

# We Are No Longer Alone: Student Panelist Reflections on the Advancing Accessibility and Disability Equity Summit

By Amanda Michel, DPT; Emily Reester, SPT; McCall Rae, DPT; Mackenzie Kennedy, DPT; and Gregory Zambrano, SPT

## Introduction

*The American Council of Academic Physical Therapy (ACAPT) Advancing Accessibility and Disability Equity Summit was designed to explore the lived experiences of disabled therapists and therapy students. An open call was issued to all ACAPT member programs in the months preceding the event, inviting disabled DPT students to apply and attend. Multiple students applied by providing a brief biographical overview and statement on why they desired to engage in the Summit. Five students were subsequently invited to attend and share their experiences on a student panel during the first day of the event. What follows are their own written reflections and observations of this experience, in their own words.*

## The Students Speak

The five of us were incredibly honored to speak on a

panel at the ACAPT Advancing Accessibility and Disability Equity Summit about our experiences as DPT students with disabilities. Each of us come from different backgrounds and represent the diverse experiences of living as a person with a disability, but as we reflected on what the Summit meant to us, three common themes emerged from our conversation: Community, Empowerment, and Optimism.

### COMMUNITY

#### Amanda:

In disability advocacy spaces, I tend to be the only DPT student. When surrounded by DPT students, I tend to be the only student with a disability. This Summit marked my first time being surrounded by a diverse and talented community of disabled clinicians and students. It was the first healthcare space where I felt I could truly be my whole self without judgment. Knowing that I am not alone and that I have such a

supportive community encouraging me to succeed has helped me become more confident as a clinician and as a human.

**Emily:**

My fellow panelists and other attendees with my same diagnosis were validating and encouraging, and it is difficult to put into words the comfort those connections had and continue to have on my life. I am eternally grateful.

**Greg:**

One of the most rewarding aspects of the conference was meeting other students and professionals with disabilities. Conversations with these individuals revealed a shared determination to break down barriers and challenge stereotypes. Many shared practical advice on navigating clinical rotations, advocating for accommodations, and pursuing leadership roles in the field.

**Mackenzie:**

I was reminded how lovely the disabled and physical therapy communities are, and how the intersection between the two is exactly where I belong. Meeting and talking to the four other speakers felt as if I was catching up with old friends already. These other students innately and intimately understood my experiences and struggles in ways my classmates and other academic peers could not.

**McCall:**

Before the conference, I felt that if I was not doing the work to advocate for myself and other PT students with disabilities after me, then no one else was doing the work and it would never get done. The Summit showed me that there were others bearing the burden

with me and that I am not alone. To say the least, it was incredible to be in a room with so many people who were there as advocates for PTs and PT students with disabilities. They were there for me, doing the work that at times I feel is not getting done. They were all there not just as advocates, but as accomplices. I had more meaningful conversations in the short time spent at the Summit with a room full of strangers than I had had in a long time. I felt a deep sense of peace, joy, and belonging.

## EMPOWERMENT

**Amanda:**

I was shocked and delighted to find that the conference attendees actually wanted to learn about our experiences and hear our ideas! As someone with ideas that are frequently perceived by others as “unrealistic,” the engagement from the audience during our student panel was incredibly validating, and reinforced my belief that disability equity is not as complicated or impossible as people make it seem.

**Emily:**

This Summit created space for preliminary conversations to happen. The continued steps are to dismantle complacency and implicit bias, creating an inclusive reality where needs are met and legal rights are honored. Let's work together to include each disabled individual as a whole—not who they are because of their disability, not what they can and cannot do because of their disability, but for who they are as a human being.

**Greg:**

This experience has deepened my understanding of how disability enriches rather than detracts from

professional practice. It has also clarified my aspirations. I aim to be a voice for students and patients with disabilities, ensuring that their needs are represented in both education and clinical care. My goal is to collaborate with institutions to implement systemic changes that make physical therapy education and practice more inclusive. I hope to mentor future generations of physical therapists, sharing the knowledge and experiences I have gained.

**Mackenzie:**

One moment from that morning that is etched into my mind permanently was when we were presented the story and experience of a therapist who is legally blind. I immediately recalled a conversation with a professor in my program where they told me about how a previous student had been encouraged to—and did—drop out after being diagnosed with a condition causing progressive vision loss. The statement made was, “You need to see to be a physical therapist.” Yet here, in front of me, was the proof that that was false. That previous student had been needlessly denied an opportunity—and their dream—because of systematic ableism. It became abundantly clear in that moment that my knowledge of the ADA—although not widely upheld or enforced—was the only thing protecting me from sharing that student's fate.

