



UNIVERSITY OF
MARYLAND

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WGSS Open Letter

Written in solidarity with the 7 December 2022 petition to President Pines written by UMD students with disabilities

The Fall 2024 opening of five new cultural centers at the University of Maryland should be a momentous step forward in realizing the University's commitments to racial and disability justice. The proposed cultural centers for Latinx, Asian Pacific Islander and Desi American, Native American and indigenous, multiracial and biracial, and disabled students could play an invaluable role in community-building, resource sharing, and promoting an atmosphere of inclusion. They also send a message about how the institution values these constituencies and the extent to which they are included in the life of the University.

The planning process for the centers, however, has not yet included enough community input, especially from disabled students. In the December 2022 petition released by a group of UMD's disabled students, they point out that no open forums were convened to solicit input from disabled students and no University-wide announcements were made informing disabled students about how they could join the steering committee or otherwise interface with project leadership. Two articles have since appeared in *The Diamondback* detailing the students' concerns, which center on the physical inaccessibility, elevation, and noise pollution of the chosen location, Cole Field House. The main entrance only has stairs, meaning any student who uses a wheelchair or other mobility aid must enter through the side of the building. Even then, the uneven sidewalk and ramps, plus the high elevation, make navigating the area leading to Cole Field House difficult or prohibitive. Cole Field House was also built prior to the passage of the ADA and, therefore, several of its interior features are not up to those minimum standards (and well below best practices for disabled users).

The architectural firm hired for this project has, by its own admission, no expertise in accessible or Universal Design and has not understood or adopted the recommendations of disabled students. Finally, the small size of each of the cultural centers (600-700 square feet) cannot accommodate the student groups that wish to use them.

WGSS faculty affirm the importance of accessibility not just for the disability cultural center but all five centers. Moreover, we recognize the many benefits of proximity, resource sharing, and cross-movement collaboration that will come with locating all five centers in the same general location. We affirm our solidarity with all five constituencies by calling upon the University to find a suitable location which will address not only accessibility, but the individual and collective needs of all groups.

The completion of this project will make the University of Maryland's Disability Cultural Center only the eleventh such center at a U.S.-based University. By coming to the table with its disabled

students, faculty, and staff—as well as representatives from the other four constituencies—the University of Maryland can design its cultural centers to be models of Universal Design and set the tone for a new era of inclusion, departing from the long history of ableism and inaccessible facilities that have prevented earlier generations of disabled students and other marginalized populations from fully participating in campus life.

We ask that the project leaders convene an open forum for members of all five constituencies to discuss an alternative location for the centers, work with architects on a plan that is not only ADA compliant but implements Universal Design, and construct centers that are large enough to hold group meetings, house regular programming staff, provide quiet study space, and any other factors the five constituencies collectively deem vital to their use of the space.

Signed,

The Faculty of the Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies