University Faculty Experience in Supporting Students with Disabilities

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Studies on accessibility and disability in higher education have focused primarily on the student experience within the college classroom. A limited number of studies have highlighted the faculty experience with accommodating students with disabilities. More research is needed to better support faculty in higher education and understand their perception of accessibility in the classroom.

According to the most recent report from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2015), as of 2011-2012, 11% of students attending college nationwide have accessibility challenges. Accessibility plays a fundamental challenge in the higher education classroom despite national legislation aimed at promoting access such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. I focused my research on this question, “What do faculty understand about accessibility in their classroom?”

Definitions of Disability
Disability can be defined by two models: social and medical. The medical model tends to focus on disability as an individual problem and what is “wrong” with the person rather than addressing his or her needs. The social model argues that people are disabled due to the barriers in society. For example, a person in a wheelchair is unable to reach an item off the shelf of a food store despite the store having a wheelchair-accessible ramp. Therefore, it is society’s job to remove the barriers and obstacles that people with disabilities face (Collins, Azmat, and Rentschler 2018; López Gavira and Moriña 2015; Waldschmidt 2018).

Joan Acker (2006) coined the term, “inequality regimes” after examining specific organizations through the lens of racial, gender, and class identity. Inequality regimes involve “interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations” (Acker 2006:443). Inequality regimes are systematic disparities between individuals, who are in power and have control over goals, resources, and outcomes. Inequality regimes function as barriers to accessibility, relating them to the social model. Therefore, persons with disabilities are hidden within the organizational structure because the organization is not made accessible to them.
While Acker’s (2006) concept of inequality regimes focuses on organizational structure, Wingfield and Alston (2014) established a different term—racial tasks—that centers on the work that is completed by minorities. Racial tasks involve work that is completed by minority groups to uphold whites’ position of power in the hierarchal structure. An example of racial tasks can include, a black worker managing a diversity program that offers internships and special trainings for workers of color.

While racial tasks focus primarily on race, I decided to alter this concept by creating the concept of ability tasks. Ability tasks are tasks that actively serve to build and/or maintain a culture where abled-bodied-ness is normalized and treated as standard. An example of an ability task can include a student being removed from the classroom because he or she has distraction-reduced testing as an accommodation. The student is accommodated but the environment is not changed. Thus, the environment still assumes that students are abled-bodied.

Initially I thought there might be a difference across different disciplines and divisions in terms of accessibility and providing accommodations to students. Therefore, I interviewed three to four faculty members (a total of 11 interviews) from four different divisions: Social Sciences, Languages, Arts/Humanities, and STEM. The interview questions focused on their experience with accessibility in the classroom ranging from providing accommodations, challenges they have faced, adaptations they have made, dealing with certain disabilities, and receiving support from the school. After all of the interviews were completed, I searched for common themes and challenges that recurred in the interviews. Three central challenges emerged:

- The need for students to disclose their disability to receive accommodations (many do not disclose)
- Certain disabilities such as chronic illnesses create unpredictable challenges
- Classroom practices to accommodate everyone through Universal Design (UD) are not widely known.

### Need to Disclose the Disability to Receive Accommodations

In order to receive academic supports and accommodations under the law, students need to disclose their disability status to the institution. According to previous studies, students reported they did not disclose for a variety of reasons such as: the need to achieve normality, the desire for ownership of their identity, the complex registration process, and the cost required for the testing (Grimes et al. 2018). Faculty are often left wondering whether their student has an undisclosed disability. As one faculty member stated, “There are some people where I’ve wondered based on the types of errors they’re making, I’m consistently [thinking] that there may be an undocumented learning disability.” About 30% of faculty interviewed reported and described incidents, where they have felt or wondered are there some students who either did not self-identify or disclose their disability status. Additionally, they reported some students have felt the necessary testing for appropriate documentation was not worth the money or did not feel comfortable speaking to his or her professor. Therefore, a significant barrier in terms of class exists because the testing is only available to those who can afford it. Consequently, faculty are not fully aware of the struggles, the frustrations, or additional changes they can make to create a more accessible classroom. Accessibility issues at the university level are invisible because abled-bodied people may not fully understand accessibility until they have experienced it.
Faculty face challenges both inside and outside of the classroom when providing accommodations to students with disabilities. Despite these challenges, most strive to make adaptations that may help. Faculty have reported attendance and participation to be a significant challenge, especially when someone has a chronic illness. A faculty member from the social sciences stated that she places “very [heavy] emphasis on participation” in her class and expects students to attend. However, if a student is in attendance but not feeling well, they may not participate to the best of their ability. Therefore, faculty are not sure how they can grade a student without penalizing them for an issue they cannot control. Faculty reported other issues besides attendance and participation such as group work and classroom discussions because a student may feel isolated, have difficulty participating because of emotional issues, or not be able to fully access information. While faculty have faced difficulty accommodating students with disabilities, they have been paying more attention and making subtle changes to make the classroom more accessible. These adaptations have included utilizing closed-captioning, creating PowerPointS, and using visual materials such as graphs and diagrams.

Classroom Management
Classroom management focuses on how faculty manage their classroom daily such as creating a syllabus that includes assignments, projects, exams, and papers. A faculty member stated, “I also try to design my test so that they can be completed in less time than the class time necessary. So those that don’t have [accommodations] should still be able to take their time and finish.” For a fifty-minute class, a professor has designed a thirty-minute exam; therefore, everyone regardless of accommodations, would have an additional twenty minutes to finish. Faculty are using more take-home exams for their own and students’ convenience.

While exams play a substantial role in classroom management, faculty often have to think about safety in lab-based classrooms such as chemistry, physics, biology, and art sculpture because “safety has to come before even the sort of success part, unfortunately.” Lab-based classrooms often include using dangerous chemicals, materials, and tools to complete various tasks such as experiments or creating a new 3-D sculpture; hence, safety is necessary for everyone regardless of ability. Faculty use a variety of approaches for learning, so students are more likely to be strong in one or another approach.

Barriers Remain
Despite ongoing efforts to accommodate students with disabilities, barriers remain. Identified barriers include testing expense, reluctance by some students to disclose their disability, and a lack of faculty access to information and training on accessibility. Faculty desire more information on working with students with disabilities such as a document briefs on best practices for providing access for those with hearing, vision, or mobility impairments or a resource for people with different disabilities because one-size does not fit all. Faculty want help in not only predicting the potential barriers in advance, but also in how they can overcome these barriers. Consequently, there is a need for faculty to have a way to as much information on accessibility as possible.

References


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