (Rivera, n.d.). In fact, the 2012 Summer Paralympic games were held in London, England, with the largest field ever, comprised of 4,302 athletes from 164 countries, 14 of which were represented for the first time.

The reason for the information on the Paralympics is because it lays the groundwork as to why I chose to focus on international students in this study. My first time to qualify for the Paralympics was in Atlanta, Georgia, 1996. It was just three years after breaking my neck in a bicycle accident and being told by the doctor's, "The best thing you can do for him is get him a good colored television and remote." This demonstrates how even experts in the medical field have limited perceptions towards people with disabilities.

Another example of negative perceptions towards disabilities is exemplified in the following story. Just prior to the start of the Atlanta games, six of the major sponsors backed out. Budweiser, Bausch & Lomb, McDonald's, John Hancock, Sarah Lee and VISA became known as the "Sinful Six." These corporate giants backed out because they said they did not have any more money. However, all of their marketing and signage remained after the Olympics, giving the illusion they were strong supporters. That was the last time they were called the "Sinful Six" as the backlash was so severe it caused their negative social perceptions to shatter due to the realization of the global influence of the Paralympic games. Since those games in 1996, the former "Sinful Six" have shifted their views and perceptions and they have continued to provide essential financial support of the Paralympics.

Perceptions can change if only given the opportunity. My own eyes were open to the vast power of the human spirit while participating at the Atlanta games. For example, one day while I was watching the track and field 100-meter sprint qualifiers, people in the stands start pointing at the Jumbotron. I glanced up to see a man from Africa running the 100-meter sprint with an inverted plunger duct-taped to his amputated leg, a make-shift prosthetic leg. It appeared he had absolutely no chance to even qualify, but he continued to run as hard as he could, but then he fell. According to the regulations in track and field, after an athlete has crossed the finish line

they may not go back over the line. All seven runners, knowing exactly what the consequences were, ran back over the finish line to cheer this man on. The runner got up and hobbled down the stretch of track finishing last in the heat, but far from last in the eyes of competition. Perceptions are a learned trait, what happened on that day was a “nonnormative” experience, which changed the perceptions of athletes and all people watching. In addition, this shows how just one moment in one’s life can change your perception if only given that opportunity. What happened on that day was a “nonnormative experience” which changed the perceptions of everyone watching that day.

International Context

Having been in a wheelchair for almost 25 years, I can honestly say there is nothing more frustrating than lack of access and lack of awareness with regard to all persons who live with physical and/or mental inconveniences, in any country. As a first-year graduate student in Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling at SCSU, I was part of a delegation to travel to Beijing, China, and some surrounding smaller cities. My initial experience was disbelief and emotionally draining. Although the majority of the people I encountered in the first 24 hours were kind, generous and genuinely welcoming, my personal pride and views were figuratively spent after being in the country for four hours. I had to set aside what I knew I could do and let hotel staff assist me. If I did not let the staff help, they would have been reprimanded for not helping me. The hotel staff was greatly surprised when they realized I was traveling alone.

My so-called physical limitations as a functional quadriplegic are as follows: minimal use of my arms (roughly 75 to 80 percent use), approximately 10-20 percent use of my hands. I use a wheelchair due to complete paralysis in both legs. It is apparent I view my physical capabilities differently than many other people, especially those from China. For example, in my above

description of my limitations I listed them as, “so-called limitations.” The reason for this is that my personal perceptions always focus on my abilities. I realize I describe myself to people as what I have, not what I do not have.

At breakfast in the hotel in Beijing on my first morning, I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat at a table. It was at that point I realized the staff had no idea how they were supposed to serve or help me. In fact, they kept looking at the manager for direction, but the manager was just as confused as they were. In short, within 24 hours my “emotional drain” was restored, I knew my being there was going to change lives for the better.

I was in a foreign land with different views and attitudes, more different than I have ever experienced. I am a seasoned traveler, having traveled to 11 countries on multiple continents. However, I could not believe how different this country was. After all, this was 2014 and China hosted the 2008 Paralympic Games!

