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# Integrating Students with Disabilities into Museum Studies Programs:

## A Case Study of the Cooperstown Graduate Program

A Project Access White Paper  
Art Beyond Sight



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A Project Access New York White Paper by  
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This white paper is a personal reflection of our experiences and our challenges to make the Cooperstown Graduate Program (CGP) more accessible. It is certainly not intended as a self-aggrandizing story, but it has been a success. We all made mistakes along the way and we all learned a great deal from these experiences that I hope might encourage others to reach out to students with disabilities.

## Background on the program

In the early 1960s Dr. Louis C. Jones, director of the New York State Historical Association and the Farmers' Museum in Cooperstown, New York, approached the State University of New York at Oneonta with a then radical idea. He wanted to establish a graduate program to train professionals to work in history museums using his museum's campus instead of the campus of the degree-granting college. The college liked the idea and in the fall of 1964 a small group of faculty members launched the Cooperstown Graduate Program in an "unusual academic building"—a nineteenth-century farmhouse, dubbed "the white house," on the museum's property beside the New York State Historical Association.

There were steps up into the building, steps to the faculty offices on the second and third floors, and a rather treacherous staircase to the often-used dark room in the basement where students developed photographs and mounted slides. With the white house as headquarters and student lounge, the nature of the program made the entire community the learning laboratory. Focused on a practical approach, student fieldwork included documenting cultural traditions and music, creating slide shows and films, crawling around old barns, and measuring historic buildings. Students worked at the Farmers' Museum, a cluster of nineteenth-century historic buildings and living history farm, as well as at Fenimore House (now called the Fenimore Art Museum), a large private residence turned art museum and located across the street from the Farmers' Museum. Fieldwork classes kept students working in the neighborhoods and nearby communities to take photographs, conduct research and gather oral histories from regional residents.

The white house continued as CGP headquarters until 1980 when the Graduate Program moved into a much larger, 1960s-era college-owned building a short walk away—perhaps 700 yards north of the museums—with a breathtaking view of Lake Otsego. Although these new accommodations were all on one floor, everyone entering the building had to climb a few steps. The only bathrooms were in the basement, down half a flight of steps to a landing, and then another half flight to the lower level. A short, grassy, and in the winter, snow-covered walk through the woods separated the Graduate Program from the museums and library. From the main road a steep hill provided access to the building by automobile, bicycle, or foot. In addition, the museum moved its collections into a renovated nineteenth-century two-story stable that provided temperature and humidity control, but not universal access. A classroom added to the first floor of this facility became the place, side-by-

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side with collections, where professors taught material culture classes.

This brief introduction provides the starting place for the integration of students with disabilities into our museum studies program. The nature of our wide-ranging Cooperstown campus—inaccessible—and the nature of our museum studies curriculum—examining and moving artifacts, hanging exhibitions, scouring communities for cultural traditions and stories—was equally inaccessible.

I came to the Cooperstown Graduate Program as Director in 1994. The Program had a terrific legacy and reputation, but a very limited track record with any form of diversity. CGP's facilities certainly did not give the outward impression of being welcoming or accessible to people with disabilities. But, the CGP was not hostile either. To be honest, in 1994 access was just not something given much thought.

### Changing priorities and focus

***We sought individuals with a commitment to public service and community development rather than solely an interest in art, artifacts, or history.***

As a popular museum studies program with a robust number of applications each year, we did not actively recruit students at first. But, through institutional and curricular planning, our mission changed dramatically as we considered the future of museums and the needs of the communities in which they resided. Our focus gradually shifted to focus on the museum as a community service institution. Our admissions priorities changed to meet this focus. We sought individuals with a commitment to public service and community development rather than solely an interest in art, artifacts, or history. Our growing concern about the profession's lack of leaders from under-represented groups led to a commitment to expand our curriculum to include courses reflecting greater diversity in museums. As we planned the curriculum we considered how to expand the usual decorative arts and material culture offerings to embrace the objects of people who were not traditionally a part of the written record. When the opportunity came to hire a new history professor we chose a colleague with specific expertise in African American, Native American, and disability rights. At the same time we actively embraced strategies that would increase the diversity of the student body.

At first our discussions about diversity centered around recruiting more African American, Latino, and Native American students as well as more men to our increasingly female profession. We had not thought much about recruiting students with disabilities to our rural campus, I am ashamed to say. But, as our curriculum continued to evolve we gradually expanded our offerings for students that incorporated working with museum visitors with disabilities.

Our first module, working with people with Down syndrome and developmental disabilities, became a model for other teaching modules. Working with a special education professor, students learned, through reading and film, about people with developmental disabilities. With this background and some class discussion under their belts, CGP students then spent the day with students at Pathfinder Village, an area residence for people who have Down syndrome and other disabilities. At the Pathfinder school CGP students observed classes, shared meals, and sometimes had the students with Down syndrome teach them how to sing a song accompanied by sign language. This particularly poignant exercise worked well because the museum studies students found that they were the ones at a disadvantage when dealing with sign language. During the next phase of the program, the students returned to

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campus and designed a lesson plan for the Pathfinder school with helpful critique offered both by museum professors and Pathfinder teachers. On an agreed upon day the entire Pathfinder student body, ranging in ability from very high-functioning to very low-functioning individuals, visited the Farmers' Museum to pilot test the program. Teachers and students gathered finally to assess the program's strengths and weaknesses. This successful program continues to this day.

