

University of Calgary
“Accessibility, Disability Inclusion and Ableism in the University”
Human Rights Day (December 10, 2021)

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I want to start today by talking about academic ableism. I am going to make the case that the university sorts the population by a medicalized and legalistic definition of “ability” as effectively now as it ever has. Universities continue to function to keep certain groups of individuals out of the work force and away from status positions, and away from knowledge and dialogue and power, and not just through admissions (though I know Dr. Jacobs will be talking about this as well). This is by design, and we have to understand this design as aligning with a history of eugenics and ableism.

Twenty four percent of first-year university students self-declare as having a disability, most commonly related to mental health (14%) (Canadian University Survey Consortium, 2019). That 24% is in stark contrast to the 6-9% of students who get help. We have a generation of students who are much more likely to experience higher education as disabling, and much less likely to seek help (NCHA 2018).

Twenty-seven percent of Canadians have university degrees. But only 17.6 percent of Canadians with “mild or moderate” disabilities have postsecondary degrees (Statistics Canada). While, recently, more students with disabilities are enrolling than in previous eras, “nearly two thirds are unable to complete their degrees within six years” (Smith, n.p.). A very modest estimate (based just on students who get accommodations) suggests that 10 percent of people with disabilities leave post-secondary institutions before obtaining their desired credentials (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2017). I think it could be much more like 30% if we extrapolate from the numbers of students with self-declared disabilities who never seek help. Disabled students are also likely to have up to 60 percent more student debt by the time they graduate. As Sarah Mohamed reveals, “debt is particularly onerous for students with disabilities who consequently require more time to complete their degree or diploma [and] this is a major contributing factor to persons with disabilities having lower application, admission and graduation rates as well as higher rates of leaving and switching programs” (n.p.). There is

actually a lawsuit in the news, just recently, challenging Canada’s student loans program for its role in creating this debt inequity.

The simple extrapolation tells us that at least 100,000 Canadian postsecondary students need accommodations but never seek them. In the United States, some studies show that two-thirds of college students “don’t receive accommodations simply because their colleges don’t know about their disabilities” (Grasgreen, n.p.). Those who do seek accommodations are likely to do so only in their third or fourth year of school. But whatever the numbers, and whatever the statistics tell us about how dire prospects might be for disabled students, the statistics only speak for the very small number of disabled students who successfully navigate the complicated accommodation process to seek help.

We could isolate specific disciplines as well. For instance, because of a lack of access to laboratory courses, research has indicated that only 4.3% of postsecondary students with disabilities in the United States chose natural sciences as their fields of study (McDaniel et al., 1994). Canadian and UK demographics in this area are lacking, but we can definitely assume that the barriers to accessing science are much the same in Canada and in the UK. This is upsetting, but it also tells us that removing barriers to access could help increase the number of students with disabilities who enroll in these programs of study, and also improve their numbers in science-related careers (Moon et al., 2012).

Let’s look at Faculty as well. A recent study conducted by Waterfield, Beagan and Weinberg (2018) revealed that academics in Canada receive little institutional support in obtaining disability accommodations. Stone et al (2013) reported that only 42% of Canadian universities had a written disability accommodation policy for Faculty. A recent policy analysis “reveals that little, if anything, has changed in the [seven] years since” (Saltes 2018). The policies that do exist, largely, do not centrally fund accommodations. This means that accommodations come out of individual department and unit budgets, and compel faculty to disclose to their Chairs and Deans. The result is a culture of silence and passing. The result is the attrition of disabled teachers and researchers.

And these forces that push disabled students out of higher education, and away from their right to an education, they intersect with other forms of discrimination. For example, we know that black males “are disproportionately placed into categories of special education that are associated with extremely poor outcomes” at the K-12 level (Losen and Gillespie). Yet education researcher Joy Banks has shown that black students with disabilities “experience difficulty accessing disability support services and appropriate accommodations” at colleges and

universities (28). So how can it be that for the same group of students, a disability diagnosis at the K-12 level can be hastily applied, and will speed them into the school-to-prison pipeline, and at the postsecondary level is so much more difficult to get, and then there are such large barriers to getting help? A recent HEQCO report on the Toronto District School Board showed that having “special education needs” in high school means you are less likely to go to University, and that has been getting worse over time, not better. Notably, being a student of color also makes you more likely to be labeled with these “special education needs.”

We see the presence of ableism in higher education persistently, when we understand that Universities create doctors and special educators and therapists who learn how to rehabilitate or cure disability, or how to tokenize or minimally include it. Seeing disability as fixable or eradicable is very, very different from seeing disability as desirable, or understanding disability as an identity and culture. In short, educating people to erase and diminish disability ensures limitations on our knowledge about bodies and minds. How can we really understand the complicated problems we face as a society when disabled people are absent from our classrooms, labs, and research teams. The last 18 months should have shown us that their inclusion is essential.

