FROM DISABLED TO DIFFERENTLY ABLED: INTERSECTIONALITY AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN AS FOUNDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Jesse Andrew Campa

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Urban Studies

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
August 2025

ABSTRACT

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Jesse Campa
The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2025
Under the Supervision of Professor Lynne Woehrle

This dissertation explores the experiences that students with disabilities (SWDs) from diverse sociodemographic backgrounds encountered beginning with their transition from high school to higher education and how on-ramps to seeking disability accommodation posed challenges in the university and college setting. I used a qualitative methodology to analyze, interrogate, and develop a constructivist grounded theory to inform interuniversity policy on principles of Universal Design (UD), the Universal Design for Learning, and the Universal Design of Instruction (UDL and UDI) frameworks to benefit SWDs from a diverse sample enrolled in urban higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Midwest region of the United States. These retrospective accounts of their experience in high school aided in expanding the current body of literature on the role that ableism plays in affecting SWDs' educational trajectories, specifically those with multiple marginalized identities. In other words, this dissertation uncovered the implicit and explicit biases that affected the well-being of differently abled students. By gathering a series of themes compiled from participants' perspectives, current disability accommodation models in institutions of higher education were scrutinized from a different angle of inquiry not looking at issues solely incepted at the university itself but by identifying a potential myriad of long-term hardships faced by participants. The goal of this study was to provide deeper understanding for HEIs to provide better on-ramps for disabled students in terms of inclusivity, overall well-being, a sense of belongingness, easier navigation through the physical environment, and universally designed learning environments to increase retention and graduation rates for the student population since many disabled students choose not to document and self-disclose their disability. What are the accounts of SWDs (across race, gender, SES, and orientation) to inform university policy on the implementation of UD, UDL, and UDI?

Dedication

This dissertation represents more than a research project; it is a testament to the resilience of those whose stories have long been ignored, misunderstood, or sidelined in urban serving HEIs. To the 27 participants who generously shared their experiences, frustrations, and hopes with me; thank you. Your candor, courage, and insight gave this study its heart, and I am forever grateful for your trust in me as your conversational partner.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my dissertation chair, Dr. Lynne Woehrle, whose unwavering support, critical guidance, and calm reassurance carried me through every phase of this project. Thank you for believing in both the work and in me. To my committee members, thank you for challenging me to think more deeply and write more boldly and clearly. I also want to acknowledge the faculty and staff in the Urban Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Your mentorship and academic support shaped the scholar I have become. I imagine I would not have made it this far without your inspiration, especially as a disadvantaged differently abled first-generation university/graduate student myself.

To my family, especially those who supported me in both visible and quiet ways, thank you for your patience, understanding, and most importantly, love. To my daughters, you arrived in the middle of this academic journey (my oldest during my master's thesis phase, and my youngest during my dissertation phase) and you both gave me renewed purpose. You both are the primary reason I persisted. To my friends and colleagues who listened to me vent, sent me articles at 2 a.m. (or similarly “inconvenient, yet helpful” times of the day/night), and reminded me that I was not alone in this work; you are the community that I needed.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Universal Design (UD)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Universal Design of Instruction (UDI)

Students with Disabilities (SWDs)

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD)

Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS)

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (hEDS)

Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME)

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)

Tourette Syndrome (TS)

Academic Access Center (AAC)

Greenhill College Disability Coalition (GCDC)

Rationale for the Study: Preface

SWDs now comprise nearly one in five undergraduates in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), yet their experiences remain marginal within dominant discourse about equity in higher education. Representation alone does not render a guarantee of meaningful access, particularly for SWDs whose lives are shaped by intersecting identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. These complexities are oftentimes flattened within institutional discourse, policy implementation, and research agendas alike.

Urban-serving institutions represent a critical yet underexplored context for understanding the educational experiences of differently abled students. These campuses tend to enroll students from historically marginalized backgrounds, many of whom navigate not only ableism but also layered structural exclusions (e.g., racism, sexism, classism). Despite serving as access points for a diverse student body, these institutions typically lack both the infrastructure and institutional will to adequately support SWDs through graduation.

Success gaps between differently abled students and students without disabilities persist across institutional types but are especially stark in urban settings where resource constraints, large class sizes, and inconsistent faculty saturation further complicate the learning environment. While frameworks like UD, UDL, and UDI all offer pathways toward a more inclusive pedagogical design, their uptake has been uneven. Moreover, current university policy implementation tends to focus on baseline compliance rather than transformation, often without input from the very students these approaches are intended to serve.

This dissertation intervenes to address the gap between minimal compliance and Disability Justice. Disability Justice is a framework that extends past the traditional disability rights movement by centering collective liberation, intersectionality, and the leadership of differently abled individuals who are also Black, Brown, queer, trans, and/or financially disadvantaged. It also recognizes that ableism is intertwined with other systems of oppression while calling for institutional transformation instead of baseline access or inclusion (Berne, 2015; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). This framework along with others such as Crip Theory[1] and Sins Invalid[2] influenced my use of grounded theory to approach analysis of the data. Through qualitative inquiry inductively grounded in the lived experiences of SWDs at urban-serving universities and colleges, this study traced how institutional structures and pedagogical practices affect access, resistance, and persistence. By centering student narratives, this research contributes to a growing body of work that challenges the assumption that inclusion is already happening and instead explores what it would take to make it real.

The predominate rhetoric in contemporary disability studies are the differences between the medical and social models of disability. The medical model of disability regards disability as a defect in the individual to be managed or cured, and the social model reframes disability as an outcome of attitudinal and environmental barriers rather than individual impairments. So, although the social model signified a profound shift in comprehension, Disability Justice scrutinizes it for inadequately addressing how oppressive systems such as capitalism and White supremacy) structure both access and disability (Mingus, 2011).

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[1] Other frameworks, such as Crip Theory foreground resistance to carceral systems, interdependence, and reimagining access as a political and relational act instead of a bureaucratic one (Piepzna, 2018).

[2] Sins Invalid is a performance project directed by differently abled artists of color. It has been foundational in articulating Disability Justice. Their work emphasizes body diversity, sexuality, and the lived experiences of multiply marginalized people (Sins Invalid, 2016).

Chapter 1: Introduction

> When I began school, because of my background, I felt very naïve. A lot of my interactions with my advisor fed into an imposter syndrome. I had a lot of setbacks with my mental health. I kept thinking… I'm treading water. I'm struggling to find a place to grasp the ground. (Avery, November 8, 2024)

Significance of the Study

This study draws from diverse SWDs enrolled at various urban-serving universities and colleges across the Midwestern United States. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of SWDs in higher education in metropolitan areas to inform universities and colleges of progressive pedagogical frameworks such as the UD principles for learning and instruction across diverse student populations to increase academic success and student retention rates. SWDs' experiences included their current higher education experience and their transition from high school to the university or college environment. High school SWDs are attending institutions of postsecondary education in rapidly increasing numbers, with their rate of college attendance more than doubling in the past twenty years.

Today, 10.8% of all students in postsecondary institutions are SWDs (Timmerman and Mulvihill, 2015). Of course, this number has since increased and will continue to do so. More alarming is that this recorded number is a modest underestimation of the actual number of differently abled students enrolled since students choose to not disclose their impairment(s) for a variety of reasons that I discuss in my analysis section (Hinz et al., 2017; Timmerman and Mulvihill, 2015). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023), 21% of undergraduate students and 11% of graduate students reported having a disability[3] during the 2019-2020 academic year. I provided the following descriptive statistics to highlight the diversity in demographics of differently abled students. In 2019-2020, the percentage of among undergraduate students who reported having a disability was 22% for women, 18% for men, and 54% for gender-fluid (nonbinary) students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). These statistics establish the urgency of institutional reform, but they also highlight the gap between access and genuine inclusion.

In the same year, the percentage of undergraduate students who reported having a disability by race/ethnicity was 18% for Black students; 21% for Hispanic (Latinx) students; 14% for Asian students; 22% for Pacific Islander students; 24% for American Indian/Alaska Native students; 25 % for students of two or more races, and 21% for non-Hispanic White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). While illuminating, these figures mask deeper structural exclusions that require a more expansive, grounded analytical frame. This project centers the unique perspectives of a diverse group of differently abled students to explore how life in higher education has been for them, focusing primarily on what has either served as a barrier or support system to their academic success and their dreamscape (i.e., aspirations) of what higher education should be like in the future. Moreover, this dissertation investigates how differently abled students at urban-serving universities experience, navigate, and resist academic ableism, and how UD frameworks may serve as a pathway toward more equitable learning spaces.

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[3] These percentages include disabilities defined with the following impairments reported: serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs; serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition; blindness or serious difficulty seeing; having deafness or serious difficulty hearing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

According to Devanda (2016), more than 50% of individuals with disabilities reside in urban and suburban areas globally, a population projected to rise to 1 billion, or approximately 15 to 20% of urban dwellers, by 2030[4]. Within this growing urban demographic, the proportion of differently abled students enrolled in HEIs continues to increase each year (Hitch et al., 2015; Moriña, 2017). Yet, despite these enrollment gains, there is not a corresponding increase in degree completion among SWDs. This gap is likely symptomatic of multiple interrelated issues, including a lack of adequate college preparation, questionable admissions practices, and the absence of comprehensive post-enrollment support systems for disabled students. Prior research further indicated that SWDs experience lower retention rates and are more likely to drop out compared to their nondisabled peers (Davies et al., 2013; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Moriña et al., 2015).

SWDs have long endured exclusion across multiple domains of public life, with education representing one of the most persistent and entrenched sites of marginalization (Berry, 2021; Booth, 2022; Dolmage, 2017; Madaus, 2011). While existing literature on UD in higher education offered a range of thematic insights (Devanda, 2016; Madaus, 2011), few studies centered the firsthand experiences of SWDs navigating the transition from secondary to post-secondary education. This dissertation builds upon and extends this body of work by examining the intersections between UD, disability studies, institutional ableism, and other structural -isms, including racism, classism, sexism, and queerphobia that collectively shape the educational trajectories of disabled students (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021).

Through in-depth interviews with a diverse group of SWDs attending urban-serving universities, this study found that institutional support remains uneven and often conditional,

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[4] Data sources were obtained from WHO & World Bank (2011). "World Report on Disability," WHO Press, Geneva, and "Urbanization | UNFA – United Nations Population Fund" (Devanda, 2016).

while faculty attitudes and rigid pedagogical structures frequently reproduce exclusion. Despite these barriers, students expressed resistance, adaptability, and a critical vision for more inclusive learning environments grounded in the principles of UD, UDL, and UDI.

Building on existing research regarding the success disparities among SWDs in higher education and the documented benefits of UDL, UDI, and UD, this study sought to explore how students themselves perceive and engage with these frameworks. The literature has yet to fully and systematically capture the intersectional experiences of SWDs, particularly those navigating multiple forms of marginalization, which this study aimed to address through participant narratives. A key rationale for including disabled students' high school experiences was to illuminate the disjuncture between K-12 disability accommodations and the comparatively limited support structures found in higher education. Understanding this transition is essential for grasping how systemic gaps contribute to inequitable outcomes, and overstanding it helps compel institutional stakeholders to move beyond symbolic gestures toward meaningful structural change. This project intentionally bridged these two educational contexts without losing sight of the central research questions, offering a more holistic understanding of the disabled student experience.

According to scholars studying ableism, higher education has long contributed to the social construction of disability as deviance, reinforcing stigmatization and exclusion; an issue that will be discussed in greater detail in the literature review (Arway, 2023; Dolmage, 2017). Historically, individuals with disabilities were confined to exclusionary institutions such as asylums, "residential schools for the feeble-minded," immigration stations, and quarantines (Dolmage, 2017). Put differently, the exclusionary practices of higher education throughout the twentieth century included relegating disabled individuals to systems of "lower education" to preserve a sense of elitism and prevent interaction between students with visible or suspected disabilities and their nondisabled peers. Because this period preceded widespread diagnosis and recognition of many invisible disabilities, such as ADHD and dyslexia, some students may have blended in, unrecognized, while others were systematically excluded.

Disability studies scholars have underscored the historical roots of exclusivity and segregation in higher education, both in physical spaces and in the social environment, where stigma continues to be reinforced through implicit and explicit ableist biases (Agenda, 2016; DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021; Dolmage, 2017). For this reason, it is important to clarify the scope of the term *disability*, both generally and in the context of higher education. The current literature operationalizes *exceptional students* (often referred to as differently abled students, or SWDs) as those who fall outside the normative range of development (Madaus et al., 2022). This dissertation draws upon the 14 federally recognized disability categories outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a framework for conceptualization. These categories include: (1) autism, (2) deaf-blindness, (3) deafness, (4) emotional disturbance, (5) hearing impairment, (6) intellectual disability, (7) multiple disabilities, (8) orthopedic impairment, (9) other health impairment, (10) specific learning disability, (11) speech or language impairment, (12) traumatic brain injury, (13) visual impairment, and (14) developmental delay (34 C.F.R. §300.8).

Unlike K-12 education, where IDEA protections mandate individualized support services, HEIs are not bound by the same legal requirements. As a result, many exceptional students enter college environments where support is minimal or inconsistently applied. These students may possess a wide range of abilities, unique learning needs, and distinct cognitive or behavioral traits. In other words, exceptional students, those often labeled as SWDs, may demonstrate extraordinary talents, divergent learning styles, and atypical developmental trajectories that remain insufficiently accommodated in postsecondary educational settings (Madaus et al., 2022).

Across multiple studies, the most significant barriers to success for students with SWDs in higher education included negative attitudes from educators and inadequate support from faculty and staff (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021; Hitch et al., 2015; Moriña, 2017). These challenges were not confined to a single region; rather, similar patterns have been observed globally. For instance, only 34.1% of Australian HEIs explicitly reference UDL or similarly inclusive instructional practices in their institutional policies; a trend that mirrors the inconsistent and often superficial commitment to UDL found in the United States and other countries (Hitch et al., 2015).

Despite these challenges, many differently abled students demonstrated resilience and offered nuanced critiques of ableist systems. They emphasized the importance of faculty accountability, UD principles, and culturally responsive practices that recognize the intersection of disability with race, class, gender, and sexuality. These findings highlight not just gaps in institutional practice but also a student-led vision for more equitable and inclusive academic environments. University faculty, student deans, and disability resource center staff also shed light on institutional barriers and suggestions for improved on-ramps for differently abled students, and students overall to increase retention rates.

My study revealed that SWDs in urban-serving universities encountered persistent structural and interpersonal barriers to meaningful inclusion. Participants consistently described a lack of proactive institutional support, limited understanding of disability among faculty, and inaccessible pedagogical approaches. Disclosure often came with risk, and accommodation, when granted, frequently failed to address the complexity of students' lived realities.

Scholarship on both overt and covert biases in education has produced a cohesive argument regarding the disproportionate impacts[5] students face across educational settings, from preschool through higher education (Davis, 2022; DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021). Several studies have specifically examined racial bias among educators, finding that both teachers and non-teachers exhibit statistically significant pro-White and anti-Black implicit and explicit biases. These patterns have been linked to the disproportionate labeling of non-White students as disabled. The persistence of such biases, despite the calls for racial equity in education, points to a broader structural issue that intensifies the challenges faced by multiply marginalized students (Starck et al., 2020).

Research exploring educator bias in early childhood, primary, and secondary education underscores the foundational barriers that SWDs, particularly those from racially marginalized backgrounds, may encounter long before entering college (Arway, 2023; Smith-Alexander, 2020). These formative experiences shape expectations, access, and outcomes for SWDs, and they often carry over into the postsecondary context. As Jones (2022) notes, "youth with disabilities already face bleaker post-secondary outcomes when compared to their peers without disabilities, such as higher unemployment and lower rates of post-secondary education" (p. 10).

While this dissertation did not directly measure implicit bias, it acknowledged implicit bias as a critical force embedded within higher education systems. Implicit bias, particularly when intertwined with other forms of oppression such as racism, classism, and queerphobia,

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[5] 40% of Black students are likely to be labeled with a disability. Black, Latinx, and Native American students all have higher risk-ratios for being labeled with a disability than White students. "There are both short and long-term impacts, specifically for students of color, because of the overrepresentation in special education programs" (Booth, 2022, p. 50).

contributes to the normalization of ableism and informs how disabled students are perceived, accommodated, and supported on campus. Understanding this context is essential to interpreting the structural and interpersonal challenges that emerged from participants' narratives. Therefore, it is significant to intertwine its presence among the collected data.

Moreover, the literature on both implicit and explicit biases corroborated various disability scholars' research that advocated cultural and disability awareness trainings and UD practices in HEIs due to exclusions from deep-rooted institutional discrimination towards SWDs and students of other marginalized identities (e.g., students of color) (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021; Jones, 2022). Supporting other disability studies of HEIs, Jones (2022) argued that supportive factors include: (a) personal experience, (b) disability training, (c) school training, and (d) rapport building. So, the overarching theory was that the provision of disability and school-specific training, along with personal experiences with disability and establishing a rapport with school staff, students, and families promoted interactions with and perceptions of the UDL and UDI frameworks to accommodate SWDs' varying and unique needs (Dean et al., 2017; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017). However, the UDL[6] framework is not restricted to accommodating only SWDs as it benefits the overall student population. Dolmage (2017) similarly described universal pedagogy as, "anyone can learn and, more broadly, suggesting that the university is the place to elevate society based on the education of all of its citizens, rather than a place to sort society based on the education of the privileged few" (p. 61). However, this quote did not speak directly to the principles of UD, the UDL, or the UDI which highlights the

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[6] According to Davies (2013), "UDL is the offspring of Universal Design (UD), a philosophy and set of principles pertaining to architecture and product design, whose own origin can be traced back to the disability rights movement of the 1970s, '80s, and especially the '90s following the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990; Center for Universal Design, 2012; Fair Housing Act, 1988; Institute for Human Centered Design, 2012; Rehabilitation Act, 1973)" (p. 195).

need for framing my planned research to bridge the gap between what appears as scholars' disconnected works. Dolmage's (2017) quote can also be interpreted by some as a notion that everyone should obtain a university degree, which was also not the premise of my study. However, it was useful to juxtapose what is deemed "universal" by some sources when academic ableism is brought into the larger conversation since Dolmage's (2017) book does have a designated space in the literature reviewed for the purpose of my dissertation. Nevertheless, studies suggested that developing/constructing universally inclusive HEIs with proactive measures will inevitably take a substantial and uncertain amount of time to complete (Goode, 2007; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

UDL/UDI frameworks starkly contrast with the current accommodation model of disability services discussed throughout the field of disability studies which is used in saturation throughout many universities and colleges that require SWDs to: (1) self-identify their impairment(s), (2) submit documentation of a diagnosis proving their impairment(s) to disability services, (3) ask for specific accommodations, (4) and wait for HEIs to implement accommodations to requesting SWDs (Davies et al., 2013; Jarus et al., 2023; Roberts, 2013). Most of the burden of SWDs having to take these steps can be alleviated by applying the UDL/UDI principles. The accommodation model of disability services stems from the medical model of disability that premises a disability as an individual problem that requires normalization or a cure (Black et al., 2015; Brown & Leigh, 2018; Goode, 2007; Indeed et al., 2015; Leake & Stodden, 2014; Long & Stabler, 2021; Madriaga, 2007; Mauldin & Brown, 2021; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

Another issue with the disability accommodation model is its assumption that SWDs *already* have adequate knowledge of their impairment(s) to make informed accommodation requests for *all* of their needs in the university setting (Coriale et al., 20212). This was problematic in terms of the transitionary phase from high school to postsecondary education where students are on their own regarding seeking out disability accommodations unlike their prior experience. Moreover, the medical model of disability exacerbates biases towards disability as a deviation from what is deemed or conceptualized as normal and functional unlike the social model of disability[7] that considers the disabling attitudinal, environmental, and social barriers that SWDs face (Indeed et al., 2015). Green's (2007) findings supported the social model of disability since the feelings of well-being among SWDs are negatively affected by public attitudes towards disability rather than the existence of impairments or disabilities alone. Similarly, Goode (2007) critiqued previous disability studies by arguing that, "early studies were predicated on a medical model as opposed to a social model of disability and much of the discourse of disability was constructed without engagement with people with disabilities themselves" (p. 35). This of course interconnected with the theme of the difficulty that SWDs encounter when transitioning from high school. Policies and programs such as IEPs and 504 plans that are in place abruptly disappear when attending universities and colleges.

Qualitative studies illuminate unique experiences of participants with self-disclosed disabilities at urban serving HEIs (Kendall, 2016; Mauldin & Brown, 2021; Smith-Alexander, 2020). SWDs' responses collectively spoke on having to spend much more time on assignments, exams, readings, and note-taking when compared to their non-disabled peers (Davies et al., 2013; Moriña, 2017). Moreover, notwithstanding improvements in the provision of Disability Justice in higher education, there remain areas needing closer attention/scrutinization such as

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[7] "The social model, postulates that society, and in this case the university, generates the barriers that hinder the inclusion of university SWDs; arguing that the practices, attitudes and policies of the social context generate the barriers and/or supports that influence access and participation" (Moriña, 2017, p. 5).

providing emotional support for SWDs (Berry, 2021; Coriale et al., 2012; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Disability Justice was developed by disabled activists of color and can be defined as a framework that aims to increase equitable access for individuals with disabilities and recognizing the connections between ableism and other forms of marginalization (Inkumsah, 2023). Also, studies found that SWDs reported the inefficiency of a "one size fits all" response to accommodating their disabilities due to its generalized approach thus having a negative overall effect[8] (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Kendall, 2016). To clarify, the attempt at a "one size fits all" approach does not mean it is universally designed. On the contrary, it is quite the opposite. Due to the range of disabilities people have, one size does not fit all. Therefore, instruction must be customizable and flexible to render adjustment and sufficient accommodation to each person's unique and individual needs. The goal of UDL is not to change the student, but it is to change the design of the classroom environment, instructional approach, and lesson plans to accommodate the learner (Dwyer-Kuntz, 2022). It is not immediately obvious instruction that is "customizable and flexible" and thus able to accommodate "each person's unique and individual needs is something that can be achieved through "design of classroom environment, instructional approach, and lesson plans." Therefore, I provide specific examples of what I suggest in my discussion section as it is difficult to understand how the former could be achieved without essentially providing an individualized program of study for each student with an impairment. Rather than individualized instruction, UDL's strength lies in scalable flexibility by embedding optionality into the course design upfront so that all learners including SWDs can navigate academic content without requiring retrofitted accommodations.

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[8] Overall, research suggests that students' learning needs must be addressed directly and also individually instead of merely through curricular and setting augmentations (Black et al., Davies et al., 2013; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Moriña, 2017).

In accordance with the first principle of UDL, it suggested that provisions of multiple means of representation be made so that every student can comprehend and engage with the content. For example, this can mean the utilization of an array of multimedia such as videos, images, audio, and text formats. Also, it can mean the provision of various ways for differently abled students to interact with content, including hands-on activities, games, and simulations (Scholl & Scholl, 2024).

UDL principles extend to suggest the provision of multiple means of action and expression. This second principle provides students the opportunity to engage with content differently by way of music, art, drama, and movement. Further, this principle also makes it possible for differently abled students to express themselves by way of singing, speaking, and writing (Scholl & Scholl, 2024).

The third central principle of UDL is to provide multiple means of engagement. This principle catalyzes differently abled students' motivations and interests through utilization of both relevant and exciting content while also providing opportunities to participate in active learning. The above-mentioned three central principles supply a foundation for every UDL practice and assist in ensuring that all students can both access and comprehend the content (Scholl & Scholl, 2024).

When it comes to customizing instructions, there are a few things to keep in mind. For instance, once students' needs have been assessed, instruction can be customized to meet their individual needs. This includes incorporating different representations of the content, different methods for students to interact with the content, and different ways for students to express themselves (Scholl & Scholl, 2024).

Many scholars have incorporated the utilization of the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to attempt gauging bias that current and pre-service teachers have towards/against students of color (Charlesworth et al., 2023; Chin et al., 2020; DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021; Whatley, 2018). However, there was a gap in the previous literature on measuring the implicit and explicit biases of current and future educators against SWDs and disability in general (Chiu et al, 2022). Part of my interview protocol asks SWDs about how faculty, staff, and peers respond to their impairments and overall perceived support from them, and this unveiled some aspect of perceived attitudinal beliefs. Overall, surveys indicated that educators are hesitant to disclose (i.e., self-reporting bias) that they hold biases against demographical outgroups such as racial minorities or individuals with disabilities in that they fear being labeled as ableist (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021). Despite this reluctance, recent studies revealed a link between educators' negative biases and the lack of their cultural awareness training thus contributing to SWDs hindered academic performance, anxiety, and the non-disclosure of their disability status due to SWDs' fear of stigmatizing attitudes of others and campus isolation (Arway, 2023; DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021; Kendall, 2016; Madriaga, 2007; Whitford & Emerson, 2019). However, the IAT is questioned as to how effective and accurate it is[9] (Carlsson & Agerström, 2016).