I struggled with the fact that even in 2014, American directors of a Chinese orphanage for children with disabilities still struggled with the concept of what accessibility really is. Even after spending a large sum of money to create an accessible facility, they still fell short of being 100 percent accessible. In fact, they even created more problems by implementing certain Chinese cultural beliefs. For example, doorways must have a doorframe on all four sides, encasing the door. In other words, when you open the door you still have to step over a frame. Doors are not flush to the ground, making it difficult for anyone with impaired mobility to enter the building. I pointed this obstruction out to the director of the orphanage, their reason was, Chinese culture dictates this threshold be there to keep out evil spirits. Of course I could not let that go and said something to the effect, you are going to have injuries of students in chairs falling out because they do not know how to manipulate this obstacle. I went on to explain, even

if they did learn how to negotiate the barrier, their chairs are so ill fitting they will still have falls when negotiating other obstructions throughout their day. As soon as I said it, I knew I should have said it differently. The look on the director's face was haunting. It was as if I had just told him the orphanage was closing down that day. Traditional values and cultural beliefs play an enormous function in Chinese culture, such that in my opinion, it will take a powerful charge of training and resources to implement the impact I hope this research be a catalyst for.

Over nine days, I observed people's body language change in reference to me being at facilities, especially at the hotel. I was having one-on-one communication with hotel staff about all sorts of things, including, "What a pleasure it is having you here, Mr. Aaron," hotel staff shared. Hotel staff had never met anyone in my situation with such a positive attitude towards life. In my estimation, being at the hotel may have changed the views of about 100 people. Perceptions are developed over time by observing societal actions, values and behaviors.

Researcher's Mantras

Having firsthand experience in the world of physical/mobility inconveniences (disabilities) along with having a unique mental outlook on my personal situation, I have embraced three separate mantras to better my personal way of life:

- 1) *You must try and do the things you think you cannot do.* ~Eleanor Roosevelt
- 2) *You don't have to be great to start something, but you do have to start something to be great at it.* ~Les Brown
- 3) *Life is about living, not wondering.* ~Aaron Cross

These quotes, which have become my personal way of life, have also changed the views of thousands of people around the world. As a professional motivational speaker, speaking over the past 25 years, my job is to perform the "Yes, you can mentality." Changing perceptions of all I

come in contact with is a goal of my seminars. The purpose of this thesis is to attempt to demonstrate how participating in The ABILITY Event, peoples' perceptions can be transformed from a negative to a positive. Furthermore, this research will exam personal changes within the international student community as well as comparing it to domestic and community participants. Cross, (2015)

Chapter II: Literature Review

Currently, empirical research is lacking on how impactful an event may be on peoples' perceptions towards individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, providing mock simulations of disabilities has had contradictory viewpoints on impact and often leads to further oppression and more generalization of people with disabilities. This study examines the existing literature of people and cultures from around the world and their viewpoints and attitudes towards people with disabilities. In addition to the limited existing literature on people with disabilities globally, there is a United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) and United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1946). According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it states:

The rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in a perfect world, would be enough to protect everyone. But in practice certain groups, such as women, children and refugees have fared far worse than other groups and international conventions are in place to protect and promote the human rights of these groups. Similarly, the 650 million people in the world living with disabilities — about 10 percent of the world's population — lack the opportunities of the mainstream population. They encounter a myriad of physical and social obstacles that:

- Prevent them from receiving an education;
- Prevent them from getting jobs, even when they are well qualified;
- Prevent them from accessing information;
- Prevent them from obtaining proper health care;
- Prevent them from getting around;

- Prevent them from “fitting in” and being accepted.

According to The World Bank, “One billion people, or 15 % of the world’s population, experience some form of disability, and disability prevalence is higher for developing countries.” The World Bank (2016), Furthermore, this population experiences more adverse socioeconomic outcomes as compared to persons not living with physical, mental or emotional inconveniences.

