

5-4-2023

Students share disability research in collaboration with Brighter Connections Theatre

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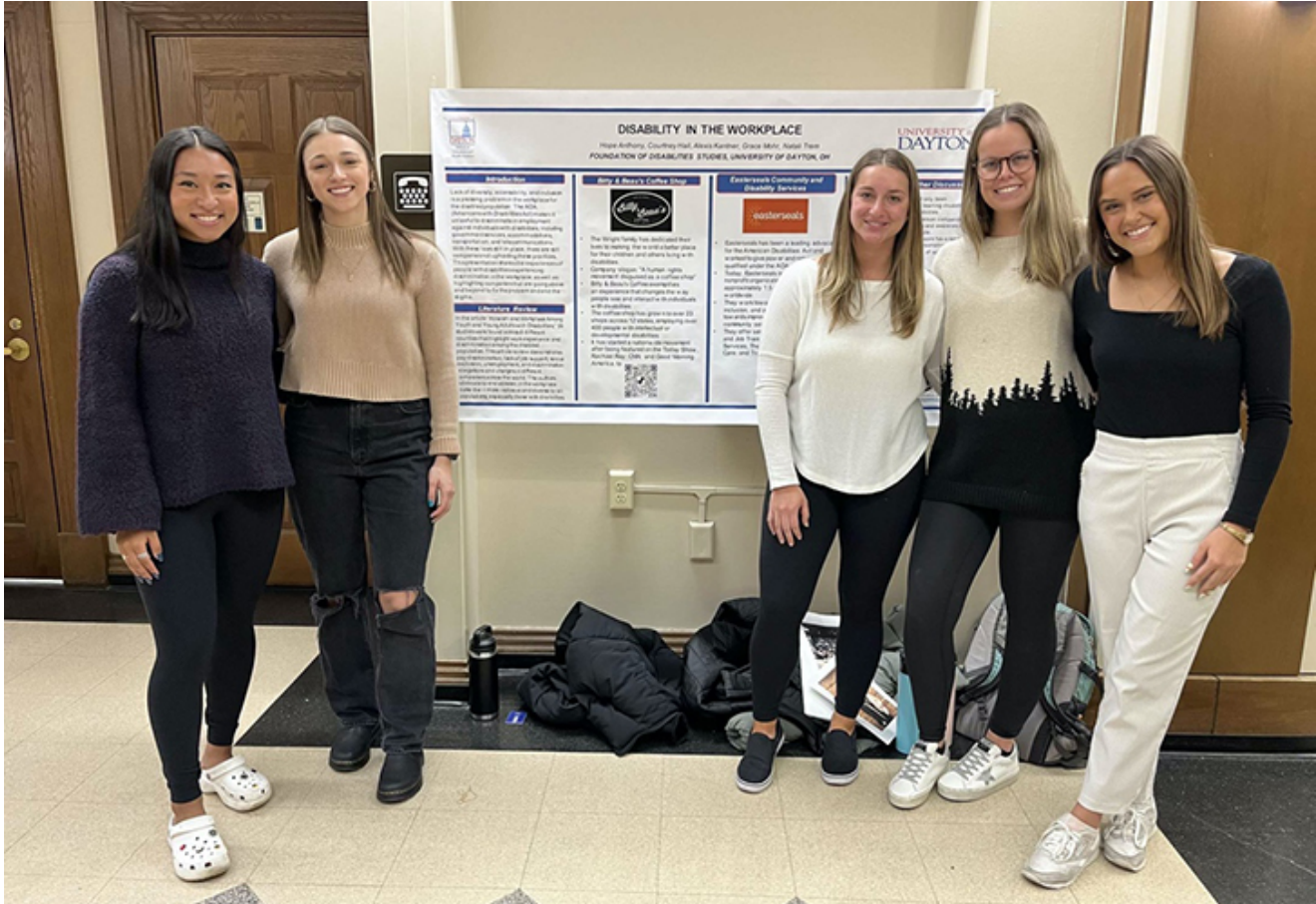
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Dillenburger, Bridgett, "Students share disability research in collaboration with Brighter Connections Theatre" (2023). *College of Arts and Sciences Newsroom*. 630.
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Students share disability research in collaboration with Brighter Connections Theatre

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Thursday May 4, 2023

By Bridgett Dillenburger '23

University of Dayton students learned about the experiences of people with disabilities through a research project with Brighter Connections Theatre, an inclusive and neurodiverse summer theater camp offered through UD's Theatre, Dance, and Performance Technology program.

