Critical Education

Encountering Ableism in the Moment
How University Students Discuss Accommodations with Faculty Members

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Abstract

At colleges and universities in the United States, disability is typically addressed as a medicalized identity. Students must self-identify as having a disability to their postsecondary school in order to receive access to accommodations. They are also expected to communicate with faculty members about using accommodations in individual courses. Students report experiencing stigma and discrimination due to being required to disclose a disability status and negotiate with faculty members to use accommodations. This paper uses theoretical frameworks within the field of Disability Studies to investigate how university students engage in conversations with faculty members about accommodations. Students provide insight into the barriers to meaningful access to education that they encounter, and how they manage stigmatized social identities within the power dynamic of a student-faculty member relationship.

In the United States, postsecondary (i.e., college and university) students who identify with a disability can qualify for legal protection under two federal laws – Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires that institutions that receive federal funding provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. The ADA, which covers employment as well, mandates that colleges and universities cannot deny students' admission or participation because of their disability status (Madaus, 2011). Colleges and universities are required to provide students reasonable accommodations that facilitate equal access to education, which may include academic adjustments such as extended time on testing and services such as a sign-language interpreter. However, accommodations are not mandated if they will cause undue hardship (e.g., significant expense) to implement. The ambiguity of terms such as "reasonable accommodations" and "undue hardship" has been the subject of several court cases since the passage of the ADA. Krebs (2019) argues that the notion that people with disabilities should only be provided equal access if it is "reasonable" perpetuates stigma against certain bodies and minds, by framing certain differences as burdens and problems. Further, even the use of the term accommodations, "implies something given out of luxury or generosity, not necessity" (Krebs, 2019, para. 33).

Approximately 19.4% of undergraduate students and 11.9% of post baccalaureate students have disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). However, this number likely underestimates the total number of students who are eligible to be recognized as having a disability and to receive accommodations. Newman and Madaus (2015) found that approximately 65% of students who were identified as having a disability in primary and secondary schooling neither registered as having a disability nor received accommodations after enrolling in higher education. As Wood (2017) argues when discussing the results of interviews with university students, it should come as no surprise that many students do not identify as having a disability once enrolled at their college or university. Despite the broadening of the definition of disability, students are still required to self-identify as disabled to their college or university if they wish to gain access to accommodations. Students must also provide documentation that their disability causes a substantial limitation to their education (Keenan, Madaus, Lombardi, & Dukes, 2019). If disability services staff ask the student to provide further documentation, such as results of psychological testing for a learning disability, the burden to pay for this evaluation falls on the student (Lovett, Nelson, & Lindstrom, 2015).

Once an office at a student's college or university recognizes a student as having a disability, staff members typically communicate with the student to determine necessary accommodations. For students who receive classroom accommodations, the student is commonly instructed to communicate about accommodations with individual faculty members who teach the courses in which the student enrolls (Rocco & Collins, 2017). Consider, for example, the following instructions that a disability services staff member e-mailed to the first author who was a college student receiving accommodations at the time:

> At the beginning of each semester, all students are required to schedule appointments with their instructors or meet with them during office hours to deliver your accommodation letter and discuss your accommodations. The instructor is the expert on the information to be taught in the course, and you are the expert on how your disability affects you academically. Students are not required to reveal the nature of their disability but should be prepared to address their need for

accommodation. This discussion, between you and your instructor, should lead to an experience where both of you feel comfortable with the accommodation process. Many problems can be avoided with clear communication between you and your instructors (M. F. Tominey, personal communication, January 17, 2012).

Communication between students and faculty members may occur over e-mail or during one-on-one meetings, as suggested in the instructions above, in which a student shares a letter from an office at the college or university that outlines the granted accommodations (Cole & Cawthon, 2015).

Expecting students to self-identify and provide documentation of a disability reflects a *biomedical* approach to disability. Disability is addressed as an attribute of certain individuals, and systems are set up to validate or invalidate disability through the application of medical knowledge (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). That process, by which students must prove their membership into the protected class of a person with a disability, is an example of what Samuels (2014) calls *biocertification*, or the sociopolitical effort to definitively categorize bodies as (dis)abled. Further, the practice of students negotiating their needs with individual faculty members is indicative of a medicalized approach in which disability is treated as an individual problem, as opposed to a problem resulting from barriers in an inaccessible environment (Linton, 2010).