**McCall:**

There are still people who believe that I cannot or should not be a PT, even after being a successful student throughout school. The weekend of the Summit was full of people who know my Cerebral Palsy will make me a better PT, not a weaker one. On that weekend in Chicago, everything said and everyone there reassured me that I am where I am supposed to be and that I am going to be a great PT. I did not realize how much that was exactly what I needed at the time.

**OPTIMISM****Amanda:**

In healthcare and academia, it usually seems like DEI-related improvements are implemented too slowly, or not at all, and it is easy to become pessimistic as an advocate. Although there is still much work to be done to ensure that disabled students and clinicians are welcomed and appreciated within healthcare spaces, I believe that this Summit will result in some concrete positive changes in the physical therapy profession, especially regarding implementation and wording of technical standards.

**Emily:**

It was an awfully dark place I was in prior to attending ACAPT's Accessibility Summit in June 2024, struggling with access to my accommodations and relentlessly advocating for my rights as a disabled student in a DPT program. I was feeling isolated beyond compare and so broken. One of the ways I cope is writing, and this is a reflection of my feelings:

*they take away my humanity when they do this to me*

*they make me hate myself when they do this to me*

*they make me the one to blame*

*and they're blaming me for something i cannot control*

*something i have laws protecting me for*

*and yet, i am always pinned down*

*struck out*

*and strung out to dry*

*fighting for my life*

*to keep the breath in my lungs*  
*completely, utterly alone*  
*the insanity comes rushing in*  
*and i enter the asylum saying,*  
*“i wish i was never made this way.”*  
*over and over and over and over again.*

I came to the Summit seeking connection, honesty, vulnerability, and most importantly, hope. I left with more than hope. I was inspired to continue to stand tall and take up space in every room I walk into regardless of my disability. I gained a newfound self-confidence through the Summit’s teachings on how to better articulate conversations around access and inclusivity.

### **Greg:**

Hearing from seasoned professionals who had overcome similar challenges gave me a renewed sense of confidence. Their stories of resilience underscored the importance of representation in shaping an inclusive future for physical therapy. Speaking at this conference was more than a professional milestone; it was a profoundly personal journey of growth and connection. It reinforced my belief that diversity, including disability, is a strength that enhances our profession’s ability to deliver compassionate, innovative, and effective care. The insights gained from this experience will continue to shape my approach as a student and, eventually, as a licensed physical therapist. Most importantly, the conference reminded me that we are not alone in our struggles or our triumphs. By sharing our stories and learning from

one another, we can create a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

### **Mackenzie:**

I realized how much bigger this event was than just talking about our experiences. We were discussing re-writing technical standards, identifying systemic ableism in curriculum, modifying admissions requirements and processes, etc. This was a real meeting of the minds to solve the issues blocking the accessibility of our profession. I quickly began taking notes on these topics to take back to my program.

### **McCall:**

I left knowing that I had people in my corner to ask for resources, give me advice, fight on my behalf, or even just listen and be outraged with me when I experience ableist and unjust acts. I left knowing that it is not a weakness for me to ask for the accommodations I need to succeed in the classroom, clinical setting, or workplace. I left calling people friends who were strangers just a few days before. I left knowing that I have a voice and should not be scared to use it, and with fear being replaced with hope for my future as a physical therapist with a disability and the physical therapy students with disabilities who will come after me.

## **Call to Action**

This Summit created an opportunity for us to find each other, and we now know that we are no longer alone. Although we shared the lived experiences of five individuals, there are many stories yet to be told—each deserving of the opportunity to be seen and heard. There are still barriers to break down and

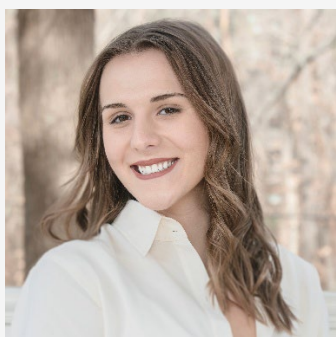
commonalities to be found. We ask that you:

- Continue moving forward, creating waves, and raising your voice to advocate relentlessly for the rights of physical therapy students with disabilities.
- Continue to strive toward equity in all walks of life.
- Continue to find community in those who support your mission.
- Continue to be empowered within your identity.
- Continue to resist those who try to suppress your identity, and those of other marginalized groups.
- Never lose hope.

