



MAKING ROOM

*Alicia Straughter
champions equal access
for everyone—and
advises starting small*

WHEN ADDRESSING ISSUES OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY and inclusion (DEI), institutions will often talk about “making room at the table” without realizing that the phrase is not just a metaphor but a practical, everyday barrier for some people. As *Fast Company* put it, “disability is the missing piece in the DEI puzzle.”

One in four Americans has a disability of one kind or another, according to government research, and they are twice as likely to be unemployed than others. Among the factors making it harder for them to find work: lack of awareness of physical limitations and other supportive needs.

Participation in DEI initiatives varies across different kinds of industries. The latest Disability Equality Index report from advocacy nonprofit Disability:IN found the tech sector leading the way, with 58% of companies involved in trying to improve access in some form. Then came banking and finance (43%), health care (27%), insurance (26%) and manufacturing (16%).

Produced in partnership with the American Association of People with Disabilities, the report warns that the much-needed speeding up of the post-coronavirus economic recovery will require companies to be more inclusive of people with disabilities. Its recommendations include innovative technology to improve digital accessibility, mental health and wellness benefits, paid caregiver leave, supplemental long-term disability insurance benefits and flexible work options.

Last year, Disability:IN was named to *Fast Company*'s inaugural Brands That Matter list, created to recognize companies and nonprofits that have “achieved relevance through cultural impact and social engagement and authentically communicated their missions and ideals.”

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As Chief Human Resources Officer at Disability:IN, Alicia Straughter is particularly concerned about making minority students—at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic-serving institutions—aware of the opportunities available through the organization's NextGen program.

This matches students with mentors at one of its 300 or so partner organizations for several months. "The fantastic part is that some of them come out with a great job or a great job opportunity, if not with that organization, with another company," she says. "I love to help and open up doors for people that are underrepresented, underserved, who have not been focused on [for] getting help and who are deserving of it."

Empowering others

As of late-2021, Disability:IN had recorded 140,000 job hires through its Inclusion Works consulting program, launched in 2015. Spotlighting Disability:IN in its awards, *Fast Company* noted that research found that companies that championed disability inclusion had higher revenues, net income and profit margins.

Straughter knows something about overcoming obstacles. She grew up in the K-Town area of Chicago's West Side, one of the city's toughest areas. The importance of school "wasn't taught to me and it wasn't really seen a lot in my community," she says;

Straughter was the only one of three siblings to take advantage of her father's working at Loyola University to attend there. She got her bachelor's in communication and master's in organizational development at Loyola, later earning a Ph.D. in general business with a concentration in organizational management from Capella University.

Though Straughter's career has been focused on empowering others, that calling, as she sees it, only became clear over time. Starting out, she didn't have a dream job in mind, though she knew she liked to help people: "I didn't really know what philanthropy was then, but I kept saying I just want to be helpful. I was always doing things around the house or with family members."

She got nudged in the right direction in her last semester as an undergrad when one of her professors suggested she pursue an internship with a nonprofit she knew of. That led to 20 years working with Athletes Against Drugs (AAD), an organization in Chicago founded by educator and businessman Stedman Graham.

Opening doors

From an intern, Straughter rose to managing director, helping broaden and develop the group's in-school and youth-event programs, and introducing scholarship programs for young people in a low-income area in Chicago.

"We had a phenomenal



program, educating youth all over the world... curriculum and sports events...," she says. "That's how the dream or the desire really began to come alive in me. As those years came on, I ended up running the organization—executive board stuff and chief HR stuff with Stedman—it was phenomenal."

It was while with AAD that "I found out what I really wanted to do in life," she says, "to help underprivileged students, preferably in my area, who did not have the opportunity you get to be informed and educated, to get them off of drugs or not involved in drugs.

"That's kind of how my dream came about, the road to where I'm at. So, I didn't really think about it until later in life."

Straughter speaks appreciatively of Graham's role in helping her find her purpose. "He allowed me to grow and learn," she says. "He really



opened up a lot of doors for me just to be me and to grow into the person that I am.”

As her responsibilities grew at AAD (“I tell students now, ‘Do not despise small beginnings’; I started as an intern, not paid, and just began helping.”), Straughter began to share some of her lessons on leadership and management. She was an adjunct professor at Dominican University for many years, and has also lectured at Concordia, DePaul and Benedictine Universities.

That was an unexpected addition to her skills, given that she had never had an interest in teaching. “I had a friend who called and said you need to call this guy at the university because he has a job for you,” she recalls. “I said I didn’t want to teach there, but I ended up calling anyway.”

Improving access

The result of that conversation was another unexpected opportunity to do something she discovered she loved. And she realized again, sometimes “you just don’t know what your dreams are, and to start evolving in it.” As it turned out, teaching provided another opportunity to impact young people.

“So, I was really able to impact the lives of our young generation through the academic area, when it was higher education, as well as elementary and high school as I was working my day job with Stedman.”

She continues to pass on her knowledge: since 2019, Straughter has hosted the popular *Soul of a Leader* podcast with longtime friend Dr. Eileen Timmins. Together they

MY WAYMAKERS: DR. ALICIA STRAUGHTER

I have had a lot of mentors. One of them, one of my professors, introduced me to the internship [at AAD]—that’s why I think it’s important to get to know some of your professors, because you just never know... My father has always been in my life and just was always one of those ones, “Stay in it, stay in it, stay in and work hard, do that.” When I put all these pieces together of the individuals, the circle gets big...



interview guests about “extraordinary impact on strategies, success stories, spirituality and leadership.” They also offer coaching and workshops through their Soul of a Leader Leadership Institute.

One challenge Straughter faces in her Disability:IN role is improving access to information about how the group can help. “I see the hurdle is getting the information to the students and getting them to understand that this is for you, that this is real. Oftentimes I’ve heard that ‘They never have anything for us’—that’s the students with a disability. ‘If they come to our schools,

these big career fairs, they never have anything for us.”

That is exactly where Disability:IN comes in, she goes on. “Because we’re coming to your school for you and you only as a student with a disability... sometimes we can miss an opportunity because we don’t think it’s for us.” She encourages students who think Disability:IN may be able to help them to upload their resume at the organization’s website (disabilityin.org). “This is an opportunity that can take you to another level just by participating.” 🗨️

From an interview with Louis Carr