Philosophers with disabilities are the most underrepresented minority group in the profession. Despite the fact that people with disabilities, on very conservative estimates, comprise well over 20% of the population, they make up between 1%-4% of full-time faculty in North American philosophy departments. Yet, while there is currently a low percentage of full-time employed professors with disabilities, there is a high number of people in the profession who need accessibility accommodations of various sorts. To take just one example based in the US, approximately fifteen percent of American adults (thirty-seven and a half million) aged eighteen and over report some trouble hearing. Roughly, then, between one and two people out of every ten at an academic conference will have trouble hearing and will be significantly assisted by the use of microphones, printed hand-outs, links to files posted online, etc. One tested and proven way that professional societies can improve with respect to the representation and inclusion of people with disabilities is by practicing and promoting accessible practices and fostering a general culture of accessibility—especially, though not solely, with respect to the way that conferences are run.

Accessibility is an ideal. Like any ideal, it is difficult to achieve, and its implementation can vary heavily based upon context. This being said, ideals of accessibility are best brought about through adherence to a powerful, albeit simple, guiding principle: universal design. As the Center for Excellence in Universal Design defines the term, “Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.”

To endeavor to make a conference or related event accessible is to try and make the environments supported by and connected to it available to as wide of a range of people as
possible. This means that an accessible conference is not one that simply works to meet accommodation requests made by specific individuals in attendance, but one that instead thinks about how to make the conference accessible from the ground-up. One of the more significant values of a dedicated focus on accessibility is that it ends up benefitting everyone—disabled, non-disabled, or somewhere in between.

For example, if one creates a culture of accessibility wherein people are adamant that microphones are to be always used—even if the speaker thinks that they are “loud enough” or that it’s “not really necessary” given the room’s acoustics—this will help far more people in any given room than one might imagine. An ethos of accessibility and universal design would suggest that using microphones is crucial, even if no one at the conference specifically requests it as an accommodation or no one admits of being hard-of-hearing.

As other academic societies with flagship accessibility practices (such as the Society for Disability Studies or Modern Language Association) have demonstrated, it takes dedication at all levels of organizing to make a conference and society accessible across its shifting membership and events (variable conference spaces, local conditions, weather events, etc.). Having a committee dedicated to accessibility would exhibit both SPEP’s commitment to accessibility as a way to substantively promote the inclusivity of people of all sorts of bodies and minds at its events, but also its commitment to specifically see more philosophers who identify as disabled as a welcomed and materially supported part of the profession. Disabled philosophers regularly report enormous barriers presented by academia, including in conference spaces in particular. In light of these reports, academic societies that take inclusion seriously should take concerted and consistent action to remedy such barriers and be aware of the negative effects lack of accessibility has not just upon people who identify as disabled, but upon all participants.

Another large obstacle many people with disabilities face in the academy is the need for constant self-advocacy. If, for example, someone requires a sign language interpreter, every single conference that that person may wish to attend will often require tens, if not hundreds, of hours of emails and phone calls between the executive committee, local organizers, local interpreters, hotel administration, and the like. Having a permanent committee dedicated to accessibility can help assist individual philosophers with disabilities navigate both individual and more general requests or issues. Having now laid out a number of details concerning the rationale for this committee, I will turn to describe its specific objectives.
Committee Objectives:

The Committee on Accessibility, Disability, and Inclusion (ADI) is to be established for the purpose of developing, promoting, and increasing accessible practices in the Society, increasing the participation of and advocating on the behalf of people with disabilities in the Society, and regularly monitoring the success of these efforts and reporting on them to the general body of the Society.

To that end, the ADI will be (i) the chief body responsible for developing, promoting, updating, and disseminating accessibility guidelines at all pertinent levels of the organization. These will be developed for the conference as a whole along with specific recommendations for local hosts, moderators/chairs, and presenters. The committee will also (ii) act as an intermediary, as needed, for those who request assistance in efforts to secure accessibility or accommodation requests for any SPEP-related events. The ADI will also (iii) request annual information on the participation of people with disabilities and accessibility practices more generally in the Society and solicit feedback on the success of past accessibility efforts and suggestions for improvement.

The ADI would report to the EC in order to develop more specific information about accessibility that can be published ahead of time in both the conference program and on the SPEP website. The ADI committee will work with the local hosts to obtain relevant information in future years and will then provide it to the graduate assistant and SPEP Co-Director who will be responsible for including it in the front matter of the conference program and in any relevant emails sent to the organization body or specific participants in a given year. As is relevant, such information will also go to the SPEP webmaster to post on the SPEP website. In this respect, the ADI will build upon and provide a sustainable, flexible future for recent SPEP practices such as asking all SPEP presenters to bring two-to-three large font copies of their papers to their panel in the acceptance letter and requiring microphone use in all sessions. This latter requirement will also be listed in the moderator instructions that go out to every moderator for each annual conference.

In addition:

- To the extent possible based upon planning parameters, the ADI committee will provide preliminary research into how much it would cost to have an interpreter or other such forms of accessible practices at future meetings.
• A committee-level summary report on accessibility practices will be made public on the SPEP website biennially following discussion and analysis of the feedback by the committee.
• The ADI will offer at least one member of its committee to come to the walk-through of the conference venue on Wednesday evening with the SPEP graduate assistant or other on-site student volunteers along with the hotel staff.
• The ADI will put on a program session every other year (alternating with the SPEP Advocacy Committee) that focuses on research in or related to the philosophy of disability.