## Disability Awareness, Training, and Empowerment: A New Paradigm for Raising Disability Awareness on a University Campus for Faculty, Staff, and Students

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Article

# Disability Awareness, Training, and Empowerment: A New Paradigm for Raising Disability Awareness on a University Campus for Faculty, Staff, and Students

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## Abstract

A select committee of faculty, staff, administrators and students collaborated to create and implement the Disability Awareness, Training, and Empowerment (DATE) program on the campus of a midsize public state institution in the Northeastern United States. Based on studies of existing literature in the field, as well as campus climate information, the committee created a unique training program that has, to date, seen the training of over 350 faculty members, staff and administrators. This article will explore the literature that was surveyed to form the philosophical underpinnings of the program. The starting place for the training was *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (Shapiro, 1993), as well as the research of Cole and Cawthon (2015), Hehir and Schifter (2015), and Oliver (1990). After surveying this supporting literature, the article will then explore the evolution and facilitation of the training program, including the various iterations of the training as it took its final form. The article will conclude with an exploration of possible new directions for disability awareness training programs on university campuses. The discussion also includes an expansion to the student body and a corresponding fulfillment of the university's civic engagement course requirements.

## Issue

This article is part of the issue "Students with Disabilities in Higher Education", edited by Geert Van Hove (Ghent University, Belgium/VU Amsterdam, The Netherlands), Minne Bakker (VU Amsterdam, The Netherlands) and Alice Schippers (Disability Studies in the Netherlands/VU Amsterdam, The Netherlands).

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, college and university campuses have sought a stronger understanding of the needs of students with disabilities, and the ways to offer support to this traditionally underserved student population (Lombardi, Murray, & Kowitt, 2016; Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008; Murray, Wren, Stevens, & Keys, 2009). Both academic and practical studies have examined general issues such as facilities upgrades through program-specific needs including service learning, athletic programs, and career services for students with disabilities.

This article will describe the development of a university campus training program on a midsize public university campus in the Northeastern United States. The program grew from the recognition by university faculty and staff that there were numbers of campus community members who lacked information about how to work effectively and proactively with students with disabilities. The relevance of creating greater awareness of how to

confront issues surrounding students with disabilities resulted from a report presented by the University Senate, a representative body of faculty, staff, administrators, students, and alumni, of a midsize North American university. One of the recommendations was to offer disability awareness training opportunities in order to help faculty and staff better serve students with disabilities. With this recognized need in mind, the chancellor of one of the university's campuses created a Disabilities Advisory Council, and a number of subcommittees to examine all aspects of the experience of students with disabilities. One of the subcommittees formed through the Disabilities Awareness Council centered on Disability Awareness Training and Empowerment (DATE subcommittee).

Working in concert with university leadership, the subcommittee was tasked with creating a time-sensitive and time-efficient training program that sought to educate faculty, staff, administrators, and students on the needs of students with disabilities, best practices related to relevant legislation, and recommendations to support these students across campus. Planning for the training sessions commenced in the fall semester, with a piloted series of workshop and subsequent feedback sessions occurring the following spring.

This article will articulate the need for the Disability Awareness, Training, and Empowerment (DATE) program, the supporting literature, including a brief discussion of approaches to disability studies, a description of the DATE program, and feedback collected. It will conclude with recommendations for future training and education initiatives.

## 2. Context and Initial Considerations

### 2.1. Problem Statement

Examinations of student success indicate that persons with disabilities can thrive in an environment where they are expected and understood (Bellman, Burgstahler, & Ladner, 2014; Simonson, Glick, & Nobe, 2013). College campuses are no exception. However, it is also common that faculty and staff are unclear how to work with and support students with disabilities, especially in activities designed for the entire student body. It was clear that, on a campus which advocates a mission of diversity and inclusivity, a proactive approach to education and training was needed (Evans, Herriott, & Myers, 2009; Lombardi & Lalor, 2017). As Lombardi, Murray and Dallas (2013) note, collaboration is critical for successful university stakeholders and staff disability awareness training programs.