Still, themes across the literature were intersected by their recommendations for future research that aligned with the intended trajectory of my own research agenda in this dissertation. While many quantitative methods have captured more generalizable inferences, the possibilities of capturing in-depth accounts of SWDs were excluded. In past research, DisCrit theory has

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[9] For example, Carlsson & Agerström (2016) stated that, "in a subsequent meta-analysis, Oswald, Mitchell, Blanton, Jaccard and Tetlock (2013) examined the predictive validity of the IAT in the specific context of ethnic and racial discrimination. They found a smaller overall correlation equivalent of $r = 0.14$ and thus concluded that the IAT is a poor predictor of discrimination" (p. 278).

been used to analyze SWDs since many disabled students come from multiple marginalized identities and backgrounds; examples included Black SWDs subjugated to both racial and ableist biases (Whatley, 2018). Ressa's (2023) narrative illustrated how intersecting marginalized identities intensify exclusion, particularly when race, gender, and disability coalesce. Moreover, contemporary disability bias is both overt and covert as observed in the policies of the abling and Whitening of higher education. Thus, ability and White ideology operate together to undermine disability rights through the institutionalization of ableism and racism in American HEIs (Berry, 2021; Dolmage, 2017; Ressa, 2023; Whatley, 2018). White ideology or Whiteness is conceptualized with nuance. But, in this case it referred to an institutional system of identity, status, and power that favors White individuals over other marginalized bodies (Meier, 2024). However, many other isms are included in systemic oppressive practices such as sexism and queerphobia which should not be overlooked in education, and they are sample criteria in my participant pool.

Research on educators' perceptions of minority students suggested a link between implicit bias and the disproportionate recommendation and placement of Black and Latinx (Hispanic) students into special education (SE) programs when compared to White students[10] that has a myriad of social and academic impacts[11] (Arway, 2023; Davis, 2022; DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021; Grindal et al., 2019; Jeffers, 2021; Maurice, 2023; Zhong, 2023). However, these studies were not limited to the overrepresentation of students of color in SE inequity but also included disparities in discipline strategies through a lens of intersectionality across race,

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[10] "In 2010, Black students comprised 15.4% of special education students while 13.6% were White; for 2019 the numbers were 16.3% (Black) and 14.1% (White), respectively. This illustrated an approximate 2% difference between the two groups when compared for those years, and the spread was approximately the same for all years in between" (Maurice, 2023).

[11] However, one study examined the disproportionality of Asian American students in SE due to model minority stereotypes in education, and the neglect of Asian American students who require accommodation services (Zhong, 2023).

socioeconomic status, gender, and ability (Maximoff, 2020; Redfield, 2012; Romero et al., 2020; Rynders, 2019). Justifying an intersectional lens to study experiences of SWDs with educator bias and the transition to higher education, Arway posited that Black students are overrepresented in impairment categories such as learning disabilities and emotional disturbance while they are also underrepresented in both speech and language accommodation services (2023). These studies highlight how ableism functions not just through individual attitudes but via institutional structures and norms.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods used in each area of thematic interest rendered an intellectual embarkment into novel academic terrain in urban disability studies[12] (Berry, 2021; DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021; Madriaga, et al., 2011; Mauldin & Brown, 2021). Different studies on educator bias used similar conceptual frameworks to guide their research questions such as critical race theory (CRT), DisCrit Theory, social exclusion theory, the research equity mindset framework, and chaos theory (C. Revels-Turner, 2022; Connelly, 2021; Corbie-Archey, 2022; DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021). This study draws on a constellation of interrelated theoretical frameworks such as Disability Justice, Sans Invalid, Crip Theory, intersectionality, CRT, DisCrit, and theorizations of structural ableism. Intersectionality serves as a foundational lens, underscoring how multiply marginalized identities mold differently abled students' educational trajectories. CRT and DisCrit provide critical tools to investigate how race, racism, and ableism co-create experiences of oppression in educational systems. Together, these frameworks are synthesized through a constructivist grounded theory approach that allows emergent themes to surface from interviewees' lived experiences instead of deductively

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[12] Mauldin and Brown (2021) posit that, "no sociology programs specialize in disability (a review of the ASA website shows that even the Section on Disability in Society refers sociologists and students to interdisciplinary disability studies programs), and this in turn leads to a diminished pipeline of graduate students in sociology that study disability" (p. 480).

imposing a top-town theory. This way, conceptual insight builds inductively while staying anchored in systemic critic.

To better understand the issues of educator bias (e.g., ableism), inaccessibility (such as the absence of UD, UDL, and UDI), and the complex transition from high school to higher education, Smith-Alexander (2020) emphasized the need to examine SWDs postsecondary experiences through an intersectional lens. While these guiding conceptual frameworks, including intersectionality, critical disability studies, and UDL, offer valuable scaffolding for the study, this research is grounded primarily in a constructivist grounded theory approach. This methodology prioritizes the voices of participants, allowing theoretical insights to emerge inductively from their lived experiences, rather than being imposed a priori. The integration of these frameworks enriches the analysis by situating grounded themes within broader systems of oppression, including ableism, racism, and sexism.[13]. To conclude, my research aims not only to illuminate experiences within higher education but also to examine how SWDs retroactively reflect on their high school journeys and how those earlier experiences shape their transitions into postsecondary spaces. Each theme in this review draws on interdisciplinary scholarship to interrogate the historical marginalization of SWDs across the educational pipeline, from secondary to postsecondary education. This marginalization has been perpetuated by layered, intersecting biases that manifest both implicitly and explicitly in classroom environments, contributing to persistent disparities in academic achievement. As Starck et al. (2020) contend, educational institutions often function as “microcosms of society rather than as antidotes to inequality” (p. 281), making it imperative to interrogate their role in sustaining, rather than dismantling, structural inequities. Further interconnecting themes, Moriña (2017) opined:

> Inclusive education is considered a basic human right and the basis for a fair and equitable society. Inclusive education focuses on the need to provide a high-quality educational response for all students, increasing the practices that lead to full participation. Within the inclusive philosophy, diversity, and differences in social and cultural origin. These differences are seen as a benefit rather than a problem. The belief is that all students, without exception, should benefit from high-quality learning and enjoy full participation in the educational system. Inclusive education was developed and implemented within educational settings prior to higher education. However, for some years, inclusive principles and practices have been making inroads into university agendas, policies, and teaching and learning practices. In the context of higher education, there is still a long way to go before we can claim full inclusion, and many challenges must be addressed to align educational practices with the principles of inclusive education and the UDL principles. (p. 3)

Research Questions

Research Question # 1: How do college students with disabilities navigate the processes of disability disclosure and self-identification in higher education settings?[14]

Research Question #2: How do SWDs describe systemic ableism in relation to faculty attitudes, accommodation procedures, and institutional responsibility?[15]

Research Question #3: In what ways do race, gender, sexuality, and other intersecting identities shape SWDs' experiences and campus navigation?[16]

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[14] This directly relates to themes of 'Navigating Disability Disclosure and Evolving Disability Self-Identification'.

[15] This research question relates to the themes of 'Systemic Ableism in Higher Ed', 'Accessibility & Accommodation Processes', 'Faculty Competency & Institutional Responsibility', and 'Gaps in Institutional Support'.

[16] This research question is addressed by the themes, 'Additive Identity & Academic Spaces', 'Racialized Experiences of Disability', 'Gendered Dimensions of Disability', 'Queer Identity & Disability Experience'.

Research Question #4: How do SWDs describe the transition from K-12 to postsecondary education, and what supports or challenges characterize that shift?[17]

Research Question #5: How do conversational partners envision Universal Design frameworks (UD, UDL, UDI) as interventions for dismantling academic ableism and creating proactive pathways to success?[18]

Preliminary Lines of Inquiry (Formerly Dubbed 'Hypotheses')

Although grounded theory does not rely on formal hypotheses in the traditional quantitative sense, this study was informed by a set of guiding assumptions and sensitizing concepts derived from prior research and theoretical insights. These assumptions helped shape the direction of inquiry while remaining open to being challenged or expanded upon by the data.

1. Differently abled students experience significant barriers in higher education due to the limited implementation of UD across campus environments.
2. The impact of inaccessibility and ableism in higher education varies based on students' intersecting identities, including race, gender identity, and socioeconomic status.
3. The absence of UDL and UDI practices negatively influences academic outcomes for many differently abled students, particularly in both traditional and distance-learning formats.
4. There is a lack of institutional support for differently abled students, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds, during the transition from secondary to postsecondary education.

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[17] This research question addressed the following themes: 'Transition Challenges into Higher Ed', 'Legacy Infrastructure as a Barrier', and 'Physical & Digital Accessibility Barriers'.

[18] This research question addresses the themes, 'Systemic Ableism in Higher Ed', 'Faculty Competency & Institutional Responsibility', Physical & Digital Accessibility Barriers', 'Gaps in Institutional Support', and 'Existing Institutional Supports'.

5. Institutional resources and staffing capacity significantly influence how well differently abled students are supported, with inequities often magnified across identity lines.
6. Faculty and staff often lack the training and infrastructure needed to implement inclusive pedagogy and accessible practices that align with UD principles.

These initial assumptions were used as analytic starting points but did not constrain data collection or analysis. The grounded theory approach allowed for emergent themes to challenge, refine, or complicate these expectations in ways that reflect the lived experiences of the study's participants.

Research Problem

Federal policies such as the ADA of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 in the United States, as well as international protections like the UK Special Educational Needs and Disability Act of 2001, explicitly prohibit discrimination SWDs in HEIs. Despite these legal safeguards, a growing body of research highlights the persistent structural and cultural barriers that continue to marginalize SWDs, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities such as race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status.

These challenges are especially evident in urban-serving institutions, which often enroll significant numbers of students from historically underserved and oppressed communities. These include disabled students of color, first-generation students, and LGBTQ+ students. While such institutions are well-positioned to support diverse student populations, many lack the infrastructure, training, and cultural responsiveness necessary to implement inclusive practices effectively. This gap impacts both the transition from high school to higher education and the provision of accommodation once students are enrolled (Taylor et al., 2010).

Importantly, meeting legal requirements does not always result in meaningful inclusion. As Dolmage (2017) explains, “Academic ableism is the idea that disability is constructed as deviance from an able-bodied norm, and that such a construction is not only prevalent in higher education but foundational to its structure” (p. 5). This observation reveals that the challenges facing SWDs are not solely a matter of unmet accommodations but also stem from deeply rooted norms, pedagogical practices, and institutional cultures that continue to position disability as a deficit rather than a valued form of diversity. Carlson examined how historical classifications like “feeblemindedness” were shaped by gendered and institutional power dynamics, and how these classifications contributed to systemic oppression. She also advocated for a feminist analysis of cognitive disability to inform future scholarship and activism.

My research examined the impact of ableism on SWDs across their secondary school experiences and during their transition into higher education. Through qualitative interviews, I gathered retrospective narratives that illuminated how participants' intersecting identities, such as disability, race, gender identity, age, and socioeconomic status, influenced their educational journeys. The study aimed to construct a student-centered account of higher education experiences, focusing on the perspectives of SWDs rather than those of institutional actors or so-called experts. However, I also interviewed faculty and staff to capture a cohesive picture using different sets of interview protocol questions, respectively. I am not just building on past work; I am reframing it through lived experience and analysis.

The research intentionally centered the voices of students in exploring how they perceived and navigated elements such as pedagogical structures, the attitudes of educators and peers, and the relational dynamics within academic spaces. Particular attention was given to the transactional dimensions of student life, including interactions with faculty, access to accommodations, and the power of imbalances embedded within these relationships. Theoretical and methodological approaches were informed by existing studies on educator bias toward SWDs (C. Revels-Turner, 2022; DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021; Gilbert, 2023), which provided a foundation for framing the inquiry and situating participant experiences within broader patterns of systemic inequity.

Limitations of the study included the potential for recall bias, especially among participants who did not enter college directly after high school, such as those who joined the workforce or experienced extended educational gaps. Additionally, the sample did not capture the perspectives of SWDs who dropped out of secondary education or those who opted not to matriculate to higher education due to the barriers encountered in high school. They do include SWDs who dropped out of high school and earned their GED prior to matriculation to college. The themes and concepts drawn from the literature offered a critical foundation for shaping the research questions and guiding the inquiry. By cross-referencing previous studies and synthesizing interdisciplinary insights, this study contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the persistent inequities facing SWDs, particularly within urban-serving institutions (Madriaga, 2011).

Central Thesis Statement

This dissertation was grounded in the understanding that varying types of impairments, both hidden and visible, were best examined through the perspectives of differently abled students, alongside insights from faculty and AAC staff sampled across different urban serving institutions in the Midwest region. The research explored how these groups perceived the implementation of institutional frameworks such as UDL and UDI in HEIs (Black et al., 2014; Black et al., 2015; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Moriña et al., 2015). The study further assumed that equitable learning strategies could be more effectively informed by the lived experiences of SWDs who had directly encountered ableism, as well as by the structural and pedagogical perspectives of campus professionals who engage in accessibility work. These narratives and professional insights helped illuminate how ableism persists within institutional culture and practice, a phenomenon rooted in historical and systemic exclusion, which is further explored in the literature review (Berry, 2021; Black et al., 2014; Black et al., 2015; Brown & Leigh, 2020; Dolmage, 2017).

Keywords
Students with disabilities, higher education, universal design (UD), universal design for learning (UDL), universal design of instruction (UDI)) inclusive education, academic ableism, disability justice, grounded theory, stigma, differently abled students, urban serving universities and colleges

Definitions

To establish clarity and consistency throughout the study, this section elaborates key legal, theoretical, and institutional terms that shaped the scope and focus of the research. These definitions were critical in framing interview questions, analyzing participant narratives, and contextualizing institutional policies and practices. Grounding these terms in both federal law and scholarly literature ensured that the study remained aligned with current legal standards while also critically examining their limitations in practice. What follows is a concise overview of the major terms that inform this research.

Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

In the context of higher education, two primary federal laws govern the rights of differently abled students and the provision of accommodations: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Public colleges and universities, as well as private institutions, are subject to Titles II and III of the ADA. Additionally, any institution receiving federal funding, regardless of whether it is public or private, must comply with Section 504. The standards outlined in Section 504 and Title II of the ADA are functionally equivalent and are expected to be applied consistently across HEIs.

These laws prohibit discrimination based on disability and protect individuals who meet one or more of the following criteria: (1) having a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; (2) having a documented history of such an impairment; or (3) being perceived as having such an impairment (29 U.S.C. § 794(9)(B); 42 U.S.C. § 12101(1)). Under these provisions, differently abled students are entitled to reasonable accommodations that support their full access to and participation in academic programs (42 U.S.C. § 12112(b)(5)(A); 34 C.F.R. §§ 104.3(l)(1), 104.12). However, institutions are not obligated to provide accommodations that would impose an undue burden or fundamentally alter the nature of a program. In all cases, students must be otherwise qualified to meet essential program requirements, with or without accommodation (42 U.S.C. § 12112(a); 34 C.F.R. § 104.3(k)(3)) (Payne-Tsoupros, 2020).

Constructivist Grounded Theory

A qualitative methodology that emphasizes reflexive interpretation and co-construction of meaning between researcher and participants, rather than the discovery of an objective truth (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory is not a singular procedure. It encompasses both a flexible and iterative process which incorporates several key components:

Simultaneous Data Collection and Analysis

Grounded theory data may be collected through interviews, documents, and observations. Analysis commences immediately instead of other methods of analysis occurring after all the data has been collected. This recursive process allows early insights to inform future rounds of data gathering (Birks & Mills, 2015).

Coding and Categorization

The data analysis continues throughout multiple coding stages. Initial (i.e., open coding) decompartmentalizes data to separate meaningful pieces (i.e., units). Then, axial coding examines relationships between the units. Lastly, selective coding synthesizes said units (i.e., categories) into a coherent theoretical structure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Constant Comparison

Throughout this process, the data are continuously compared to identify recurring themes, differences, and patterns. Moreover, this stage sharpens categories while refining emerging theoretical insights (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Theoretical Sampling

While the analysis progresses, new data is collected to explore some emerging concepts or to address current gaps within your developing theory. Therefore, this purposive sampling method is guided by the developing analytic deficits of the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Birks & Mills, 2015).

Memo Writing

Another stage of conducting grounded theory is memo writing, a core analytical practice of the framework. The primary purpose of writing memos serves to document developing thoughts, connectivity between the codes, and conceptual reflections, altogether crystallizing theory (Charmaz, 2006).

Theory Development

Ultimately, the sole purpose is rendering a theory that is grounded in the data, capable of *explaining* the studied phenomena, and applicable (i.e., transferrable) to similar contexts. In this dissertation, the grounded theory provided a scaffold to interpret how differently abled students experience, navigate, and resist structural barriers such as ableism in higher education (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Disability

This study drew upon the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to conceptualize disability, due to the Act's strong relevance to the intersection of disability and education. IDEA outlines fourteen categories of disability that are recognized for the provision of special education services at the K-12 level. This framework was especially appropriate for examining the transition from secondary to postsecondary education, as many differently abled students who received services under IDEA in high school may encounter differing levels of recognition or support in higher education settings.

The IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) categories include Autism, Deaf-Blindness, Deafness, Developmental Delay, Emotional Disturbance, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Visual Impairment including blindness (Bleak & Abernathy, 2022). Utilizing this classification helped maintain continuity between participants' high school experiences and their subsequent navigation of college environments. In this dissertation, disability is understood primarily through a social model lens, with recognition of chronic illness, neurodivergence, and mental health conditions as valid disability identities. This framing resists deficit-oriented definitions and emphasizes systemic barriers rather than individual impairment (Oliver, 1996).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that examines how overlapping social identities, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability, interact to produce distinct and compounded forms of discrimination or privilege. Originally developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to address the legal invisibility of Black women in antidiscrimination law, intersectionality has since been widely applied across disciplines to understand how systems of power operate simultaneously and interdependently.

In the context of this study, intersectionality was used to interpret how SWDs navigated higher education while also managing other marginalized identities. This framework was especially useful in illuminating how ableism, when magnified by racism, sexism, classism, or other forms of systemic oppression, shaped students' educational experiences. Further, it provided a critical lens through which participants' narratives could be understood not as isolated incidents, but as the outcome of interlocking structural forces.

Ableism

Ableism refers to a system of oppression that assigns value to individuals based on socially constructed standards of normalcy, intelligence, productivity, and physical or cognitive ability. Payne-Tsoupros (2020) defines it as "a system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence and productivity" (p. 178). These ideals are historically rooted in broader structures of capitalism, colonialism, eugenics, and anti-Blackness, all of which have shaped who is seen as worthy of full participation in society, including within educational institutions.

In the context of higher education, ableism manifests through exclusionary pedagogies, inaccessible physical and digital environments, and implicit biases among faculty, staff, and peers. For this study, ableism served as both a conceptual and analytic lens for interpreting how differently abled students experienced institutional and interpersonal forms of marginalization. It also helped frame the persistence of discriminatory norms despite the presence of formal disability policies and accommodations.

Academic Ableism

This dissertation provides a scholarly rationale for including 'academic ableism' as a central analytic concept within a qualitative dissertation on disabled students’ unique experiences. It was designed to address concerns from quantitatively oriented readers, specifically contextualizing academic ableism with the goal of eventual publication in empirical, peer-reviewed research.

Academic ableism refers to the structural and cultural practices in higher education that marginalize people with disabilities through assumptions of normalcy, productivity, and intellectual capability. Dolmage (2017) defined academic ableism as the ways in which universities reinforce able-bodied, neurotypical standards by way of admissions, grading, classroom participation norms, and teaching practices. Academic ableism simply refers to the structural privileging of normative bodyminds and performance expectations in educational systems. It includes institutional policies, pedagogical practices, and cultural assumptions that marginalize disabled students (Dolmage, 2017).

Although rooted in critical disability studies, academic ableism is increasingly supported by quantitative research. Lindsay and Fuentes (2022), in a systematic review of academic professionals with disabilities, found consistent evidence of ableist practices that hinder promotion, disclosure, and inclusion. Additionally, a 2022 survey published in the Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability found that less than 35% of students who qualify for accommodations disclose their disability, a measurable outcome of institutional climate (Newman et al., 2022).

Moreover, studies using national datasets such as NPSAS (National Postsecondary Student Aid Study) and NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) demonstrated disparities in retention and graduation rates for differently abled students, even when controlling for SES, GPA, and institution type (Raue & Lewis, 2011; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). These disparities highlighted the systemic nature of barriers.

Grounded theory privileges emergent insights from lived experiences. Across interviews in this study, patterns of institutional neglect, faculty microaggressions, and inaccessible pedagogy repeatedly surfaced, aligning with the core tenets of academic ableism. To omit the term (academic ableism) would risk masking the systemic dimensions of disability oppression, thus reducing complex interactions to individual failures or oversights.

Acknowledging academic ableism, like other systemic oppressions (e.g., institutional racism or sexism), bridges the gap between personal narratives and structural critique. It is both theoretically robust and empirically grounded given my data collection and analytical inferences. Its inclusion strengthens, not weakens, the methodological and interpretive rigor of this dissertation, particularly when engaging intersectional (e.g., urbanist educators) and sociological audiences.

Universal Design (UD)

UD is a conceptual and architectural framework that originated in the field of design and engineering to promote environments that are inherently accessible to all people, regardless of ability, age, or background. In other words, it serves as a philosophical ideal of accessibility for everyone across a broad spectrum of different abilities among the population. The Center for UD at North Carolina State University (1997) defines it as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”

Although UD began in the context of physical spaces, its principles have since been adapted across educational, technological, and policy domains. In this study, UD served as a foundational concept for understanding how inclusive learning environments can be proactively created, rather than retroactively modified through accommodations. UD emphasizes equitable use, flexibility, simplicity, and perceptible information, principles that are especially relevant to addressing the needs of differently abled students in both classroom and campus settings.

Drawing on UD, the study examined not only the physical or structural barriers students faced, but also how institutional planning, teaching practices, and service design either supported or hindered equitable participation for SWDs. Simply put, UD is a design framework focused on creating environments usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation (Center for Universal Design, 1997).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL is an educational framework developed to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all individuals by anticipating and addressing learner variability. Rooted in the principles of UD, UDL was developed by CAST (Center for Applied Special Technology) and emphasizes proactive curriculum design that reduces barriers to learning while promoting accessibility, engagement, and equity.

UDL is structured around three core principles: (1) providing multiple means of engagement to tap into learners' interests and motivation; (2) offering multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge; and (3) using multiple means of action and expression to allow learners to demonstrate what they know in different ways (CAST, 2018).

Within the context of this study, UDL served as a critical lens for examining how institutional efforts, or the lack thereof, to implement inclusive instructional strategies impacted differently abled students. Participants' experiences were analyzed considering how well higher education environments aligned with UDL principles and whether such environments fostered flexibility, autonomy, and a sense of belonging. The UDL framework was particularly relevant to evaluating the gaps between institutional intent and the actual classroom realities faced by SWDs. In a nutshell, UDL guides the design of inclusive curricula by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression (CAST, 2018).

Universal Design of Instruction (UDI)

UDI extends the principles of UD to the realm of college teaching and course design. UDI is a pedagogical approach that seeks to create inclusive learning environments by proactively designing instructional materials, assessments, and classroom interactions to be accessible to the broadest range of learners, without requiring retroactive accommodations.

UDI integrates the physical and cognitive access principles of UD with the instructional strategies of UDL, combining attention to classroom accessibility, inclusive communication, and learner diversity. According to Scott, McGuire, and Shaw (2003), UDI is guided by a set of principles that include equitable use, flexibility in use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, and low physical and cognitive effort, among others.

In this study, UDI was used as a framework for understanding how instructors designed, or failed to design, their courses to accommodate diverse learners from the outset. Participants' narratives, particularly those of differently abled students, were interpreted in relation to how teaching practices either aligned with or contradicted the core tenets of UDI. This framework provided a valuable basis for exploring the relationship between instructional design and students' experiences of inclusion, exclusion, or conditional belonging within higher education environments.

Students with Disabilities

SWDs are individuals enrolled in educational institutions who experience physical, cognitive, sensory, psychological, or neurological impairments that may substantially limit one or more major life activities. These impairments can be visible or invisible, permanent or episodic, and vary widely in how they affect learning and participation in academic environments. For the purposes of this study, the terms “SWDs” and “differently abled students” reflects students who self-identify as having a disability, whether formally documented through a disability resource center or informally recognized through their lived experiences of navigating educational barriers.

This definition is intentionally broad to acknowledge that many students who face disability-related challenges may not pursue formal accommodations, either due to stigma, lack of awareness, institutional barriers, or the burdens associated with disclosure. As such, the study includes the narratives of students who had received disability accommodations, those who had not, and those who were unsure about their eligibility or diagnosis. Recognizing the diversity of disability experiences was essential for understanding how intersecting forms of oppression, such as ableism, racism, classism, and sexism, shaped students' access, belonging, and academic outcomes in higher education.

Disability Justice

Disability justice is a framework and social movement that expands beyond legal rights-based approaches to disability and centers the leadership, voices, and needs of those most marginalized within disabled communities. Coined in 2005 by a collective of BIPOC, queer, and disabled activists, including members of the performance project Sins Invalid, disability justice recognizes that ableism does not operate in isolation but is deeply intertwined with systems of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

Unlike traditional disability rights frameworks that often prioritize individual access within predominantly white, middle-class, and physically disabled narratives, disability justice emphasizes collective access, interdependence, and liberation for all bodies and minds. It calls attention to the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and economic status shape disabled people's experiences and access to care, education, and dignity.

In the context of this study, disability justice served as a critical framework for analyzing how institutional responses to disability in higher education either reinforced or resisted dominant structures of exclusion. It also informed how participant narratives were interpreted in relation to broader questions of equity, autonomy, and systemic transformation.