In much of the research about disability in higher education, the biomedical approach to disability is not critiqued. Instead, researchers often focus on how to support a more consistent and efficient system, and how to foster characteristics in students that support them to navigate the system. For example, researchers have expressed concern that students are receiving accommodations when they do not meet the diagnostic criteria for a disability and have advocated for colleges and universities to use more strict and objective criteria to determine students' eligibility for accommodations (e.g., Lovett et al., 2015). Researchers have also focused on improving students' abilities to advocate for accommodations by successfully negotiating conversations with faculty members (e.g., Holzberg, Test, & Rusher, 2018). However, a consideration of sociocultural views of disability within the field of Disability Studies can reframe the problems of disability in higher education by shifting the focus from how to implement consistent policies (e.g., documentation guidelines) and bolster individual abilities (i.e., self-advocacy), to a focus on countering systematic discrimination.

Critiques of the Biomedical Approach to Disability in Higher Education

Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary field with scholars who draw from a number of critical theoretical frameworks to examine how disability is constructed within social contexts (Taylor, 2006). As Gabel (2005) writes, a basic tenet of frameworks in Disability Studies is to theorize "social interpretations" of disability through examining the cultural, political, and economic context that structures or gives meaning to disability (p. 2). Social interpretations depart from medicalized responses to disability in research and practice by providing critical analyses of how disability is constructed through barriers to meaningful social participation. Within the broader field of Disability Studies is the sub-discipline of Disability Studies in Education (DSE). Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, and Morton (2008) describe the aim of scholars in DSE "to deepen understandings of the daily experiences of people with disabilities in schools and universities" and "to create and sustain inclusive and accessible schools" (pp. 441-442). Key tenets of DSE include

the need to: provide context for the social and political aspects of disability, privilege interests and voices of disabled people, promote access to inclusive education and participation in society, and to reject deficit perspectives of disability (Connor et al., 2008).

Perspectives within the field of Disability Studies and other sociocultural analyses provide insight into how disability is constructed as a medicalized identity within the social and political context of higher education. For example, the biomedical approach to certifying certain students as "disabled enough" for accommodations places a burden on students to prove their disability by providing acceptable documentation. As Beckwith (2019) asserts, the reliance on medical documentation and psychological evaluations subordinates people with disabilities in that it "calls upon the professional expertise" of medical professionals, "rather than relying on the person's lived-experience and knowledge" (p. 22). Further, Hutcheon and Wolbring (2012) note that the biomedical approach discriminates against students who cannot afford to pay for disability evaluations. It also requires that individuals choose between self-identifying with a disability that they might not wish to identify with, or be faced with foregoing accommodations. The biomedical approach to disability documentation also disproportionately restricts access to accommodations for students whose disability identity intersects with other marginalized social identities. Undocumented students and students of color, for example, are less likely to be able to access affordable healthcare that would allow them to provide sufficient documentation to be eligible for accommodations (Krebs, 2019).

Beyond the problematic ontology of disability in higher education, the use of accommodations represents a *retrofit* approach that can be unwelcoming to students. As Dolmage (2017) describes, retrofitting is an approach in which accommodations are used as a response to students' individual characteristics, as opposed to addressing environmental barriers that are disabling in the first place. Within this retrofit model, the needs of students with disabilities are often not considered from the onset of design (e.g., when planning instruction or designing an academic building). Further, students who then access accommodations may be perceived by college faculty and staff as seeking special treatment or an "advantage" over non-disabled students (Dolmage, 2017). A key manifestation of the retrofit approach to accommodations is that students are expected to repeatedly self-identify their disability status to individual faculty and staff.

Researchers have increasingly illuminated the complexity of disability disclosure – revealing one's disability – in higher education. Choosing whether to disclose one's disability has been likened to "coming out" as LGBTQ (Shallish, 2017) and is often influenced by the pressure to pass, or appear as, able-bodied (Samuels, 2017). Further, there is "risk-taking that accompanies disclosure" which is "not experienced equally or in the same ways by all people" due to their multiple social identities that intersect with disability (Kerschbaum, Eisenman, & Jones, 2017, p.1). Disclosing a disability may not involve the same degree of risk for a white male as it does for those with minoritized identities (Yuknis & Bernstein, 2017). Students are therefore strategic about when they disclose a disability and how much they reveal (if at all) about their disability and needs. Students consider many factors when deciding if, when, and how to disclose a disability identity, including their own multiple social identities, and how they perceive a faculty member will respond to knowledge of their disability status (e.g., Miller, Wynn, & Webb, 2017; Wood, 2017).