### 2.2. Call for Awareness Training from University Stakeholders

The University Senate, made up of faculty, staff, administrators, alumni, and students, presented a report to university leadership, noting a lack of understanding of is-

sues related to success for students with disabilities. In an effort to improve understanding of this, often invisible, minority, the University campus's chancellor worked to establish the Disabilities Advisory Council, which included faculty and staff from several parts of the campus. The Council created a number of working groups related to success initiatives for students with disabilities and charged the DATE subcommittee with creating a pilot program for faculty, staff, and administrators. The subcommittee was comprised of faculty from the department of Fine Arts and the School of Business, as well as staff and administrators from the Division of Student Life and the Center for Learning and Student Success. The primary aim of this program was to increase and improve familiarity with the needs of students with disabilities, with the overarching goal of supporting, retaining, and graduating students with disabilities in a more effective and timely manner.

## 3. Literature Underpinning the Program

### 3.1. Disability Rights and Equal Access

The philosophy behind the disability rights movement, beginning in the 1960s, served as the starting place for the creation of a training program for faculty and staff in higher education. *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (Shapiro, 1993, henceforth referenced as *No Pity*) was chosen as a common resource providing insights into the creation of laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the US Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In the case of higher education, the primary focus centers on institutional barriers that deny access to students with disabilities. As Judy Heumann states, quoted in *No Pity*, "disability only becomes a tragedy for me when society fails to provide the things we need to lead our lives—job opportunities or barrier free buildings" (Shapiro, 1993, p. 20).

### 3.2. Institutional Barriers from the Student Perspective

Institutional barriers can take many forms, from inaccessible classroom buildings, paper-only textbooks, and PowerPoint slideshows that lack alt-tagging, to videos that are uncaptioned. Such challenges are often cited by students as significant barriers to their access to academic curriculum and courses. Stigma of disability can present one such barrier, when students may perceive that the disclosure of a disability, along with requesting of accommodations, will be treated negatively by faculty. Cole and Cawthon (2015), in a survey of students with disabilities at a large public university, found that a number of students did not disclose their disability to faculty. The power of stigma looms large. In a qualitative analysis of students with disabilities at Harvard University, one of the participants offers the following statement, after a poor experience disclosing her disability to a faculty member:

Whether the professor did actually tie my grades to assumptions about my disability, I perceived it that way. For the rest of my college experience, I did not volunteer to have conversations with my professors about my disability. (Hehir & Schifter, 2015, p. 165)

What's more, in one survey of undergraduate students, approximately one third of student respondents reported feeling hesitant or fearful of approaching a professor regarding accommodation requests (Baker, Boland, & Nowik, 2012).

### 3.3. Training for Faculty and Staff

Research also points to a knowledge gap between faculty responsibilities and appropriate training. Again, Cole and Cawthon (2015, p. 176) note: "[Students with learning disabilities] reported that, when they approached faculty with their accommodation letters, professors often did not seem to know what to do". As Baker et al. (2012) found in a survey of 400 undergraduate students and faculty, faculty understand the concept of disability, but do not always understand the laws that govern services for students with disabilities. In the survey, approximately one third of faculty respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the notion that they are familiar with the ADA and Section 504.

Significantly, once provided with information regarding both legal compliance and also pedagogical training, studies have shown that faculty are able to provide improved support for students with disabilities. For example, after attending a three-day summer institute, faculty felt better equipped to provide accommodations and academic support for students with disabilities in their courses during the following semester (Park, Roberts, & Stodden, 2012). A study of disability training programs at two universities indicates that "faculty attitudes could improve if a variety of training opportunities [were] available" (Lombardi et al., 2013, p. 230). Taking this a step further, we observe that faculty who participate in training and awareness programs are better equipped to support students with disabilities (Lombardi & Murray, 2011; Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2011; Murray et al., 2009).

Additionally, as Murray et al. (2008) and Evans et al. (2009) note, student affairs professionals do not receive explicit training in or possess awareness of the needs of college students with disabilities. In order to effectively support the needs of these students both in and out of the classroom setting, it is imperative that staff and administrators develop the tools to help students access college curriculum and co-curricular endeavors (Lombardi & Lalor, 2017). Participating in disability awareness training programs develops staff and administrators' understanding of student needs and develops more positive attitudes toward working with students with disabilities (Murray, Lombardi, & Wren, 2011). With these demonstrated needs and impacts in mind, it is evident that a training program that serves the interests of staff and faculty alike will be beneficial to constituents across the college campus.