Since the first principle of Disability Justice is *intersectionality*, it is imperative to include its definition in application to this proposal. Berne and others state, "We know that each person has multiple identities, and that each identity can be a site of privilege or oppression. The mechanical workings of oppression and how they output shift depending upon the characteristics of any given institutional or interpersonal interaction; the very experience of disability itself is being shaped by race, gender, class, gender expression, historical moment, relationship to colonization, and more (p. 227, 2018)."

Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit Theory)

Disability Critical Race Theory (i.e., DisCrit) is an interdisciplinary framework that merges the insights of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies to examine how racism and ableism operate in interlocking and mutually reinforcing ways. Developed by Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013), DisCrit challenges the dominant narratives that treat race and disability as separate, isolated categories. Instead, it foregrounds the ways in which structures of power pathologize and marginalize individuals, particularly students of color with disabilities, through educational, legal, and medical systems.

DisCrit is rooted in a commitment to intersectionality and explicitly critiques how whiteness, normativity, and able-bodiedness are upheld as standards in educational institutions. It centers the voices and lived experiences of those who occupy both racialized and disabled subject positions, arguing that these perspectives are crucial for understanding the full scope of systemic oppression.

In this study, DisCrit served as a critical lens for analyzing participant narratives in relation to institutional policies, classroom practices, and interpersonal dynamics. It provided a theoretical foundation for understanding how multiply marginalized differently abled students encountered barriers in both secondary and higher education settings.

The Social Model of Disability and the Medical Model of Disability

Contemporary debates within disability research often hinge on two dominant conceptual frameworks: the social model and the medical model of disability. The medical model conceptualizes disability primarily as an individual deficit or impairment, viewing the source of difficulty as residing within the person rather than in their environment. This perspective tends to emphasize diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation, thereby locating both the problem and the solution within the body or mind of the individual (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). In doing so, the medical model neglects broader structural and societal contributors to disablement, such as inaccessibility, exclusion, and prejudice.

In contrast, the social model of disability emerged from disability rights activism and critical scholarship, including feminist-informed research, as a counterpoint to the limitations of the medical model (Thomas, 2012). The social model posits that disability is not an inherent personal shortcoming but rather the result of systemic barriers, social exclusion, and discriminatory practices that hinder full participation in society. It shifts attention from "fixing" the individual to transforming societal structures, policies, and attitudes to be more inclusive.

This distinction remains a foundational concern in the evolving subfield of the sociology of disability, which continues to grapple with how best to conceptualize and research disability. Mauldin and Brown (2021) note the absence of formalized disability specialization within sociology graduate programs and argue that this gap contributes to a limited pipeline of scholars equipped to engage critically with disability as a sociological issue.

Recent scholarship calls for a more reflexive, participatory approach in disability research, particularly within sociology (Jones, 2022). This includes recognizing disabled individuals as experts of their own experiences, incorporating cultural and community-based knowledge, and practicing methodological reflexivity, such as researchers disclosing their own positionality and lived experiences of disability. As Denhart (2008) argues, the integration of these practices is essential for capturing the complex social dimensions of disability and for resisting research frameworks that marginalize or erase disabled voices.

Urban Areas

The terms *urban* and *metropolitan areas* are frequently used in educational and sociological research to describe geographic areas characterized by high population density, concentrated infrastructure, and complex social and institutional networks. In the context of this study, *urban-serving* or *metropolitan* institutions refer to colleges and universities located in densely populated areas that often serve racially, ethnically, and economically diverse student populations. These institutions are typically situated within large cities or metropolitan regions and are distinguished by their proximity to local government systems, urban school districts, and regional industries (Arum et al., 2011; Kantor & Lowe, 2013).

Urban institutions often face distinct challenges, including underfunding, political pressures, and heightened accountability demands, while simultaneously serving as critical access points to higher education for historically marginalized communities (Harris, Bensimon, & Bishop, 2010). These environments are shaped by systemic inequalities, such as racial segregation, gentrification, and economic stratification, that influence the educational trajectories of differently abled students and other minoritized groups.

In this study, the term 'urban-serving university' is used to emphasize the institutional role of higher education in responding to local social inequities, particularly for students navigating intersecting forms of oppression such as ableism, racism, and classism.

Definition of Sociodemographic Terms

Agender

An individual who feels an absence of gender or does not self-identify with any gender (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015; Human Rights Campaign [HRC], n.d.).

Asexual

An individual who experiences no or little sexual attraction towards other people. Asexuality sits in a spectrum that might include individuals who experience attraction romantically without having attraction sexually (GLAAD, n.d.; National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, 2020).

Bisexual

An individual who is sexually, romantically, or emotionally attracted to individuals from one or more gender identity groups (APA, 2015; GLAAD, n.d.).

Gay

An individual who is sexually, romantically, or emotionally attracted towards individuals belonging to the same gender identity, usually a term used for the description of men, but it also broadly applied to other genders (GLAAD, n.d.).

Heterosexual (i.e., Straight)

An individual who is sexually, romantically, or emotionally attracted to individuals from a different gender identity (APA, 2015).

Lesbian

A woman who is sexually, romantically, or emotionally attracted to other women (GLAAD, n.d.).

Pansexual

An individual who is sexually, romantically, or emotionally attracted to individuals notwithstanding their gender expression or identity (HRC, n.d.; GLAAD, n.d.).

Queer

This is an umbrella term used to describe gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation that fall outside of heteronormativity. It has been historically derogatory but has since undergone reclamation by many from LGBTQ+ communities (Jagose, 1996; GLAAD, n.d.).

Questioning

This is a term for individuals who are unsure or exploring their sexual orientation or gender.

Transgender

This is an umbrella term used for individuals having a gender identity that differs from the sex that they were assigned at birth (APA, 2015).

Nonbinary

An individual whose gender identity does not align in traditional groups of either female or male. Included are identities such as genderfluid, genderqueer, or agender (Richards et al., 2016)

Two-Spirit

This is a term used by select North American Indigenous communities describing an individual who embodies both feminine and masculine spirits, usually connected to spiritual and cultural roles (Driskill, 2010)

Cisgender

An individual whose gender identity is in alignment with assigned sex from birth (APA, 2015).

Conclusion

This dissertation foregrounds the lived realities of SWDs navigating HEIs that remain molded by systemic ableism and unequitable pedagogical inclusion. Through constructivist grounded theory, the study centers marginalized voices in educational policy and research, with the aim of informing structural transformation embedded in disability justice. The introductory chapter has outlined the significance of the study, research questions, and my methods orientation that guide the inquiry. To best situate these questions within scholarly discourse, the next chapter turns to past research on disability in higher education. Chapter 2 critically examines prevailing models of accessibility, explores emergent frameworks such as UDL, and interrogates how issues of inclusion, access, and intersectionality have been addressed, and, in many cases, overlooked in pedagogical literature. This review lays the empirical and theoretical foundation on which this dissertation builds its analysis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

SWDs have actively engaged throughout the history of academic accommodations. However, an achievement gap between SWDs and their non-disabled counterparts persists which underscores the importance of researching disability inclusivity in higher education (Newman et al., 2011). Although much has been accomplished since the onset of the disability rights movement, substantial improvement remains to be made to render equitable and inclusive experiences for SWDs in educational spaces. The geographic parameters of this literature review range from studies conducted in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia while the temporal parameters contain sources from predominately the 2010s and 2000s.[19] This literature review argues that successful learning strategies are better when informed by the unique perspectives of SWDs who experience first-hand academic ableism, which has been historically rooted in the institution of higher education (Black et al., 2015; Brown & Leigh, 2020; Dolmage, 2017).

The sources used in the bibliography of this dissertation proposal are a compilation of three distinct, yet relatable themes when justified through interweaving the academic

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[19] Bibliography snowballing was used to compile much of the references used in this review. However, the initial phase of collecting sources were by searching key terms using the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee library database and Google Scholar. Challenges in the research process consisted of finding the precise key terms to query the most relevant research.

conversation via my literature review. In other words, the first theme is implicit and explicit bias research (a social-psychological approach), the second theme is concerning classroom environments for differently abled students (an educational approach), and the third theme is UD, which is an interventionist approach. It is my responsibility to connect these themes to render an interdisciplinary approach to both disability and pedagogical studies. I will elaborate on the interconnectivity, compatibility, utility, and justification for using the chosen scholarly sources in the literature review chapter for the purpose of this dissertation.

History of Disability Accommodations on University Campuses

Abraham Lincoln signed a bill into legislation authorizing the foundation of a college division at the Columbia Institution for the "Deaf and Dumb," in 1864. The college was named the National Deaf-Mute College, and its first student was enrolled in the fall of 1864. The college was renamed Gallaudet College in 1894 in response to the disdain for having the words 'deaf-mute' in the college's title. The Gallaudet University remains as the only liberal arts university in existence exclusively devoted to deaf students (Maudas, 2011).

The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1918 was passed by U.S. federal government that provided academic assistance for disabled veterans following World War I. By 1946, veterans made up 52% of the total college population in the U.S. Therefore, the increase in SWDs ensued from the corresponding influx of veteran students. Moreover, the University of Illinois established a program in 1947 designating a VA Hospital in Galesburg as a satellite campus where SWDs were enrolled. However, a group of students self-advocated for "experimental" enrollment status at the Urbana-Champaign campus after the Galesburg satellite campus shut down. This resulted in the group of SWDs enrolling at the university's main campus (Maudas, 2011).

Disability law was applied to higher education began with the enactment of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973 which “prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability for programs receiving federal financial assistance” (Rothstein, 2015, p. 533). The disability rights movement accomplished successes such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 mainly due to people with disabilities standing at the forefront to declare visibility as fellow human beings which is akin to the self-advocacy approach of SWDs to catalyze administrations in institutions of higher education to render truly inclusive college campuses. Moreover, the passage of the ADA started to augment the judicial focus of disability in higher education (Rothstein, 2015).

In 2001, a group of graduate SWDs founded The Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee at Syracuse University which held multiple events raising disability awareness to inform revision of disability practices and policies (Leake & Strodden, 2014). Institutions may still attempt to use the “undue hardship” defense to avoid engaging in activities or accommodations thought to drastically augment a program or lower standards. In 2008, the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 augmented the definition of “disability.” Interestingly, community colleges typically have fewer resources and are less likely to have experts reviewing disability documentation or connections to accommodation requests (Rothstein, 2015).

Licia Carlson's (2001) seminal work critically examined the historical construction of cognitive ableism, particularly through the lens of gender and institutional power dynamics. She argued that classifications such as "feeblemindedness" were not merely medical diagnoses but were deeply embedded in societal structures that marginalized women and individuals with cognitive disabilities. Carlson emphasized the necessity of a feminist analysis to understand and dismantle these oppressive frameworks, advocating for a more inclusive approach to disability studies.

Contrastingly, a more recent study conceptualized ableism as a cognitive distortion, suggesting that biases against individuals with disabilities can be addressed through psychological interventions like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). This perspective focused on the individual cognitive processes that contribute to ableist attitudes, proposing that modifying these thought patterns can lead to more inclusive behaviors, especially in healthcare settings (The Impact of Ableist Microaggressions, 2024; Perceptual Filters, 2024).

Supporting Carlson's assertions, another study investigated the impact(s) of ableist microaggressions on individuals with cognitive and physical disabilities. The findings indicated that microinsults, particularly those implying a lack of intellect, correlate with increased feelings of shame and hinder the development of a positive disability identity. This reinforces the idea that societal perceptions and interactions play a significant role in the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities (The Impact of Ableist Microaggressions, 2024; Perceptual Filters, 2024).

Dolmage (2017) critiques higher education’s tendency to retroactively accommodate disability rather than proactively design for it, framing access as a structural issue tied to academic culture. Ruppar et al. (2017) and Sontag (1996) extend this critique by illustrating how accommodation systems remain largely reactive and compliance-driven, reinforcing narrow definitions of who qualifies for support and when. Together, these scholars expose a shared concern that higher education’s dominant frameworks treat disability as an individual burden to be mitigated, rather than a systemic design challenge to be addressed through inclusive pedagogical practices. Their collective work calls for a shift away from minimal legal compliance toward structural transformation grounded in disability justice.

Systemic Academic Ableism

Despite being one of the largest number of minorities, individuals with disabilities are frequently overlooked (Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022). According to Brown & Ramlackhan (2021), ableism is a set of beliefs that guide cultural and institutional practices ascribing negative values to individuals with disabilities whilst deeming able-bodies and able-minded individuals as normal, therefore superior to their disabled counterparts" (p. 1227). Given what has been said, ableism operates as an umbrella ism for other isms (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021) that has disability serving as a "cast of diminished state of being human" (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021). Therefore, minds and bodies must be in conformity to status quo standards or transform into being deemed devalued and flawed (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021). Put another way, "disabled people are the 'able-bodied' gone wrong." Within higher education, the organizational spaces or equally entrenched in power relations between disabled and non-disabled" (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2021).

SWDs have experienced not only alienation and exclusion within various spaces on campus, but from the entire collegiate lore and history (Dolmage, 2017). Moreover, authors argue that ableism is both the unconscious and conscious favoring of individuals perceived as being 'able' over individuals perceived as disabled. In other words, ableism undoubtedly values able-bodiedness (Dolmage, 2017; Lynch & Macklin, 2020). Importantly, the multi-dimensionality of identity is significant in that SWDs may be a part of another marginalized, minority group such as being a student of color, female, transgender, etc. Therefore, faculty must consider the intersectionality of students' identities and how institutional oppression permeates each (Lynch & Macklin, 2020). Academia is a space characterized by class privilege which alienates many students (hooks, 2019). Moreover, institutions of higher education exacerbate ableism since society's reflection can be seen in the hierarchical, organizational, architectural, and pedagogical design of campus spaces (Dolmage, 2017; Lynch & Macklin, 2020). Dolmage (2017) incorporates the concept, "design-apartheid" which is described as systemic exclusion of people with disabilities from architecture, planning, and design decision-making.

The social model posits that larger society, and specifically universities, render obstacles that impede inclusivity for SWDs on campus (Dolmage, 2017; Green, 2007; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Moriña, 2017). In other words, both the social model and disability theory suggest the concept of disability is essentially a product of social construction and oppression piled atop of peoples' actual impairments (Denhart, 2008; Dolmage, 2017). The social model is fundamental in the fight for disability justice by highlighting the systemic oppression of individuals with disabilities (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Dolmage, 2017). Research highlights themes of declaring hidden disabilities as a primary concern, and that rates of disclosure are more prevalent among students than faculty (Brown & Leigh, 2018). The prevalence of hidden disabilities as a facet of diversity on university and college campuses is significant since students with obscured disabilities are not visible in the same manner as wheelchair users (Leake & Strodden, 2014).

Implicit & Explicit Bias Towards Students with Disabilities

Although many of the studies incorporated in this review comprise methods sampling educators in early childhood and primary education, it is imperative to gain further insight into implicit and explicit bias experienced by SWDs early in life that permeates into their transition from secondary education to HEIs (Maurice, 2023). For example, other strengths of these studies included the use of semi-structured interviews allowing both the interviewee and researcher to feel as if they are engaging in a free-flowing conversation while not deviating too far from the list of guided questions (Jones, 2022). However, the downside to this approach among studies is that they take longer to complete, transcribe, and thematically code if important interview questions get skipped over due to the conversation getting off track. But in the case of various studies (i.e, journal articles *and* dissertations), findings across them indicate that there is a lack of bias mitigation training, time to train educators and staff, and implementation of multitiered support frameworks in schools, according to both preservice and current teachers (Arway, 2023). Chiu and others opined that, "beyond the findings from this study, DisCrit Theory[20] can be used as a mechanism to promote student success when teachers and educational leaders first understand how educational inequalities are reproduced and then use that knowledge to create equitable learning settings and opportunities" (2022, pp. 21-22). Otherwise known as Disability Critical Race Theory, DisCrit Theory was founded in 2013 based on the core tenets of investigating and unveiling special education's embedded and hidden systems of inequities (Chiu et al., 2023).

Universal Design

UD refers to, "the modification of environments and activities so they are accessible to everyone, no matter their functional limitations" (Leake & Strodden, 2014, p. 405). Studies suggest the concept of UD is underpinned by seven principles that include: 1) equitable use, 2) flexibility in use, 3) simple and intuitive use, 4) perceptible information, 5) tolerance for error, 6) low physical effort, and 7) size and space for approach and use (Black et al., 2015; Dolmage,

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[20] DisCrit (Disability Critical Race Theory) combines the two theories of Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory as a means of critically evaluating problems through the intersection of both disability and race (Chiu et al., 2022).

2017; Moriña, 2017). *Equitable use* consists of design that is both marketable and practical to individuals with diverse abilities. *Flexibility in use* pertains to how well the design accommodates a broad spectrum of peoples' different abilities and preferences. *Simple and intuitive use* occurs when the design is straightforward despite the user's previous experience, knowledge, cognitive ability, or language competency. *Perceptible information* is how well the design relays information to the user notwithstanding the user's sensory abilities or ambient conditions. *Tolerance for error* pertains to how well the design mitigates the likelihood of hazards, unintended actions, or accidents. *Low physical effort* is how the design mitigates the level of exertion and fatigue through improved comfort and efficiency. Lastly, *size and space for approach and use* is how suitable the design's dimensions are regarding approach, reach, manipulation, and use notwithstanding the user's posture, mobility status, or bodily size (Dolmage, 2017; Moriña, 2017).

Other research presents a different set of UDL[21] (UDL) principles and guidelines specific to learning environments (CAST, 2022; Davies et al., 2013; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017). The pedagogical framework of UDL bridges the gap between the individual and social models of disability studies. UDL presents three broad principles including: *multiple means of expression*, *representation*, and *engagement* (Black et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2013; Griful-Freixenet, 2017). The *expression* principle is the 'how' of learning, the *representation* principle is the 'what' of learning, and the *engagement* principle is the 'why' of learning (Black et al., 2015). Dolmage uses similar language to describe universal pedagogy stating that "anyone can learn and, more broadly, suggesting that the university is the place to elevate society based on the education of all

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[21] While both UD and UDL share the goal of universal access, UD seeks to eradicate barriers from the *built* environment, while UDL strives to eliminate barriers from the *learning* environment (Black et al., 2015)

of its citizens, rather than a place to sort society based on the education of the privileged few" (2017, p. 61).

UD and UDL reshaped how instructors conceptualize inclusive pedagogy, shifting focus from individual accommodation to institutional design. Rose and Meyer (2002) introduced UDL as a framework grounded in neuroscience and learner variability, advocating for flexible instructional strategies anticipating wide ranges of needs. Bowe (2000) emphasized that nontraditional students, including SWDs, require radically inclusive pedagogical approaches, critiquing one-size-fits-all teaching norms. Burgstahler and Cory's first edition (2008) offered institutional case studies to bridge UD principles with practice in HEI settings. The second edition, edited solely by Burgstahler (2015), builds on this foundation with updated examples and implementation strategies, signaling a maturing field committed to embedding UD across HEIs. Collectively, these works provided a robust theoretical and practical framework for reimagining accessibility past baseline legal compliance, aligning directly with the ethos and analytic scope of this study.

UDI expands UD by adding to the original seven UD principles with two more titled, "*instructional climate*" and "*community of learners*"[22] (Black et al., 2015). Studies suggest that rendering an entirely inclusive institution embedded with proactive measures will take a substantial amount of time to achieve (Goode, 2007; Vickerman and Blundell, 2010). Despite the importance of research in this review, the historical rhetoric of UD has developed into a way of discussing how to augment space to accommodate the broadest range of users, but it invariably fails to observe the significance of continued feedback from SWDs (Dolmage, 2017).

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[22] "Community of learners" is described as the promotion of interaction and communication among students and between faculty and students. "Instructional climate" is how expectations are promoted for all students in an inclusive and welcoming learning environment.

Studies such as Devanda's (2016) deliberate on UD principles in a variety of public spaces including educational institutions. Furthermore, Devanda (2016) stated that, "it is generally feasible to meet accessibility requirements at 1% of the total cost of new building construction. Retrofitting accessibility is more expensive, by up to 20% of the original cost, than integrating accessibility and UD principles into new buildings" (p. 10). Therefore, it is imperative that urban serving institution planning be mindful of UD when considering the needs of the growing population of disabled individuals in metropolitan areas that include the construction of new campus buildings and renovations to older architecture (Dolmage, 2017; Madaus, 2011). Articles such as these furnished quantitative estimates of future possibilities of UD that provided insight that catalyze this dissertation to inform urban serving university policy makers and stakeholders through highlighting the experiences of affected populations.

SWDs' Perceived Barriers to Academic Success

Surprisingly, SWDs' perspectives in this body of literature pertain to UDL rather than addressing needs of inclusive architectural design in physical spaces prescribed by UD. SWDs commonly perceive hesitancies to request accommodations in fear of invoking social stigma, being misunderstood by faculty, the desire for successful learning techniques, and the need to study significantly longer than peers without disabilities as barriers to their academic success (Black et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2013; Denhart, 2008; Moriña, 2015). Moreover, students with learning impairments collectively perceive feelings of intellectual inferiority, feelings of "cheating" or using unfair advantages when requesting accommodations, and incompetency in comparison to their counterparts without impairments (Black et al., 2015; Denhart, 2008).

Coriale and others' (2012) article took a unique approach using a narrative inquiry that yields distinct emerging themes in contrast to other literature on disability in higher education.

For example, the critical role of teaching assistants is perceived as having both positive and negative effects on SWDs. Positive effects included empathy, inclusivity, and support for SWDs. Negative effects included TAs being unsupportive, controlling, and misusing their power dynamic in relation to SWDs. Another distinctive theme is physical and pedagogical access. Contrary to findings in other studies, pedagogical and physical accommodations are typically prioritized higher than addressing attitudinal and social barriers to inclusion. In other words, faculty neglected the social and emotional needs of SWDs while attempting to be more accommodating to physical needs and augmenting pedagogical styles to specific learning needs (Coriale et al., 2012).

A smaller section of the literature suggests that SWDs share many perceptions of stigma with their non-disabled peers (Green, 2007; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Moreover, the Modified Labeling Approach is a framework positing that students in general expect that they will experience negative emotional responses associated with stereotyping, labeling, and subjugation to discrimination and status decline. However, studies using this framework argued that perceptions of devaluation are higher among SWDs. Importantly, the association between disability and stigma was not considered one-dimensional (Green, 2007; Mullins & Preyde, 2013).

Studies found that various elements perceived to be effective by some SWDs were thought of as barriers by other SWDs (Davies et al., 2013; Griful-Freixenet, 2017). Studies specifically examined how well an institution aligns with UDL guidelines (Black et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2013). SWDs' perceptions of instruction strategies most impacted by UDL training consisted of 1) presenting material in multiple formats, 2) provision of an outline at the beginning of each lecture, 3) relating key concept to the larger objectives of the class, 4) summarizing material throughout each class session, 5) highlighting key points of an instructional video, 6) using well-organized and accessible materials, and using instructional videos (Black et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2013; Griful-Freixenet, 2017).

Many SWDs stated instructors' discriminatory attitudes and lack of disability awareness and training were significant barriers to their academic success (Coriale et al., 2012; Griful-Freixenet, 2017; Moriña et al., 2015; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Other research argued that new students are at an especially high risk of dropping out if they perceive that they do not belong within the first eight weeks of arrival on campus. On the contrary, SWDs were more likely to succeed if they form supportive social networks to help mitigate the larger barriers that they were more likely to encounter in comparison to their peers without disabilities (Leake & Stodden, 2014). Perceptions varied across students with different types of disabilities (Moriña, 2017). However, a common response among SWDs was that both course structure and organization were crucial for success. Most students also perceived the 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum approach as problematic and exclusive (Griful-Freixienet et al., 2017).

SWDs' perceptions of opportunities for learning improvements largely supported an emphasis on presenting information through multiple formats of media (i.e., tangible objects) and by faculty providing materials such as lecture slides and class notes ahead of time for students with learning impairments such as dyslexia (Goode, 2007; Griful-Freixenet, 2017). Moreover, the aspect that most clearly aligned with SWDs' perceptions was the design of activities that provided authentic outcomes and communicates to real audiences by involving all learners in class discussions which corroborated UDI principles (Black et al., 2015). SWDs from these studies stated preferring smaller class sizes over large lecture halls and that guest presentations were helpful modes of learning (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017). For instance, Emily explained that “Many of them [small classroom professors] were [accommodating]. So, I think in general, it was a good thing that the class sizes were small and [that] the campus was [also] small. I really enjoyed that.”

Disclosing a Disability & Social Stigma

A common conception of disclosure was that disclosing something was oftentimes connected to sensitive information that an individual may be ashamed or reluctant of due to secrecy. Therefore, if ableism was rejected then the necessity for disclosure in this sense should be met with comfort thus rendering new conceptions and attitudes of disclosure (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Moreover, it was not surprising that more than half of SWDs under the traditional higher education model do not wish to disclose their disability to others (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002; Green, 2007; Grifil-Freixenet, 2017; Goode, 2007).

Researchers argued that hidden disabilities were the most common impairment type among college students because there was a vast lack of consistency in both identifying and classifying disability rates. Other research suggested that a substantial percentage of self-identifying SWDs did not initially disclose their impairment on their college application due to a perceived fear of not being admitted to their preferred program (Green, 2007; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Many studies argued that the concept of stigma lacked precise definition thus rendering it unpragmatic for understanding complex social experiences of having a disability (Cahill & Eggleston, 1994; Green, 2007; Link & Phelan, 2001; Murphy et al., 1988). Others argued that the experience of disability carried with it a particular stigma that was reinforced by academic ableism (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Lynch & Macklin, 2020). Students with hidden disabilities were less likely to disclose impairments due to the fear of social stigma which left the impression that disabilities were less prevalent on campus (Leake & Stodden, 2014).