The students, from courses in the Department of Religious Studies and the Theatre, Dance and Performance Technology program, presented research posters March 24 before an improv show and fundraiser benefiting Brighter Connections at the Sears Recital Hall in the Jesse Philips Humanities Center.

Hope Anthony, a junior health science major from Sidney, Ohio, worked with four classmates in the Foundations of Disability Studies course on their project, "Disability in the Workplace."

“Our conversations and discussions throughout this course have allowed us and our peers to gain a better understanding of the experiences of people with disabilities, including the challenges they face and the ways in which they navigate the world,” Anthony said. “By incorporating disability awareness into our research, we have had the opportunity to create work that is more informed and comprehensive.”

Meghan Henning, associate professor of Christian origins in the Department of Religious Studies, and Michelle Hayford, professor and program director of the Theatre, Dance and Performance Technology program, both serve on the Brighter Connections board and decided to have poster presentations for the improv performance.

The Theatre, Dance and Performance Technology program has offered Brighter Connections on campus since 2016. The nonprofit was founded in 2013 by Katie O’Leary, its president. Hayford became co-director of the camp and started offering UD students fellowships and internships once UD and Brighter Connections became collaborators.

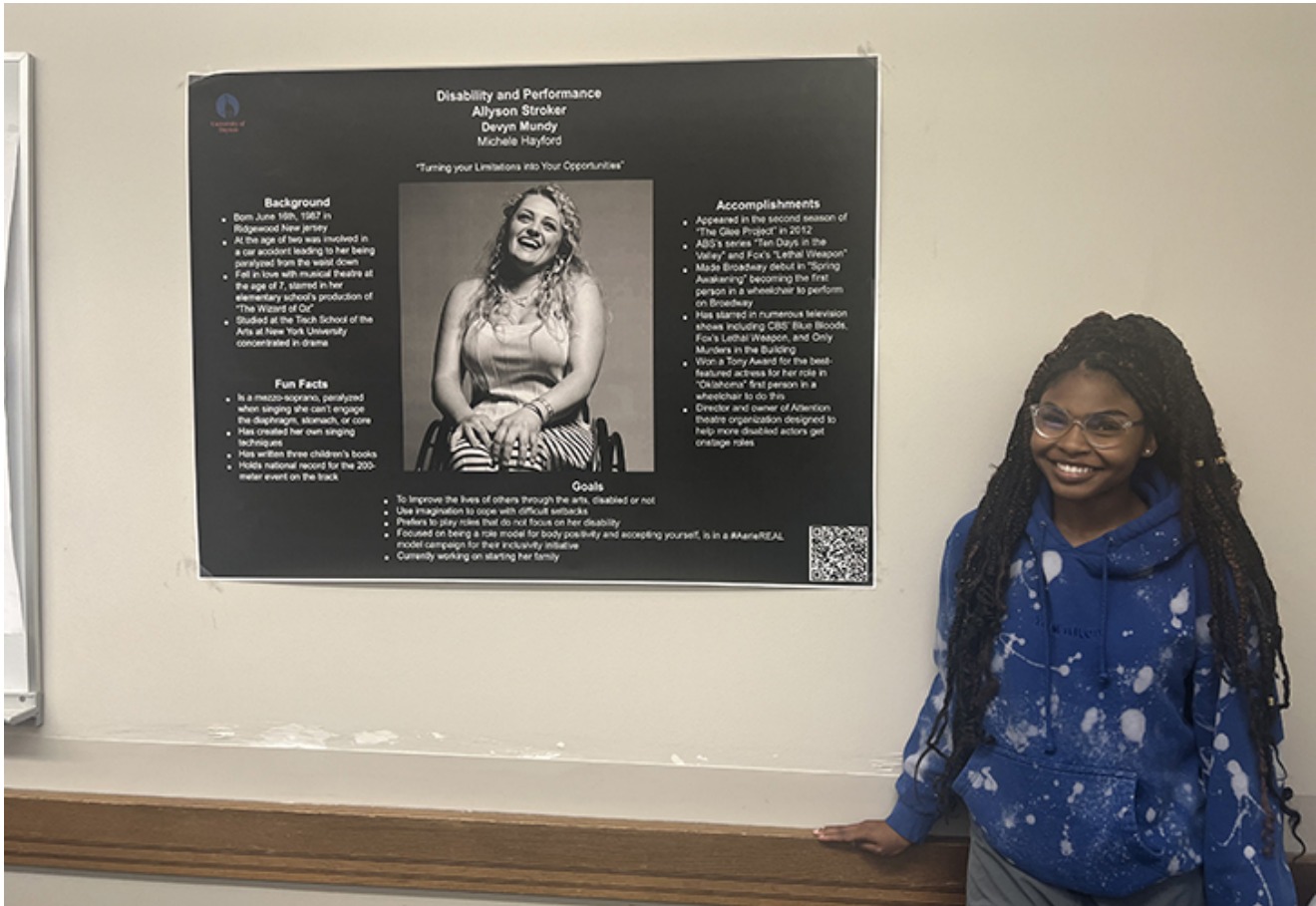
“I am proud of the collaboration between UD and Brighter Connections Theatre because it represents a truly immersive and integrated performing arts experience for disabled and non-disabled performers,” Henning said.