### 3.4. Approaches to Disability Studies

Early academics considered persons with disabilities to have "spoiled" lives that would "never" accomplish their life's purpose. Many viewed persons with disabilities as not belonging in society, feeling that these individuals might best be served by being hidden away in institutions. As sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) suggested, they would live their lives apart from society as people to be avoided, feared, and protected from contact. As a result, they were unlikely to be considered when mainstream educational systems were designed. Scholars such as Chouinard (1997), Imrie (1999), and Oliver (1990) framed the experience of disability through two classic models: the medical model and the social model. The medical model, as its name implies, assumes that the actual disability causes the person to become isolated from society (Llewellyn & Hogan, 2000). Hence, it focuses on identifying ways to "fix" the individual so that they might participate in the environment of able-bodied persons (Chouinard, 1997). This perspective is based on ableism, the expectation that one must be able-bodied to participate, which tends to create privileged access for persons who do not have disabilities.

In contrast, the social model assumes that the environment should be changed or "fixed" to provide access to persons with disabilities. In essence, the social model identifies problems that should be adapted in a society so that access is available for all persons. Thus, workplaces, schools, shops, religious institutions, and entertainment venues can all "disable" persons who might otherwise function comfortably and effectively (Oliver, 1990). Such "disabling" can occur when infrastructure is built that overlooks the necessity to include persons with disabilities (Paar & Butler, 1999). As a result, classrooms may be built without proper access, while online education systems may fail to provide closed-captioning or transcripts of lectures. However, more recent works criticize the social model as outdated and needing expansion (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001) to correct its simplified picture of the real world (Owens, 2015).

### 4. Program Features

The DATE program seeks to go beyond the traditional social model in solely considering campus environmental problems to be corrected. Instead, this program takes a broader perspective in examining the activities, attitudes, myths, misunderstandings, technologies, and pedagogical practices that can limit inclusion in the university setting. The article will now explore the evolution of the training program, including the various iterations of the training as it took its final form.

### 4.1. Description of Practice

In order to represent touch points with the entire spectrum of student life, the subcommittee members created a hybrid process to be delivered through advance online readings and two videos, plus an in-person 90-minute interactive presentation, lunch, and a collaborative learning exercise organized in campus workshop format. This approach ensured that the training would be delivered in a time-effective manner. The presentation itself was divided into two sections. The first half employed a lecture format and covered the following topics:

- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, coupled with the impact on students and higher education institutions alike;
- The need for maintaining confidentiality related to a student's disclosure of a disability diagnosis;
- A review of appropriate disability documentation, and how decisions related to disability status and accommodations are made at the institution;
- The process for requesting and receiving academic accommodations at the institution, including the request and approval process, notifying faculty of accommodations through a Forecast Memo and Letter of Accommodation, and providing updated documentation as needed to provide accommodations throughout a student's tenure at the institution;
- A discussion of possible accommodations available to students;
- A discussion of "unfair advantage" and the aims of accommodations leveling the playing field for students with disabilities, which included an overview of the underrepresentation of students with disabilities on college and university campuses and in the workforce;

- An overview of self-advocacy, and its impact on student success.

The second half of the session involved attendees discussing scenarios (further details follow below).

### 4.2. Scenario Development

The DATE subcommittee first collaborated to brainstorm situations that they or their colleagues had observed. A concerted effort was made to identify barriers to inclusion from various aspects of the lives of SWDs. For example, representatives from student life were able to consider campus social events while information technology and learning staff provided instances of technology barriers. Short, real-life discussion scenarios were chosen as the mode of collaborative learning for the training sessions. Each scenario was written to be read easily within five minutes, and was followed by a discussion of questions including: "What is the problem? What should have happened? What could have prevented the problem? What can be done to prevent this situation from happening again?" The desired outcome was that participants learned to predict and diagnose a possible problem, and to implement changes to prevent it from recurring. After initial sessions were completed, the subcommittee fine-tuned these cases in order to represent a variety of general themes of how to address disabilities within the student body. These cases were later presented to training session participants for small and large group discussion.

