



LETTERS

Edited by Jennifer Sills

Disability inclusion enhances science

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—a landmark piece of legislation for the support of people with disabilities—turns 30 next year (1). As the ADA has aged, the culture around disabilities has grown, revealing that much more can be done. Legislation is helpful, but improvements don't have to come from the top.

Nearly a quarter of Americans live with a disability, yet individuals with disabilities comprise just 17% of the entire American workforce (2), 9% of the scientific workforce, and a mere 7% of PhD-holders employed in science (3). Barriers to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers among people with disabilities include the lack of proper instruction, insufficient access to facilities and instruments, and not being accepted by peers (4). Students with disabilities report that only two-thirds of course instructors help them engage in lab tasks and that there are no accommodations in half of the labs they enter (5), creating missed opportunities to gain the skills necessary for careers in STEM research.

Many world-renowned scientists, past and present, have built successful STEM careers while managing a disability [e.g., (6)]. Still,

if the average principal investigator were to assess whether his or her research lab is prepared to accommodate a new member with a disability, the answer most likely would be: "I have no idea." The vast range of disabilities—including those with outward characteristics and those that are invisible—makes the necessary accommodations diverse. Fortunately, there is help, such as that offered by the DO-IT program at the University of Washington (7). DO-IT works with groups worldwide to create laboratory accommodations, including bringing Universal Design into the lab environment.

Universal Design principles create accommodations for everybody. Many of us enjoy Universal Design every day in the form of curb cuts—ramps that bring sidewalks down to street level—which are helpful for those walking unassisted as well as those using walkers or wheelchairs, pushing baby strollers or pulling rolling carts, or riding bikes or scooters. Translated to the lab, Universal Design takes the form of adjustable height workstations, wider doors and gaps between workstations, easily accessible lab supplies and safety equipment, touch screens, and closed captioning (8). As this list attests, everyone benefits, even if they just differ in height. Feeling the need to explain one's disability or limitation can be upsetting, and communicating it can be challenging, causing individuals to avoid certain social interactions and activities. Turning labs into more accessible work environments

Students in the University of Washington's "DO-IT" Scholars program discuss data with an instructor.

increases awareness among existing lab members, and an accommodative culture can become the new norm, reducing the social barriers that individuals with disabilities face in STEM environments.

Increasing recruitment of individuals with disabilities in STEM will markedly improve the business of science. It will draw in brilliant minds that previously shied away, foster specialization that pushes fields along faster than ever before, and create the collaborative atmosphere necessary to tackle the biggest challenges facing our planet. Disability inclusion may seem daunting because of financial, logistical, and safety concerns; however, increasing disability representation can start with simple changes like implementing Universal Design principles, engaging with university disability specialists, and embracing an inclusive mind-set, to the benefit of this marginalized group and to our society and planet as a whole.

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10.1126/science.aaz0271

Climate concerns and the disabled community

Climate change and the loss of ecosystem services are likely to disproportionately affect the world's disabled populations by

accentuating inequalities and increasing marginalization of the most vulnerable members of society (1, 2). Disabled populations may experience a limited access to knowledge, resources, and services to effectively respond to environmental change (3). Compromised health may make people more vulnerable to extreme climate events, ecosystem services loss, or infectious disease exposure (4), and those with disabilities are more likely to have difficulties during required evacuations or migrations (5, 6). For example, Hurricane Katrina was found to disproportionately impact 155,000 people with disabilities ranging from visual and physical impairments to learning disabilities (7). The international research community has made good progress at including vulnerable groups such as poor communities, women, indigenous people, and youth in recent international conversations about global environmental change (8, 9), but disabled populations have been mostly absent from the conversation.

In a positive step this past July, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution calling on governments to adopt a disability-inclusive approach to addressing climate change (10, 11). However, more needs to be done at the international level. Two leading international bodies assessing the knowledge and impacts of climate change and the loss of ecosystem services—the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES)—have, thus far, done little to address the critical implications of climate change and biodiversity loss for disabled populations (8, 12). Global environmental change should be considered a disability rights issue. The formation of dedicated task forces within IPCC and IPBES will be critical for increasing research and including persons with disabilities in the conversation

around climate resilience to better tackle this pressing global challenge.

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10.1126/science.aaz9045

Collaboration across boundaries in the Amazon

Amidst increasing global concerns over the recent Amazon fires and escalating deforestation in the region (D. Arruda *et al.*, "Amazon fires threaten Brazil's agribusiness," Letters, 27 September, p. 1387), the signing of the Leticia Pact for the

Amazon Region on 6 September by Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, and Suriname represents a crucial step toward more effectively and collaboratively tackling the major environmental challenges facing the Amazon (1). The Amazon holds over half of Earth's rainforests and a quarter of the planet's terrestrial biodiversity (2). Amazon deforestation and related fires have wide-ranging negative impacts that cross political boundaries, including major loss of biodiversity and ecosystem functions (3), spread of disease (4–6), loss of sustainable agribusiness and tourism opportunities (Arruda *et al.*), threats to water security (7), and suspension of climate regulation (8). Many of these impacts cross international boundaries and pose threats to humans and nature across vast regions (9).

The Leticia Pact offers an opportunity to ensure that the responsibility of protecting the Amazon forest and its sustainable resource use is shared among Amazon countries. Cross-boundary collaboration has economic, socio-political, and environmental advantages, substantially reducing conservation costs (10). However, to go beyond declarations of intent, the Leticia Pact urgently requires binding targets, resources, and measurable, well-defined actions and milestones (11).

As ecologists specializing in Amazon forest and cross-boundary collaboration, we therefore call for the pact's member nations to commit to these goals: Set joint targets for reducing deforestation and maintaining forest cover over 80% in all Amazon countries to avoid reaching an ecological tipping point (12); promote environmentally sustainable markets—for example, provide payments for essential ecosystem services and cross-boundary initiatives that both benefit local people and retain native forests; build joint management plans for coordinated surveillance, restoration, and transboundary protected areas; enhance rapid response programs and free movement of environmental, health, and education organizations across borders; foster cross-boundary collaborative research; and finally, promote actions for guaranteeing Indigenous people's land rights across the Amazon.

In the current political climate, strengthening cross-boundary collaboration by translating the Leticia pledge from declarations to actions is a crucial step toward addressing the escalating environmental crisis and its global impacts, enhancing responsible and sustainable resource use across all Amazon countries.

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