International Statistics

According to Vanderklippe (2014), “China says it has 576,000 orphans in total, roughly 100,000 of them in the full-time care of the state. (Outside groups peg the total overall number nearer a million)” (p.1). In addition, Vanderklippe writes, “Chinese authorities estimate that fully 98 percent of abandoned children have disabilities.” In other words, 566,000 orphans are disabled. As for the adult population, China Spinal Cord Injury Network, (2006) reports the largest number of injuries is spinal cord injuries (SCI). They believe this is due to substandard working environments. Almost 60 percent of SCIs in Beijing, China, are due to being crushed in work-related injuries. Research indicates one reason for work related injuries is lack of governmental oversight and not providing and not regulating safety in the workplace (Hampton, N. Z., & Qin-Hilliard, D. B., 2004). Furthermore, individuals with an SCI lack affordable medical care, accessible transportation to medical and/or rehabilitation facilities.

In comparison to China’s statistics on the number of children with disabilities who are orphans, Disabled World explained in their article on U.S. disability statistics at large as being:

Of the 53.9 million school-age children, 5 to 17, about 2.8 million were reported as having a disability in 2010. In addition, the percentage of metro children with disabilities who were enrolled in the public schools ranged from 75.6 percent to nearly 100 percent.

(Brault, M.W., 2010)

Disabilities can occur at any minute of anyone's day for many reasons. According to Andreason (2001) the top 10 reasons for obtaining a disability in the world are: Unipolar major depression, Tuberculosis, Road traffic accidents, Alcohol, Self-inflicted injuries, Manic-depressive (bipolar) illness, War, Violence, Schizophrenia, Iron deficiency (anemia).

In conclusion, it is evident there is a lack of empirical research on the topic of social perceptions towards people with disabilities. The current study is positioned to enhance the breath of knowledge and social awareness about the current state of global perceptions towards disability and the impact upon this perception by participating in this event.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research IRB was approved by St. Cloud State University prior to the "Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY event." Research was completed using a quasi-experimental design to measure change of social perceptions within the international student body, (undergraduate and graduate) levels. In addition, data was collected from domestic students, (undergraduate and graduate), and community participants, (open to the public) for comparison purposes.

Participants

On February 19, 2016, roughly 104 participants, undergraduate, graduate and community participants, completed the four hour "Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY event." Of the participants, 56 were successfully paired to their pre- and post-surveys and the 56 paired surveys, six were matched as international students. Pre- and post-surveys are as followed:

- Total surveys pre and post 193
- Total pre-surveys completed 104
- Total post-surveys completed 89
- Total surveys paired pre and post 45
- Total International students with paired surveys 5
- Total International students with unpaired surveys 7
- Total Domestic students with paired surveys 40
- Total domestic students with unpaired surveys 33
- Total non-student surveys 24

In order to increase validity of surveys, the pre-survey was completed online through Survey Monkey.

Both surveys, created by researcher, utilized questions for the participants to examine

their beliefs with regard to persons living with inconveniences. Questions applied “Yes, No and I don’t know,” Likert style questioning, i.e., Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree — 1 – 7 rating. Finally, surveys also gave participants the chance to write down their beliefs/definitions by utilizing an “Other” category.

Process of Event

On February 19, 2016 roughly 104 participants, undergraduate, graduate and community participants, completed the four-hour “Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY Event.” held at SCSU. After registering, which did include filling out the pre-survey, (only if participant did not fill it out prior to event online) participants spent the entire event with their specific groups, approximately four hours participating in eight ELSs. Groups were randomly assigned, allowing the participants to engage in the ELS stations, but to work with and obtain different perspectives from other participants. Each group was assigned a guide to lead them through the eight twelve minute ELS stations. The event consisted of the following:

Experiential Learning Simulations, (ELS) these stations are designed to give firsthand experience of living with specific abilities, (cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury — mobility, mental illness, ADD/ADHD, vision loss, deaf and hard of hearing and Autism/Asperger). Community members who have that specific disability lead ELSs.