A typical scenario featured a classroom, campus, or event situation in which a faculty or staff member interacted with a person with a disability. Other persons may have appeared in the scenario, but their role was incidental to the main point. Within the scenario, something occurred that was a violation or misunderstanding of the rights of the person with disabilities. The situation was rich enough that multiple interpretations were possible. Table 1, "Examples of Scenarios", is presented below:

**Table 1.** Examples of Scenarios.

| Scenario Description | Possible Outcomes of Discussion |
| --- | --- |
| **Scenario 1**: At a workshop on Professionalism and Ethics attended by various faculty and undergraduate students, a guest lecturer, a distinguished professor from another university, is giving a presentation. Danielle, a student with a hearing impairment who receives captioning accommodations through the Office of Disability Services (captioning allows a hearing-impaired student to read from a computer screen as a stenographer captures what is being spoken), is seated in the front row, her laptop open in front of her so that she can follow along. The guest lecturer is animatedly gesturing to Danielle to close the laptop and pay attention to the lecture.<br><br>Question 1: If you were Danielle, how would you handle the situation?<br><br>Question 2: If you were a faculty member in the audience, how would you respond? | Discussion of the student's role in self-advocacy, with an acknowledgement that this places the student in a highly uncomfortable position. Discussion of the faculty member perhaps intervening to assist student. Understanding that this was a failure of planning on the part of the organizer of the workshop, that issues of access and accommodations should be dealt with proactively (i.e., letting the guest lecturer know he/she should speak to a designated faculty member or school representative if he/she has any questions). |

**Table 1.** (Cont.) Examples of Scenarios.

| Scenario Description | Possible Outcomes of Discussion |
| --- | --- |
| **Scenario 2:** You are a professor of physics at a major university in the northeastern United States. One of the students in your class, Peter, approaches you and says, "Hi, Professor. I'm Peter, and I have ADHD. My other professors have all given me extended time on tests, and I would really appreciate it if you would do the same". You ask to see his letter of accommodation from the Disability Resources Office, and he says that he does not have one, but it should not be a big deal. After all, Peter says, "It's just a little extra time. And all of my other professors have done this for me. I'd really appreciate it". While you want to be helpful, you have an uncertain feeling about the request. | Discussion of the processes and procedures for requesting accommodations. Additional discussion of the resources available to faculty to assist them in supporting students with disabilities in their classroom work. |
| Question: What do you do? | |
| **Scenario 3:** You are a disability services officer at a public university in New Jersey. A student on file with your office, Lora, has approached you regarding an issue she is having with an online course. Lora's letter of accommodation specifies that she is eligible for extended time of 150% on all in-class and/or online tests, quizzes, and exams. A professor for one of her courses has told her that he believes it is an unfair advantage for her to get extended time, so to be fair to everyone, instead of an hour, the entire class will receive an hour and a half. Lora states that this seems to be unfair to her. | Discussion of the topic of "unfair advantage", especially as it pertains to classroom accommodations. Discussion of the role of a disability services office in mediating this situation on behalf of the student, as well as a discussion of faculty roles and responsibilities. |
| Question 1: What is your response to Lora? | |
| Question 2: What is your response to the professor? | |
| **Scenario 4:** You are a psychology professor at a small university. Grace, a student who uses a wheelchair, is in your introductory lecture and lab. At the beginning of the semester, the student discloses that she will need to use an assistive technology software, such as Dragon Naturally Speaking, in order to write in your class (Dragon Naturally Speaking allows a student to speak to a computer, which then transcribes the spoken word into text on a word processing program). What's more, this student reports transportation issues and sudden illnesses, which may make class attendance a challenge. | Discussion of the use of assistive technology to support students with disabilities in the classroom. Exploration of the issues regarding absences for medical conditions and how faculty can best work with the student and the disability services office to support a student in their class. Importance of referral to the disability services office on campus. |
| Question: How do you proceed with this student's requests? | |
| **Scenario 5:** You and your son are visiting the campus of a major university, as your son is attempting to choose which school he will attend for his BS in Engineering. You have toured the campus, your son has fallen in love with the school, and he is already talking about his interest in a potential internship with a major aeronautics firm located nearby. At the end of the day, you and your son visit the Office of Disability Services. Your son has dysgraphia, a learning disability that interferes with his ability to produce written material. He utilized a computer program, Dragon Naturally Speaking, to aid him in writing his papers in high school, and is quite proficient in its use. Upon your son explaining his disability to the disability services officer, the staff member replies, "Oh, dysgraphia. I've never heard of that before. That's a form of blindness, right? We don't really do a good job helping people who can't see. This might not be the school for you". | Discussion of the role of parents in the academic lives of students with disabilities, and an exploration of how to handle a poor interaction with an office that facilitates disability accommodations on campus. Discussion of the parent's perspective on this situation. |
| Question: What do you do? | |