While decisions about disclosing a disability are highly contextualized, the common denominator experienced by students is engaging in conversations with faculty members about the use of disability-related accommodations in individual courses (Rocco & Collins, 2017). When asked about their experiences discussing accommodations with faculty members, students report

that most faculty members agree to fulfill accommodation requests without conflict (Lyman, Beecher, Griner, Brooks, Call, & Jackson, 2016). In contrast, other studies have reported students' negative and stigmatizing experiences when interacting with faculty members. Students report being discriminated against by faculty members after disclosing their disability, including being perceived as less competent (Kurth & Mellard, 2006) and receiving demeaning responses about disability and accommodations from faculty members (Albanesi & Nusbaum, 2017). Students cite fear of discrimination and previous negative experiences as reasons for their reluctance to disclose a disability status and attempt to access accommodations (Denhart, 2008; Lyman et al., 2016).

The results of these studies, together with critiques of the biomedical and retrofit approach to addressing accommodations, demonstrate multiple domains of institutional *ableism* – discrimination based on perceived or actual abilities (Dolmage, 2017). Institutional ableism includes practices in which students must prove their membership into a group as dictated by medical/clinical expertise (Beckwith, 2019; Beratan, 2008). Institutional structures then position students as having to advocate and negotiate for their needs, leading them to experience ableist attitudes when engaging with faculty members. Further, as Dolmage (2017) argues, ableism is at the core of the cultural identity of higher education, whereby steep steps and gates have long excluded people with physical disabilities, and narrow ideas about what constitutes intelligence privilege certain characteristics of students.

While the existence of ableism in higher education has been well documented, a central purpose of this paper is to understand how students navigate institutional requirements to access accommodations. Previous researchers have used interviews (e.g., Wood, 2017) and surveys (e.g., Albanesi & Nusbaum, 2017) to document the experiences of students when discussing accommodations with faculty members. These studies offer retrospective insights, such as students' recollections of discussions about accommodations, how students feel about these conversations, and the implications of these conversations for students' decisions about disclosing or not disclosing their disability in the future. Yet, little is known about how students represent themselves in the moment and react to the responses of faculty members. In this study, the researchers developed a simulated meeting to examine how postsecondary students engage with faculty members in the moment when discussing disability-related accommodations and to understand how students reflect on how they advocate for their needs.

Methodology

In this study, a simulated meeting was developed in which a university student visited a faculty member in their office to discuss disability-related accommodations. Dotger's (2013) adaptation of a medical simulation model for teacher education was used to guide the design of this simulated meeting. In the simulation model for teacher education, university students studying to become teachers meet with actors who are trained to portray a specific individual, such as a concerned parent who has arranged a parent-teacher conference. Each actor is trained to convey the same disposition and verbal statements to each participating student. For university students who are aspiring teachers, the simulated conversation provides an opportunity to practice engaging in and reflecting upon conversations that reflect the professional context of teaching.

To simulate a student-initiated discussion with a faculty member about accommodations, the researchers developed a protocol that described the actor-portrayed faculty member. Because there is no standard or consistent way that faculty members respond to a student disclosing that

they receive accommodations, initial research was conducted to develop the character. The researchers conducted character development at the site of this study, a medium sized private university in the United States, using semi-structured interviews with five staff members from the university's Disability Services Office, and a focus group including four university students who receive disability-related accommodations. Interviews with staff members provided insights into the procedures of disability accommodations at the university and of common dispositions of faculty members toward accommodations. Students in the focus group were given an initial description of the scenario for the simulated meeting protocol, including possible statements for the hypothetical faculty member to make. Students evaluated early drafts of the protocols and suggested ways to rewrite the protocols to make them more authentic. The students were asked to help construct the faculty member's character based on the most common dispositions and statements the students experienced when meeting with faculty members.

The final simulation protocol described an Associate Professor of Economics named Professor Williams. Four local actors – one African American female, one white female, and two white males – were trained to portray Professor Williams. As a mid-career faculty member, Professor Williams would have experience with meeting with students to discuss disability-related accommodations. When students provide a letter from the Disability Services Office, Professor Williams tries to be supportive of students using accommodations. With the best interest of the student in mind, Professor Williams sometimes makes a suggestion or expresses a concern about how a student might use an accommodation. However, Professor Williams does not explicitly deny the use of accommodations by students. Actors were trained to enact these characteristics in a consistent manner when engaging with participating students.