- a. Cerebral Palsy (CP) ELS consisted of participants having to draw a predetermined picture, while another participant was pulling on a string that was tied around the person’s wrist. Gentle intermittent tugs created the knowledge of involuntary spasms to which CP causes.
- b. Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) and mobility showcased two separate aspects of living

life with a SCI. In the first section of the ELS, community member had volunteers learn how to transfer a immobile person from chair to chair using a sliding board, a device which allows a non-standing person to be moved from one position, i.e. their wheelchair, to a bed etc. This portion of the ELS explains one of the ways communication and trust is needed to be successfully independent. The second half focuses on understanding ways to make life easier, specifically utilizing gas station pumps and ATMs. Within this section, a volunteer has his/her hand wrapped and placed in a wrong-handed glove. So if your right hand is wrapped you will be wearing a left handed glove, vice versa; this simulates a limited function hand. The participant's job is to sit in a wheelchair, pickup a credit card and slide it in and out of the credit card slot. ELS actually has a cardboard credit card slot which the volunteer must use. Participants quickly realize how difficult it can be with limited or no hand function due to paralysis, or arthritis, etc., to accomplish the simplest of tasks. However, the volunteer is presented the question, "How can you overcome this?" Primary answer is to ask for help; but what if you are stubborn and don't want to ask for help? Participants are introduced to "Card Stick." Card stick is a simple device with two parts, a spring loaded clamp bolted on to a paint stir stick. The card is place in the clamp and the participant holds on to the stir stick, which allows them to get the height to reach the reader as well as, push and pull the card in and out of the reader.

- c. Mental Illness, (MI) ELS participants were given a simple task, read and hold a cup at the same time. Easy right? Not so much, there is another aspect to this ELS, which opens the eyes of all persons experiencing the world of MI. Step one,

your cup has writing pens in and it's your job to keep your cup full of the pens.

Step two, while making sure your cup is consistently full you will be reading the story on the piece of paper that was handed to you. Step three, while reading and understanding your document the ELS leaders, remove pens from the cups, often tossing them on the floor making it difficult to bend over and pick up a pen and not spill the pens in your cup. This particular exercise shows how a person living with anxiety, depression, PTSD can become overwhelmed with what society would consider the simplest of tasks.

- d. ADD/ADHD, while the ELS leads are doing their presentation, volunteers, (permanently assigned to the ELS) walk around the room, make noise and be very disruptive. While the participants are trying to concentrate it becomes very apparent what is going on and what it feels like to live with ADD/ADHD
- e. Autism/Asperger, all participants step into a circle made by a rope, which is laid on the floor. As the ELS progresses, the rope is raised to waist level of the participants and is slowly tightened; while at the same time, sound effects are played over a public address (PA) system. As the rope tightens the sound effects get louder and louder at the same time the participants start to get closer and closer to one another. This is done while trying to converse with a partner about a specific topic. After several minutes of this intense stimulus, it all stops. This particular ELS showcases just how overwhelming surroundings can be for persons living with Autism/Asperger. ELS leaders then have group discussion of how they overcome their challenges.
- f. Blindness, Low and Vision, blindfolds utilized throughout this ELS. Each

participant is passed objects to feel in order to gain a sense of what it is like to use your other senses as your eyes. In addition, several sandwich bags filled with cotton balls and specific oils/smells are passed around to see if the participants can identify the correct smell.

- g. Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Students participating in the simulations were forced to communicate with members of the community that were talking via American Sign Language. Since many participants were not familiar with ASL, they had to figure out how to speak to someone that is deaf or has a hearing impairment.
- h. Vendors, are the eighth ELS, and add crucial insight into the world of all the possibilities of resources, i.e., daily living equipment (durable medical equipment), organizations for advocacy, housing, transportation and travel. Vendors also showcase different types of technology, simple changes, which can allow any person to live a more independent life.

2) Post-ELS "Panel," lead by community members — For an hour, the ELS leaders fielded questions from the participants. Discussions ranged from, dealing with extreme stress, family, i.e., relationships, stressors in a relationship due to having a disability (are they more difficult than non-disabled couples), intimacy, daily difficulties (transportation, living arrangements), travel and anything the participants wanted to know about. It needs to be stated, prior to the start of the panel, a disclaimer was given stating, the content that may be discussed could have adult content and for some could be difficult to hear.