Conversely, others argue that the low proportion of SWDs in higher education may be explained by the anxiety and stress of college preparation. Moreover, experiences of academic ableism further exacerbated the retention and attrition rates of SWDs (Madriaga, 2007; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Educators must realize that both the extensive history of experimentation on and the exclusion of individuals with disabilities in addition to contemporary accounts of SWDs experiencing ableism (Dolmage, 2017).

SWDs were entitled to the provision of support and funding to learn effectively under the Equality Act of 2010 (Rothstein, 2015). However, this provision was observed as an ex post facto retrofit that carried the implication that the pedagogy of academics goes unquestioned which largely resulted in the obliviousness of what is understood as ableist behavior among faculty (Lynch & Macklin, 2020). Although faculty were accountable for ensuring inclusive practices such as the encouragement of hand waving (i.e., jazz hands) instead of clapping, descriptive text, alt-text, etc., they have not become standard practice and largely remain an ideal of UD in higher education (Lynch & Macklin, 2020). One SWD stated, "theory can sound good, but if you do not see it in practice, it becomes less true" (Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017, p. 1636).

Significant attention in research on the experience of disability, specifically as it applies to education, has been assigned to examining the stigma that is associated with the label of disability (Mauldin & Brown, 2021). Furthermore, Mauldin and Brown's (2021) scrutinized the ways in which disability was an axis of inequality that intersected with other sociodemographic parameters (e.g., race/ethnicity). Other research posited how such labels occur in classroom environments, specifically highlighting the intersection of race and disability (Maurice, 2023). According to Mauldin and Brown, "because there are hierarchies of disability (i.e., some disabilities are more stigmatized than others), there are certainly more "high-status" disabilities (e.g., ADHD and autism) that may be attributed to white students" (2021, p. 484; Skrtic et al, 2021). Still, many previous sociological studies posited social constructions of disability as deviant within the symbolic interactionists' framework, influenced by Goffman's (1963) research on stigma (Mauldin & Brown, 2021).

Another intersection across the literature was the common reference to Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, specifically regarding the disclosure of hidden disabilities and perceptions of visible disabilities (Brown & Leigh, 2018; Cahill & Eggleston, 1994; Mauldin & Brown, 2021; Shifer, 2013; Stentiford et al., 2023). However, juxtaposed to many disability studies, an ethnography (Stentiford et al., 2023) of a higher education institution in the United Kingdom yielded peculiar findings, but overall inferences corroborated different studies on disability. For example, Stentiford and others revealed that disability was conceptually reworked by SWDs as a form of social capital, social status, and as a liberal intellectual identity marker. But this community ethos was bound/restricted to their campus bubble which was insulated from the wider society holding otherwise stigmatizing views towards disability (Stentiford et al., 2023). Therefore, studies of thematic areas reviewed in this dissertation proposal must be scrutinized and interpreted carefully when incorporated into the larger discussion. Small conflicts between studies' varying inferences tended to manifest, especially when different methods captured different insights and observations. Nevertheless, the broad conclusions across studies described the differential access to higher education and experiences of being a disabled student who faced both physical and pedagogical barriers such as educator biases (e.g. ableism and racism) (Whatley, 2018).

Faculty Approaches to Disability Inclusivity on Campus

An outlier study suggested that academic faculty typically displayed positive attitudes towards disabilities. However, value was placed upon theoretical strategies of inclusive education, but seldom were these strategies implemented in practice (Griful-Freixenet, 2017). Positive experiences among students predominately depended on the personal knowledge, experience, and attitudes of specific faculty members rather than on institutional policies and provisions that varied significantly between different departments of institutions (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Overall, research revealed that faculty exhibited limited enthusiasm to make substantial augmentations to their curriculum and assessments (Vickerman Blundell, 2010; Zepke et al., 2006). Coraile and others' (2012) study corroborated the larger narrative that there was a void of dedication to the emotional and social needs of SWDs which signified both a lack of comfort among faculty members in responding to a diversity of abilities and a lack of awareness of SWDs' experiences. According to Dunn et al. (2006), not having faculty members with disabilities who experience ableism inhibited the likelihood of rendering socially inclusive learning environments despite universities articulating social inclusion as an institutional goal.

Studies posited that although equality legislation was a key piece of the disability justice puzzle in academia, it remains crucial that this is matched by practice through the education and training of university and college faculty to proactively respond to the diverse needs of SWDs that they must advocate for (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Moreover, other research corroborated the argument that faculty were not typically trained in and do not incorporate UDL into their curriculum (Black et al., 2014; Davies et al., 2013; Hitch et al., 2015; Moriña, 2017). Moreover, there was a void of personal development models with specific attention on producing a collection of life skills designed to ultimately help students succeed in both their coursework and acquirement of employability skills (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

Strengths & Limitations of Previous Research

Some studies incorporated the use of recorded in-depth interviews of SWDs that helped inform disability accommodation policies in higher education (Goode, 2007; Griful-Freixenet, 2017; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). However, limitations with this approach included the use of small sample populations (e.g., <20 participants) which offered limited variation among respondents. Other research incorporated mixed methods that used different phases ranging from one-on-one interviews to large scale questionnaires to supplement limitations of each phase (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). However, some research solely used questionnaires to capture SWDs' perceptions in correspondence to UDL/I principles (Black et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2013). Another limitation of the methodologies in this review was that each study only sampled from one campus which limited the overall breadth of responses to one geographic location with no other institution as a reference to compare with or to draw more generalizable conclusions from. Studies using cross-sectional, small sample sizes limited the generalizability of findings and introduced selection bias. Despite the significance of the topic, some authors used theoretical instead of empirical approaches which did not create compelling arguments when informing policy augmentation (Lynch & Macklin, 2020). Moreover, future studies should consider measuring performance outcomes among SWDs post-UDL/I training of faculty.

Throughout the current literature, researchers have employed a range of methodological approaches to examine the experiences of students with SWDs in HEIs, contributing valuable insights through both quantitative and qualitative studies (Berry, 2021; Black et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2013; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Kendall, 2016; Mauldin & Brown, 2021; Moriña et al., 2015; Shifrer, 2013; Smith-Alexander, 2020). While each approach has its limitations, these studies collectively underscore the need for continued exploration of how disability is experienced and navigated in academic environments. In this section, I outline the methodological patterns present in the existing literature and suggest future research directions, including how my own study builds upon and advances this growing body of work.

Notably, many of the most impactful studies on SWDs in higher education have utilized qualitative methods to center student voice and lived experience (Davies et al., 2013; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Kendall, 2016; Mauldin & Brown, 2021; Moriña et al., 2015; Smith-Alexander, 2020). For instance, Kendall (2016) emphasized the value of a participant-centered approach, stating, “this small-scale study sought to elicit the ‘voice’ of differently abled students, providing a rich source of data about their lived university experience” (p. 5). These qualitative contributions laid the groundwork for my study’s focus on narrative inquiry, intersectionality, and grounded theory analysis, as a way to expand understanding of disability beyond compliance-focused discourse.

Despite the valuable contributions of existing qualitative studies, several limitations persist across literature, particularly concerning sample diversity and institutional access. Many studies relied on small, relatively homogenous samples, which restricted the generalizability of their findings. For example, Kendall’s (2016) study primarily included white female participants with similar disability diagnoses (e.g., dyslexia), thereby limiting the exploration of intersecting identities such as race, gender, and disability type. Broader representation across sociodemographic dimensions, including race/ethnicity, disability classification, gender identity, and age, is essential to advancing more inclusive understandings within disability studies.

One of the recurring barriers to achieving such diversity lies in institutional constraints related to participant recruitment. Across multiple studies, researchers encountered obstacles posed by university "gatekeepers" who control access to student populations and demographic data (Corbie-Archy, 2022; Day, 2021; Dean, 2017; Kendall, 2016). These gatekeepers, often housed in student support services or disability offices, serve as intermediaries and must approve or facilitate contact with potential participants. In most cases, this results in impersonal recruitment strategies such as mass email distribution, which may fail to engage students with specific lived experiences or marginalized identities.

Additionally, data protection protocols and ethical approval processes frequently prohibit researchers from accessing detailed information about students' disability types or identity markers prior to recruitment (Kendall, 2016). These limitations underscore the need for research methodologies that are both ethically sound and strategically inclusive.

In response to these challenges, my study adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach, which emphasized participants' meaning-making processes while also attending to structural barriers to access. This methodology allowed for emergent themes to be shaped by the narratives of participants with a wide range of disability experiences and sociodemographic backgrounds, including students who had been historically underrepresented in previous research. By actively navigating institutional barriers and centering student voices, the study contributed a more nuanced and inclusive account of disability in higher education.

Despite growing attention within disability scholarship to the pervasiveness of ableist attitudes in social institutions, such as healthcare systems and educational settings, bias is still infrequently addressed within the field of medical sociology. Like other marginalized groups, individuals with disabilities experience persistent disparities in both health and educational outcomes. These disparities are not necessarily rooted in the impairments themselves but are often driven by unacknowledged and unaddressed ableism embedded in institutional practices and interpersonal interactions (Mauldin & Brown, 2021).

Much of the existing scholarship on bias in educational settings has focused on implicit and explicit racial attitudes, frequently using the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to assess covert bias (Charlesworth et al., 2021; Charlesworth et al., 2023; Chin et al., 2020; DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2021; Whatley, 2018). However, the application of the IAT in these studies has been largely limited to racial bias, leaving implicit disability bias underexamined, particularly within higher education and among educators (Chin et al., 2020; Chiu et al., 2022). Expanding the use of IAT to assess both racial and disability-related bias would provide a more intersectional and comprehensive understanding of how various forms of bias contribute to inequitable academic outcomes. Chin et al. (2020) themselves acknowledged this potential, noting that "one natural extension of our study would be to look beyond this article's focus on individuals' racial attitudes towards Black Americans and examine measures of bias toward other groups to understand how they influence other students' outcomes" (p. 576).

While these quantitative studies offer important insights into covert racial bias in educational settings, they often fall short in producing generalizable or causal conclusions, particularly within urban-serving institutions. Moreover, many of these studies neglect the nuanced, lived experiences of disabled students. Methodologically, the literature on educator bias includes both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys (Storage et al., 2020). Scholars such as C. Revels-Turner (2022) have advocated for mixed-methods approaches that incorporate subjective, narrative data alongside statistical findings. In her study, a quantitative correlational design was used to ensure reliability and objectivity, yet she emphasized the value of open-ended responses in uncovering educators' feelings and perspectives regarding bias. This reinforces the need for qualitative inquiry that captures the complex, intersectional ways in which students encounter both implicit and explicit bias.

This study contributes to that gap by applying a constructivist grounded theory approach to explore how differently abled students and campus professionals interpret and experience ableism in higher education. By foregrounding participant narratives, the research illuminates dimensions of bias that remain hidden in purely quantitative studies and provides insight into how these biases are both reproduced and resisted in educational contexts.

There is considerable strength in the conceptual and theoretical frameworks guiding recent studies on students with SWDs in higher education. Several mixed-methods researchers have applied robust frameworks to explore the influence of identity, environment, and institutional structures on disabled students' experiences. For instance, Arway (2023) employed social cognitive theory to examine how individuals' behaviors are shaped by environmental influences and interpersonal interactions. Similarly, Jones (2022) utilized labeling theory, grounded in the sociology of stigma, to explore how classifications imposed by others may contribute to self-fulfilling prophecies, affecting students' behavior, academic self-concept, and access to opportunity.

Recent scholarship within medical sociology and the sociology of disability suggests the value of methodological cross-fertilization, drawing on both quantitative generalizability and qualitative depth, to enhance inquiry while centering disabled experiences. Several studies highlight the potential of integrating methods to advance disability-centric research agendas that inform both theory and practice.

Qualitative methods have been especially influential in identifying both supports and barriers within the university experience. These methods foreground students' voices, offering insight into intervention strategies that are contextually grounded, and student informed. Some researchers suggest that including faculty perspectives could provide a more holistic understanding of inclusive design in HEIs (Moriña, 2017; Rioux & Pinto, 2013). Vickerman and Blundell (2010) affirm this view, stating:

"[Qualitative research] supports the increase in human rights and empowerment agendas reflecting social models of disability in which individuals are encouraged to have a greater say in decisions that have an impact upon them. Until HE institutions consult disabled students directly, they will remain ignorant of the difficulties and barriers faced by them." (p. 21)

Biographical narrative methods have also gained traction for their ability to illuminate the lived experiences of SWDs over time. For example, Moriña et al. (2015) employed in-depth interviews, observational research, and photography to collect rich data from both SWDs and key figures in their educational journeys. This approach revealed how structural and interpersonal factors interact to shape student outcomes, particularly in relation to UDL and UDI.

Such findings have direct implications for my own research. My study builds upon the narrative traditions of biographical methods while centering on the voices of SWDs to better inform inclusive policy, instructional design, and pedagogical practices. Existing literature also points to faculty members as critical agents of either support or exclusion, often functioning as the gatekeepers between institutional policy and classroom implementation, whether in person or through virtual platforms such as Zoom, Canvas, or Microsoft Teams (Davies et al., 2013; Moriña et al., 2015; Ressa, 2023).

Limitations in the current body of literature on the transition to higher education for SWDs often stem from narrow institutional scope. Many studies have focused on a single university, and in some cases, only one department within an institution, thereby limiting the diversity and generalizability of the sample pool (Taylor et al., 2010). Furthermore, institutional and regional policy differences significantly impact the ability of researchers to recruit participants and access demographic data. For example, some universities prohibit the disclosure of students' demographic characteristics for privacy reasons, which has restricted the diversity of participant samples in previous studies (Kendall, 2016).

However, contextual differences in national policy can expand research possibilities. Moriña et al. (2015), conducting research at the University of Seville in Spain, successfully recruited 44 SWDs during their initial data collection phase. This broader access may be attributed to Spain's progressive disability legislation, particularly Organic Law 4/2007, which mandates accessibility in university classroom environments. Additionally, funding from the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation likely supported more comprehensive research efforts. These findings suggest that borrowing or adapting recruitment strategies and inclusive practices from countries with well-established disability policies may enhance the depth and inclusiveness of future disability studies and UD research.

By contrast, only one-third of universities in Australia explicitly reference UDL or inclusive instructional practices in institutional guidelines (Hitch et al., 2015). This may reflect broader trends in Australian research on disability in higher education, where quantitative survey methods are more commonly employed. While these methods often yield generalizable results, they frequently lack the demographic detail and thematic richness provided by qualitative approaches. The reliance on quantitative designs, often motivated by privacy protection concerns, limits the field’s ability to explore the nuanced and intersectional experiences of SWDs in depth (Hitch et al., 2015).

Some studies have adopted an experimental or quasi-experimental approach to inform UD and UDL policy in higher education. For instance, Black et al. (2014) and Davies et al. (2013) assessed student perceptions of lecturers’ teaching methods before and after instructors received UDL training. In one study, a control group was used in which a separate section of the course was taught by an instructor who did not receive UDL training, allowing for comparison of student outcomes and experiences (Davies et al., 2013). Dean et al. (2017) employed a similar strategy but did not include a control group. Instead, they distributed surveys using a five-point Likert-type scale to measure student satisfaction with various instructional tools after UDL-informed instruction was implemented. The study achieved a strong response rate, with 928 out of 1,285 surveys completed and deemed usable (Dean et al., 2017).

Quantitative analyses in Dean et al.’s study included Parson’s chi-squared tests for categorical variables and regression model analyses using t-tests to detect statistically significant differences in student preferences for instructional methods. While this approach enabled the identification of partial associations and student trends, its reliance on self-reported data introduced subjectivity and potential bias. Moreover, although the sample was stratified by gender, major, ethnicity, and GPA, the data were overrepresented by self-identifying females, like Kendall’s (2016) findings. Additionally, the study did not account for participants’ disability status or type, a significant omission when evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive design interventions (Dean et al., 2017).

Despite these limitations, qualitative methods continue to play a central role in examining the effectiveness of UD and UDL implementation. Prominent studies have relied on audiotaped, semi-structured interviews, followed by thematic coding aligned with UDL or UDI frameworks, to gain a richer understanding of student experience (Black et al., 2015; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017). The representativeness of samples in these studies often depended on multiple factors, including institutional policy, participant availability, and the scope and ambition of the research team (Dean et al., 2017; Moriña, 2017).

While every study has its limitations, the shortcomings identified in these prior works are not expected to significantly hinder the goals of my research. Drawing from a constructivist grounded theory approach, my study prioritizes depth over breadth, with the understanding that rich, narrative data, even from smaller identity groups, can generate critical theoretical insights. The aim is not only to document what is missing from current policy and practice, but to reimagine inclusion from the perspective of those most impacted by ableism in HEIs.

Transitioning from High School to Higher Education

While the transition from high school to full-time university attendance can be challenging for any student, this process is particularly daunting for differently abled students (Taylor et al., 2010). Moreover, studies maintained that there has been increased funding for education provision in secondary education for SWDs. This has been missing for SWDs within the higher education sector (Taylor et al., 2010). Under the guise of maintaining academic standards (i.e., if students did not directly meet course requirements), discrimination against SWDs can be used rather than by simply rendering adjustments or accommodations to allow SWDs to meet course requirements (Taylor et al., 2010).

Secondary school SWDs are protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, which mandates the provision of free, appropriate public education specific to individual needs. Therefore, studies argued that it is both a distressing and surprising experience for SWDs to face after graduating high school, these same protections and rights for the same services provided by IDEIA are no longer applicable in their new university or college setting. In other words, "in high school, IDEIA places the burden on the school to find and serve the student with an IEP. In higher education the burden is on the student, not the school, to find appropriate services and navigate through higher education (Timmerman and Mulvihill, p. 1609, 2015)."

To estimate the number of SWDs likely to pursue higher education, researchers often turned to longitudinal data from elementary and secondary education systems. These datasets provided essential context regarding the prevalence of disability identification, service delivery models, and educational trajectories of students prior to their transition into postsecondary settings (Hinz et al., 2017). For instance, under the IDEA of 1975, approximately 13% of students enrolled in U.S. public schools, equating to around 6.5 million individuals between the ages of 3 and 21, received special education services (Hinz et al., 2017).

These figures highlight not only the prevalence of disability in K-12 populations but also the pressing responsibility of HEIs to proactively plan for increasingly diverse student needs. As more SWDs graduate from high school, expectations for equitable access, inclusive pedagogies, and responsive campus support services in college environments have intensified. However, while K-12 systems operate under IDEA's mandates for individualized support and inclusive placement, these protections do not seamlessly transfer to postsecondary education, where accommodations are governed instead by civil rights legislation such as the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

The discontinuity between pre-college and college-level support systems raises important questions about preparedness, access, and systemic equity. Without intentional efforts to bridge this gap, SWDs may face heightened risk of academic marginalization or dropout despite having qualified for and received services earlier in their educational journeys. Therefore, understanding pre-college disability statistics is not merely a matter of numerical forecasting but a crucial step in shaping institutional policy, training, and support infrastructure across the educational pipeline.

Contemporary studies have contributed *some* information regarding the transition to post-secondary education among SWDs and their subsequent experiences after enrollment in college (Hinz et al., 2017). Hinz and others (2017) found that 59% of students that received special education services and had been out of high school for up to 8 years enrolled in a higher education institution (HEI)[23]. Moreover, less than half (45%) of differently abled students attending a 4-year university or college graduated with a degree or other certificate. Among SWDs enrolled in a 2-year college graduated, 37% completed their program. Studies examined academic performance regarding grades among SWDs revealing that in 2011-2012, 13% of undergraduate SWDs reported obtaining mostly A grades; 22% reported obtaining mostly B grades, and 10% reported obtaining mostly C grades in their courses (Hinz et al., 2017).

Previous research implicated that HEIs should be cognizant, proactive, and timely in terms of rendering adjustments for incoming disabled students as the projected number of differently abled students entering higher education is said to likely increase as time goes on (Madriga, 2007; Taylor et al., 2010; Timmerman and Mulvihill, 2015). Studies asserted that incoming university SWDs should self-identify as early as possible for accommodations to be made appropriately where necessary (e.g., instruction, curriculum design, assessment, etc.)

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[23] This is based on their longitudinal study using initial data from 2009 (Hinz et al., 2017).

(Madriga, 2007; Taylor et al., 2010). Other more recent studies posited that UD principles be set in place to mitigate the need for reactive disability accommodation model approaches.

As scholars increasingly criticized the reactive characteristics of disability accommodations in higher education, attention has turned toward proactive frameworks such as UD, UDL, and UDI. Dissimilar to traditional accommodation models that allocate the burden on differently abled students to request individual modifications, typically after encountering barriers to access, UD and its derivatives foreground the design of learning spaces that are inherently inclusive from the start. These frameworks aim to anticipate and speak to a broad range of learner needs without requiring disclosure or special status (Burgstahler, 2009; CAST, 2018; Moriña, 2017). Theoretically, the application of UDL can reduce stigmatization, streamline pedagogical design, and support every student, not just those with documented impairments. Nevertheless, in spite of evolving awareness of UDL principles, their implementation across HEIs remains inconsistent which is typically inhibited by a lack of structural training or support, limited institutional incentives, and faculty misconceptions of disability (Scott et al., 2003; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). The tension among theoretical promise and practical application highlights the need for student-centered research that examines how UD and UDL are actually experienced in reality.

Conclusion of Literature Review

In conclusion, a range of methodological approaches remains available to researchers seeking to inform UD, UDL, and UDI in higher education. While the choice of method is often shaped by institutional constraints and researcher preference, qualitative approaches that center on the voices of SWDs continue to show the greatest promise. Such methods offer critical insights into what works, and what does not work when designing inclusive learning environments. These insights are essential not only for improving practices within higher HEIs, but for reshaping pedagogical culture more broadly. Addressing implicit bias and ableist norms embedded in classroom environments remains central to the global advancement of inclusive education (Moriña et al., 2015; Rioux & Pinto, 2013). As Dolmage (2017) contends, "we cannot recognize the foundations and futures of academia if we are constantly dodging the idea of disability. Instead, educators must recognize these very foundations and futures as being built upon ableism, and as, literally, being built upon the bodies of disabled people" (p. 22).

The existing literature on SWDs' experiences with UD in higher education encompasses a wide range of themes, frameworks, and disciplinary perspectives. This review has surfaced persistent barriers encountered by students with both visible and non-apparent disabilities, which are often made more legible through participants' reflections on how UDL and UDI frameworks are implemented, or neglected, in practice. Although there has been notable progress in promoting disability justice within higher education, critical gaps remain. These include the lack of emotional and mental health support services for SWDs, insufficient disability awareness among faculty, and minimal implementation of inclusive instructional design (Coriale et al., 2012; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

Throughout this review, several recurring themes emerged, including structural barriers to academic success, student-driven recommendations for inclusive pedagogy, and the absence of consistent disability training among instructors. This review also documented a range of theoretical frameworks employed by scholars in the field, such as Critical Race Theory, Crip Theory, DisCrit, and Stigma Theory. These frameworks offer valuable analytic tools for interpreting the multilayered experiences of disabled students.

However, for the purpose of this study, I applied grounded theory, which allowed theory to emerge inductively from participants' lived experiences. This method supports iterative coding and conceptual development while remaining grounded in participants' own meaning-making processes. Future research might further contribute to the field by adopting longitudinal designs that will examine the impact of accommodations over time, or by comparing cohorts of SWDs pre- and post-policy implementation. In all cases, the continued centering of student narratives remains vital for reimagining an academic future rooted in access, dignity, and justice.

Theoretical Framework

As mentioned in the conclusion of my literature review, this dissertation employed a grounded theory approach to guide both data collection and analysis. Grounded theory, first developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s, is a qualitative research methodology designed to generate theory inductively from systematically gathered and analyzed data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). Instead of starting with a hypothesis or applying a pre-existing framework, grounded theory allows theoretical insights to emerge organically from participants' experiences. This orientation made it especially well-suited for studies such as this dissertation that sought to capture underexplored or marginalized perspectives, such as those of differently abled students navigating ableism in higher education.

Moreover, this framework was aligned with my aim of the study, which was to render a nuanced, student-informed conception of how institutional practices, intersecting forms of bias, and uneven implementation of UD (or lack thereof) affected differential access and belonging in urban-serving universities and colleges. Since theory emerged from the participants' lived realities as opposed to imposing preexisting theories on them, the grounded method honored the complexity of disability (or being differently abled) in academic environments.

Chapter 3: Research Design & Methods

Research Design & Methods

Research Design

This study was carried out utilizing a grounded theory approach to data analysis. Grounded theory is an advantageous tool to delve into social justice problems such as disability experiences. Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser originally created grounded theory in their field of sociology (Charmaz, 2020). Grounded theory intends to explore or comprehend what does not previously exist in current theory such as interactions or social processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the sampling, data collection, analysis, and comparison processes are iterative and cyclical. As a result, the theory formed is inducted within the data pertaining to contexts of how the studied experiences happened to occur (Bainbridge et al., 2012; Charmaz, 2020). As mentioned earlier, most of the coding was constructed during the midpoint of the interview collection process (i.e., around interview 14 of 27), following Charmaz's iterative model (2020). Earlier codes were refined mid-project and reapplied to previously collected data.