Implementing the Simulation

The researchers recruited 15 university students who were registered with the Disability Services Office to participate in the simulated meeting. Participants ranged from first-year undergraduate students to a master's level graduate student. Table 1 provides demographic information for the participating students, which was self-reported. Approximately one week prior to the simulation, participants received a one-page document that described the context of the simulated meeting, including that they were a student in Professor Williams' economics class and had recently attended the first class of the semester. On the day of the simulations, participants arrived at the Simulation Center of a medical university nearby their university. With a copy of their letter of accommodations, participants entered individual simulation rooms, which were set up to look like an office of a faculty member. Here, participants met the actor-portrayed Professor Williams. All meetings were recorded by wall-mounted cameras. Following the simulated meeting, participants entered another room in groups of three for a video-recorded small-group reflection. Finally, nine of the 15 participants agreed to return the following week to watch their simulation video and participate in an individual audio-recorded interview. All methods were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the university where the study was conducted.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

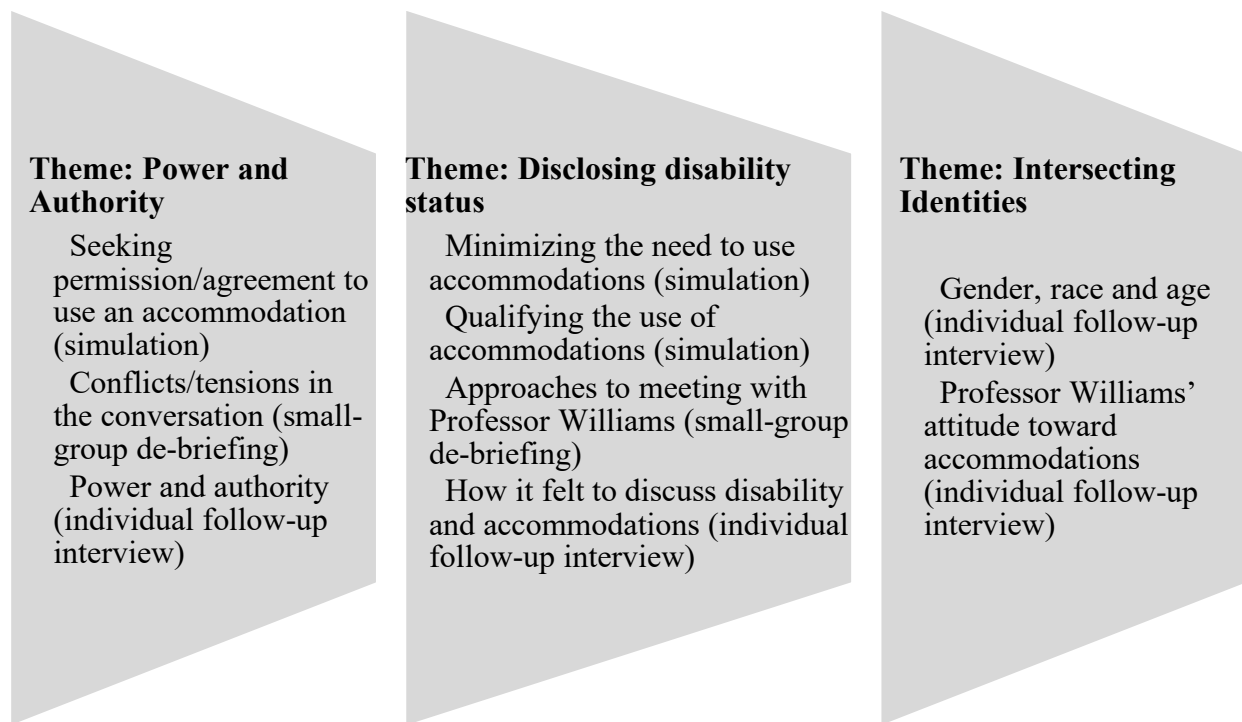| Name	Age	Gender	Race	Year	Disability Identity
Allison	19	F	White	Freshman	Testing anxiety; ADHD
Arlene	25	F	White	Graduate	Physical health
Brian	18	M	White	Freshman	Physical health
Caroline	18	F	White	Freshman	Slow processing, learning disability
Chris	21	M	White	Senior	ADHD
Elissa	20	F	White	Junior	ADHD; Mild dyslexia
Jared	18	M	White	Freshman	ADHD
Karen	21	F	White	Senior	Generalized anxiety; Obsessive Compulsive Disorder; ADHD
Kimberly	19	F	White	Sophomore	Hearing impaired
Marissa	19	F	White	Sophomore	Learning disability
Mark	18	M	Hispanic	Freshman	Learning disability, dyslexia, auditory processing
Nick	18	M	White	Freshman	ADHD
Nora	18	F	White	Freshman	Testing anxiety
Sam	22	M	Asian	Senior	Mental health
Scott	20	M	White	Junior	ADHD

Importantly, the simulated meeting was *not* designed to be an intervention for or assessment of the participating students. Participants did not receive any instruction on how to engage in the conversation, and their actions were not compared to predetermined criteria about how to advocate for their needs (e.g., Holzberg et al., 2018). Instead of coaching and assessing, the simulation was designed for students to have an opportunity to practice and reflect about their approach, and ultimately, to teach us as researchers about the reality of navigating the context of meeting with faculty members to discuss accommodations.