3) Interaction with all attendees of the event. The primary goal of this project is to evaluate if social perceptions changed by the international students, and in what areas, i.e., work, relationships, general communication, and compare the international students' responses to those

of the domestic students and community members.

Chapter IV: Results

This study investigated the data regarding perceptions of international students towards persons with disabilities. A series of t-test, Univariate analysis and Anovas were run to analyze the pretest and posttest responses of participants. The findings are based on the matched pre and post surveys for all participants for the 2016 "Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY Event." Gaining an understanding of these data and by utilizing the "Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY Event," this study was looking to find change in one specific area, social perceptions. The findings of this study only resulted in statistical significance in one of the nineteen questions. However, the primary question of statistical significance supports the overall research question "Does participation in "Embracing Difference: the ABILITY Event" change social perceptions towards persons with disabilities in International students?" (See table 1 below).

Table 1

Results of t-test for Pretest and Posttest of View Towards Persons with Disabilities

	Group						95% CI for		Sig	df
	International			Domestic			Mean			
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n	Difference			
View Towards										
Persons with	2.00	1.414	5	1.15	1.292	40	-1.640, -.849	.000*	44	
Disabilities										

* p < .05.

Table 1 indicates there is a statistically significant mean difference from pre to post testing in how international students viewed persons with disabilities as compared to how domestic students viewed persons with disabilities. The pre/post survey question utilized a Likert scale, 1 (hide from society) to 7 (fully able to live and do things). Results indicated that international students scored more negative views of disability on the pretest than domestic students. This study found when comparing the pre and post-survey, international students' attitudes shifted from a negative perception to a more positive realization of the abilities of people with disabilities.

Table 2

Results of t-test of International Student's Feelings Towards Persons with Disabilities

	Paired Samples						95% CI for		
	Pretest			Posttest			Mean Difference	Sig	df
	M	SD	n	M	SD	n			
How do you feel when you see someone with a disability	2.00	1.00	5	1.00	.000	5	-.242, 2.242	.089	4

* $p < .05$.

Table 2 reports the results of the survey question, "What do you feel when you see someone with a disability." Although there was not statistical significance there was practical

significance from participant's feelings towards people with disabilities being more positive after the event. During the pretest survey international students indicated feeling "sad and indifferent." However, posttest survey results showed all the international students chose "curious and motivated/empowered." It's worth noting that one student wrote in the "Other" category, "Someone special who always do more and more." Another student wrote, "I really felt motivated seeing the members and it has really brought a great difference in my view towards disabled people. I now feel that they are more able than we do. Hats off!!"

On the posttest survey students were asked to indicate whether the ABILITY Event changed their view of persons with disabilities. All of the international participants indicated a "complete change/positive." Furthermore, 90% of domestic students indicated a "complete change/positive" on their view of persons with disabilities. The remaining 10% accounts for the participants who commented that their views of persons with disabilities were already positive, so they did not feel a change had been made.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Embracing the Difference: the ABILITY Event is an annual event at St. Cloud State University that focuses on building awareness of the abilities of people instead of the stereotypical social perception of a persons' disability. This study focused specifically on the social perceptions of international students prior to and after their participation in the event. The results of data indicate a positive change within the international participants' perception. This finding suggest that the event is an effective platform for transforming social perception towards people with disabilities.

Limitations

Prior to the event, the researcher may have inadvertently skewed the pre-survey questionnaire for the event. For example, several professors had the researcher guest lecture on topics such as, growing up with a disability, sexuality and relationships, family dynamics with regard to living with disability as well as marriage and ethics. These lectures gave in-depth knowledge of living with mobility setbacks as well as personal experiences with other physical and mental disabilities. In short, the guest appearances may have changed the views of students even prior to completing the pre-surveys for the event.

Flaws in question design, researcher was looking to gather as much information as possible when it comes to perceptions, thus researcher had questions that had "Choose all that apply" for answers. For example, see below:

What do you feel when you see someone with a disability? Choose all that apply

Disgust, Sad, Pity, Indifferent, Curious, Motivated/Empowered

Other (please explain)

However, by using this type of question, it makes finding results a bit skewed, meaning, if on the pre-survey the participant marked “Sad” but on the post survey didn’t mark anything, the computer throws that stat out showing no correlation.