Students from Henning’s Foundations of Disability Studies course and Hayford’s Social Justice and Dramatic Literature course presented research posters at the improv event, which allowed students to participate in a thriving disability-centered community and learn from its members.

“Students get the opportunity to engage directly with an audience about their research and disseminate their research to the public in the context of an event that is related to their research,” Hayford said. “The event and the poster presentation reinforce the learning goals of the class.”

Brighter Connections board members and audience members engaged with student research around disability before and after the performance, generating active conversation in the Humanities Center’s lobby area. Henning said her students told her they learned as much from audience members they met that night as they did in doing their research.

“Audience members shared their own experiences of navigating life with a disability or as a parent of a disabled child and asked questions about each topic that invited students to think about their projects from different angles,” Henning said. “When we came back to the classroom on Tuesday the students were bubbling with excitement, wanting to tell me what they had learned about disability law in Ohio, about neurodivergence, and about disability and education.”



Devyn Mundy (pictured above), a sophomore business management major from Cincinnati, worked individually on her project “Disability and Performance: Alyson Stroker” for the Social Justice and Dramatic Literature course. Stroker is a Tony Award-winning actress who uses a wheelchair for mobility.

Mundy said she learned about the importance of recognizing someone not just for their disability but for being a top performer as well. She was inspired by Stroker’s quote, “turning your limitations into opportunities.” She said the course was interesting because it was outside of the typical coursework for her major.

“It was very different and outside of my box, but I enjoyed it,” Mundy said. “It really expanded my knowledge about people with disabilities because there are so many misconceptions and it’s important to be able to learn more about how to address it.”

Anthony said attending the performance helped everything she learned from the course “come to life” as she could now apply it to the real world.

Anthony’s group members included Courtney Hall, a junior health sciences major from St. Louis; Alexis Kantner, a junior health sciences major from Chicago; Grace Mohr, a junior health sciences major from Mentor, Ohio; and Natali Trem, a junior health sciences major from Willoughby, Ohio.

Anthony said she and her group partners now have a deeper understanding of disability and social, historical and cultural contexts behind it.

“One important takeaway from this course is that disability is not an isolated identity, and individuals with disabilities may also experience discrimination or marginalization based on their race, gender, sexuality, or other identities,” Anthony said. “Disability study courses and future research can help to understand the importance of intersectionality and how to create a more inclusive environment for people with multiple marginalized identities.”

For more information, visit the [Department of Religious Studies](#); [Theatre, Dance and Performance Technology program](#); and [Brighter Connections](#) websites.

Top Photo: (from left to right) Alexis Kantner, Grace Mohr, Hope Anthony, Courtney Hall and Natali Trem with their project "Disability in the Workplace," completed for the Foundations of Disability Studies Course.



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