Data Analysis

The procedures described above resulted in 15 videos of individual simulated meetings, five videos of small-group debriefings, and nine audio-recorded files of follow-up interviews, in which students watched the video of the simulation. All data were transcribed with identifying information removed. A content analysis of the simulation was conducted using deductive thematic coding (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), beginning with listing participants' statements relating to each of the verbal statements that the actors were instructed to communicate. Open coding (Strauss, 1987) was then used to classify students' verbal communication during the simulated meeting. Coding of the post-simulation group debriefings began with categorizing responses under the central topics of the conversation, and then using a constant comparative approach (Oktay, 2012) by comparing reflections across participants, and comparing reflections with the actual simulation transcripts. The researchers used grounded theory to analyze the nine follow-up interviews (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), again with constant comparative analysis of the simulation transcripts.

Data reported in this paper include themes that emerged from codes across data from the simulated meeting, small-group reflections, and follow-up interviews. These themes emerged from theoretical sensitive analysis (Oktay, 2012) with consideration of literature indicating the importance of attuning to the subtle yet complex ways that students negotiate disclosing their disability status, and with consideration of social identities that intersect with disability status (Kerschbaum, Eisenman, & Jones, 2017).

Figure 1 describes the three themes reported in this section – power and authority, disclosing disability status, and intersecting identities. For each theme, the specific codes and data sources that were used to develop each theme are listed. The results are primarily of the students' perspectives in the small-group debriefing and individual follow-up interviews. However, statements and dialogues from the simulated meetings are included to provide context for the students' reflections.

Theme: Power and Authority

Seeking permission/agreement to use an accommodation (simulation)
Conflicts/tensions in the conversation (small-group de-briefing)
Power and authority (individual follow-up interview)

Theme: Disclosing disability status

Minimizing the need to use accommodations (simulation)
Qualifying the use of accommodations (simulation)
Approaches to meeting with Professor Williams (small-group de-briefing)
How it felt to discuss disability and accommodations (individual follow-up interview)

Theme: Intersecting Identities

Gender, race and age (individual follow-up interview)
Professor Williams' attitude toward accommodations (individual follow-up interview)

Figure 1. Themes resulting from data analysis.

Results

Power and Authority

Dynamics of power and the influence of Professor Williams' authority was evident early in the meetings. For example, when Kimberly and Scott gave Professor Williams their letter of accommodations, they sought Professor Williams' approval as they began to address one of the accommodations:

> **Kimberly**: So, [the Disability Services Office] has granted me a reduced-distraction environment testing. So, I take all my exams there. Is that okay with you?
>
> **Scott**: I use my computer in class, if that's okay with you.

A common experience that students shared in their reflections on the conversation was that they felt pressure to be agreeable or to hide their preferences in response to Professor Williams' concerns or questions about accommodations. For example, Arlene recalled how she agreed to Professor Williams' suggestion that she complete exams in the classroom, as opposed to the accommodations-approved location in the testing center of the Disability Services Office:

> They're the professor and you're the student so you just kind of say okay…There is an inherent power difference there. I mean, they are the professor. They are an authority figure. So even though I consider [Disability Services Office] accommodations to be things that are granted to you, you know, they are rights, essentially, it's an awkward situation where you are coming to a position who is an authority figure and saying that these are rights that you have to give me.

After watching the video of her simulation, Arlene reflected that she "found it a little bit almost pathetic" that she agreed to do "whatever is easiest" for Professor Williams in terms of completing exams.

Elissa also attributed not asserting her preferences to the power differential inherent in discussing accommodations with a faculty member. During the follow-up interview, Elissa paused the video of the meeting. She explained that she did not initiate a discussion about the accommodation of using a laptop computer in class for note taking because Professor Williams had already expressed a concern that laptops can be distracting:

> I felt like I couldn't ask for it [using my computer in class]. I kind of agreed because I didn't want to fight with a professor. So, I figured I might as well try it the way he wants it and then go forward. But I feel like because it's on my accommodations letter, he is supposed to be like 'well if you need it, go ahead and use it' and really support my needs, based on my letter, because he legally has to. But he was still so distant on it that I was like, I need to compromise, because I felt scared.

Elissa added that she was afraid to mention other accommodations and that she frequently backs down from asserting her preferences when talking with faculty members because she doesn't "want to start the semester off with a professor on a bad note."