Educators must recognize both the long history of exclusion and experimentation upon people with disabilities, as well as the more recent history of academic ableism experienced by disabled students.

Right now, the idea of “attending” higher education has forever changed: who will have a choice about teaching or learning in person on-campus? Who will get to choose to work and learn from home? What social and student-centered spaces will replace physical ones like these steps, and who will be included? How has teaching changed right now just by moving some of the steep steps online, with the same demands of student time and productivity, but without the overhead costs of buildings and classrooms? What regimes of individualization, self-responsibilization, and personal wellness are being put in place? What new regimes of control and surveillance have been built or are being built?

In the history of disability in higher education, a rights-based approach has often meant that disabled students are invited in the door, they are counted and added to diversity statistics, but then the culture of the University makes no changes, no lasting adjustments to account for their presence, participation, and thriving.

One way to think about this might be to look at a Tweet posted by a student named Sarah-Marie Da Silva from the University of Hull. She posted the picture on Twitter, showing

how she is forced to take in her Zoology lectures. When she arrives at the lecture, there is only one place for her to sit, in the doorway at the back of the room. That doorway has a push-button entrance and an automatic door, allowing her to get into the room. But when she gets in, there is nowhere to go. This is what so many of the physical but also curricular and cultural layouts within higher education actually look like: disabled students may be there, may be able to get into the room, but their access is so clearly an afterthought, their participation is already minimized. No wonder we are losing so many disabled students.

We acknowledge that our students come from different places, and that they are headed in different directions, yet this does little to alter the vectors of our own pedagogy. Most often, the only time disability is spoken or written about in class is in the final line of the syllabus, when students are referred to the Office of Disability Services should they desire assistance. The message to students is that disability is a supplementary concern—and then that it is not the teachers’ concern, not really a part of the course; it’s at the back door of the syllabus. The sentence about Disability gets their syllabus up to spec. Teachers ‘deal with’ disability via the ideological equivalent of a ramp—disability as an identity category can come in the side or the back entrance if it is to be included at all. The nature of the “retrofitted” accommodation requires that we make no lasting changes to our pedagogy or to the culture of the university. To begin with there are such a limited range of accommodations offered. More than three quarters of the accommodations offered are the same exact accommodation: extended time on tests and exams (NEADS). If, like me, you don’t offer tests or exams very often, and never in a timed way – well, then good. But if you keep working with disability services and they keep offering this accommodation, then you are short-fusing the process. This ramp or door leads students nowhere. We need a much broader repertoire of accommodations.

That said, retrofitted adjustments are still legally-mandated, and we need to continue to offer them. But how can we allow retrofits to become permanent, to endure? What are some ways that in higher education we have taken “accommodations” that were made over time, and turned them into mainstream pedagogical techniques? How could we do more of this?

We have had an opportunity, over the last eighteen months, to redesign higher education in ways we never have before. Yet nobody was talking about accessibility as part of this process. For example, we spent much more time investing in surveillant test-proctoring software than we spent developing alternatives to outdated teaching models that rely on testing.

There is some irony that the ableist demands for physical attendance and participation that teachers used to cling to so tightly have now been so easily left behind. Asking to have a

grade converted to CR rather than a numerical grade, asking for an extended deadline, getting extra time on a research grant or a tenure deadline, all of a sudden anyone who wanted these things could have them. Disabled people can hardly count the number of times they were denied these things and stigmatized for even asking about them. That said, if expanded access is being called for, let's ride that momentum.

Of course, most of the ableist demands of academia will likely slide right back into place, while others may be gone for good. The advocacy of actual disabled people – unfortunately, based on the patterns we have seen – is unlikely to be what determines this future, if we don't advocate now.

For example, as we were forced to pivot online, we learned how to caption video maybe, or how to provide transcripts, or how to share these things so that students could access them any time. Well, in a recent study of engineering students with disabilities at the University of Illinois, results from 303 responses from 49 different courses showed that students with disabilities have always, well before the pandemic, been asking for recorded lectures as videos, transcripts for these videos and for lectures, as well as course textbook and instructor notes/slides that they could engage with offline (Amos et. Al.) These are all things we began to offer quite broadly during COVID. Let's keep doing this, even when we move back into the physical classroom! That's just a small place to start. But it is a place to start. What did you do in your research environment in order to continue to keep your research program going? Did some of these things increase access more generally? Can you keep doing those things? What have you changed about your teaching since the pandemic that you could keep doing in order to increase accessibility?