### 4.3. Pilot Study and Revisions

For the pilot of the DATE program, the initiative leaders presented three 90-minute sessions to the campus community in the beginning of the spring semester. Sessions included the following components:

- Prior to the in-person training sessions, the subcommittee asked participants to register to attend a session online, view two online videos, and read a short, one-page compilation of excerpts from *No Pity*;
- PowerPoint Presentation, detailing legal issues and responsibilities surrounding college students with disabilities, materials that the Office of Disability Services provides to faculty (i.e., Letter of Accommodation, Forecast Memo), and common misconceptions of college students with disabilities;
- Small group discussion of one of four cases, along with questions provided to groups;
- Larger group discussion of findings from each group's case;
- Wrap-up and inform participants of follow-up feedback session dates.

### 4.4. Participants

After the training was developed, the DATE initiative opened the pilot study to participation from a cross-section of the campus. DATE representatives reached out to four divisions of the university campus: School of Business, Division of Student Life, Department of Fine Arts, and the Center for Learning and Student Success. Members of these four divisions were invited to participate in the training sessions. From these divisions, 60 faculty, staff, and administrators attended one of three 90-minute training sessions.

## 5. Anecdotal Program Feedback

Following the three initial training sessions, participants were solicited for their feedback from their experience later in the spring semester. In addition, the subcommittee members were interested to learn the participants' reactions and suggestions, as well as whether their learning was consistent with expectations.

Seven follow-up debriefing sessions were offered for participants to attend, after the DATE subcommittee delivered the three 90-minute workshops. Thirty-eight faculty and staff attended these follow-up sessions. During the follow-up sessions, participants' feedback on their feelings of workshop structure, content, and overall message, as well as recommendations to make future workshops more beneficial for their coworkers were solicited. Faculty and staff overarchingly agreed that the training should be required for all faculty members moving forward, and that new faculty members should attend this workshop during their orientation. To this end, outreach to Human Resources to coordinate this training was recommended. Faculty and staff agreed that training would be beneficial for staff, though the training should be adjusted, to include cases that highlight student interactions with staff, in addition to their interactions with faculty.

Participants also remarked that while one training is helpful, it would be preferable to have the option of ongoing trainings throughout the year and throughout their tenure with the University. Accordingly, one suggestion was to require all staff and faculty to attend the overview session, which currently includes cases for faculty and staff, and offer special interest training sessions throughout the year. The special interest training sessions could focus on specific disabilities that are increasing in number at the University, including Autism Spectrum Disorder, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, and Traumatic Brain Injury; sessions could also highlight areas such as, "how can we make our office more accommodating to student employees with a disability", or "how can academic and career advisors work more effectively with students with a disability".

## 6. Post-Pilot Training

Following the piloted training program, the subcommittee began growing the DATE program. Using the suggestions from original participants' feedback, the subcommittee members created a total of 17 scenarios to draw from and discuss in various training sessions. Additionally, sessions were tailor-made for specific schools and majors to incorporate specifically-requested situations. For instance, the School of Nursing had particular travel and clinical issues to cover that are not common across the general campus. As of the current time, the DATE program has had more than 350 faculty, staff, and administrator participants representing all parts of the campus.

Participants also shared that in the future, they wish to see an increased online presence for disability services. This increase would focus on specific resources to guide staff and faculty knowledge of disability-related issues and serve as another means to inform their interactions with students.