The pressure to maintain a positive relationship with a faculty member also had a silencing effect on other students. Brian indicated that he did not appreciate Professor Williams suggesting that he complete exams in the classroom with Professor Williams because of the implication that he would be missing important information when he takes the exam in the Disability Services Office. Brian felt like stopping Professor Williams and saying, "Wait, what?", but decided that "I'm not going to say that to a teacher" because it could be interpreted as rude. Similarly, Scott paused the video of the simulated meeting in the follow-up interview to explain how he held back his preferences and reaction during the following dialogue, when Professor Williams made a suggestion about note taking:

Professor Williams:	I read a study…students tend to retain information better by handwriting notes instead of typing.
Scott:	I appreciate it. I'll do both throughout the semester.

Scott explained that he would prefer to never handwrite notes, but he told Professor Williams that he would "do both" to maintain a positive relationship with Professor Williams. "I probably wouldn't use his advice," Scott admitted, but leading Professor Williams to believe that he would use his suggestion was a tactic he used so that Professor Williams "thinks I'm listening and that I value his opinion." Scott then explained, "You have to pick your battles" when deciding whether to assert preferences about using or not using accommodations. Scott noted, "You have to keep your relationship with the teacher in mind."

Disclosing Disability Status

Students also provided insight into their approaches to disclosing their disability status and discussing specific accommodations with Professor Williams. During the meetings, the actor was trained to ask the students, "What does your disability mean for you as a student in my class?" Students are not mandated to disclose a specific disability label, and only four of the 15 participants did so to Professor Williams. For example, Kimberly removed her hearing aid and showed it to Professor Williams as she explained that she has "a hearing impairment." Kimberly later shared that this is her common approach to explaining her needs to faculty members. Arlene told Professor Williams that she has the auto-immune disease lupus. She reflected that since the meeting with Professor Williams, she had been more aware of her perception that faculty members are more sympathetic to her physical health condition, than to someone with a learning disability, and attributed this perception to her comfort in disclosing this specific label.

Others, however, explained that they are reluctant to disclose a specific disability label out of concern for stigma. Sam explained that while he felt comfortable enough with Professor Williams to tell him about his mental illness, he often does not disclose the label. "I still feel a stigma," Sam explained. "I always debate with myself if I should disclose or not. But if all things were equal, I wouldn't disclose it to anybody…I prefer that people don't know." Similarly, Elissa, who did not reference a specific disability label when meeting with Professor Williams, expressed that she does not think faculty members need to know about students' disabilities:

> I don't think it's any of their business…Like they don't need to know and they don't need to have any information to make an assumption about my academic work. [Sometimes people ask] but I'm hesitant to say anything because I don't want anyone to think that I am not smart...and I don't want to be treated differently because I have accommodations, which often, I think, happens.

Scott also shared that he tries not to disclose that he has ADHD because he thinks "it comes with a very negative stigma." Scott recalled that when Professor Williams asked about what Scott's disability means for him as a student in the class, "I was thinking, I know how it really affects me but I can't really explain everything because the faculty member does not have ADHD and he wouldn't really understand everything."

Scott and Sam also described instances in which they do not provide a letter of accommodations to faculty members, thereby foregoing access to accommodations in those courses. "I only do it in certain classes," Scott explained in the post-simulation group debriefing.

He does not provide a letter of accommodations to faculty members for courses in his major field of study, because he feels this will hinder employment opportunities. "They're the ones who are going to potentially hook me up with jobs or something," Scott explained. "To me I just feel like if they see 'Oh, he has double time, he is just slower than everyone else', when that's just not the case."

Sam also explained that he is selective when he seeks to use accommodations. "If it's a class where I feel like I don't really need the accommodation, I'll just not tell them anything about it," Sam explained, providing the example of not disclosing his accommodation of extended time on deadlines in classes that involve group work assignments. Like Scott, Sam appeared to also be influenced by concern about discrimination. He explained:

> I don't want to have to tell the professor and then have to tell the group…because if I need an extension on an assignment…then I would have to explain to the group that I can't keep up. And I felt like, for this semester, I can keep up with it. I don't need the assignment extensions.

Sam also recalled a previous class involving group work in which he did disclose his disability status to the faculty member, who told Sam that he "should be keeping up" with the assignments and that Sam should tell his group members about his condition.

