

HAILEE M. GIBBONS

124 McGuffey Hall | Oxford, OH 45056 | Phone: 513.529.0434 | E-mail: hgibbo2@uic.edu

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University of Toledo
Disability Studies Program
2100 University Hall
Toledo, OH

Dear Dr. Kim Nielsen,

With great enthusiasm, I submit this letter as my application for the position of Assistant Professor in Disability Studies at the University of Toledo. As a doctoral candidate in the Disability Studies program at University of Illinois at Chicago, I believe you will find that my research interests, teaching experience, and service activities are aligned with the qualities you seek in candidates for this tenure-track faculty position. In this letter, I will demonstrate the ways in which my academic and professional background advances the objective of the Disability Studies program at UT to focus on the contributions, experiences, history, and culture of people with disabilities.

Commitment to Research

Several experiences over the course of my undergraduate and graduate schooling have been instrumental in shaping my research agenda. As an undergraduate, I was educated using an interdisciplinary philosophy and encouraged to integrate diverse interests, which has continuously influenced me as a researcher. Furthermore, I had excellent mentors, who provided me with the opportunity co-author papers (e.g., “Explicit vs. implicit family decision-making strategies among Mexican American caregiving adult children” in *Marriage and Family Review*) and co-present at national conferences (e.g., “Talkin’ bout my generation: The presence of the young-old in virtual networks” at the *Ohio Association of Gerontology Education Conference*). This instilled an early love in me for the creation and expanding of knowledge.

In terms of my current research agenda, I am highly interested in disability as a social identity and the structures and systems that oppress and marginalize those in this category. I became particularly interested in this topic due to two personal experiences. First, my younger sister was born with two congenital heart disabilities and had open-heart surgery at the age of 20. Due to the prominent scar on her chest, her previously invisible disability became visible, which had a significant impact on how others viewed her—and thus on how she viewed herself. She began to claim a disability identity but at the same time would always note how other people had “more legitimate” disabilities than her (meaning more visible or having a more profound impact on their lives). Second, I began to reject the label of “mental illness” and was instead developing a stronger psychological disability identity. As a result of these experiences, I became increasingly interested in the identities of people with disabilities.

I first began to research this topic during my Master’s program in Student Affairs and Higher Education. I implemented a critical narrative study that sought to better understand the multiple social identities of college students with visible disabilities and how they make meaning of, respond to, and/or resist the outside perception of disability as a “master status” identity (i.e., their most salient or only identity). I presented this study at the Society for Disability Studies Annual Meeting in June 2013 and later published my findings in *The Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*. For my dissertation, I furthered this work by expanding the study to include participants of varying ages (e.g.,

adolescents, middle aged adults, and elders). These findings will be presented in the coming year at both the Society for Disability Studies Annual Meeting and the Gerontological Society of America Annual Meeting. I am also in the process of authoring several publications based on my dissertation research.

In addition to researching disability as a category of social identity, I am also interested in people who are aging with a disability and how disability and age affect people's experiences, opportunities, and participation in society. Many gerontologists view disability primarily through the medical model, and only a few scholars have strived to better integrate gerontology with disability studies so it is important to me to continue this work. I am currently working on co-authoring a chapter with Dr. Tamar Heller on the intersections of disability and age. I am eager to join the research community in the Disability Studies program at UT, which I think will support and encourage future collaborations with faculty in diverse disciplines.

Commitment to Teaching and Learning

Beyond maintaining an active research agenda, I have purposefully engaged in a variety of activities to hone my pedagogical skills and promote student learning in curricular and co-curricular contexts. After graduating from college, I worked full-time for three years in Miami University's Office of Community Engagement and Service, focusing primarily on service-learning and civic engagement. As a student affairs practitioner, my primary responsibility was not teaching; however, I sought out teaching opportunities to hone my pedagogical skills and promote student learning. I developed and taught a number of courses related to service and social justice, such as HON 190 A: Adopt A School Honors Experience, EDP 177: Issues in Education, and WST 277: Community Engagement and Service-Learning.

I gained additional experience in the Student Affairs in Higher Education Master's program by engaging in two practicums involving Disability Studies courses. In Spring 2012, I served as a Teaching Assistant for an Introduction to Disability Studies course. The following year, I co-taught a more advanced course, Media Illusions of Disability. For both of these courses, I worked with students who have never taken Disability Studies courses as well as students in the Disability Studies Minor. This required me to provide different levels of challenge and support, depending on each student's unique experiences, personality, and development. As a result, my background in diversity/social justice education and knowledge of student development theory was instrumental in teaching these courses.

Furthermore, in order to supplement my practical experiences as an instructor and co-instructor, I pursued the Graduate Certificate in College Teaching, which was awarded by the Center for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching, and University Assessment at Miami University. This certificate program allowed me to further reflect on my role as an educator and expand my pedagogical knowledge. It also provided opportunities for putting theory into practice – for example, creating a course syllabus, developing a teaching philosophy, and practicing classroom assessment techniques.

I am also dedicated to teaching in other contexts outside of the classroom. For example, during my Student Affairs and Higher Education classes, I realized my peers knew very little about disability and, despite having good intentions, often use deficit-based thinking (grounded in the medical model) when working with college students with disabilities. In order to address this issue, I used GLBTQ SafeZone Training as a model to create an "Ally Training for People with Disabilities." This is an interactive presentation that can be given in person and online. In this presentation, I cover definitions of disability, explain the Medical and Social Models of Disability, educate people on how to use person-first language, provide suggestions on how to respectfully interact with people with disabilities, and explain universal design. Additionally, I discuss able-bodied privilege, ally behavior, and then engage with the audience to explore ways they can act as allies for people with disabilities in their particular contexts. I have presented this training to several groups on campus, including Social Justice Studies majors, Resident Assistants, Professional Staff in Residence Life, and first year students attending a Cultural Competency Week.

Commitment to Service

I have committed much of my personal and professional life to service and social justice. As a student leader and full time professional in Miami's Office of Community Engagement and Service, I gained experience in planning programs and activities, supervising full-time staff, student staff, and practicum students, teaching social justice courses, advising student organizations, and working collaboratively with faculty, staff, student, and community stakeholders. While disability was not my core focus area, I found opportunities to integrate disability studies into my work. For example, I coordinated service-learning experiences for three special education and disability studies courses. I also brokered partnerships with several new community partners, including Bridge Riding, a therapeutic horseback riding program for children and adults with disabilities, and Project SEARCH, a program for high school students with disabilities in which they intern with local businesses and community agencies to provide entry-level job experience. Additionally, I have extensive experience in volunteerism. I volunteered for three years at the Adult Day Service Center and Knolls of Oxford (a continuing care retirement community) in Oxford, Ohio. I also tutored at an after school program in Hamilton, Ohio for approximately seven years, during which time I wrote and was awarded several grants to engage in special programming. These experiences have contributed greatly to my ability to serve the university, the community, and the profession as a faculty member.

In closing, I would welcome the opportunity to interview for the position of Assistant Professor in Disability Studies at the University of Toledo. I am enthusiastic about the possibility of joining your faculty and believe my research, teaching, and service commitments reflect the values espoused by your program. If you have additional questions regarding my application, please feel free to contact me at hgibbo2@uic.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Hailee Gibbons".

Hailee Gibbons
Doctoral Candidate in Disability Studies
University of Illinois at Chicago

*This is a sample cover letter—while the personal experiences and research interests are factual and accurate, some details in the letter (e.g., my dissertation research, future publications) is fictional.