Pre- and post-surveys were flawed from the start with questions lacking in structure and not having same questions to help pair the pre-surveys. While compiling the data, it became clear removing certain questions with regard to the demographics of the surveys cost writer the ability to pair more completed surveys. Moreover, the idea of a “User ID” did not work out as well as expected. For example, participants used the “Sample ID” as their User ID, which disqualified six pre-surveys. In addition, as the event took place, it occurred to the researcher, that there was no directions for creating a “User ID” for the non-students/community participants; thus hindering the pairing process.

Moreover, there were pre-surveys completed the day of the event, (paper) again, participants did not follow the directions, and participants used their Student ID. See above directions in “methods” portion of the research. Finally, with regard to the pre- and post-surveys, the researcher was informed that a new e-mail system, which ensures privacy and increases accuracy for results was available. However, this process was approved after researcher’s project had already started. It was very apparent the research surveys were somewhat flawed and hindered the success of the research.

Although each ELS is lead by a community member with that specific ability and the event is to showcase a person’s ability and positive outcomes, the ELS members presenting may not have their “A” game, the day of the event. Having difficulties explaining your abilities to others in a way that is uplifting and clear can be difficult for some.

Another limitation, some students were doing the event as a requirement for class; and they may not have taken the event as seriously as they could have. Finally, with regard to students, this research was to look at the social perceptions of international students, but there were few international participants response

Benefits

Over 600 million people world-wide, are living with some form of disability. This study helps show how the ABILITY event can change societal views of persons with disabilities; students, international and domestic, as well as, community and families. Although this study did not have overwhelming results, it did show in several areas that participant's views became more positive, which does show change. For example, personal comments written by participants showed an overwhelming change in societal views, whether it was having no experience with disabilities to now having a basic understanding; or from one's student saying, "The ABILITY event made it very clear just how able people with disabilities are, as well as shedding light on many misconceptions and difficulties that they go through on a daily basis." (Anonymous student response to the 2016 ABILITY Event Class room reflection)

By completing the ABILITY Event in other facilities, i.e., higher education, employment even other countries, it could affect persons who have had no ties to disabilities; or who are living with inconveniences. For example, it can give a positive understanding to people who have never had any contact with persons with disabilities. Secondly, those who are living with disabilities could obtain assurances and greater understanding of how to live a better life, increased Quality Of Life (QOL). Third, it could help prevent future injuries to person(s) already living with physical and mental limitations. Finally, the event could allow participants to clear up misconceptions of multiple physical and mental inconveniences.

Implications for Future Research

It is the researcher's perspective, that after having been in multiple countries and having experienced firsthand three "Embracing the Difference: the ABILITY event," there is no question that future research in the area of social perspectives is needed. In addition, there is no limit to how the "Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY Event. positively affects the professional fields of counseling, i.e., family practice, psychiatry, and vocational rehabilitation in a positive manner. Experiencing this event can allow counselors, family members other community and friends to understand, view, and work with persons with physical, mental and emotional inconveniences. "Embracing the Difference: the ABILITY event," is a one day event which can change societal perceptions. The nine days I was in China, spoke at three universities, stayed at a popular hotel, as I left, the facilities company stated they were going to change their facilities this year. Moreover, it is imperative to include the fact, during the university visits, all four of them were already committing to having the ABILITY event be a part of their university for students and mandatory training for their faculty and staff.

In final closing, the "Embracing the Difference: The ABILITY Event." can change lives and social perceptions for the better.

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Appendix A: Pre-Test

Please use the User ID you created in your pre-test in order to compare your tests. The user ID will only be used to connect your pre-test with your post-test scores. No other identifying information will be collected. — Last three numbers of your Star ID, Your favorite color. For example:

Star ID # PB0084RX Favorite Color Blue

User ID number would be 4RXBlue ID _____

1) What is your role at Saint Cloud State University _____? (Circle one)

Undergraduate Graduate Faculty Staff Not related to SCSU

2) Are you an International student? Yes _____ No _____

If yes, please name country _____ (Optional)

3) Immigration status: _____ Resident Alien _____ Refugee _____ Asylum

Other _____

4) Are you a U.S. Citizen? Yes _____ No _____

If not, type of VISA: _____

5) Do you identify as a: Male _____ Female _____

Transgender _____ None Genderbinary _____

6) What is your definition of disability?