Students also described the strategies they used as they tried to frame and manage the conversation with Professor Williams as they introduced their accommodations. Karen spoke about feeling the need to offer a lengthy explanation regarding the accommodation of having extended deadlines on assignments. She told Professor Williams that the accommodation was not a "free pass." After watching the video of the meeting, Karen explained that "sometimes professors might subconsciously sort of have these underlying thoughts about students with disabilities or that have [Disability Services Office] accommodations, and that can affect how well that student does in their course." Telling Professor Williams that the accommodation was not a "free pass" was a means for Karen to "get on their good side" and ensure an "image of me as a hardworking student that's not just going to take advantage of any accommodation." Sam, who has the same accommodation of extended assignment deadlines as Karen, used the same term – "free pass" – to describe his fears of how faculty members will view the accommodation. Twice in the conversation with Professor Williams, Sam told Professor Williams that he would try to not ask for modified deadlines on assignments. Sam later explained that he commonly makes these comments because, "I don't want the professor to think that I'm slacking or that I can't perform as well as other students or think that it's a free pass or something."

Elissa also expressed a deliberate effort to manage stigma by downplaying the "whole long list," referring to her awareness that her letter lists more accommodations than most other students. She paused the video of the meeting with Professor Williams and explained that she took the lead in discussing "only" the accommodations that she felt were relevant to the assignments and structure of the course. Elissa explained that she attempts to frame the discussion around only a few specific accommodations. "I don't want to emphasize that I get accommodations," she explained, "I don't want him to think of me as someone with a DSO [Disability Services Office] letter, but just a student who might need some additional support."

Intersecting Identities

During individual follow-up interviews, the nine participating students were asked about whether Professor Williams' gender, race, and age influenced the conversation. None of the four male students who participated in follow-up interviews mentioned gender as having any impact on the meeting. In fact, three of the four stated explicitly gender had no impact. For example, Brian, who met with a female African American actor, responded that these identity categories "had absolutely no impact on the meeting" because faculty members commonly "vary in their age, gender and race." Sam, who met with a white male actor, said that he "didn't really think about it" because so many of his faculty members are white males.

In contrast, four of the five female students who participated in follow-up interviews spoke about the significance of Professor Williams' gender. Elissa explained that the fact that the actor she met with was male made it more difficult for her to speak up and assert her needs:

> If it was a female, I feel like I could argue, but he seemed pretty adamant in his ways…I feel that had it have been a woman, I just feel like I would have connected better from the beginning…he was set in his ways. And even when he said something in agreement, he had to like preach on it. He wouldn't just listen.

Karen, who met with a white female actor in the simulation, explained that she would have experienced "substantially more anxiety" had she been meeting with a male faculty member. "I tend to do better talking about things that I consider sort of personal [with a female faculty member]," Karen explained. Arlene was the only student to mention the race of the actor. Arlene met with a female African-American actor. She recalled that she had been wondering if the actor might have any personal connection to the auto-immune disease lupus, because women and African-Americans are more likely to be diagnosed.

Five students commented about Professor Williams' age. Students expressed similar perceptions of older faculty members – like Professor Williams – being more rigid and having the effect of students feeling as though they cannot express themselves freely. Arlene added that, "I've noticed younger professors to be more flexible" with accommodations. Kimberly noted that the actor was "a lot older than me" and that she thought he might be the kind of faculty member who wanted to "control" students' behavior. Scott explained, "I would talk more loosely with a young professor than I would with an older one." Karen commented, "I almost felt like her age might have made her have more antiquated views and [be] less open to these sorts of things." However, Karen also added that she might feel judged by a younger faculty member because they are "almost a peer." Finally, Elissa described Professor Williams as "set in his ways" and that if she met with a younger professor, she is more likely to assert her needs.

Discussion

Within a biomedical approach to disability in higher education, students who seek access to disability-related accommodations experience multiple forms of ableism. Ableism is institutionalized through processes such as privileging medicalized disability status as the only means of gaining equal access to education (Beckwith, 2019). Institutional processes then position students to experience ableism at interactional levels as they are expected to negotiate with faculty members to secure their use of accommodations (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). Both institutional and interactional ableism are experienced disproportionately by students whose disability status

intersects with other privileging and marginalized identities, to shape the complexity and undesirability of disability disclosure (Kerschbaum, Eisenman, & Jones, 2017; Krebs, 2019). Rooted in Disability Studies scholarship, the purpose of this study was to center the voices of disabled students in an effort to better understand the sociopolitical context with which students navigate to access accommodations. By examining discussions with faculty members as the primary context, the design of this study (e.g., Professor Williams' character) was shaped by contributions from actual students with disabilities who have engaged in many conversations with faculty members.