Soon after we started the Pathfinder program and early in my tenure as director, a young man with a physical disability applied for admission. His parents pulled me aside during their September visit and asked me to "look after him." This would be his first experience so far from home. "I am not your mother," I clumsily informed him during our first discussion, trying to show him that I was going to treat him just like everyone else. "You are an adult and I expect you to tell me whatever accommodations you need and we will address them together." Despite his parents' concerns about a graduate program so far from home, this student was incredibly capable and self-sufficient. No matter how hard I worked to get him to tell me what special accommodations he might need, he wanted nothing. Was this my need or his to provide special accommodations?

At first, I later realized, I did want to mother him. I worried. I hovered. I asked him to demand an upstairs bathroom so that the college would be forced to install an accessible facility on the first floor. He refused. He hopped up and down those stairs everyday, which indicated to all of the staff how drastically our building needed to change. I started to push our facilities department hard. But, once I learned to relax—once we all learned to relax—none of the faculty members or his fellow students treated him any differently than any other student. It was a terrific two years with a young man who has become a lifelong friend and colleague. The first lesson learned—mind your own business unless there is a reason not to, but make sure the facilities are fully accessible.

Two young women—one profoundly deaf, the other with some hearing—enabled us to see weaknesses in our teaching about which we were unaware. All of our faculty members discovered how often we taught while facing the whiteboard or at least while turning away from the class. Some faculty members realized their tendencies to speak too fast or indistinctly. One mustached colleague also learned the importance of trimming his facial hair. When his moustache grew down over the top of his upper lip his students didn't understand him because they could not read his lips. I asked the faculty member to trim his moustache and we all learned to face the class when teaching and to stop talking when we faced the board. Certainly these are things known by faculty members who work regularly with people with varying abilities, but without these experiences they were new to us. The second lesson learned: students are incredibly expert at managing their disabilities. They will help you give them the best possible experiences. The College Office of Disability Services also provided enormous help in identifying and accessing important resources, from sign language interpreters to independent living services.

With only thirty-two students, we have the ability to develop a singular experience for each person. Working out problems individually was particularly important when we accepted a student in a motorized wheelchair. To be honest, there was some initial fear expressed by a few faculty members when he chose to describe

***We will not turn an applicant away because of our own fears. We will accept all qualified students, be honest about our weaknesses, and then figure it out.***



**Ansel Lurio, who uses a wheelchair, is shown here with CGP's class of 2009; he is now working for New York City's Historic House Trust. The author is at far right in photo. (Photo by Laura Cox)**

his disability in his application. "Could he get around in Cooperstown," they wondered? Where would he live? How would we manage our weeklong field trips to other cities in the northeast? At the time of the student's application Cooperstown did not have a single accessible apartment. Quite a few of the Farmers' Museum buildings were inaccessible, and the library's elevator was very small and very slow. We had no doubt that our applicant, an excellent writer and talented scholar, deserved to be here. Lesson number three: We will not turn an applicant away because of our own fears. We will accept all qualified students, be honest about our weaknesses, and then figure it out.

The summer before he arrived provided an opportunity to search for the closest accessible apartment, to rethink the field trips, and to locate accessible vans. We learned which subway stops in New York had elevators and to ask hotels about their accessible rooms. Understanding the difficulties that people with disabilities face just getting to a museum's front door helped us to see and consider some of the limitations on museum visitorship, particularly those institutions outside of urban downtowns.

Our physical location in a rural area and away from the college campus has posed one of our greatest challenges. One student with a physical disability could not manage to walk through the deep snow between the museums and library during a surprise spring storm. With the assistance of the college we borrowed a small John Deere Gator to ferry her back and forth.

Students helped us identify weaknesses in the accessibility of local museums and to find solutions that assisted the general public as well as the students themselves. As part of their museum education course students also developed programs for the museum—sometimes related to accessibility. One student researched the experience of illness in the nineteenth century and using a diary developed a first-person narrative for the doctor's office at the Farmers' Museum. Wearing modern clothing, the young man began the program with an introduction about a nineteenth-century boy with only one leg. The student then retreated to the back room, removed his prosthetic leg, folded up his pant leg, exchanged his modern crutch for a historic one, and added a farmer's hat. The presentation was particularly poignant because the surprising change made visitors just a little bit uncomfortable and demonstrated the differences and similarities, linking past and present. It was one of the most memorable history museum programs I have ever seen.

When the college announced that our building was in the queue for a complete renovation, we incorporated the many lessons our students taught us into the design and planning process. In addition to a completely accessible parking lot, entrance and bathrooms, as required by law, we considered accessibility in selecting furnishings and arranging our computer lab and classrooms for the building. The movable, motorized table that can be adjusted to different heights has proven to be a very popular work surface for everyone, for those of us who are vertically challenged as well as those of us who are very tall. I hope that it does not sound cliché, but the men and women with disabilities who came to Cooperstown as students, taught our faculty and staff important lessons about disabilities and abilities, and they made us much better



**CGP alumnus David Lewis, seen here painting an exhibit, is now the curator of the Aurora, Illinois Fire Museum.**

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teachers. They also broadened our understanding of diversity and helped us make the Cooperstown Graduate Program a much more open and accommodating place for all of our students.

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