### 6.1. Post-Pilot Resources for Participants

For example, participants requested a glossary of disability-related terms, which could break down materials and services that Disability Services provide and promote (i.e., Forecast Memo, Letter of Accommodation, Assistive Technology, Universal Design for Learning; definitions of various disabilities, i.e., dyslexia and ADHD; and types of Assistive Technology, i.e., Dragon Naturally Speaking, LiveScribe SmartPen, etc.). Another online resource that participants requested was a list of frequently asked questions and answers, in conjunction with sample cases that Disability Services has overseen.

Additionally, participants requested broader access to a Disability Manual, which Disability Services maintains and updates periodically. After consulting a variety of postsecondary institutions' websites, the subcommittee members observed that many schools provide a link to their Disability Manual on the Disability Services website, and the campus is looking into following suit. Moreover, participants noted that they wish the Disability Services website was easier to find, and that it provided links to information such as best practices, the Association on Higher Education and Disability, and explanations of legislation. The authors will consider this feedback moving forward, as well.

In addition to these recommendations, faculty participants have requested a disability statement to include in their syllabi and have encouraged the subcommittee to consider providing evening training sessions, in order to accommodate part-time lecturers. Moving forward, the subcommittee will consider how to provide trainings both in-person and in an online format.

## 7. Recommendations

This article concludes with an exploration of possible new directions for disability awareness training programs on university campuses. The discussion also includes an expansion to the student body and a corresponding fulfillment of the university's civic engagement course requirements.

These observations can apply broadly to college and university campuses that seek to offer or require professional development opportunities for faculty, staff, and administrators, in order to cultivate understanding of the needs of students with disabilities. As prior empirical research suggests (Murray et al., 2008, 2009, 2011), growing staff and faculty awareness of the needs of students with disabilities leads to more positive attitudes, greater willingness to support students with disabilities, and more positive student experiences and student success. By continuing to offer trainings such as this, particularly in relation to key areas of exploration on individual campuses, faculty, staff, and administrators will be better equipped to serve their students.

### 7.1. Training Includes All Points of Contact on and off Campus

The authors learned the importance of gaining the support and participation of those who interact with students with disabilities in all facets of their college experience. While other approaches may focus on the experiences of students with faculty in their courses, the DATE subcommittee members believe that access limitations and misunderstandings may also occur when interacting with staff and administration. Awareness and sensitivity to issues that impact on this part of the student population will move the University towards greater inclusiveness. Session participants also indicated

that advance planning must precede off-campus activities, such as those encountered when students go on field trips, participate in internships, and work in academic cooperatives.

### 7.2. Educational Access Beyond the Physical Setting through Online Training and Online Education

In many academic settings, faculty, staff, and administration may find difficulty in attending training during their work days on campus. Instead, building an online training program is a logical next step in order to engage faculty who cannot come to on-campus training sessions. Online training also offers the opportunity to review training materials at later dates, to view video discussions of other scenarios, and potentially to engage in discussion forums with the training session leaders.

Additionally, colleges and universities continue to grow programs offered in a variety of online formats ranging from hybrid courses to fully-online degree programs. The educational community indicates that both similar as well as unique barriers can be found, ranging from registration issues such as non-accessible tables, and activity posts that lack accessibility information, to the lack of accurate closed-captioning, presentation scripts, and alt-tagged photos. Educating faculty, staff, and administration to these issues can make a significant difference in the accessibility that students can experience. A similar method can be followed in developing representative scenarios that capture the realities of the online students' experiences.

### 7.3. Training for Students without Disabilities

Beyond the participation of the faculty, staff, and administration, the authors would recommend creating greater awareness among students without disabilities with a training program emphasizing student to student scenarios. For example, students who lead campus organizations could be coached in planning activities that welcome all students to participate and attend, or at least attempt to minimize barriers to access. As a potential incentive, campus administration can require student organizations to include a simple request for accessibility needs as a routine part of their publicity. Colleges can also require that off-campus activities be held at locations that are accessible to all students.

Students can also gain insights into accessibility by participating in selected public activities and forums. For instance, civic engagement activities and internships involving interactions with local schools who educate students with disabilities might add to such awareness.

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**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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