The collaborative construction of knowledge between researchers and participants lies at the heart of constructivist grounded theory. This epistemological stance challenges the traditional separation between subject and object, instead asserting that meaning is co-produced through dialogue, reflexivity, and situated engagement (Bainbridge et al., 2012; Lauridsen & Higginbottom, 2014). In this framework, the researcher is not a distant observer, but an active interlocutor whose positionality is shaped by the research encounter. Consequently, the emergent theory is not a neutral abstraction but a grounded, contextually embedded account that reflects the complexity of lived experience.

This co-constructive dynamic ensured that the analytic outcomes of the study were not imposed upon participants from a position of epistemic authority. Rather, the theory that develops is intimately linked to the narratives and meaning-making practices of those most affected by the phenomena under investigation. It is in this relational process where interpretation is continually negotiated and revised, that the rigor and authenticity of constructivist grounded theory reside. The resulting framework, then, is not only empirically grounded but also ethically responsive, allowing for a nuanced theorization of power, marginalization, and agency within the social worlds participants inhabit.

Ethical Approval

This dissertation was approved by the Institutional Review Board on September 16th, 2024. The amended IRB application was also approved on February 14th, 2025. See Appendix E and D for the letters of approval from the Institutional Review Board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To protect privacy, identifying details were omitted from all records, and pseudonyms were used for individuals and institutions. Additional care was taken to mask specific combinations of identity markers or job titles that could risk participant identification. Participants were offered a small incentive in appreciation of their time. The data has been securely stored in encrypted formats accessible only to the researcher. All ethical protocols for conducting research with human subjects in the social sciences were followed.

Participants

The study population involved SWDs currently enrolled in urban serving 4-year institutions of higher education predominately located in the Midwest region of the United States. The amendment for recruitment was open to SWDs from any 4-year institution of higher education to increase participation in the study. I also interviewed a small sample of faculty and staff members familiar with UDL principles. Their voices were included deliberately to triangulate SWDs' experiences and to add institutional insight. In other words, they were recruited based on their expertise in UDL, disability advocacy, etc. to illuminate and contextualize SWDs' data, but not to represent a general perspective of faculty and staff. Moreover, my primary goal was to elevate the lived realities of differently abled students instead of producing generalizable results. Lastly, the sample size was methodologically adequate for the purposes of using grounded theory as I reached thematic saturation in most key areas. The relatively small sample size is justified by framing the pool as a supplemental insight instead of being meant as a representative dataset.

Recruitment

I recruited SWDs through in-class presentations (i.e., calls for participation), flyers, social media on Facebook for student groups, and referrals from previous interviewees (i.e., word of mouth). Following conducting in-person class presentations to call for participation in multiple courses, I posted the flyer around the Lakeshore University to recruit SWDs. Many of the participants were successfully recruited through interest accumulated through social media posts which vastly alleviated the need for the other methods of participation calls. Despite additional plans to conduct more presentations and emails to various universities' professors and resource centers to see if their students were interested, I garnered enough recruits, so I decided not to continue calling for further participation.

Nevertheless, the limited window of time to complete the dissertation led to the pragmatic decision to set a feasible limit of 40 participants instead of interviewing participants to the point of plethora. Although the original intent was to recruit up to 40 participants or continue until full theoretical saturation was reached, the study ultimately concluded with 27 participants.

This decision was informed by both the unexpectedly high level of early interest in the study and the rich, detailed nature of the data collected. As themes began to recur across interviews and no substantially new categories emerged during the final rounds of analysis, it became evident that conceptual saturation had been sufficiently achieved within this sample. Moreover, the diverse range of identities and experiences represented in the 27 participants provided ample depth for grounded theory development. Consequently, I ended up recruiting 27 conversational partners while also ensuring a diverse sample population respective of the goals outlined in my dissertational proposal. See Appendix D for the IRB approval letter from September 16th, 2024, and Appendix E for the amendment approved by the IRB from February 14th, 2025. Refer to Appendix F for my template of the recruitment email distributed to professors and staff members to assist in participant outreach, and Appendix G for the recruitment flyer for SWDs that was posted on bulletin boards located throughout the campus in different buildings.

After study recruits contacted me predominately by email, I scheduled a date and time to interview participants either in person or via Zoom and Microsoft Teams, whichever their preference. I did propose meeting in person as well. Although some planned interviews did not transpire after exchanges of meeting times via email and Facebook Messenger. I also presented a brief synopsis of their role and overall scope of the study via email. If they remained intrigued in the study and were also eligible to be interviewed, I would go over the consent form with potential conversational partners. During this process, I would also review any potential benefits and risks that accompany participation in any academic study, specifically mine. I would then distribute the consent form and demographic information form to ensure both eligibility for disability status and diversity among the sample population. The participants would then complete the form post-self-review and consideration and email the forms back to me prior to meeting with me to be interviewed. Refer to Appendix C for the informed consent form, and Appendix H for the demographic information form.

Data Collection

Between the dates of September of 2024 and July of 2025, I conducted semi-structured individual interviews using open ended questions with the three separate groups of conversational partners, SWDs, faculty, and staff from disability services from 5 different urban serving institutions of higher education located in the greater central region of the United States. A total of 27 participants were interviewed for this study, including SWDs, faculty members, and staff from campus disability services. All interviews were conducted virtually, primarily via Zoom, with 5 interviews completed using Microsoft Teams. Each session was audio- and video-recorded with each participant's consent, then transcribed verbatim for analysis. This virtual format provided flexibility and accessibility for participants while maintaining the privacy and integrity of the interview process. Following the transcription where the audio is captured accurately, but unnecessary elements such as stutters, pauses, and filler words were omitted in my analysis write up to enhance readability while simultaneously preserving the integrity of the original meaning of the conversation. Moreover, all identifying information such as names of students, institutions, professors, staff, and physical locations described were omitted and given pseudonyms.

The purpose of interviewing the separate groups of participants was to ameliorate the exploration of the multifaceted experience of being differently abled on a university campus while also belonging to multiply marginalized demographic populations. Such marginalized groups outside of the general differently abled population consisted of racial and ethnic minorities, non-binary, woman, queer, international, and first generation, low-income college

SWDs. By listening to the voices of SWDs who also experience racism, classism, sexism, and queermisia, I focused to highlight the unique hardships and societal barriers that they are faced with. By comparing their experiences to the pedagogical approaches of instructors, I pursued to shed light on the dimensions of higher education where UD and UDL/I can alleviate the obstacles specifically encountered by SWDs.

To support the intentional recruitment of a diverse and representative participant pool, outreach efforts included collaboration with LGBTQ+ resource centers on campus. This decision was guided by an understanding that disability does not exist by itself as many SWDs also identify as LGBTQ+, and these intersecting identities often magnify experiences of marginalization in HEIs. LGBTQ+ campus centers frequently function as affirming and accessible spaces for students navigating multiple forms of social exclusion. Therefore, making them strategic sites for connecting with individuals whose perspectives are frequently overlooked in mainstream educational research. This approach reflected the study’s broader commitment to intersectional inquiry and the inclusion of voices that remain underrepresented in institutional conversations about differential access and inequity in postsecondary education.

Description of Instruments

To explore the central research question: How do differently abled college students navigate the processes of disability disclosure and self-identification in higher education settings, I employed semi-structured interviews as the primary instrument for data collection. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their flexibility and capacity to generate rich, in-depth narratives while maintaining a consistent structure across participants. This approach allowed me to guide conversations around key topics relevant to the research questions, including experiences with ableism, perceptions of institutional support, faculty interactions, and the accessibility of learning environments. At the same time, it enabled conversational partners to direct the flow of dialogue, raise issues of personal significance, and elaborate on their unique positionalities.

The interview protocol (see Appendix) was developed through an iterative process informed by the literature on disability justice, grounded theory methodology, and prior empirical studies on campus accessibility and UDL. Questions were designed to be open-ended, inclusive, and sensitive to SWDs' diverse experiences and comfort levels. For example, participants were asked to reflect on how they navigated academic environments, accessed accommodations, interacted with faculty and peers, and understood the broader cultural climate of their institution.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted virtually, allowing for accessibility, safety, and convenience. All interviews were audio-recorded (with video when applicable) and transcribed to preserve the authenticity of conversational partners' voices and to facilitate deep engagement with the data during analysis.

Reflexivity & Positionality

Academics are urged to use reflection regarding the ways in which their internal biases, self-perspective, and privilege affect their data collection and analysis. Specifically, such encouragement to be reflexive is highly emphasized when using grounded theory.   Moreover, researchers are reminded to scrutinize their own methodological decisions, ethical commitments, and ponder on their own experiences. Researchers are able to make connections across structural conditions and their effect on the investigator and study process. This is by way of locating interviewees in the situational, temporal, and societal conditions in which they live, and through acknowledging their own positionality (Charmaz, 2020). As a result, the rise of significant questions is cultivated which tests past beliefs and embarks to novel understanding of disability in university settings.

During the process of memo-writing, I took note of personal emotion, observation, and potential assumptions that periodically emerged to maintain a reflexive frame throughout both my data collection and analysis sessions. What I found was that the personally held notions I had at the inception of my research were debated as I progressed through my research. Therefore, self-examination and ponderance rendered the deliberation of how my positionality may augment my elucidation pertaining to my analytical inferences. As a result, my positionality augmented throughout the analysis.

The motive for choosing this topic stemmed from my own experience as a Latinx first generation low-income college student with multiple hidden disabilities that negatively affected my transition from high school to post-secondary education. Thus, it garnered my interest in the topic of disability in higher education to spotlight the experiences that affected students have endured and will continue to go through if ableism is left unchecked in academia. Despite being a cisgender man, I experience an intersection of multiple marginalized identities as mentioned earlier which helped create trust and rapport with participants sharing both similar and different oppressed identities. For example, like several of my participants, I have obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), generalized anxiety disorder, PTSD, depression, and social phobia. Taken together, such fragments of my essence altogether played a part in the exegesis and inductive reasoning of the data.

Additionally, I maintained a researcher's reflexive journal throughout the data collection period to document observations, adjusted the interview guide based on emerging insights, and tracked the development of theoretical memos. This reflexive engagement served both as a secondary instrument and a methodological safeguard, ensuring that my interpretations remained grounded in interviewees' meaning making instead of being shaped by prior assumptions. Ultimately, the interview instrument functioned not merely as a tool for eliciting responses but as a collaborative site for co-constructing meaning between researcher and participant, consistent with the principles of constructivist grounded theory. Therefore, it was my intent to co-create meaning with conversational partners. It is important to also note that although it may appear as bias, my shifted lens due to my positionality cannot be separated from my role as the researcher.

As a researcher with personal and professional investment in disability justice, I remained reflexively engaged throughout the research process. I acknowledge that my social location, perspectives, and interpretive lens influenced every stage of this study, from participant recruitment to final analysis. My goal was not to erase this influence but to make it visible and analytically productive. This co-creation of insights between myself and conversational partners does not necessarily serve as a limitation, but how shared experiences based on my own identity as a multiply marginalized first-generation SWD crafted the lens I viewed patterns in the data through that other researchers may not have unearthed. In some aspect, I may be viewed by some readers as the 28th conversational partner.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this dissertation was to center the voices of SWDs by exploring their educational trajectories, including but not limited to their experiences in higher education. This study also aimed to investigate how intersecting identities such as race/ethnicity, gender identity, and socioeconomic class shape these experiences. A qualitative design guided by grounded theory principles was employed, allowing for the development of theory directly informed by participants' lived experiences.

Data Analysis

The analytic process drew from the tenets of grounded theory. Open coding was used to break transcripts into meaningful units. These codes were then grouped into categories through axial coding, identifying relationships among emerging concepts. Finally, selective coding was employed to integrate and refine the core categories into a coherent theoretical model.

NVivo software was used to support the organization and management of coded data. Some handwritten coding was used to incorporate invoking a different means of coding to see which was more suited to my analytical style/preference. Analytic memos written during the coding process captured analytic insights and helped trace the development of emerging themes.

Description of Student Interviews

The types of disabilities varied across participants, and several participants identified as having more than one impairment.[24] Additionally, both visible and hidden impairments were prevalent among conversational partners. The disabilities mentioned in the set of interviews included those listed in the 14 categories mentioned by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Specifically, the following impairments were mentioned across interviews with SWDs: generalized anxiety disorder, asthma, uterine fibroids (non-cancerous tumors), anemia, social phobia, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, idiopathic hypersomnia, depression, muscle spasms, herniated spinal discs, pseudotumor cerebri, bipolar disorder, sensory processing disorder, and others.

The process of grounding the data incorporated several readings of interviews and identifying units of significance as they surfaced. Recurrent themes from the interview data

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[24] See Table 1. Demographic Information of Conversational Partners.

include ableism, access to accommodations, decision of disclosing a disability, disability identification, experience having a hidden disability, faculty awareness and disability training, disability and gender identity intersection, how the disability affects students in their personal life, the impact of students' disability on their academic performance, the lack of support for differently abled students, navigation of campus accessibility, disability and sexual orientation intersection, disability and racial/ethnic identity intersection, social interactions and stigmatization among SWDs, support systems in place for SWDs, and the transition from high school to higher education for SWDs.

Prior to delving into the stories of my conversational partners, I will introduce a table illustrating the varying types of disabilities among the sample using pseudonyms to both educate the audience while keeping the reader(s) engaged with my research in the most accessible manner. I incorporated excerpts from participants' experiences per thematic section. The purpose of this method of discussion was to convey a readable, yet analytical narrative effectively telling their stories underpinned by human experience. In this regard, depth and richness of the qualitative data is prioritized rather than numbers of participants that other quantitative approaches aim for. However, the quota was nearly reached, it is important to illuminate the strengths of depth over breadth regarding my collected data.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Conversational Partners

Participant	Role	Institution	Disability / Health Condition(s)
Avery Monroe	Student	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	Asthma, uterine fibroids, anxiety
Rowan Ellis	Student	Greenhill College (Small Size)	Juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, chronic pain, EDS, undiagnosed LD
Emily Sloane	Student	Greenhill College (Small Size)	Bipolar disorder, ADHD, anxiety, sensory processing disorder

Participant	Role	Institution	Disability / Health Condition(s)
Claire Benton	Student	Greenhill College (Small Size)	Muscle spasms, herniated discs, pseudotumor cerebri
Sol Márquez	Student	Mountainview University (Large Size)	ADHD, depression, anxiety
Celeste Newman	Student	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	Autism, ADHD, Suspected PTSD
Micah Renn	Student	Greenhill College (Small Size)	Autism, ADHD, HEDS, Concussion Effects, Anxiety, Depression, Tourette Syndrome
Riley Tamsin Feld	Student	Midtown Metropolitan University (Large Size)	Autoimmune Disorder, Chronic Appendicitis, Antiphospholipid Syndrome, Depression
Mariana Torres	Student	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	Idiopathic Hypersomnia
Rebecca Sutton	Student	Midtown Metropolitan University (Large Size)	Fibromyalgia, Dyslexia
Dr. Skye Rivera	Faculty	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	Deaf (Identifies as Functionally Diverse, Not Disabled)
Hannah Whitaker	Student	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	ADHD, Anxiety, Depression (Identifies as Differently Abled, Not Disabled)
Dr. Elise Moran	Staff	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	
Devon K. Adler	Student	Midwest Urban University (Large Size)	ADHD, GAD, Chronic Pain
Jasmine Holliday	Student	Midwest Urban University (Large Size)	Learning Disability (Processing Speed, Retention)
Jordan Ramirez	Staff	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	
Lina Chen	Student	Midtown Metropolitan University (Large Size)	Deaf
Malik Thompson	Student	Midwest Urban University (Large Size)	Dyslexia
Tyler Brennan	Student	Midtown Metropolitan University (Large Size)	Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD)
Dr. Elias Monroe	Staff	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	
Zahra Al-Saedi	Student	Midtown Metropolitan University (Large Size)	GAD, POTS
Breanna Thompson	Student	Midwest Urban University (Large Size)	Autism Spectrum Disorder, Sensory Processing Disorder

Participant	Role	Institution	Disability / Health Condition(s)
Alondra Vélez	Student	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	Epilepsy, PTSD (Medical Trauma + Neighborhood Violence)
Jae Min	Student	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	OCD, Chronic Migraines
Dr. Liana Serrano	Faculty	Midwest Urban University (Large Size)	
Imani Barbarin	Student	Lakeshore University (Large Size)	Hearing Loss, Vision Loss (Use of White Cane), Autism
Maryam Haddad	Student	Midwest Urban University (Large Size)	Anxiety, Depression

Throughout the analytic stage of this dissertation, I used a grounded theory approach informed by Charmaz (2006), engaging in an iterative cycle of memo writing, code refinement, and constant comparison across conversational partner narratives. Initial coding rendered a broad array of interpretive and descriptive codes that I repeatedly reorganized and merged as patterns became clearer. During this process, I started to observe thematic clusters that consistently recurred across interviews. In a way, I considered myself as part of the data regarding the self-effected coding of the data. Throughout coding the data, I had conversations with myself about what is significant, recurring, overlapping, and I would not see the data in the same way without the shifted lens I have that served as a research strength, not a limitation. Analytic memos were key in capturing early reflections and tensions among the data, and it ultimately guided the merging of finer grained codes into broader conceptual categories. By the midpoint of data collection, I had developed a working codebook that was applied retroactively to earlier transcripts for the purpose of consistency. Through several rounds of synthesis and mapping, I consolidated the data into three overarching chapters. One centering on stigma and disclosure decisions; another focused on the intersection of disability with other marginalized identities; and a third addressing the transition into higher education and the forward-looking aspirations that SWDs, faculty, and staff expressed. This chapter structure mirrors both the conceptual weight and frequency of the themes as they emerged through the entire analytic process.

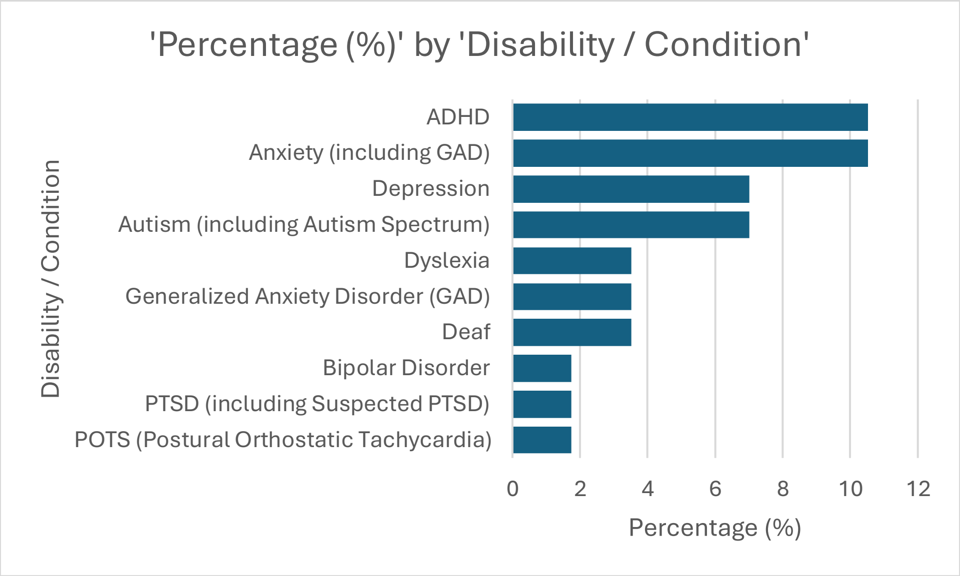
The following sections detail the analytic process, from coding strategies to theme development, illustrating how theory emerged from the data rather than being imposed upon it. Through this approach, the study seeks to elevate student voices and illuminate the systemic barriers and microaggressions that shape their educational trajectories.

This qualitative research study using interviews to explore disability experiences in HEIs involves conducting in-depth conversations with SWDs to understand their perspectives on navigating academic challenges, accessing support services, encountering accessibility barriers, and overall feelings about their university experience, utilizing semi-structured interview techniques to gather rich, detailed data about their lived experiences. The experiences of people with a variety of identities are not represented in previous literature. It was my goal to highlight those experiences and have them be a part of the canon of existing literature.

Recurrent themes from the interview data include ableism, access to accommodations, decision of disclosing a disability, disability identification, experience having a hidden disability, faculty awareness and disability training, disability and gender identity intersection, how the disability affects students in their personal life, the impact of students' disability on their academic performance, the lack of support for SWDs, navigation of campus accessibility, disability and sexual orientation intersection, disability and racial/ethnic identity intersection, social interactions and stigmatization among SWDs, support systems in place for SWDs, and the transition from high school to higher education for SWDs.

Figure 1

Disability Types in Sample (by % of total disability mentions)



The percentages in Figure 1 are based on total mentions (i.e., not individual participants), since many reported more than one condition. In other words, the percentages show how frequently each disability or health condition was mentioned out of all disability mentions combined across my sample. For example, ADHD accounted for about 10.5% of all the disability-related conditions reported by SWDs. Since many SWDs reported more than one condition, the total adds up to 100% over all mentions, not just participants. So, this gives the audience a sense of which conditions are most represented in the sample, but not the percentage of SWDs who have that condition individually.

Table 2

Percentage of Participants who Individually Have Each Condition

Disability / Condition	% of Participants with Condition
ADHD	9 out of 27 → 33.3%
Anxiety (including GAD)	9 out of 27 → 33.3%
Depression	6 out of 27 → 22.2%
Autism (including Autism Spectrum)	4 out of 27 → 14.8%
Dyslexia	2 out of 27 → 7.4%
Deaf	2 out of 27 → 7.4%

Disability / Condition	% of Participants with Condition
Fibromyalgia	1 out of 27 → 3.7%
Bipolar Disorder	1 out of 27 → 3.7%
PTSD (including Suspected PTSD)	2 out of 27 → 7.4%
POTS (Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia)	1 out of 27 → 3.7%
Chronic Pain	2 out of 27 → 7.4%
Learning Disability (LD)	2 out of 27 → 7.4%
OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder)	1 out of 27 → 3.7%
Hearing Loss	1 out of 27 → 3.7%
Central Auditory Processing Disorder	1 out of 27 → 3.7%
Sensory Processing Disorder	2 out of 27 → 7.4%

Below, Table 3 displays percentages of SWDs who have each mentioned condition. For example, 33.3% of participants (9 people) report having ADHD. Some conditions had fewer interviewees, such as Fibromyalgia, reported by 1 participant (3.7%). Since SWDs had multiple conditions, these percentages will not add up to 100%, but each percentage shows the portion of my whole sample that has that specific condition.

Table 3

Race/Ethnicity (% of Participants, N=27)

Racial/Ethnic Identity	% of Participants
White (incl. Middle Eastern [Arab])	48.2%
Latinx (incl. Mexican-American, Puerto Rican)	18.5%
Asian (incl. Korean-American, Pakistani-American, Asian-American)	14.8%
Black	14.8%
Jewish	3.7%

Table 4

Sexuality (% of Participants, N=27)

Sexual Identity	% of Participants
Pansexual	11.1%
Heterosexual	11.1%

Sexual Identity	% of Participants
Queer	11.1%
Bisexual	7.4%
Asexual	7.4%
Fluid sexuality	3.7%
Lesbian	3.7%
Fluid Orientation	3.7%

Figure 2

Gender Identity Breakdown (N=27)

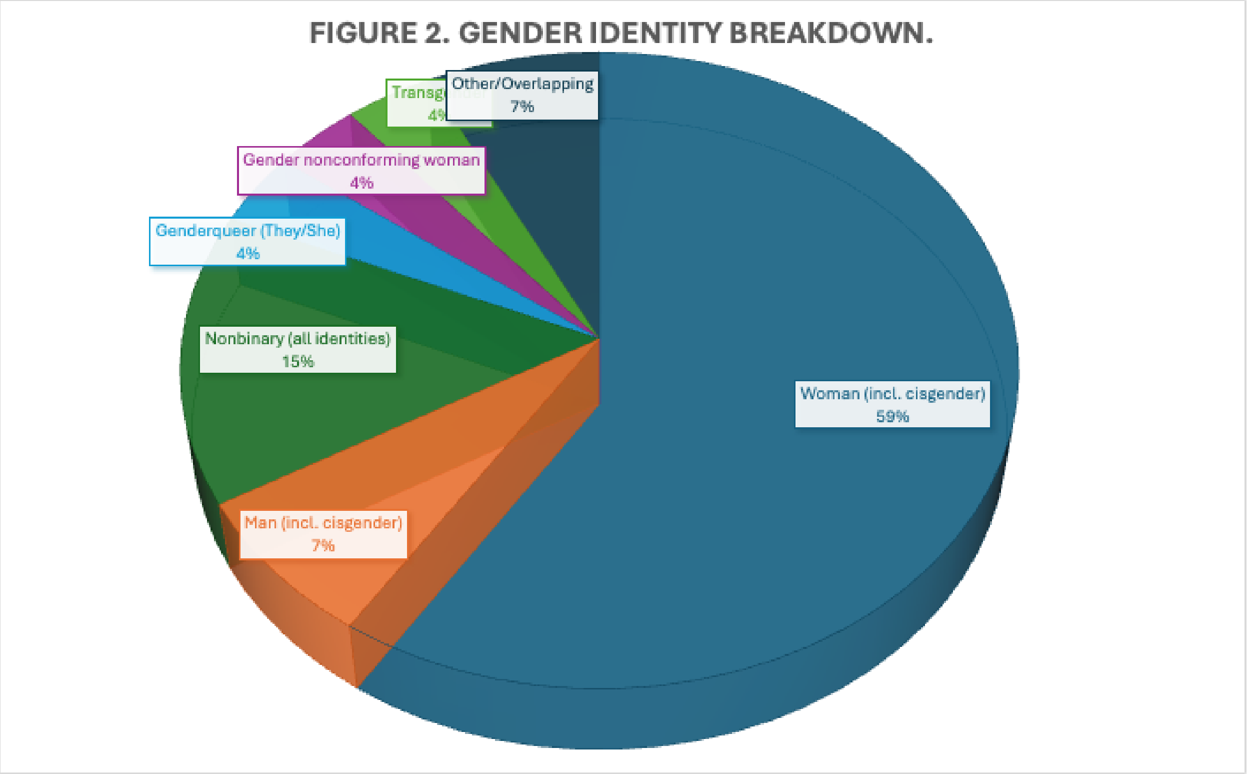
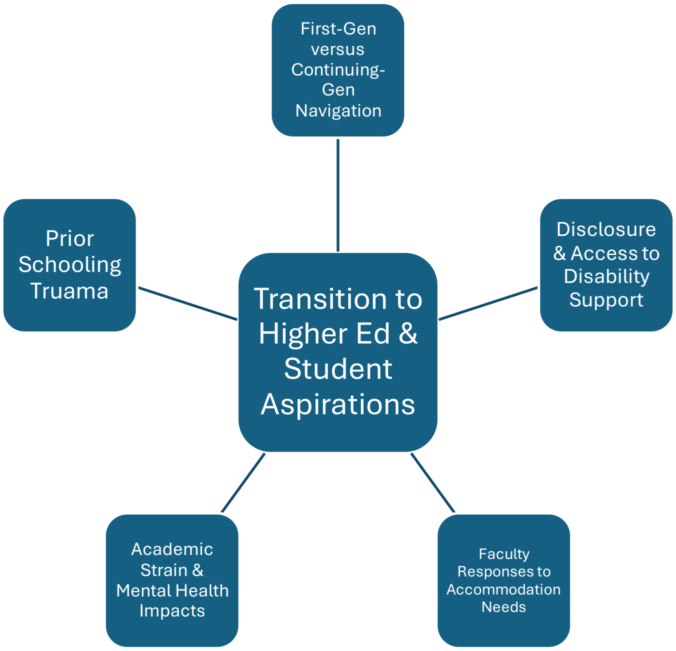


Figure 3

Open Coding Themes that Evolved into Broader Themes for Chapter 6



Conclusion

Centering participants' experiences and insights, this study contributes to a grounded, empirically rich account of how SWDs navigate higher education. The findings speak to the need for more inclusive pedagogical design, more accessible institutional infrastructures, and a deeper understanding of how multiple forms of marginalization interact within college environments.