The findings of this study reinforce many of the existing findings about ableism experienced by postsecondary students. Consistent with past research (e.g., Albanesi & Nusbaum, 2017), students in this study conveyed a fear of stigma related to disclosing their disability status. Further, the voices of students in this study support past findings that students experience stigma particularly related to invisible disabilities, including mental disorders (Corrigan et al., 2016). Similar to the students in Denhart's (2008) and Kurth and Mellard's (2006) studies, students expressed concern about being treated differently by faculty members, or that the faculty members might have lower expectations of their abilities because they are seeking to use accommodations. Students also demonstrated a pattern of attempting to downplay their need for accommodations when talking to Professor Williams. Like students in Lyman and colleagues' (2016) study, students preferred to try to appear self-sufficient and only use accommodations as a backup plan, which could potentially deter them from disclosing their right to access accommodations later in mid-semester.

The design of this study resulted in data that can deepen our understanding of how ableism manifests in higher education. Students had the opportunity to view and reflect upon their video-recorded simulated discussion about accommodations. Students' narration of their experiences discussing their disability status and accommodations led to insights into the covert aspects of ableism that could not have been fully understood by simply observing students' dialogue with a faculty member. Keller and Galgay (2010) describe covert ableism as manifesting itself through subtle forms of communication, often by well-intended individuals, which they refer to as disability microaggressions. The actors portraying Professor Williams' character were deliberately instructed to enact a faculty member who is supportive of accommodations, in line with what students with disabilities described as a common disposition of their professors. Students' reflections on their meetings with Professor Williams provide insight into the "interpersonal complexities" of encountering a seemingly "well-intended" faculty member (Keller & Galgay, 2010, p. 244).

Students repeatedly attested to the ways that their perception of Professor Williams' authority over them compromised their negotiation of accommodations. For example, Professor Williams suggested how the student might use their accommodations to be successful. The voices of students demonstrate that suggestions are not simply suggestions when expressed by a faculty member, but they instead produce a coercive and ableist effect; students feel pressure to minimize their needs in order to maintain a positive relationship with a faculty member.

The identities of both students and Professor Williams further influenced the dynamics of discussing accommodations. Disability and gender intersected to marginalize students like Elissa, who identified as female and felt too scared to discuss certain accommodations in the presence of a white, male, and middle-aged professor. Students' reluctance to assert their needs in response to Professor Williams is particularly alarming given that the students were aware that this was a

simulated meeting with an actor who they were unlikely to encounter again. The results demonstrate that female students who receive disability accommodations are simultaneously negotiating access to accommodations and gendered power dynamics when engaging with professors. The pressure to perform stereotypical feminine gender roles, such as appearing agreeable, can materially impact students' education by contributing to their underutilization of needed accommodations that contribute to their academic success. Conversely, social categories also manifest by conveying privilege. For white, male students in this study, the impact of gender and race was invisible. This erasure of race and gender as an issue allowed these students to focus more narrowly on navigating the stigma surrounding disability.

Conclusion

As Dolmage (2017) argues, disability in higher education is viewed as "something frozen in time and frozen in other bodies" (p.73). Disclosing a disability status to individual professors in exchange for access to accommodations is a manifestation of ascribing disability to certain bodies, while obscuring ableist policies and physical barriers that compel students to seek accommodations to begin with. The results of this study demonstrate how institutional and interactional ableism manifests itself to discourage students from attaining equal and meaningful access to higher education. The continued expectation that postsecondary students negotiate to access accommodations may lead to negative experiences and further contribute to the current underrepresentation of students with disabilities who pursue advanced degrees (Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

At the end of their follow-up interviews, both Elissa and Karen critiqued the institutional ableism that students face:

Elissa: I feel like there is a systematic problem around disability…because part of the problem with the academic letters is you give them to them [faculty members] before you have any chance to make a relationship with them…it lets them judge before they have anything on you.

Karen: I am hardworking and smart and intelligent, but like presenting this letter is going to negate all of that.

For students like those in this study, the ableism that they encounter makes fully accessing accommodations too costly to pursue. Rather than placing students in the unenviable position of negotiating their needs and rights that have been framed as exceptional, practices in higher education must be guided by planning for the diverse characteristics of all students, to ensure that equal access to education does not come at the cost of students' dignity.

Universal Design provides one means for rethinking individual accommodations in favor of building postsecondary environments that anticipate and value disability (Dolmage, 2017). Disability services staff and faculty members can work together to design flexible course policies that could reduce the stigma of accommodating the needs of students with disabilities. Faculty and staff might also examine transcripts of simulated meetings, or of student interviews about their experiences, to better understand how students with disabilities feel about the seemingly benign suggestions that faculty members make in discussions about accommodations. Students with disabilities could be compensated to facilitate workshops with staff and faculty in which they

consider ways to build meaningful relationships and welcoming classroom environments. These efforts and others can shift the focus in higher education away from a reliance on medicalized approaches to disability and towards practices that deliberately target institutional and cultural ableism.

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