Disability Simulation Resources
Disability Simulations are controversial activities; below is a summary on why such simulations can be more harmful than helpful, a guide to minimize the negative outcomes of a simulation, and the 7 Principles of Universal Design.

The following is excerpted from the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign – Disability Resources & Educational Services Division](#).

1. **Immersion Experiences Are Different than Borrowing a Wheelchair**

In other immersive experiences, like taking part in a Pride event, attending a religious service or interacting with another culture, the emphasis is placed on interacting in an environment which a person is not a member, and exposing themselves to their own expectations, bias and stereotypes, while developing awareness of other opportunities outside of their own lived experiences. In borrowing a wheelchair, there is no interaction with the culture of disability or individuals and trivializes the importance of what is gained through that exposure and immersion.

2. **Borrowing a Wheelchair is Different from a "Disability Experience"**

Here at the University of Illinois, the number of students who have "invisible" or "hidden" disabilities account for approximately 85-90% of our population, so borrowing a wheelchair completely misses the spectrum of what disability can be for an individual, and trivializes all the ways in which disability affects every day experiences and continuous development. In addition, being able to get in, out and "take off" the disability when the wheelchair is turned in is in and of itself, a barrier towards a truly impactful experience of most wheelchair users.

3. **Borrowing a Wheelchair Places Disability as an "Other" in Cultural Immersion Conversations**

Disability, in almost all contexts, is not a condition that can be taken "on or off," placing it similar to other cultural identities such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or religious affiliation. One cannot pretend to be a person from a different race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or religion. Disability is comparable in that an attempt to "simulate" a disability can be perceived as deeply prejudicial and hurtful.

4. **The "Positive Effects" from a "Disability Experience" are Privilege**

Some people may say that they have experienced positive effects from their "disability experience". Unfortunately, this perception is very common in cultural competence trainings as well. People often state they have "learned" or "enjoyed" the experience when in actuality, their beliefs have become more biased and prejudicial, which are now less likely to change because they believe they have been "changed." A commonly heard phrase can be, "I understand now what _____ is like," which is an impossible statement based in privilege. It is impossible to understand what is like to be a person of color, a person of a different gender, a person of a different religious affiliation or a person of different ability if you are not.

The following except is from *[Disability-related Simulations: If, When, and How to Use Them in Professional Development](#)* by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D. and Tanis Doe, Ph.D. University of Washington

Guidelines for Creating Effective Simulations
While some scholars argue that simulations of disability should never be used (Finkelstein, 1991; French, 1992), we feel carefully designed simulations are effective learning tools in specific situations. Well-designed simulations also reduce potential negative consequences, while they ensure participants explore accommodation strategies, as well as the design of resources and environments that minimize barriers for people with disabilities. Based on a review of the literature and the experiences of the authors, the following suggestions are offered to those who wish to use simulations that maximize positive outcomes for educators and administrators.
State Objectives Clearly

Make it clear to participants at the beginning of the activity what they will do and what they are expected to learn. "Unless the simulation is prefaced with a clear discussion of why we are doing this and what we hope to learn and is followed by a conscientious debriefing about critical thinking processes and values, norms and social change, the simulation has merely served as recreation" (Karraker, 1993, p. 136).

Ensure Voluntary Participation

Allowing people to decline participation eliminates reluctant or resentful participation, maximizes positive outcomes, and creates a sense of safety and trust. Those who choose not to participate may learn just as much from observing the experiences of others and critiquing the simulation activity.

Illustrate Challenges and Solutions Related to Both the System and the Individual

Avoid focusing exclusively on challenges imposed on individuals by a disability, and avoid comparing one disability experience to another in ways that devalue people. In particular, avoid activities that lead to conclusions such as "this disability is far worse than that one," or "I could never live with X, but I could handle Y." Use concrete examples to illustrate both barriers and strategies for overcoming barriers for people with disabilities (Westwood, Vargo, & Vargo, 1981). Some strategies should highlight solutions employed by an individual (e.g., the student's use of assistive technology to access a computer); others can show solutions implemented by other individuals (e.g., accessible Web page design). Make sure when participants learn about the disability experience they learn how people with disabilities cope with inaccessible environments and negative societal attitudes through advocacy, technology and interpersonal skills.