Chapter 4: Stigma & Disclosure

Introduction

This chapter explores how SWDs navigated the layered terrain of both stigmatization and disclosure within higher education. Drawing from codes such as ‘Navigating Disability Disclosure,’ ‘Invisibility and Misrecognition of Disability,’ ‘Disability & Academic Strain’, and ‘Peer Relations and Disability Stigma’, this chapter demonstrates how internalized ableism, fear of misjudgment, and social vulnerability shape when and how SWDs choose to disclose. The codes that I incorporated in this chapter get at answering research question #1 the most. Overall, disclosure was observed as occurring in isolation, but a continuous process contingent on specific contexts such as the fear of judgement from others and being misinterpreted.

Overall, conversational partners' narratives reflected their significant internal tension surrounding the disclosure of disability. The main takeaway from these interviews in this chapter is based on those with hidden disabilities often felt hesitant to disclose to others and to seek out accommodations. SWDs typically developed their own coping mechanisms to navigate through college due to not wanting to be labeled or garner unwanted attention from peers, etc. Furthermore, the phase(s) of disclosure was viewed as not just potentially stigmatizing but also required emotional labor, leaving SWDs feeling exhausted in addition to the burdens of just being a university or college student. This included the fear of repeated explanations and the justification of their conditions in detail that accompany self-identification to those who might not fully comprehend their disability or acknowledge the importance of accommodations. In other words, the anticipation of judgement from faculty, staff members, and peers about the legitimacy of hidden impairments further discouraged open lines of communication while also perpetuating self-reliance, usually at the expense of accessing necessary resources which in turn affected both personal and academic life for SWDs.

Weaving together interviews, both SWDs and faculty/staff illustrated the way that existing systems (e.g., urban serving universities and colleges) place the burden of access and accommodation on individual differently abled students instead of on the institutional structures of academia that are meant to support them. Moreover, the "accommodation first" model (i.e., medical model of disability) currently used in higher education that relies heavily on disclosure, documentation, and even negotiation represents a reactive form of student support that often fails to meet both SWDs' needs and where to meet them upon or prior to matriculation to postsecondary education. Jordan Ramirez, a staff member from a large urban serving university posited that the current model oftentimes "requires students to advocate for themselves in ways that can be exhausting." Although there exist disability advocacy/resource centers on varying campuses, a significant portion of the effort falls on SWDs to secure equal accessibility, specifically for those with hidden disabilities (e.g., chronic pain and ADHD) or lesser-known impairments such as Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD).

Navigating Disability Disclosure

A common theme across the data was the complex, often fraught process of disability disclosure. For SWDs with non-apparent impairments ranged from mental health diagnoses and neurodivergence to autoimmune conditions and chronic pain, disclosure was rarely straightforward. Conversational partners generally reported a profound hesitance to disclose their identity as a disabled person in educational settings. Reasons behind this was due to thoughts of being perceived by others as trying to get unfair advantages, not as competent, or truthful about their conditions. For example, many SWDs spoke of being discriminated against or their disability concerns dismissed. Those who may have disclosed in secondary school also viewed college as a higher stakes environment so anxiety surrounding disclosure exacerbated in their new setting in HEIs.

SWDs adopted practices that I would refer to as selective disclosure of their impairments. What this means is that they revealed their identity as being differently abled after deeming it absolutely necessary or if they found people that they could comfortably confide in about their disability whether that be peers, faculty, or staff members. This had an underpinning of protection instead of empowerment thereby making disclosure more of a risk than a resource for many differently abled students with hidden conditions. Moreover, some SWDs would conceal their symptoms as obscurely as possible to avoid being noticed by others or due to anticipated scrutiny. According to Alondra, “At first [who did I disclose to]? No one. I didn’t trust the system. I thought, “If I tell them, they’re [going to] see me as a liability” (March 30, 2025).

Rowan opined that professors’ attitudes towards SWDs influence willingness to disclose. For example, Rowan stated that, “You can tell which [professors] take you seriously and which ones will just nod and forget [about students’ mention of their disability]. This tactical form of disclosure demonstrates how SWDs often become hyper-attuned to environmental and relational cues, learning to scan for receptivity before sharing any personal information. Therefore, SWDs had to develop a tactic to ‘read’ the professors’ perceived attitude prior to opening up about their various conditions. If students did not feel comfortable, they did not come forward. Faculty approachability, prior negative experiences, peer climate, and perceived instructor knowledge about disability all played into whether students disclosed and how.

Imani, reflecting on their own undergraduate experience, added that institutional language often reinforced feelings of exclusion sharing that: “It’s all about ‘disclosing to receive accommodations.’ But [what if] I just want to be understood? Not everything is about paperwork.” Imani’s comment points to the inadequacy of institutionalized semantics that treat disclosure as a formality or a precondition for support instead of a deeply personal and typically vulnerable act of trusting others.

Overall, SWDs responses echoed similar notions of why those with hidden impairments opt out of disclosing their condition(s) due to the fear of being stigmatized. Such hesitancy to disclose their impairments serves as a recurrent theme in the data supporting this part of my grounded framework. This was one of the most salient points among the interviews, even among faculty and staff members when asked about the low disclosure rates. It is important to understand ways in which disclosure can be encouraged without the fear of stigma. Many students reported additional bureaucratic barriers of not being taken seriously by staff members in the position of providing accommodations or at least verifying them as designated incumbents of the institution to render accommodation possible. For instance, students who did not have formal diagnoses from medical professionals faced even further hardship when attempting to navigate accommodation. Despite this, those with documentation did not appear to have a very streamlined experience either. This is not to assert that this pattern occurred identically across different institutions, but it followed similar patterns suggesting that academic ableism is a large-scale structural problem affecting retention rates across the HEIs I sampled participants from. These findings (i.e., patterns in the data) also corroborate the underpinning theory of famed sociologist Goffman.

Moreover, themes emerged from the data that generally faculty and staff (not the interviewed faculty and staff, to be clear) are undertrained and lack awareness of the broader spectrum of disability categories, proactive measures to mitigate student enrollment attrition, failure rates, microaggressions, bullying among peers, and overall negative attitudes stemming from ableist implicit and explicit biases. Extensive and increased thoroughness of disability training (i.e., influx of prioritization of embracement of being differently abled and supportive of the differently abled student community) and in broader society will theoretically lead to better practices to serve the overall student body since the fear of stigma affects initial steps towards seeking accommodation in the first place for SWDs.

Many participants described the hardships that SWDs encounter during the decision-making process of disclosing their impairment or not. As Dr. Serrano explained, ‘There’s this like constant dance of 'Do I say something or not?' because the burden is on the student to make the case… You're disclosing to someone who doesn't even understand your experience.' This quote encapsulates the profound impact of the politics and psychology of disclosure. It highlights the uncertainty of anticipated encounters with others concerning their disability.

Many students internalized ableist narratives that associated accommodation-seeking with weakness, particularly male students, as noted in reflections on masculinity and independence. A recurrent theme across interviews and participants' responses were concerning their perspective on when students should formally identify as a differently abled student on campus. For example, Emily stated:

> I am not sure when [students should identify themselves]. Probably before or at the time of accommodations being discussed would be a time to identify that you have a disability, although I know that you do need to get an official diagnosis prior to that [accommodation request]. So, if you do not have a diagnosis, that would be important to get ahead of time.
>
> And I feel like there should be more options on campus, or maybe there should be a connection between campus and the local hospital[s] or something for someone to get diagnosed. Because many people come to college knowing that they are neurodivergent or they have chronic pain, but they never got [formally] diagnosed. That would be a good option for them [students] to have so that they can [get diagnosed] while they are at school if they feel that they need accommodations. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

This interview excerpt demonstrated that SWDs have different timeframes in mind when it comes to self-identification. These rely on the campus climate, characteristics of their impairment(s), and any previous formal diagnosis. Instead SWDs are expected to focus on requesting accommodations. Emily further stated that:

> I feel this is kind of the rule, but it does not always work [with disclosure of a disability]. You are not supposed to tell your professors what your disability is. It is more like this accommodation, and I need it. Can I have it for a day? Whereas with the example of the one professor I gave, even when I told her more details that I need sleep for my disability, she did not even take that seriously. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

The significance of this quote is to highlight that students may choose *not* to disclose the specifics of their disability as it may be left to individual professors' interpretation of the severity of students' conditions and whether they in fact need accommodations based on their request to the respective professor(s). Another participant shared, 'Sometimes professors want more disclosure than they really need.'

When asking interviewees about their perspectives on students with invisible disabilities' decision to disclose or not, some participants referred to gendered stereotypes on potential reasons to not disclose[25]. This is discussed further in 'Gendered Dimensions of Disability.'

Participants described feeling isolated and prone to bullying and harsh remarks from peers as obstacles of disclosure. As one participant explained, 'Other people might, and this has been my experience, get bullied for disclosing more to their peers. I disclosed to some peers who did not accept me as a disabled person and decided to bully me for it.'

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[25] Emily shared: I think there are a lot of factors that go into that. There is kind of an expectation, especially with men that it is 'weak' to ask for help. And this is in a lot of different areas of life [outside college]. It is this myth that if you get help for your disability or even acknowledge that you have a disability, you are being weak and you are not a man, you are not strong, that kind of thing. Obviously, as a woman, I did not have that experience, but I have heard of people having that experience (Emily, October 18, 2024).

This section complicates traditional notions and beliefs of disability disclosure as a static, administrative task. Instead, disclosure became a relational often recursive negotiation that was mediated by fear, hope, and institutional unpredictability. Universities must recognize/consider that the disclosure of being differently abled cannot be ethically or effectively addressed through policy alone. It takes attitudinal change influenced by the structural level that is currently underpinned by systemic ableism which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The code of 'Navigating Disability Disclosure' emerged from conversational partners' co-developed accounts and thus a reflection of how differently abled students vary in their own decisions to disclose and their opinions of why others may choose to not disclose their disability. It was displayed in students' experiences such as Rebecca's. Rebecca opined, "My first year, I didn't tell people out of [fear that] … It would get scoffed at" (January 15, 2025). Moreover, conversational partners' experiences highlighted that the fear of judgement leads to delayed disclosure among those that choose to do so. Students also believed that there would be inadequate accommodations post-disclosure, so some did not see the point in coming forward in addition to the stigma already mentioned.

The next quote really gets to the core of the role that stigmatization plays in relation to disability disclosure (or lack thereof). For example, one participant shared:

> People might have that experience that shuts them down and makes them not want to talk about it [their disability] to anybody. I think [there] are a lot of stigmas that exists around disabilities, especially invisible disabilities like mental illness. But really any kind of disability. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

"I just kept quiet and struggled." Micah's quote captures the psychosocial cost of visibility, and the emotional formula involved in self-disclosure (December 3, 2024). This narrative reinforces findings on stigma management and identity concealment grounded in the data.

Many participants described their personal approach to disclosure. Not everyone had a bad experience disclosing to faculty. For example, Hannah shared:

> I have told a couple teachers in the beginning of class, just like, “hey, I’m just letting you know...I'm registered with Academic Access Center (AAC). Like, [I’ll] let you know if I need anything.” And they were always like, “OK. Sounds good. Just let me know if [you] need anything,” but it’s just been really positive feedback overall. (Hannah, April 25, 2025)

This quote in full context is significant due to the following reasons. Hannah provided her AAC with documentation requested and found professors to be mindful and accommodating in her experience, which contrasts from many of the remaining interviewees’. Moreover, faculty and staff were not overbearing by requesting an excessive amount of paperwork to prove her disabilities. Regarding Goffman’s (1963) concept of stigma, Hannah was an exception to not fearing visibility regarding her condition, particularly faculty. In other words, disclosure was not a concern for her nor a fear of stigmatization. Therefore, grounded from the data is this example that not all differently abled students’ experiences overlapped.

Other participants’ experiences contrast with Hannah’s. For example, Rowan navigated disclosure with strategic transparency yet still found themselves blamed when accommodations failed to be honored. For instance, Rowan said that “I met with the professor… I thought everything was good… but the professor was just like, ‘if you wanted that as an accommodation, you should have told me at the beginning [of the semester]’.” This quote illustrates how disability services operate under the assumption of perfect foresight and complete self-knowledge, both unrealistic and unjust expectations that disproportionately harm those with complex or fluctuating impairments. In other words, if students do not request accommodations soon enough from the perspective of professors, they are faced with dismissal. Proactive measures to mitigate these experiences will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

One participant, an undergraduate SWD reported a mixed experience of both positive and negative reactions from instructors post disclosure. For example, Celeste shared:

> I will say that most professors, if you approach them in a professional manner and you do it before the class starts, most of the time they're pretty accommodating… But it's almost like they don't seriously think that's the reason why I need the extension. (Celeste, October 27, 2024)

In this quote, Celeste described how she approaches her professors proactively to request flexibility related to her ADHD. While she often received accommodations, she sensed that instructors did not entirely believe her condition warranted the adjustments. This dynamic illustrates the emotional and rhetorical labor that disclosure entails for students with invisible disabilities. Rather than being met with trust, their disclosures often triggered skepticism, requiring them to overperform legitimacy. An example of this is when differently abled students masked symptoms to appear neurotypical to blend in with other students.

Like many other participants, Jae initially withheld disclosure of his disabilities, fearing negative academic or social consequences. It was only after support from a disabled peer student, that he accessed official accommodations. His experience demonstrated the role of peer networks in enabling access and how institutional trust barriers delayed needed support. For example, Jae shared this when asked who he initially disclosed his disability to:

> No one at first. I was scared it would somehow mess up my academic record or make professors treat me differently. It wasn't until my second year, when I missed three days in a row from a migraine episode, that I realized I needed accommodation. A friend in my architecture studio, who's also disabled, helped me reach out to the AAC. (Jae, February 17, 2025)

Faculty participants offered their own perspective to disclosure navigation. For instance, one participant shared:

> The first thing that comes to my mind is like, what is the tone that the instructor is setting at the start of the course?... If we are generally communicating this atmosphere of welcome and inclusion… I think students are much more likely to be willing to approach that professor and say, hey here's the accommodation that I need. (Dr. Moran, March 24, 2025)

The significance of this quote served to demonstrate how vital it is to establish inclusive language and support at each start of the semester. So, if SWDs think that the professor is going to be accommodating, they would be more likely to request anything after disclosure. Moreover, differently abled students would be less hesitant to disclose if they felt that their instructor was welcoming to the topic of disability. She also stressed the importance of classroom climate which is typically overlooked regarding Universal Design (UD). Therefore, without hearing student perspectives from the data, it can be inferred that disability informed faculty already feel what needs to be implemented, but not all professors are as inclusive as the ones I interviewed based on student interviews.

Other participants such as Dr. Rivera noted that students often refrained from disclosing their disabilities due to fear of stigmatization or being treated differently, which corroborates student participant responses. She related this to her own identity as a Deaf instructor who does not view herself as ‘disabled’ and she also suggested that modeling disability pride can help normalize disclosure. It is important to note that low disclosure rates appear reflective of (i.e., correlated with) the institutional tone of ableism which students internalize as a catalyst for fear of stigmatization.

In summary, the topic of disclosure emerged as both highly contextual and a fraught process. Faculty did acknowledge that SWDs are likely to decide not to disclose out of uncertainty or fear of being judged unless instructors explicitly state their openness to disability. For example, a resource staff member elaborated on disclosure as “a trust transaction,” formed by anticipated judgement, past experience, and institutional climate (i.e., tone). The burden persists for SWDs to initiate and oversee their disclosure, usually repeatedly for each class that they have. This further exhausts SWDs who are already attempting to cope with significant health and cognitive hardships. Not only does disclosure serve as a challenge, but the feeling of isolation and being unseen that accompanies having a hidden impairment exacerbates SWDs’ experiences in higher education.

Invisibility & Misrecognition of Disability

For students with invisible impairments, the burden of proof oftentimes becomes an additional layer of emotional labor. It is one that shapes both their academic identity and sense of belonging. Many SWDs who were interviewed identified as having a covert disability or a combination of both visible and hidden impairments. The common theme across collected data is that many invisible disabilities go unnoticed or not taken as seriously by others such as faculty, staff, and peers. It is also important to note that there appeared to be a perceived hierarchy of invisible disabilities and their severity level in the minds of SWDs whether that be stemming from the judgement of teachers in secondary school, professors in higher education, peers in both high school and the university setting, or a combination of these. It also appears that with regards to a theoretical explanation, there is an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach that society has when perceiving hidden disabilities. Within the interview data, I pulled various quotes that were directed at this aspect of my grounded theory. According to Claire, "An interesting part about having an invisible impairment is [that] there is the assumption that it does not exist" (January 14, 2025).

Participants' accounts challenge the notion that disability (or being differently abled) is only visible or verifiable through documentation (i.e., formal medical diagnoses). Dr. Serrano noted that instructors often received "generic" accommodation letters that failed to adequately communicate students' nuanced needs, further contributing to misunderstanding or disbelief. This misrecognition frequently led to advocacy fatigue and internalized stigma, confirming findings in the literature about hypervigilance and disbelief directed toward those with hidden disabilities (Valeras, 2010).

The emergence of this section resulted from many differently abled students' accounts of their hidden impairments not being taken seriously by faculty and peers throughout their experience in both high school and college. For instance, Mariana shared that, "No one sees it, so they assume I'm just making excuses or being lazy" (December 7, 2024). There exists a separate stigmatization around conditions that are not visually apparent. I say separate because there were accounts of reported stigma surrounding visually apparent impairments as well.

Hannah stated that, "I was one of the top students...The only issue was turning homework in on time" (April 25, 2025). This quote revealed the negotiation of legitimacy. Students with invisible disabilities are forced to repeatedly assert and reassert their credibility. This quote also suggests that visibility alone becomes a form of epistemic authority on university and college campuses, thus marginalizing invisible embodiments of impairments.

Riley opined, “I had a TA say, ‘You should’ve managed your time better,’ when I had a flare-up and missed a quiz” (January 14, 2025). This interaction illustrated how students with invisible conditions must contend with a persistent demand for justification, as their needs are usually interpreted as character flaws instead of symptoms of a chronic illness.

Other participants, such as Celeste and Micah discussed how their disabilities were either disbelieved or misinterpreted because they lacked visual markers. Celeste shared that she was frequently told she “seemed fine” and thus did not need accommodations. According to interviewees, professors assumed executive dysfunction was laziness or disorganization. Similarly, Micah, especially prior to his/their spinal issues becoming visible, was treated with skepticism. He/they described moments when his/their requests for flexibility were met with suspicion rather than support, highlighting how chronic illness and neurodivergence often fail to “register” as valid forms of disability in institutional logic. In other words, those in academic environments have yet to fully recognize hidden impairments and their symptoms. Even after disclosure, SWDs are met with disbelief. This dynamic created a twofold burden: not only did these SWDs have to manage their conditions, but they also had to justify and narrate them repeatedly to access basic accommodations. These experiences mirror what Valeras (2010) termed the “invisible labor” of making disability visible. The next section discusses how SWDs vary in their self-conception of being differently abled and disability in general.

Evolving Disability Self-Identification

Among interviewees, there was a wide range of disabilities that students identified themselves as having. Some SWDs disclosed that they had one or more impairments. Some disabilities were temporary while others were permanent. SWDs displayed differing perspectives on their unique conceptualizations on what constitutes being “disabled.” For example, Hannah expressed that she preferred the term ‘differently abled’ and that other impairments warrant the term more justly. In other words, those with hidden impairments did not view their condition as seriously as those with other disabilities, specifically physical. On the other hand, some SWDs viewed their invisible impairments as a disability and thus the term was self-identified in addition to medical diagnoses. This is not to assert that a medical diagnosis is a requisite for students to legitimately self-identify as being disabled or differently abled. For example, Emily shared, “So my disability is mental illness [which is] mostly bipolar disorder, ADHD, anxiety, sensory processing disorder. And yes, I do consider myself disabled” (October 18, 2024).

The quote above illustrates the nuances among participants and their conceptualization of what is deserving of being deemed a disability. Conversational partners viewed their own impairments differently than others’ based on perceived severity of the disability. As a result, some participants gravitated toward the language of “differently abled,” emphasizing adaptation rather than deficit. SWDs’ stories exemplify how disability identity formation was mediated by personal history, diagnosis timing, and family culture.

Some participants shared that they did not initially identify as disabled right away, despite having long managed conditions. For some, it was only through connecting with a campus community of other SWDs that they began to articulate disability as part of their identity. Student narratives reveal how the formation of disability identity is not innate or automatic but often mediated by access to collective spaces and language that validate such self-recognition. Their interviews point to the critical importance of peer networks in the co-

construction of disabled subjectivity as many did not self-identify until joining coalitions or meeting others in similar contexts.

Several other participants did self-identify as being disabled. For instance, Claire shared:

> I do consider myself to be disabled. A very simple way of putting out my disabilities is [that] I have disabilities that kind of affect everything. They affect my muscular skeletal system. I get dislocations, herniated discs, and muscle spasms. They [also] affect my stomach. I have conditions like IBS and GERD. I also have a condition called pseudotumor cerebri, which is increased pressure in the brain that causes symptoms of a brain tumor without there actually being a brain tumor present. So, it can cause a lot of things like brain fog or memory problems. I have muscle imbalance because of it and hearing problems. So, lots of different things. (Claire, October 17, 2024)

Quotes such as these highlight how nuanced conceptualizations of the term disability and what it meant to be considered disabled were in the data. Other recurrent findings across interviews were the varying perspectives on when students should formally identify as a differently abled student on campus. Many participants corroborated each other's thoughts of it being dependent on the students' discretion and comfortability. Others stated that it should be as soon as possible. Some participants were uncertain of an ideal timeframe for self-identification. For example, Emily stated:

> In terms of getting accommodations, it is important to be aware of what your needs are and what your disabilities are. I am not sure when [students should identify themselves]. Probably before or at the time of accommodations being discussed

> would be a time to identify that you have a disability, although I know that you do need to get an official diagnosis prior to that [accommodation request]. So, if you do not have a diagnosis, that would be important to get ahead of time. And I feel like there should be more options on campus, or maybe there should be a connection between campus and the local hospital[s] or something for someone to get diagnosed. Because many people come to college knowing that they are neurodivergent or they have chronic pain, but they never got [formally] diagnosed. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

Many participants described feeling uncomfortable self-identifying on campus until developing friendships with other SWDs. One participant explained, 'I did not [identify] when I started college, but after joining a community with other disabled students, I developed that as my identity.'

