

# ASSOCIATION ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND DISABILITY (AHEAD) ON LANGUAGE

January 19, 2021

Dear Members,

AHEAD is in the process of posting our 2020-2025 strategic plan and updating our professional and program standards. As Board members and staff have engaged in these processes, we have been thinking about language across AHEAD's communication and resources. Language is a powerful way to demonstrate professional values and, in our specific case, our beliefs about disability.

***There are two prevalent ways that we identify with disability in language: person-first and identity-first. Both options have implications for how we think about disability.***

## Person-first language

Distances the person from the disability, ostensibly to separate the person from the negative connotations and stigma with which we have all been socialized. As professionals, many of us have been taught that person-first language is preferable, and some disabled individuals choose to identify as a person first, based on their personal orientation to disability. Example: I am a woman with a disability. I am separate from the stereotypes and stigma you associate with disability.

## Identity-first language

Challenges negative connotations by claiming disability directly. Identity-first language references the variety that exists in how our bodies and brains work with a myriad of conditions that exist, and the role of inaccessible or oppressive systems, structures, or environments in making someone disabled. Example: I am disabled, queer, and Latinx. I have an impairment, and I am disabled by societal barriers.

These language choices underscore the differences between impairment and disability. "Impairment" is the term used by disability studies scholars to refer to a physiological difference in one's body or brain. Disability is a lived experience with far-reaching political, social, and economic implications.

As AHEAD moves to promote concepts of disability informed by social justice, we are adopting identity-first language across all communication, information and materials. This is not a directive or a recommendation about how others should identify; it is one way to model new thinking on disability that we see reflected in disability studies and in the disability rights community.

When referencing disability, naming it explicitly is important. AHEAD embraces the word "disability" and actively avoids the use of outmoded euphemisms such as "special needs," "physically or mentally challenged," differently- or alternatively-abled, etc.

There are many good resources for learning more about language that conveys respect for disabled people and their experiences. A good place to begin is the [Disability Language Style Guide](https://bit.ly/3rbwI3N) <https://bit.ly/3rbwI3N> published by the National Center on Disability and Journalism. AHEAD also recommends considering the recommendations of disabled people themselves. We have included additional resources below.

A subgroup of the Board developed this communication to inform professional practice in the provision of disability-related accommodations and professional outreach. We invite you to a free webinar on Friday, January 29 at 2 pm Eastern Time / 11 am Pacific Time to engage in conversation and ask any questions about this guidance. The details for this webinar are forthcoming. We will also have a roundtable at the annual conference this summer to dialogue and generate strategies to support one another as we work to evolve disability language on our campuses.

## Additional resources:

- [Becoming Disabled](https://bit.ly/3rbgTKc) <https://bit.ly/3rbgTKc>: Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, New York Times, 2016
- Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist: Judy Heumann (Beacon, 2020)
- Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure: Eli Clare (Duke UP, 2017)
- Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity, Simi Linton (NYU Press, 1998)
- [Disability as Diversity](https://bit.ly/3koybSM) <https://bit.ly/3koybSM>: Lilah Burke, Inside Higher Ed., 2020
- [Disability Visibility Project](https://bit.ly/3enGKtq) <https://bit.ly/3enGKtq>: [Alice Wong](mailto:AliceWong@disabilityvisibilityproject.com)  
[DisabilityVisibilityProject@gmail.com](mailto:DisabilityVisibilityProject@gmail.com)
- [Disabled: Just Say the Word](https://bit.ly/2TcQoYj) <https://bit.ly/2TcQoYj>: Barbara J. King, NPR, 2016
- [Disabled Person or Person with a Disability](https://bit.ly/3yZuyXF) <https://bit.ly/3yZuyXF>: Annie Elaine
- [Guidelines: How to Write About People with Disabilities](https://bit.ly/3BciSmq) <https://bit.ly/3BciSmq>, University of Kansas, Research and Training Center on Independent Living
- [Guidelines for Writing About People with Disabilities](https://bit.ly/3ivPJKr) <https://bit.ly/3ivPJKr>: ADA National Network
- [Identity-First Language](https://bit.ly/36GuZKq) <https://bit.ly/36GuZKq>: Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)
- [Language and Disability](https://bit.ly/3rfcW7e) <https://bit.ly/3rfcW7e>: Explore Access, UA Partners for Inclusive Communities
- [The Language of Disability Activity](https://bit.ly/3xL4y23) <https://bit.ly/3xL4y23>: Disability as Diversity Toolkit, Explore Access, UA Partners for Inclusive Communities
- [Language Guide](https://bit.ly/2UgORAX) <https://bit.ly/2UgORAX>: Disability Cultural Center, Syracuse University
- [Leaving Evidence](https://bit.ly/3rhKhP1) <https://bit.ly/3rhKhP1> (blog): Mia Mingus
- [PC Labels Do a Diservice](https://bit.ly/3ijyUSL) <https://bit.ly/3ijyUSL>: Stephen Stern, Inside Higher Ed., 2020