7) What do you feel when you see someone with a disability? Choose all that apply

Disgust, Sad, Pity, Indifferent, Curious, Motivated/Empowered

Other (please explain)

8) Do you know someone with a disability? Yes _____ No _____

9) Persons with disabilities can have intimate relationships, (sex, love)?

Yes _____ No _____ I Don't Know _____

10) Would you have committed relationship, (sexual, loving, family) with a person with a disability?

Yes _____ No _____ I Don't Know _____

11) Have you ever had a committed relationship, (sexual, loving, family) with a person with a disability?

Yes _____ No _____

12) Persons with disabilities can raise children and or have childbirth?

Yes _____ No _____ I Don't Know _____

13) How do you view persons' with disabilities? Scale (1 – 7).

Hide from society						Fully able to live life and do things
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

14) Do you believe persons with disabilities have the right to go to school along with people without disabilities?

No not at all						Yes, everyone should go to school
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

15) Using the scale 1-7, I agree that persons with disabilities have the ability to have a career (job that is able to pay the bills)?

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

16) In your country, do persons with disabilities have employment?

No, there is no chance they will be able to be successful _____

No, families do not want others to know of the disability _____

Yes, employed but only with other persons with disabilities _____

Yes, it is common for persons with disabilities to be employed _____

Yes, it is families and communities support all people to be successful _____

Other (please explain)

17) Do you think "Embracing the Difference: the ABILITY Event!" will change your views or increase your views of persons with disabilities for the better?

Yes _____ No _____

18) Do you think this "Embracing the Difference : the ABILITY Event!" can change or increase your countries views/beliefs of persons with disabilities for the better?

Yes _____ No _____

19) Using 1-7 scale "I have no idea about disabilities" to 7, "I have always had a excellent knowledge of disabilities" where do you feel your knowledge is regarding persons with disabilities?

No idea
about
disabilities

Fully aware
of
disabilities

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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Appendix B: Post-Test

Please use the User ID you created in your pre-test in order to compare your tests. The user ID will only be used to connect your pre-test with your post-test scores. No other identifying information will be collected. — Last three numbers of your Star ID, Your favorite color. For example:

Star ID # PB0084RX Favorite Color Blue

User ID number would be 4RXBlue ID _____

1) Persons with disabilities can have intimate relationships, (sex, love)?

Yes _____ No _____ I Don't Know _____

2) Would you have committed relationship, (sexual, loving, start a family) with a person with a disability?

Yes _____ No _____ I Don't Know _____

3) Persons with disabilities can raise children and or have childbirth?

Yes _____ No _____ I Don't Know _____

4) Using the scale 1-7, I agree that persons with disabilities have the ability to have a career (job that is able to pay the bills)?

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

5) Did "Embracing the Difference: the ABILITY Event!" change your views or increase your views of persons with disabilities for the better?

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

6) Do you think this "Embracing the Difference : the ABILITY Event!" can change or increase your countries views/beliefs of persons with disabilities for the better?

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

7) What do you feel when you see someone with a disability? Choose all that apply

Disgust, Sad, Pity, Indifferent, Curious, Motivated/Empowered

Other (please explain)

8) Having been through "Embracing the Difference: the ABILITY Event!" what s your view towards persons' with disabilities? Scale (1 – 7).

Hide them from society						Fully able to live life and do things
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

9) Having been through "Embracing the Difference ABILITY Event" do you feel persons with disabilities should go to school, (secondary and higher education)?

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

10) Using 1-7 scale how did "Embracing the Difference: the ABILITY Event!" change your view(s) of persons with disabilities?

No change at all						Complete change (positive)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

11) Having been through "Embracing the Difference: the ABILITY Event!", what is your definition of disability?