Participants like Imani shared her story as she had both visible and non-visible disabilities. She did self-identify as disabled although her hidden impairments were similar to other students who chose to be called differently abled. The point is that while most themes shared similarities, self-identification was more nuanced. Therefore, emerging from the data was the sheer sense of frustration regarding the skepticism among peers and the public concerning the legitimacy of her needs even with visible markers of disability such as the use of a cane. According to Imani:

> So, I get on the bus. I like the bus a lot [be]cause I commute [to Lakeshore University]. Like when I was on the bus, I've been accused by people on the bus that oh, are you really blind? Do you really need that cane or whatever? You know, like that makes me feel inadequate and makes me feel like I am faking, but I'm not

> because I've been. Because I've been told by the doctor that I could use is waking for my sleep. And people, and that comes with people who are just not being educated, people being willfully ignorant about disability and not doing the research themselves about it. And so, and This is why disability needs to be more normalized. (Imani, July 7, 2025)

Experiences like that of Imani's and others' give a glimpse into the lived realities of differently abled students. In particular, this magnifies with additives of identity markers and different combinations of disabilities. For example, based on the data, belonging to oppressed groups, especially more than one, compounds the different hardships that students already face. These additive identities will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Conversational partners also posited that instructors should serve as role models who can help students reframe disability as identity rather than as a deficit. For example, Dr. Rivera noted that Deaf faculty visibility can normalize diverse embodiments and counter internalized ableism among students. This can help bridge the gap between disability obscurity and uncertainty towards the encouragement of self-identification and embracing a differentiation of abilities across campuses. This conceptualization of disability extends beyond institutions of education. For example, participants shared examples of interactions with medical professionals and how their experiences bled into their self-identification in college.

Rowan's understanding of their disability changed over time, especially after being gaslit by doctors during their childhood and denied formal accommodations in early education. Rowan shared, "The doctors had said… 'you're cured.' 'You're really lucky.' Even though I had all this pain" (December 9, 2024). This evolution reveals how medical systems obscure chronic conditions, leaving SWDs without the language or documentation required to self-advocate until much later in their academic endeavors.

Sòl stated:

> I got recently diagnosed with ADHD, so that's like a new thing. But I have had a diagnosis of depression and generalized anxiety disorder, which made it really hard to be able to complete things at a college level. It wasn't too much of a problem in high school. But those are, I guess, what I call my disabilities. I don't really consider myself disabled because I feel like I still can function pretty normally. (Sòl, October 24, 2024)

Zahra stated, “I consider myself disabled now and claiming that identity helped me stop feeling ashamed about needing support” (March 25, 2025). This quote sharpens my argument that identity formation for SWDs frequently pivoted on social context, educational access, and community, instead of diagnosis alone. Like others, Zahra’s experience advanced a theoretical model where identity emerged through exposure to empowering discourses and peer validation which challenged essentialist or purely medical frameworks of disability (e.g., the medical model of disability).

In synopsis, conversational partners stressed that disability identity evolves throughout time, formed by context, community, and experiences. For most SWDs interviewed, college represented the first time that they considered themselves to be either disabled, differently abled, or even start to adopt such language. As mentioned before, students like Hannah shared that growing up culturally Deaf, she did not view herself as disabled at first. Moreover, this shift happened in relation to her university’s framing of her accommodation needs. SWDs’ experiences highlighted the way institutional categories usually catalyze (i.e., prompt) novel forms of identity negotiation. Likewise, faculty including Dr. Moran recognized that SWDs willingness to identify as disabled is usually influenced by both broader institutional and micro level classroom climates. SWDs might deny the label altogether or postpone self-identification without the affirmation of inclusive spaces or proper disability representation, therefore inhibiting SWDs' ability to access accommodations and support early on. Next, I will discuss in depth, the stigma that often accompanies the experience of disability and SWDs' relationships with their peers in college.

Peer Relations & Disability Stigma

SWDs detailed their specific encounters with ableism (i.e., discriminatory behaviors and microaggressions) on campus throughout their university endeavors. According to Emily:

> I disclosed to some peers who didn't accept me as a disabled person and decided to bully me for it. It was weird because there was this rumor going around [of] people calling me autistic, but autistic as an insult. [Being] autistic is not an insult. So, it was kind of hard for me to defend myself because I am not going to say, "no I am not autistic." [It is] another kind of neurotype. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

This quote illustrates that occurrences like these are how attrition rates could be affected for SWDs, which is further discussed in Chapter 6. Moreover, Emily explained that this dynamic with peers lasted mostly throughout her sophomore year in college, which exacerbated additional mental health issues such as depression. Recollections of disclosing disability to peers was met with ridicule. She was repeatedly mocked and called "autistic" as an insult. Rather than rejecting the label itself, Emily expressed frustration at the ableist connotations weaponized through her peers' choice of language. Moreover, her story demonstrated the emotional labor of disclosure, particularly in peer spaces where disability is still framed through deficit and deviance. It also underscored how stigmatization is not only institutional but profoundly interpersonal. Other SWDs' experiences were similar since despite experiencing stigma, there was some relief from negative peer interaction by having friend groups of similar backgrounds as a social support system. For example, Sòl shared:

> I think in reference to the bullying, I felt like it was hard because the campus being small was a negative because I felt like even in my own classes, I did not know who was judging me and who would hear the rumors and believe them or believe them to be a *bad* thing, I should say. At least at Greenhill, I did feel pretty supported by my friends. But that's probably because I hung around with other people who had similar mental health history… We would like post these during COVID, like, study hour time on Discord, where we stay on a call until, like, 3 a.m. doing homework together to not feel lonely. (Sòl, October 24, 2024)

This quote highlights an example that despite institutional barriers, participants described finding deep support within their peer group, particularly among friends who shared similar mental health experiences. For example, during the pandemic, they engaged in communal study sessions virtually, staying online together into the early hours of the morning. These sessions functioned as both an academic motivation and social lifeline. Their experience illustrated how peer networks can serve as informal but powerful systems of mutual support, particularly when formal accommodations fall short.

Among her classmates, Zahra sometimes encountered resentment or disbelief around her use of academic adjustments. Comments about "perks" and special treatment amplified her sense of difference and compelled her to explain the realities of her daily challenges. For example, she shared, 'People don't get that I'd trade all the 'perks' to just have a day without brain fog or panic attacks.' This excerpt shows how peer attitudes can powerfully shape SWDs' willingness to seek and use accommodations. Emerging from the data, I account for how stigmatization circulates laterally among students, not just vertically from faculty or staff. Other participants' perspectives were similar with Alondra sharing:

> I've heard people say stuff like, "I wish I could get extra time too," or "How do I get a single room like you?" as if it's a perk. They don't see the seizures. They don't see panic attacks. They just see the 'benefits. (Alondra, March 27, 2025)

These challenges highlight the need to attend to the ways in which cultural narratives of fairness and effort obscure the realities of disability and fuel exclusion within the student community. Alongside peer relations were internal struggles and decisions and attitudes towards medication use to help mitigate symptoms of their disabilities that I will discuss further.

Stigma & Medication

Interviewees varied in their attitudes towards medication use, and much of what they shared was the stigma surrounding its use for hidden impairments. Specifically, when treated pharmacologically, some opted out after trying medications while others reported having some support that encouraged their respective forms of treatment. This section is relevant because part of the disabled experience is encountering others' attitudes and beliefs of medication and its applicability towards hidden impairments, specifically those pertaining to learning disabilities and mental health conditions. Hannah shared:

> My Adderall really helps bring my baseline down so when troubling things pop up, I can handle them better. I really struggled with wanting to take it because I was like, well, I've gotten by fine. I'm not great. I'm not happy that I'm [just doing]

> fine. Why should I want to or need to take these meds, and I still struggle with that to this day. (Hannah, April 25, 2025)

The significance of this quote captured SWDs questioning their need to continue taking prescribed medication to treat their disabilities. Therefore, similar to how students feel towards seeking accommodations, they share similar sentiments about medication use and question their effectiveness. Some participants felt the need to "push through" and adhere to other coping mechanisms outside of medicinal use. The stigma appears to be an internalized ableism. So, the same things keeping students from disability disclosure, asking for accommodations, can be argued to contribute to a self-consciousness of medication use. According to Sòl:

> Not that I kept it from them [family] as like a secret. It just never came up in conversation. To them it's just like, "Oh she gets sad sometimes and they [say] "just take a Lexapro" and that's it… and she's doing good in school, right? It's just something that you don't really talk about when you're Latina. It's interesting because my mom got all the help that she needed when she moved to the States. I think I was like four or five when I remember going to these psychology appointments with her, and she seemed really embarrassed about it. When I finally made the move to my senior year of high school to go to therapy, it was a really hard conversation. They really blame themselves as being bad parents or they failed you in some way if you have like a mental disorder of some sorts. It's always dramatic when talking about it. [They're] always like, "no, you're fine." [Do] you [really] have to be taking those pills? (Sòl, October 24, 2024)

Although the quote is extensive, it allows the audience to take a look into the experience that coincides with being Latinx, a woman, and having relatives question the legitimacy of medication use for mental health. As can be inferred from interviews, family and culture also play a role in internalized ableism which permeates into SWDs' college life in different ways. In this instance, differently abled students often carry the weight from their upbringings into their educational settings where they are faced with other institutional barriers. The topic of stigma and medicinal treatment was not brought up in every interview, however, it emerged across a few conversations with SWDs and should not be overlooked in the broader discussion of disability in higher education.

Personal Impacts of Disability

Several participants, including Celeste and Hannah, conveyed frustration with being disbelieved or patronized because their disabilities were not immediately visible. Celeste described being spoken to as though she were a child, despite her academic competence, purely based on others' assumptions about neurodivergent people. Celeste shared, "People assume [that] you're not as intelligent as a neurotypical person. And I don't like when people speak to me like I'm a child" (October 27, 2024). The quote by Celeste illustrates her frustration she encounters in both her personal and academic life. For example, she is neurodivergent and reported that people tend to manifest their biases knowingly or unknowingly by patronizing her and speaking to her as if she is unable to understand them if they articulated in their usual manner. Her account revealed how deeply ableist assumptions around competence persist, particularly for students with cognitive or behavioral disabilities that challenge normal expectations of performance.

Avery's reproductive health condition was another case in point. Uterine fibroids and the resulting chronic anemia were not immediately apparent to those around her, yet they had a profound impact on her capacity to function academically which will be further detailed in the next section. Because her symptoms did not match the dominant narratives of disability, she hesitated to seek accommodations, which further intensified her challenges in college.

Overall, participants felt overwhelmed in their personal lives which bled into the educational spaces, where campuses tended to fail to meet their unique needs. Inferred from the data is that it is difficult enough for able-bodied and neurotypical students transitioning to and continuing their academic life at urban serving universities; however, being differently abled presents an array of additional unique challenges that are contingent on their disability *and* social location. It is important to remember that bias was not empirically quantified in this study, emergent themes suggest that systemic ableism in conjunction with other isms operate in any institution, but specifically in the context of higher education. Therefore, I will present findings pertaining to academic strain.

Disability & Academic Strain

Varying across a broad spectrum of disabilities as defined by the IDEA, and in many cases a combination of multiple disabilities carried variation and commonalities among participants' responses. Students spoke on the effect ableism and ow their disability has on their academic performance. Positive experiences are also discussed as students may have had differing support systems in place to render a different experience in higher education. Direct quotes supporting this theme include an excerpt from Rowan, "Nobody else was doing this reading, and I was tearing my entire life apart to do it all" (December 9, 2025).

Avery’s academic experience was marked by a persistent tension between her embodied needs and the intellectual demands of graduate work. Living with uterine fibroids and chronic anemia, she described the daily academic grind not just as mentally taxing but also as physically depleting. These conditions were not episodic since they constituted a baseline level of exhaustion that was largely invisible to others. Since her disability did not manifest in conventional or outwardly recognizable ways, the pressure to “keep up” was intensified by an unspoken expectation that she does not let it interfere with her academic productivity. This was a common expectation among the participants which ties their narratives together despite their unique perspectives based on their own lived experience.

As taken from Avery’s quote is that there was an internalization of academic ableist norms. For instance, despite being in severe pain physically, she perceived that her absence would be taken by faculty as being uncommitted to her academic work. Even with her faculty cognizant of her condition, it would never be taken into consideration that she needed accommodations. Instead, her conditions were downplayed and gendered. This normalization of self-sacrifice reflects a deeper cultural problem. This is when SWDs internalize academic expectations that prize (i.e., reward) endurance over sustainability, therefore, their own wellbeing becomes the cost of participation.

Being a first-generation graduate student only exacerbated her academic distress. In other words, she did not possess an ‘institutional roadmap’ from relatives (i.e., parents) to assist in her navigation of her dual roles of being a graduate assistant and full-time student. Moreover, she endured performance pressures without an indication of knowing who, how, and when to ask for help when it was crucial. Her experience captures how the intersection of disability, class background, and professional invisibility creates an environment in which students like her are pushed to their physical and psychological limits. Intersectionality will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5. According to one SWD:

> I can't pull all-nighters like other students; that could literally trigger a seizure. I can't be around strobe lights, which rules out a lot of social things on campus. And PTSD? That makes crowds hard… I avoid parties, I don't go to big events, and sometimes I miss out on networking stuff because I don't feel safe [in large crowds]. (Alondra, March 27, 2025)

Taken from this quote, Alondra's reflection underscores how disability reshapes the entire architecture of student life beyond the boundaries of the classroom. For her, academic demands like late-night study sessions and extracurricular expectations such as attending large campus events or career mixers potentially poses serious health risks. As a result, she navigates her education with constant vigilance, balancing achievement with the imperative of safety. Her experience is emblematic of the quiet but pervasive strain many SWDs encounter which is an exhaustion of risk management.

These are examples of how universities tend to normalize a one size fits all approach to student participation and engagement. In other words, students are forced to decide between their well-being and campus related participation when campus life is designed for able bodied and neurotypical people only. Moreover, academic strain is not restricted to the classroom, but all other facets of life in higher education including social integration.

My grounded theory of disability in higher education moves beyond narrow frameworks of classroom accommodations that are centered around medicalized and document driven models. Universities tend to frame their disability services to comply to minimum standard allowed by law or baselines of the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. In turn, this approach does not take into consideration social aspects such as cultural stigma, campus life in general, or disabilities that change over time. Alondra's account illustrates the necessity of what some scholars call an ecological approach to access (Ruppar et al., 2017, Sontag, 1996). Accessibility and inclusivity are not restricted to being only about assignment extensions and ramps. Stakeholders should also be cognizant that learning occurs beyond lecture halls into other spaces of university life. It is about transforming campus culture so that safety, participation, and belonging are not luxuries but shared foundations.

When speaking with students who received medication for their impairments, there were mixed responses on how that affected their academic performance. For example, Claire stated that due to her herniated disc, she felt sedated during part of her semester. Therefore, fortunately some of her professors acknowledged that she needed additional help.

> I went to classes last month and a half, doped up on an opioid medication, not really knowing what was happening. I talked with my professors, and they pretty much told me, "If this ever happens again, do not go to the dean of students' office." Every single one of them, they're like, "that entire [situation was] ridiculous." They're like, "You have all A's in all our classes." "We'd be happy to work with you." (Claire, October 17, 2024)

SWDs, predominately among those with ADHD (e.g., executive dysfunction) and depression, expressed that there was a big impact on their learning and being able to complete schoolwork. Emily shared:

> That did make my depression bad that year. It affected my grades because I was not going to class because of the depression. After sophomore year, that was not really happening quite as much. [If] anything, it was helpful that I was feeling more

> confident, and people did not feel like they could just pull me down as easily. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

Taken from this quote, she openly discussed how her worsening depression throughout the academic year led her to miss multiple classes and suffer a regression in her GPA. The university's rigid attendance and grading rubrics offered no meaningful accommodation for this fluctuation in mental health, reinforcing how academic metrics often ignore or punish disability-related hardships. Her experience shed light on the unacknowledged toll of ableist expectations in performance-driven educational environments.

For many SWDs, the academic experience was marked by a persistent and often invisible negotiation between managing health conditions and meeting institutional expectations that presume consistent, high-performance output. SWDs described scenarios where physical or psychological flare-ups made participation difficult or impossible, yet few structural mechanisms existed to meaningfully accommodate those moments without adding further strain.

Differently abled students were able to navigate difficulties that left them both physically and mentally exhausted. Despite challenges, they still completed their academic commitments, but the process could have been much easier if UD and derivative frameworks like UDL and UDI were implemented and used. This would theoretically cause a paradigm shift in pedagogy. Severity of disabilities should not have to be masked by work ethic which only reinforces the existing academic culture rooted in ableist thought that discourages vulnerability among the student population. Students overall are typically met with shallow levels of empathy aside from a supportive few faculty in their academic life reported across interviews. What can be inferred from this is that disability awareness training should be extended and made mandatory for everyone involved in higher education. This is in addition to UDL guidelines utilization.

The theme of disability & academic strain emerged by way conversational partners' co-constructed narratives, and it is a reflection about how SWDs interpret, adapt to, or resist their institutional conditions that they face. I provided the theme's manifestation as observed within their narratives. This section underscores the persistence of meritocratic norms that often disadvantage differently abled students. Participants often reported of having to work 'twice as hard' as able bodied and neurotypical counterparts just to keep up. Therefore, SWDs' experience aligns with the current body of literature on cognitive ableism in postsecondary settings (Carlson, 2001).

Hannah shared, "Assignments are due Wednesday, but my brain is like, 'Oh, they're really due Saturday" (April 25, 2025). This quote highlights that cognitive and emotional fatigue emerged as a recurring dimension of academic strain, particularly among students navigating both internal demands and external expectations tied to disability. Participants like Hannah noted the challenges of aligning neurodivergent mental rhythms with rigid academic timelines. While deadlines were officially set for midweek, her focus and energy often peaked later, creating a persistent mismatch between internal processing and institutional pacing. For others, the strain was linked to the scale and content of their work. The resulting tension between personal identity and scholarly expectation was deeply taxing.

Faculty participants echoed other concerns. Dr. Serrano observed how the process of disability disclosure itself can be an ongoing source of exhaustion for students. Dr. Serrano shared, 'We keep asking students to disclose and disclose and disclose, and every disclosure is an act of vulnerability. And you don't know how that faculty member is going to respond. That's exhausting' (April 15, 2025). It is emphasized how the expectation for students to repeatedly disclose their disabilities to different instructors and staff is not only burdensome, but it is also emotionally draining.

Systemic Ableism in Higher Ed

Perhaps, another of the salient points of discussion pertains to the systemic ableism that permeated into the attitudinal beliefs across different sociodemographic parameters. For example, interviewees mentioned cultural conceptualizations of invisible disabilities and how they are disregarded or downplayed altogether as “non-existent” in the household growing up. This was reported to be carried into the educational environment and therefore through into the transition to higher education. First-generation students experienced a more difficult time than those who had parents or relatives familiar with the accommodation process and higher education adjustments from high school overall. Conversational partners described their personal accounts of ableist behaviors that they experienced. For example, Avery described her advisor in the following manner, “His own internalized imposter syndrome and ableism is manifesting in his approach to advising, and I think something important to mention, is how we as his advisee's kind of share knowledge and cope with his inaccessible approach... His extreme[ly]...high expectations” (November 8, 2024).

In these cases, high standards were not inherently the problem. It was the lack of relational support and inclusive flexibility that rendered them oppressive. Administrative interactions further revealed how institutions prioritize procedural simplicity over human complexity. Claire’s experience with her dean of students was not one of support but of abrupt dismissal. Claire’s follow-up email expressing a lack of trust in the institution was simply met with passive deflection thereby signaling a troubling pattern on behalf on the administration.

Rowan’s account of being offered a storage room as an “accessible” classroom alternative exemplifies how accommodations can be isolating rather than inclusive. Similarly, Emily’s request for an extension due to exhaustion linked directly to her disability was denied on the grounds that sleep was not listed as part of her diagnosis. Both instances reveal a common theme that support is often conditional upon how neatly a SWD’s needs conform to bureaucratic definitions of disability.

The university, in its current form, remains a site where SWDs are expected to justify not only their needs but also their very presence. If inclusion is to be more than just symbolic, it must involve a fundamental redesign of educational culture which is one that centers flexibility, mutual respect, and accountability. This requires shifting our understanding of ableism from an interpersonal failure to a systemic logic that governs the very architecture of higher education.

During interviews many students felt as if using accommodations was taking an unfair advantage. In other words, students were hesitant to have their needs met and often felt guilty. This reluctance points to internalized ableism which can be thought of the absorption of societal beliefs that frame disability accommodations as special favors rather than as legal rights. As Dr. Serrano noted, students often behave as though accommodations are finite resources, something to be rationed. Rather than requesting what they need, students gauge whether their requests will be viewed as legitimate, palatable, or excessive. This internal filtering process is not benign. So, advocating for self becomes calculated against risks of not being credible or altogether dismissal. Therefore, a culture is reflected that places stigma on disability even if it is within HEIs that boldly assert that they value diversity and inclusion of everyone.

This internal conflict was reflected in several student and faculty narratives. Dr. Rivera offered a compelling example from her experience teaching ASL, noting that classroom layouts and digital tools often cater to spoken-language instruction and ignore the visual demands of Deaf pedagogy[26]. Speaking to the physical environment, Micah described how snow removal procedures on their campus routinely blocked access to wheelchair ramps, which renders a continuous safety hazard demonstrating HEI failures to think of accessibility in the most basic of operational compliances. On the surface to many, these might appear as minor design flaws, but even maintenance decisions reflect how deep systemic ableism gets since the default planning mechanisms do not include differently abled bodies unless they undergo explicit challenge. What results is a campus climate that normalizes inaccessibility rendering accessibility invisible to many SWDs who feel left behind. Oversights in design is not described as overtly malicious on behalf of the HEIs, but they are just that; institutional oversights unseparated from the frameworks of normative physical architecture, course design, and digital modalities such as software used. It is to these tensions, the fear of overstepping, the pressure to self-discipline, and the myth of over-accommodation that the next section now turns to.

Figure 4

Visual Thematic Map

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[26] I constructed a visual map to demonstrate iterative coding of Dr. Rivera's interview. See Figure 5.

Across these interviews, patterns revealed that ableism in higher education is rarely overt[27]. It is embedded deeply in policies, norms, and unspoken expectations. Interviewed faculty do acknowledge that many course designs persist depending on a "default learner" model that privileges rigid timelines, uninterrupted attention, and linear thinking. In other words, courses were urged to be redesigned for all types of learning styles for SWDs and overall. Even well-meaning professors might inadvertently uphold academic ableist norms by way of the assumption that SWDs will proactively disclose their accommodation needs, rebound quickly from setbacks, or navigate complex bureaucratic processes on their own while already facing hardships. Such a systemic orientation further privileges students who are already socialized to self-advocate which leaves many SWDs to 'fall through the cracks.' As one conversational

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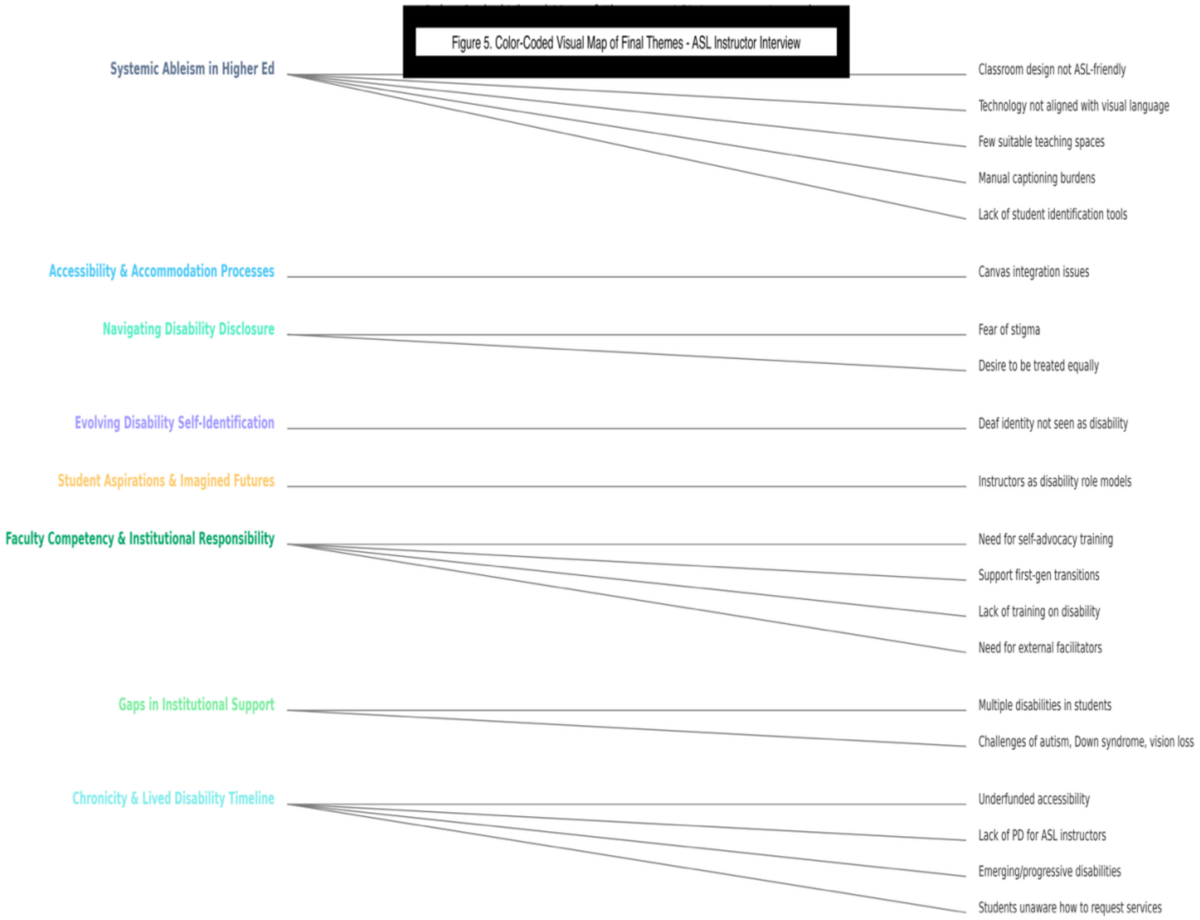
[27] Refer to Figure 4 for a Visual Thematic Map.

partner opined, “accessibility should not be retrofit or reactionary; it should be embedded in course design from the outset” (Rowan, December 9, 2024).

