

# CPD policy director chairs landmark national conference

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AUCD President Pavithran with Executive Director Andy Impararato and President-Elect Tawara Goode

In the history of the Association of University Centers on Disability conference, this was the first year presenters in the opening plenary received a standing ovation, said Association of University Centers on Disability President Sachin Pavithran. It happened this month, after a panel of three women with disabilities spoke. They were moderated by someone with an intellectual disability.

“All of them are leaders in the disability space,” Dr. Pavithran said. “Some of the things they said were what this network needed to hear.”

Pavithran is also the policy director for the Center for Persons with Disabilities and the program director of the Utah Assistive Technology Program. He chaired this year’s conference, deliberately choosing presenters who had been underrepresented in the past: women, people with disabilities, people of color, immigrants and people from the LGBTQ community.

The panel members spoke frankly about life as people with disabilities who also belonged to other minority populations. The ovation they received spoke volumes about how their message was received, Pavithran said.

He was also direct in his own remarks to participants. “We talk a lot about diversity and inclusion, and we talk a lot about the work that we do, but how much do we actually bring people with disabilities into leadership? Don’t tell me there are not qualified people with disabilities.”

When he started going to AUCD conferences, they numbered about 400 or 500 participants. “It was not a setting for people with disabilities to be professional in the space,” he said. “I don’t know what the reason was, but that has shifted over the past three to five years. ... There are more young professionals who are excited and want to be part of this network.”

This year, the event had over 1200 registrants, 200 of which were trainees or young professionals. “They are so charged up about working in the field. ... There were visibly a lot of people with disabilities at the conference, actually playing a role, having something of substance there.”

The AUCD network’s members include 67 university centers on disability, 52 leadership education in neurodevelopmental disabilities programs, and 14 intellectual and developmental disability research centers. These programs are located in every state in the US.

Now, with the AUCD conference over, Pavithran will move from serving as president-elect—whose primary focus was chairing the conference—to serving as president. His role will now be to take the information presented and interpret what it means for the network.

He would love to see AUCD interact more with other groups. “Are there things we could be improving on when it comes to collaborating outside the network and doing things that we may not have thought about?” he asked. “The fundamental goal will always be to continue to improve the conversation about what will an inclusive society look like... and what to do with that in mind.”