My challenge to you is to think again about the barriers students might be facing right now during this most recent wave of COVID and also to explore how they get accommodated. What are the work-arounds. How have we built accessibility into our COVID pivot to online learning? How will we need to retrofit our teaching in ways that remove barriers when we finally do return to campus (knowing that some of us already have)? How will these sync with our own access needs, our own safety?

I want to offer, quickly, a few examples.

I think that during our forced pivot of teaching during this pandemic, we came to understand attendance and participation in radically new ways – we were forced to create more expansive ways for students to learn and to who what they had learned outside of the 50-80 minutes that they were in a room with us. Let's never assess their involvement based only on

being in the classroom, or based only in 50 minute chunks again. The ability to “attend” classes in flexible ways needs to become a right and not a concession in higher education, because our understanding of the safety of our campuses, and the risks posed to those who work and learn there, needs to forever change. We cannot fantasize about a post-Covid return-to-normal. Our campuses were never as safe and accessible as we thought they were. It's just that the risks and burdens were always borne mainly by disabled people.

As Arlene Kanter of Syracuse University very recently argued, “While discussions of the future of remote work have been a “hot topic” during the pandemic...given the current realities of the post-pandemic workplace, remote work is a reasonable accommodation for qualified disabled employees” and we will need to lobby for changes and amendments to the current regulations and policies “to re-envision remote work as the future of disability accommodation” (Kanter). Our University workplaces are, we need to admit, much riskier places than they have ever been before. This risk disproportionately impacts disabled people. And we also need to admit that the ways universities approach risk have always been highly problematic. We either actively advocate for our rights now, or we stand back and watch them disappear.

That's piece one: physical attendance.

Here's another interesting example. My own Faculty of Arts at Waterloo was told by our Associate Dean to pull back on assignments in Spring of 2020 – assign less. This allowed me and many of my colleagues to teach more, to connect with students more, and to assess less. Why should we ever go back? That's a second pillar: how can we adjust content and expectations of student labour? How can we make changes to the biggest stressors, systematically, rather than asking students to be resilient and adjust individually?

In Winter of 2020, despite their centrality to educational culture, we were also asked to find alternatives to timed in-person tests and exams. Well, they were never a good way to assess student learning, and despite the lore that supports their continued use, there is no research that shows that students learn more, retain more information, study more effectively, or even properly reveal what they have learned when a test or exam is timed. No research. And at the same time, we are spending almost all of our accommodations budget and time on granting extended time on these ineffective instruments. Testing in higher education is a significant creator of barriers, in particular for people with learning disabilities and mental-health related disabilities. And it doesn't make sense to think that these students will experience

anything like these barriers in the environment outside of school, where high stakes testing-like experiences are extremely rare. Nobody walks into an Engineering firm and says: "put your pencils down, whatever bridge you have drawn up is the one we are building." So why would we train engineers, or anyone else, to think under these constraints? There will be other barriers for our students when they reach the world of work. But nothing like the barrier imposed by a timed test. Likewise, the accommodations that these students will need in a professional capacity are unlikely to look anything like the accommodations they get in testing-heavy classrooms. And that is a huge problem, and a huge wasted opportunity. I understand that many in STEM fields believe that there are no easy alternatives to timed testing. But I will also remind those folks just how few disabled students choose their fields, as I mentioned earlier in the talk. That's a third, big point: We need to connect the dots if we want to correct that huge loss of student potential in STEM.

We know that there are accommodations that can really help students in the classroom, including help with note-taking and record-keeping, and technological solutions around communication and memory. And I also want to suggest that if we planned for more disabled students in our classrooms, we could really change the shape of higher education. This is an innocuous but a revolutionary question: what if we allocated all of the energy we spend on adapting to an old educational regime based on timing and testing into building a new one, one in which disabled students don't always need to ask for accommodations but instead their needs are expected? We did it for one term, but if your university talks about things like Universal Design for learning and isn't also willing to talk about seriously cutting back on timed assessments, or reconfiguring attendance and participation policies, or taking a long, hard look at workload, there is a problem.

Finally, for the last decade, I've been working on creating a long, long list of Universal Design ideas. These have been created collaboratively through discussions like this one. I call this "Places To Start" because that's how I want fellow teachers to approach them – as things to try, to experiment with, in their own teaching. I want to challenge you to visit this site, and to pick a Universally-Designed teaching technique to try. I also include a link to the Open Access version of my book *Academic Ableism*.

Thanks for your time today, and I hope we can talk more and we can answer some of your questions. I think we all agree that before COVID, our schools had too many unnecessary barriers in place for students, and for faculty. During COVID, we all viewed and experienced new barriers, or saw the old ones from new perspectives. Now we have a chance to build something different.