RJ: We’re speaking with Susanne Bruyère, the Director of the Employment and Disability Institute at the ILR School. Susanne, how and why did you become involved with the Institute?

SB: I have been at Cornell University for twenty years. I was originally born in Upstate New York and had been at other educational institutions and in other parts of the country and graduate school for 15 years. What attracted me to the ILR School and Cornell was the land grant mission — being at an educational institution with an expectation for academic excellence in research and teaching but also a strong public service component. That combination is a unique one and since Cornell is our land grant institution — if I was going to return to New York State — it was the perfect place for the work I was interested in.

Q. What gave birth to the Institute?
A. The School of Industrial and Labor Relations has had in its Extension Division for almost 35 years now a component that had disability interests. It was started by Bill Wasmuth and soon, following him, he included others in his work. It started out as a research institute that studied how small businesses could be applied to the management of what was then called “sheltered workshops” which were in proliferation around the United States. And from that, over the course of 35 years in response to public policy and the needs of the rehabilitation community, new initiatives were included such as independent living, supported employment training, management training.
At Cornell, we had something under the leadership of Ron House called “Cornell Simulation” which was used across the whole country. And then, more recently in the 1990s with the advent of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), we began to focus much more on “workplace practice” and reintroduced research with a strong employment policy component. So, the Institute has gone through a number of changes in response to the environment.

**Q. What is the main mission of the Institute today?**

**A.** Today, I’d say we have several areas of focus. In general, we have a strong research component. We do provide training and consultation both online and in person. And we have a strong dissemination or information-dissemination component.

In terms of our thematic areas, we do research on employment policy and on workplace practices, especially to focus on practices to minimize discrimination across the whole employment process. We do a great deal of training on the Americans with Disabilities Act across all five titles of the Act but with a focus also on employment issues. We have a research project and a practice project in three prisons in New York State looking at person-centered planning for people with developmental disabilities. We also work for the Social Security Administration and do training for individuals who are providing benefits counseling to persons on Social Security across a 13-state region. And within our own state and in our own back yard, we have an initiative that looks at school-to-work transition for youths with disabilities in about half of the counties in New York State.

So, you can see that we have a breadth of projects all focused on employment, from young people through an aging work force. The focus is on getting people into the workplace and keeping them there.

**Q. Education is a big part of what you do. Tell us a little bit about some of the educational activities you've become involved in.**

**A.** We construe our educational mission very broadly. We certainly do traditional training programs that can be anywhere from a presentation that’s 90 minutes at an employer breakfast to five- to ten-day intensive training programs. For example, our benefits advisors need a very strong background and grounding in what they need to provide to people with disabilities in their
consultation process. We consider public education a big part of our mission.

And an example of a somewhat different kind of training or education effort is our employment policy project. This is a series over five years of 12 to 15 policy forums that will be based in Washington, D.C. and will cover a variety of different topical areas for policy makers and interested disability advocates.

Some of our topics are Social Security incentives for people with disabilities to return to work. It's how we do a better job of addressing the employment needs of people who are ethnic or racial minorities and yet also people with disabilities. We look at a variety of other issues mostly focused on employment practices, but we also talk about other topics such as housing inequities and things like that.

Q. Research is a large part of the ILR mission and the Cornell mission and your group is involved in research activities. Can you tell us about some of your recent research?

A. We have a couple of independent projects going on that are great examples of high-quality research brought down to the field and disseminated, as that was originally the concept of the land grant institution. We have two large research centers – one is employment policy research with mostly an economic thrust and the other is disability statistics — both funded at $3 ½ to $4 million by the U.S. Department of Education. Both have as a part of their commitment that they will take and translate high-quality research across a number of key issue areas and bring it down to policy briefs that can be disseminated in educational programs to people with disabilities so they can advocate on their behalf at the state level.

Some other topics we are looking at are Social Security reform, taking a look at supports and attendant care for people with disabilities, housing reform and equity in the housing market.

The disability statistics can be used in any wide number of topics. So, we get many broad reaching questions that we respond to on that.

Q. Dissemination of the research can take place through many avenues but obviously, publications are one way. Can you tell us about some of your recent publications?
A. We have a number of different things. We have some very user friendly publications that are available online as well as in print on a web site called HR Tips. They are 35 informational brochures on a variety of topics relevant to human resource professionals. They are available both in English and in Spanish. These pieces came out of a five-year research initiative both in the public and the private sector on employer disability nondiscrimination policies and practices and we translated them into guides for human resource professionals.

We also have about 55 papers on economic policy research for employment with people with disabilities. These are very high-level scholarly pieces, and we have made an effort to also translate those. They are translated to executive summaries or policy briefs of the research which are available online. And all of these documents, I also should say, have to be translated for access considerations for people who are visually impaired. So, all of our documents are also provided in text or html format on our Web site.

Q. You have mentioned the technical assistance and training that you do with the Institute in several disability-related areas. Can you tell us about some of the specific things?

A. We believe that training alone is not sufficient to really reinforce new knowledge gained or behavior changed, and so we try to build in extensive technical assistance or consultation activities to support all of our training. An example is one of our centers called the Northeast Americans With Disabilities Act and Information Technology Center, which is a project also funded by the U.S Department of Education. They respond to a 1-800 number from a variety of constituencies but mostly people with disabilities and employers on any number of topics on the ADA. We get well over eight hundred calls a month for that center alone on that one topic and have trained technical assistants who respond either by phone or we get many more e-mail inquiries now as well on this particular topical area.

Q. You have been involved with the Institute for a good number of years now — when you think back to what you have accomplished through this program, what are you most proud of?
A. That’s a great question. I think I’m proud of the external domain — I am proud of the fact that a lot of the material that we have developed is now reaching a global audience. With the advent of the Internet, we are able to have a much broader reach than we ever would have originally conceptualized. We are getting inquires from many developing countries about how to bring civil rights legislation to people with disabilities and advocating at the grass roots level, and that’s very exciting to me. It’s really an opportunity to be a part of a global family and a part of the disability movement in a way we would never have originally dreamed.

Inside the organization, I’m proud of the team we have developed. We have a remarkable group of professionals who take great pride in their work and who take pride in making a difference and making an impact and who work well as a team. We like each other. We have fun and we thrive in our work environment and in being in a school that is devoted to workplace concerns and considerations. I think we model being a team that really does good work but also has fun doing it and enjoys it.

Q. We’re proud that you are part of the ILR School and the Institute also. People listening to this interview have gained a great deal of information about the Institute. If someone has some questions and wants to get in touch with you and your group – what’s the best way to go about that?

A. Two ways. They certainly can give a call on our general information phone number at 607-255-7727, and they will be routed to the right resource for the particular topic they’re interested in. They can also go to our Web site and get that information at [http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi) or e-mail us at [edi@cornell.edu](mailto:edi@cornell.edu). We would be happy to respond to any of those avenues with further information.

RJ: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today.

SB: Thanks for inviting us to be here.