Demonstrate the Value of Universal Design

Simulations and debriefing discussions should examine the way in which a well-designed environment or activity can maximize access for everyone and minimize the need for individual accommodations. A simulation can be used as an opportunity to share information about how civil rights legislation, accessible design of technology and facilities, and inclusive social practices empower people and ensure equal opportunity. "[Administrators], teachers, and curriculum planners should examine learning outcomes closely and consider their role in tackling discrimination ..." (French, 1992, p. 263).

Include Consumers in Planning and, When Possible, Delivery of the Simulation

Consult people with disabilities when developing simulations and, when possible, involve them in the delivery, debriefing, and evaluation of simulation activities (Scullion, 1999). By interacting with people with disabilities, learners may realize some of their own assumptions about people with disabilities are not based in reality and that people with disabilities are more similar than they are dissimilar to people without disabilities. By hearing from someone who has experience in being disabled, being discriminated against, and developing coping mechanisms, the learner may be able to understand some of challenges faced by people with disabilities and, more importantly, how these challenges may be successfully addressed. While a training activity involving a person with a disability is not as valuable as long-term contact, it can initiate a consciousness shift for people previously unfamiliar with disability issues (Biordi & Ooermann, 1993). However, when a person with a disability participates in a training activity, it should be made clear that one person cannot represent the views and experiences of all people with the same type of disability, and certainly cannot represent people with all types of disabilities.

Support Positive Attitude Change

Even though it can be awkward, participants should be encouraged to bring up personal beliefs or assumptions, even if negative, without fear of negative repercussions. Such disclosures can help all participants learn what underlying thoughts often inform discriminatory or exclusionary practices. Personal disclosure of changed attitudes provides a good role model to participants. Even for leaders who themselves have disabilities, it is useful to explain how their previous attitudes might have been dis-empowering. Some may be able to share their changed attitudes about people with types of disabilities other than their own. Training facilitators should point out that with changes to legislation, knowledge, and design, new perceptions about disability could emerge. Learners should leave with both knowledge and attitudes that support the rights of people with disabilities to participate in society.

Presenters should be prepared to recognize and handle situations where a simulated disability experience convinces faculty that students with disabilities are not suited to participation in postsecondary programs and careers in their field; when this situation occurs, potential universal design considerations and accommodations should be discussed as well as the essential functions of specific careers within a field of study.

Debrief Thoroughly and Reflectively Acknowledge Discomfort.

An important part of successful simulation activities is a full and meaningful debriefing to disengage participants from what is sometimes an emotional experience, as well as to sort out what was learned (Jones, 1995; Livingston & Kidder, 1993). During debriefing, participants can discuss what they felt and experienced and then reframe new knowledge and attitudes within the context of intended outcomes, perhaps replacing old attitudes and understandings with new. If faculty participants have unanswered questions, fears, and technical difficulties from simulations, they may deal with them in the debriefing instead of carrying them to the classroom. "Some people find the discovery process painful, which is an experience common to all forms of equality training. This is to be expected when exposing societal oppression and the part an individual participant could have unconsciously played in it" (London Boroughs Disability Resource Team, 1991). Trainers should acknowledge that learning about disability and difference can be uncomfortable. Allowing for written responses as well as discussion in small groups and with a larger group may ensure that each person has a chance to reflect on what happened in the simulation, and on what was learned from it.

The following are the 7 Principles of Universal Design from the [University of Washington – Universal Design: Process, Principles, and Applications](#)

- **Equitable use.**

The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities. For example, a website that is designed to be accessible to everyone, including people who are blind and use screen reader technology, employs this principle.

- **Flexibility in Use.**

The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities. An example is a museum that allows visitors to choose to read or listen to the description of the contents of a display case.

- **Simple and intuitive.**

Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. Science lab equipment with clear and intuitive control buttons is an example of an application of this principle.

Perceptible information.

The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities. An example of this principle is captioned television programming projected in a noisy sports bar.

- **Tolerance for error.**

The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions. An example of a product applying this principle is software applications that provide guidance when the user makes an inappropriate selection.

- **Low physical effort.**

The design can be used efficiently, comfortably, and with a minimum of fatigue. Doors that open automatically for people with a wide variety of physical characteristics demonstrate the application of this principle.

- **Size and space for approach and use.**

Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility. A flexible work area designed for use by employees who are left- or right-handed and have a variety of other physical characteristics and abilities is an example of applying this principle