## About the Authors



**Amanda Michel** (she/her) is a DPT student at Simmons University (graduating May 2025) with a passion for disability justice. She received PT and OT services as a child for developmental motor delays and was later diagnosed with autism and ADHD. Amanda uses her experiences as a patient in the medical system to relate to individuals with disabilities currently seeking care and to advocate on an individual, community, and policy level. Before beginning higher education, Amanda worked as a professional ballet dancer while leading efforts to increase the accessibility of dance education for students with disabilities. As a PT student, she worked as an adaptive sports coach and served as a student intern with the APTA of MA DEI Committee and as a member of APTA's Disability Justice and Anti-Ableism Catalyst Group. She has presented research at APTA's Combined Sections Meeting and the APTA of MA Annual Conference, and she served as a student panelist at ACAPT's Inclusive Horizons Summit. She was also featured in APTA Magazine's July 2024 issue. Amanda's clinical interests include pediatrics, neurology, and acute care, and her research interests include the intersection of disability identity and therapeutic alliance. As an artist and avid reader, Amanda believes that the humanities are essential in delivering engaging, patient-centered care.



**Emily Reester** (she/her) is a student at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, PA, pursuing a Doctorate in Physical Therapy with an anticipated graduation in January 2026. At age four, Emily was diagnosed with bilateral sensorineural hearing loss, and she has worn hearing aids since to engage with the world around her. Her advocacy journey began early, from participating in IEP and 504 planning meetings in her primary education to presenting at the Alexander Graham Bell (AG Bell) Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing's bi-annual conference at sixteen. She continued sharing her story at local colleges and participated in advocacy events through AG Bell. She recently spoke at ACAPT's Inclusive Horizons Summit in June 2024. Inspired by physical therapy in high school, she's passionate about helping others despite facing challenges as a person with an "invisible" disability. Emily believes that her disability has shaped her into the person she is today. To Emily, the humanities are an integral part of understanding lived experiences of individuals and help foster connections of community that are meaningful, beautiful, and vulnerable.



**McCall Rae** (she/her) is a DPT student at Tennessee State University graduating in Summer 2025. She was born with Spastic Diplegia Cerebral Palsy and received physical and occupational therapy throughout childhood. At the point in her life when she began to contemplate what career she would like to pursue, physical therapy stuck out because she knew the significant impact it made in her life and wanted to walk with others as they worked through their own rehabilitation journey. Knowing the importance of having incredible advocates at every point in her life who played a part in her pursuing her goals, she strives to be an advocate for others and to be the person who encourages them to go after their goals, no matter how big, small, or impossible they may seem. One of the many things McCall enjoys about the field of physical therapy is the opportunity to spend one-on-one time with people, getting to know them and hear their stories while also providing the treatment they need. During her time at a campus ministry as an undergraduate student and later as employee at that same ministry, she began to see the significance that taking the time to see, listen to, and get to know someone by spending intentional time with them and being present can have. Here, she also gained exposure to the humanities and began to recognize the power that they have to bring people together, cultivate relationships, and allow us to feel seen, known, and foster a sense of connection to the people and the world around us.



**Mackenzie Kennedy** (she/her) is a student physical therapist at the University of North Georgia, currently pursuing her DPT and holding the credential of an ACSM Certified Exercise Physiologist. With a strong foundation built upon shadowing, volunteering, and working within the physical therapy field since 2018 across numerous settings, Mackenzie brings both practical experience and a deep commitment to fostering inclusivity to her academic pursuits. Recognizing the importance of accessibility and disability equity, she has pioneered new guidelines and ideas for inclusivity within the UNG physical therapy program, actively paving the way for future students. Looking ahead, Mackenzie will be transitioning to a full-time therapist role with Benchmark Physical Therapy in the greater metro Atlanta area, where she intends to continue her vital work in promoting inclusivity, with a particular focus on bringing in LGBTQ+ inclusive practices. Drawing from her own lived experience navigating the world with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, she offers a personal perspective to the crucial conversations surrounding accessibility and disability equity within healthcare. As a student panelist at the "Advancing Accessibility and Disability Equity Summit," she shared reflections on her journey and the importance of fostering a more inclusive environment for both patients and future clinicians. Mackenzie's



clinical interests include pediatrics, chronic pain management, and the complexities of connective tissue disorders, areas deeply informed by her personal understanding of navigating healthcare with a disability.



**Gregory Zambrano** (he/him) is a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) student at the Massachusetts College of Pharmaceutical and Health Sciences, living with Hereditary Spastic Paraplegia (HSP) and receiving physical therapy for as long as he can remember. His personal experiences with disability drive his passion for improving accessibility and inclusion within healthcare. Gregory emphasizes the importance of empathy in patient care, using his own journey to advocate for better understanding and inclusion. Through his studies and advocacy, he strives to foster compassionate care and improve rehabilitation outcomes for individuals with disabilities.