Figure 5

Color-Coded Visual Map of Themes - ASL Instructor Interview



COVID-19 and the Exposure of Structural Flexibility

“The pandemic proved that we could be flexible. The faculty were doing [assigning] take-home exams. You could turn in assignments late. Things that disabled students had been asking for all along were suddenly standard” (Dr. Serrano, April 15, 2025). Yet the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these norms in ways that laid bare the possibilities for structural change. As Dr. Serrano observed, accommodations that had long been denied or framed as unmanageable. Extended deadlines, take-home exams, and flexible attendance all seemingly became standard overnight. The shift in this showed that HEIs are capable of meaningful flexibility when external pressures are demanding it as necessary. This raises critical questions concerning why this adaptability has not been offered to differently abled student prior to COVID-19. For academic infrastructure, the pandemic appeared to function as a stress test and exposed that many policies that should have been essential were merely organizational decision. This period highlighted not just the artificiality of academic time, but also the undeniable hypocrisy of longstanding resistance to disability accommodation. It also reinforced what many had long argued which is that access is not merely a matter of willingness, but of institutional design.

However, the sustenance of this structural flexibility becomes convoluted by broader labor academic market trends. The continual shift toward onboarding adjunct part-time instructors who teach more classes for less income, renders new barriers to implementing and maintaining UDL and UDI guidelines. Moreover, when faculty become simultaneously under-resourced and overextended, they might lack institutional backing, training, and time to redesign classes while keeping in mind proactive accessibility. Regarding this section, the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated risks in flexibility remembered as an anomaly instead of becoming institutionalized as a standard practice still in use.

Labor dynamics such as these described solidify the urgency to situate UDL and UDI as an institutional responsibility as opposed to a pedagogical option. If policy goals depend merely on individual faculty members' initiatives, they will probably stall under such conditions of employment. Rather, implementation on the systemic level should rely on structural investments that include workload adjustments, funded professional development, and centralized support units that carry the weight of accessibility and design labor. If this is missing as a commitment on behalf of the HEI, educators will continue to be face the burden of inclusion that falls unevenly on even the most conscientious and usually overworked adjuncts.

Dr. Rivera emphasized that traditional classroom design often fails to support ASL pedagogy. She also explained that semicircle seating arrangements are essential for visual communication, but most classrooms are set up in lecture styles that obstruct this. Technological systems, such as auto-captioning tools, also cater to spoken language and neglect the needs of visual language instruction. Institutional ableism, in this sense, is not overt but embedded in architecture and default technological priorities.

"Professors will hold office hours during Zoom… instead of me having to go down to campus… That has been a complete game changer for me" (Celeste, October 27, 2024). This quote encapsulates how significantly Celeste's ability to manage course demands improved from the shift to online and hybrid learning during the pandemic. Moreover, the commonality of office hours held via Zoom or Teams was highly preferred by SWDs who did not have to physically go in person. Additionally, differently abled students reported performing better with asynchronous formats. In particular, Celeste's experience refutes the assumption that traditional in-person formats were better inherently thereby revealing how tools that are virtual present a sustainable inclusive learning environment for SWDs.

The rarity of spaces that are ASL-accessible on campuses was a matter of patterned failure to consider diverse educational requirements, not a matter of occasional oversight. SWDs are further marginalized when the environment assumes a single normative way of teaching. Additionally, it inhibits the effectiveness of instruction when the instructor needs to rely on alternative modes of communication such as ASL tools. Therefore, there is a disconnection among environmental infrastructure and course design which brings about larger question of who professors are equipped to teach and how efficiently HEIs prepare them to do so. This brings about the segway to the following section of institutional structures that shape and influence faculty competency.

Faculty Competency & Institutional Responsibility

Participants across the study consistently emphasized that institutional efforts to prepare faculty for supporting differently abled students remain fragmented and insufficient. While many instructors hold good intentions, a lack of comprehensive training leaves them ill-equipped to effectively meet the needs of multiply marginalized students. Several students and faculty highlighted the patchwork nature of professional development that was often voluntary, inconsistently attended, and internally managed by already overburdened staff resulting in gaps in knowledge and uneven application of accommodations. This fragmentation underscores the urgent need for epistemic diversity in training programs, ideally through external facilitators who can bring fresh, critical perspectives that challenge prevailing norms around disability and inclusion. This analytic insight reveals a persistent institutional ambivalence, despite growing awareness of disability rights, the infrastructure for faculty development remains under-resourced and reactive rather than proactive, perpetuating systemic ableism embedded within the academy.

A striking theme was the inequity between departments in faculty disability awareness and pedagogical competency. As Dr. Serrano opined, education faculty typically receive more disability-focused training, while many other disciplines remain largely unaware or underprepared. This disparity directly affects student experiences, with those in less prepared departments encountering more barriers and resistance, according to Dr. Serrano. SWDs' narratives vividly illustrated how voluntary training structures often reinforce existing disparities of faculty who already care about accessibility seek out and benefit from training, while those who lack awareness or investment tend to opt out, perpetuating gaps in support. The implication is clear. Optional training alone is insufficient, and universities must mandate disability education for all faculty and staff to ensure baseline competency and accountability. Theoretically, this speaks to the institutional reproduction of inequity through uneven knowledge distribution, reflecting Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital where some faculty possess the "capital" to enact inclusive pedagogy, while others remain dispossessed, to the detriment of marginalized students. The relational dynamic between faculty and differently abled students emerged as a critical factor shaping academic inclusion. Positive experiences tended to hinge on instructors' prior knowledge, personal experiences, or attitudes of genuine care and flexibility. Conversely, negative encounters frequently involved ignorance, dismissiveness, or punitive gatekeeping around accommodations, with faculty arbitrating access based on personal biases rather than institutional policy. Students like Emily and Zahra recounted instances where faculty demanded excessive disclosure, lost accommodation letters, or outright denied legitimate needs, underscoring how inconsistent faculty competence can transform accommodations from a right into a burdensome negotiation. These stories illustrate the precariousness of academic legitimacy for SWDs when faculty engagement is left to chance rather than being supported by systematic institutional frameworks such as UDL. This dynamic reflects Foucault's (1977) theory of power relations, where faculty, as gatekeepers, exercise discretionary power that can either enable or restrict student access, revealing the deeply political nature of accommodation processes.

Faculty themselves acknowledged significant gaps in their preparation to understand disability beyond compliance frameworks. Dr. Serrano and Dr. Moran both argued that HEIs have largely failed to equip instructors with the conceptual tools to view disability as a political, cultural, and pedagogical phenomenon. Instead, disability is often narrowly framed as a logistical hurdle, which limits faculty willingness and ability to adopt inclusive teaching strategies. This lack of awareness perpetuates a reactive model of accommodation where institutions and instructors only respond after harm occurs or when legal pressures arise as opposed to proactively embedding accessibility as a norm. Calls from participants like Sol and Micah for ongoing, mandatory professional development that includes invisible disabilities and neurodivergence further highlight the urgent need for institutions to shift from piecemeal compliance to sustained critical reflection and transformative pedagogy. Without this shift, faculty competency gaps will continue to undermine student access and success, reinforcing systemic academic ableism. This finding strongly supports the dissertation's broader argument that institutional responsibility must move beyond surface-level compliance to embrace holistic, equity-centered approaches to disability inclusion.

However, faculty competency is only one part of a larger ecosystem that shapes student experiences. As the following section on Gaps in Institutional Support will explore, deficiencies in faculty training intersect with broader structural and administrative shortcomings. These gaps exacerbate barriers faced by differently abled students, revealing how institutional infrastructures often fail to provide the comprehensive, coordinated support necessary to foster genuine accessibility and inclusion across campus environments.

Gaps in Institutional Support

Building on concerns about faculty preparedness, participants also illuminated the broader structural deficits that compromise disability inclusion in higher education. Institutional support systems were frequently described as reactive, fragmented, or outright inaccessible. Dr. Rivera, for instance, emphasized the complexity of accommodating students with multiple co-occurring disabilities such as autism, vision loss, and Down syndrome within systems that assume homogeneity in learning needs. She stressed the urgent need for differentiated instruction, peer pairing, and scaffolded strategies. However, these practices are often unavailable due to budgetary constraints and a lack of systemic investment in inclusive pedagogy. Participants repeatedly underscored that flexibility should not be the exception but a standard across postsecondary institutions.

Spatial inaccessibility was also a recurrent theme, revealing the disconnect between institutional mission statements and lived realities. Students at Greenhill College, for example, described the irony and cruelty of having to climb multiple staircases to reach the disability services office located at the top of Parson's Hall. Emily described how the only accessible entrance to the building was behind a dumpster, in a dimly lit and unsafe area: "The people with wheelchairs [should] not have to go through all these gross dumpsters to get to the building they need to get for their accommodation." Such architectural decisions symbolize the embedded ableism that persists within campus infrastructures where access is not denied outright but rendered arduous, humiliating, or unsafe. These physical barriers represent deeper ideological failures, reinforcing the marginal status of disabled students by relegating their needs to the periphery, both figuratively and literally.

SWDs also described institutional responses that failed to meet even minimal expectations for support. Claire recounted being told to “just drop out” by a disability services coordinator who could offer no accommodation beyond Zoom access, which, post-COVID, was no longer available. Such responses reveal how disability services can inadvertently become gatekeepers to education when under-resourced or lacking a holistic understanding of disability. Taken from our conversation, Claire needed more advocacy to succeed on campus as opposed to encountering administrative encouragement to withdrawal from her institution due to her difference in ability. Similarly, Tyler and Alex both shared frustrations with accommodations that failed to address their actual needs such as extra time for tests that did not resolve auditory processing challenges or chronic fatigue. The burden of self-advocacy loomed large across many accounts, with students like Emily describing the constant follow-up required just to receive basic services: “If I didn’t constantly follow up, I wouldn’t get what I needed. It made me question if I belonged there at all.”

Analytically, these findings point to a key distinction between accommodation as a retrofit and access as a design principle. From a grounded theory perspective, the conceptual gap between individualized exceptions and system-wide inclusion surfaced repeatedly. The prevailing model of access, anchored in compliance and diagnosis, often placed the burden on students to prove their legitimacy, reinforcing internalized ableism and academic fatigue. As one participant noted, “UD should be standard, not an afterthought.” Dr. Serrano and Dr. Moran reinforced this view, critiquing the lack of centralized infrastructure for UDL implementation. They observed that reliance on individual “faculty champions” leads to inconsistent practices and burnout. In their view, a sustainable model requires institutional commitment, not just scattered enthusiasm.

Participants argued persuasively that UDL provides a path toward more equitable academic environments not only for disabled students, but for all learners. Jordan noted that objections to UDL often stem from budget limitations and faculty unfamiliarity, yet he emphasized its benefits for the entire classroom ecosystem. Tyler and Alex proposed specific UDL-aligned suggestions, such as real-time captioning, clearer lecture materials, and faculty case management. These ideas reflect UDL's core principles of multiple means of engagement, expression, and representation. Importantly, participants rejected the notion that they were asking for "special treatment." Rather, they sought structural supports that accounted for the real-world fluctuations of chronic illness, neurodivergence, and disability. A UDL approach would also reduce the need for constant self-disclosure and negotiations, enabling students to focus on learning rather than survival.

Institutional underinvestment further limits disability services' ability to enact meaningful change. Emily Sloan recounted how her disability coordinator was deeply competent and caring yet overwhelmed by caseloads: "We just weren't getting our needs met." This is not a failure of individual staff, but of the system that neglects to adequately fund, staff, and prioritize disability support. Dr. Rivera, echoing this, critiqued the lack of resources for interpreter services, ASL-focused technology, and faculty development in visual pedagogy. This mirrors what Disability Justice frameworks have long argued that cross-disability accessibility must be ingrained into systems, not appended as an afterthought.

Even campus buildings themselves reflect this marginalization. As Hannah observed, many facilities predate the ADA and continue to disregard the full spectrum of disability needs. Without major infrastructure changes, many universities continue to communicate that disability access is conditional, only available when legally required or budgetarily feasible. These conditions reveal the persistent institutional ambivalence toward disability. Until accessibility is understood as a core educational obligation, rather than an auxiliary or remedial function, SWDs will continue to experience the gaps between policy and practice as both alienating and exhausting.

In sum, while isolated examples of care and competence exist, they are insufficient to offset a system fundamentally structured around normative assumptions of ability. The data in this theme illustrate that institutional support for disabled students is often reactive, inconsistent, and inadequate. Yet it is precisely in these gaps that UD holds transformative potential. By shifting the framework from accommodation to access, and from exception to expectation, UDL offers not just a pedagogical adjustment but a cultural reorientation. It would replace the logic of proving eligibility with one of presumed inclusion.

The preceding chapters have mapped the complex terrain of disability access in higher education, drawing on the lived experiences of students and the perspectives of institutional actors to expose both the progress and persistent gaps in faculty competency, institutional infrastructure, and pedagogical design. As the data reveal, current systems overwhelmingly rely on reactive accommodations and individualized negotiation, thereby reinforcing structural ableism and leaving many students to navigate higher education as outsiders to its normative expectations. Yet within these struggles also lie seeds of transformation. The call for UD, proactive planning, and structural accountability resonates not as an abstract ideal but as a grounded demand voiced by those most impacted.

Conclusion

Disclosure was often contingent upon anticipated stigma from peers, faculty, and even administrative gatekeepers. For some, choosing to disclose emerged only after academic hardship or mental health crises, while others resisted disclosure entirely to avoid being perceived as “less capable.” In other words, the disclosure of disability was situationally dependent. It was shaped by a combination of perceived necessity and anticipated responses from others. For example, Imani stressed the significance of early open dialog regarding disability and accommodations with an ideal inception beginning in elementary or secondary education to both normalize self-advocacy and mitigate the pressures of having to disclose for their first time in higher education. Furthermore, Imani pointed out that “For a disabled person to be able to disclose their disability when they go to college, they shouldn’t have to [that late]. Disclosing at university shouldn’t be the first time.”

Faculty participants discussed this as something universities offload to SWDs who are assumed to have to initiate the process of support. In other words, SWDs are expected to initiate the accommodation process. In particular, this was most prevalent for students having hidden disabilities, who did not wish to be subjected to disbelief or being misinterpreted such as mental health conditions, dyslexia, ADHD, and chronic fatigue. Students such as Micah and Tyler often opined on the balancing act between already overwhelming demands of student life and self-advocacy.

Even among students who did disclose, the process was rarely empowering. Several described experiencing lowered expectations or paternalistic attitudes from instructors post-disclosure. Others, like Rowan Ellis shared the strategic nature of selective disclosure, revealing their conditions only to instructors who had demonstrated empathy or prior understanding. This was both a protective strategy and an indictment of the patchy nature of faculty competency.

Among many participants, disclosure felt like it meant risking between subjugation to bias and actually receiving needed accommodations. Moreover, SWDs from diverse backgrounds stressed that their choice to disclose was molded by not merely ableism, but additional factors such as racism and heteronormativity. This left many students feeling isolated on campuses and even feeling unseen which necessitates the push for UDL and UDI framed academic spaces so that disclosure is not a prerequisite to inclusivity.

Despite some SWDs reporting that they had favorable experiences with their AAC, most underscored the red tape of educational bureaucracy that comes with processes of formal accommodations. Other highlights from interviews included that allied staff, empathetic faculty, and other informal supports from peers were beneficial as opposed to their HEI's protocol for accessibility.

Overall, participants did not merely opt in or out of disability disclosure. Rather, they all navigated through complex inhospitable spaces where decision to disclose often carried the risk of either relief or stigma from others. The omnipresence of stigmatization in combination with uncertainty if faculty would be understanding turned disclosure into a negotiation of legitimacy instead of a personal choice for SWDs. In chapter 5, I categorized themes pertaining to intersections of sociodemographic in addition to disability in higher education.

Chapter 5: Institutional Barriers to Student Success

The interlocking systems of social constructs such as race, class, gender, and orientation often intensified stigma or created contradictions between expected performance and lived capacity. Moreover, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how academic ableism is both systemic and differentially experienced depending on students' full social location (i.e., demographics).

Additive Identity & Academic Spaces

Disability was rarely experienced in isolation. Student narratives highlighted how multiple marginalized identities converge to render an experience of 'invisibility'. SWDs are not only navigating disability but are also simultaneously grappling with racialized and gendered structures in their academic life. Their unique narratives challenge institutional frameworks that oftentimes treat these identities in isolation. The layering of marginalizations amplifies ableism and calls for analytical approaches that resist siloed understandings of oppression. In short, interviews revealed that being differently abled is hardly one dimensional. Rather, it is intertwined with other dimensions of identity. For many, disability stigma is stacked on top of existing challenges in relation to belonging, representation, and visibility. For instance, SWDs from immigrant families described cultural attitudes that discouraged open dialog of mental health and neurodivergence, which inhibited seeking help and disclosure (i.e., self-identification.)

Queer and gender-fluid SWDs recounted additional barriers such as campus spaces for LGBTQ+ community members not always being accessible for differently abled students, and that not all disability groups were attentive to queer and trans experiences. For student parents, specifically those with differently abled children, the lines between personal, academic, and caregiving identities became opaque. One of the major consequences of being multiply marginalized in college in addition to being disabled is the stress that accompanies it from enduring ableism. Participants frequently pointed out an increase in microaggressions from both peers and faculty or staff that they felt were associated to their intersectional identities.

Racialized Experiences of Disability

SWDs of color, particularly Maryam, Imani, Sol, Zahra, Lina, Malik, and Alondra, spoke about the intersection of racism and ableism. For example, Malik and Zahra expressed minimalizations of their abilities in school that they suspect was tied to their demographic identities such as race. Malik noted that his condition of dyslexia was mistaken for a behavioral condition instead of a learning impairment. Therefore, implicit bias regarding racial identity molds how diagnoses and accommodations based on those operate which corroborates previous studies such as Annamma et al. (2016) and Erevelles (2011).

Participants like Imani also spoke to issues around race and disability. For example, she elaborated on being one of the very few Black disabled students on campus at Lakeshore University and noted there is an absence of curriculum and professors who meaningfully would engage the topic of disability from an intersectional perspective. Moreover, Imani shared that there was resistance from faculty members when she tried to address the lack of representation of Black SWDs, even when the class topic was directly related to disability in general. Imani did observe that "the intersectionality of voice and disability is very significant because I don't see a whole lot of people who look like me, who have disabilities, who are openly disabled."

Participants such as Imani generally reported that there is also a lack of racially diverse and disabled faculty. This results in a sense of lost opportunity and isolation for both belonging and learning on campus for differently abled students of color. Although there were some accounts of positive experiences with individual professors and instructors who actively sought to accommodate and understand students' needs, there was a recurrent wide frustration with a system that centers on the perspectives of able-bodied, majority culture people in discussions of diversity and disability.

The intersection of race and disability surfaced clearly in Lina's reflection on being an Asian American student who is also Deaf. Lina noted the disconnect between stereotypes of Asian students as academically successful and the real challenges she encountered with her accessibility of classroom content and communication. According to Lina, stemming from the "model minority" myth, she reported that some faculty assumed that she did not need as much support as she did, which further entrenched her sense of isolation.

I also include the perspectives of White SWDs regarding race and disability. For example, Emily shared:

> I know other [disabled] people with other racial identities whose disability may have been discounted. They may have been seen [perceived] as aggressive [among] other things like that. I have heard from my peers who are not White and disabled that their disability was taken less seriously than their White peers were. So, I feel like that gave me some privilege as a White person with a disability to have mine taken seriously. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

This quote relays the significance of SWDs being cognizant of their racial privilege despite belonging to at least one marginalized demographic. Among other White conversational partners, Whiteness was rarely addressed directly, often functioning as an unmarked default, even though the same interview questions were asked. While SWDs of color described racialized disbelief, surveillance, or cultural dissonance in their disability experiences, other White SWDs like Micah, Hannah, and Celeste primarily framed barriers as medical, cognitive, or bureaucratic. Their narratives, while powerful in highlighting systemic ableism, did not situate those experiences within the racial stratification of higher education. Such absence is telling. Moreover, it reinforced how racial privilege can operate silently, making some forms of access (e.g., clinical diagnosis, instructor validation) more available, even when other marginalizations are at play.

> The process is super bureaucratic, very "bring a note from your neurologist," as if I didn't grow up with no car, no easy access to a specialist, and a mom who works two jobs. They don't understand that managing a chronic condition when you're low-income and Brown [Latinx] is a different kind of challenge. (Alondra, March 27, 2025).

Navigating the disability service 'red tape' was especially burdensome for Alondra, who described the hardships of accessing specialists, transportation, and required paperwork (i.e., documentation of impairments). The rigid documentation system did not accommodate her reality, making support feel out of reach even when it was theoretically available. The institutionalization of "proof" within accommodation systems reflects dominant cultural assumptions about access to resources. This case signaled the significance of theorizing disability services through a lens of class and racial equity, recognizing how exclusion may be perpetuated through policies intended to assist SWDs.

Avery also shared observations about how her advisors' elitist academic training (e.g., Ivy League background) informed their deficit views of students, particularly those from public institutions like Lakeshore University. The subtle racial and class-coded judgments against students who did not fit traditional academic molds (including disabled and working-class students) contributed to what she called "mosquito bites of inferiority," a slow erosion of self-worth.

Participants such as Alondra recounted that faculty usually expressed surprise at her academic achievements, particularly of her pursuit of a senior thesis. "And I'm doing it while dealing with a whole neurological condition and trauma flashbacks, thank you very much" (Alondra, March 27, 2025). Reactions she received conveyed a signal of implicit bias that students like her are not fully expected to be visible or prosperous in academic spaces. Assumptions like these rendered an environment where her abilities were constantly doubted which further complicated her efforts to access support and a sense of belonging on campus. Moreover, this narrative brought to the surface how intersecting identities of disability and race form unique structural barriers to legitimacy in higher education. The expectation of non-achievement for racialized SWDs served to police the boundaries of who is recognized as a "real" scholar. These patterns contribute to a theoretical understanding of intersecting oppression, where institutional cultures worsen already stratified recognition and accessibility. Similarly, Riley's narratives echoed corroborating experiences by sharing:

> I think being Latina made it harder to get help, honestly. When I finally went to AAC, they kept asking if I was sure I needed it. It felt like they were doubting me before even reading my file. And it's not like I'm new to this. My doctor sent them everything. (Riley, January 14, 2025)

This quote highlights how Riley described her interactions with AAC as being marked by disbelief, particularly as a Latina SWD. Despite having all the required documentation submitted by her physician to the school, Riley was still scrutinized about her requests for accommodations. This in combination with other differently abled students' responses reflect a broader pattern of racialized gatekeeping where SWDs of color are often subjugated to increased scrutiny when seeking support. Further, her narrative illustrates how disability services may reinforce systemic inequities by way of implicit biases that question the credibility of racialized

SWDs. Another participant explained their experience as well which was fraught with bias, but in terms of stereotypes of model minorities. For example, Jae shared:

> When I finally got help, I realized that most of the resources on campus weren't built for students like me. I didn't see Asian American staff in disability services. And in class, professors sometimes assume that because I'm Asian, I must be a high-achiever, support put-together, no issues. They don't realize I'm having panic spirals before every critique or hiding in the bathroom during studio hours because my head feels like it's splitting open. (Jae, February 17, 2025)

In this excerpt, Jae described the barriers of navigating disability as a Korean American student. They felt unseen by staff, where nobody reflected their identity, and the feeling of being misread by faculty who biasedly assumed academic excellence and emotional stability based on racialized stereotypes. Therefore, this intersectional invisibility shaped this student's access to care and sense of belonging on campus.

One participant shared, "In our culture, or at least how my family practiced it, there's this huge stigma around mental health. Like anxiety? That's not real. You're just not praying enough or you're weak." By describing her upbringing, Zahra explained that mental health conditions were usually dismissed as signs of weakness or spiritual failing. Therefore, family attitudes shaped her initial reluctance to seek accommodations in college. This may have also contributed to her feelings of isolation among peers who appeared to her as more familiar with accessing resources. Moreover, the significance of using this quote and the previous is that cultural stigma and racialized assumptions operate in tandem to delay help-seeking and reinforce marginalization for SWDs of color. Zahra's story provided a foundation for theorizing how ethno-racial background mediates both access and belonging which suggests that disability support structures should adapt to various cultural logics.

Among SWDs, racialization exacerbated disbelief and exclusion. For example, Zahra shared that some of her instructors minimized her requests, attributed her chronic illness to stress or culture rather than a valid medical need. Malik reported being labeled as "disruptive" in high school due to his dyslexia as being shaped by racial bias and assumptions about Black male behavior. Therefore, such patterns reveal how racialized SWDs are usually misread, misdiagnosed, or surveilled in ways that their White peers are not. Next, I will discuss the analysis based on the intersection of gender and disability.

Gendered Dimensions of Disability

Patterns emerged throughout the data that varied depending on gender identity in combination with a variety of different abilities. Experiences differed among men, women, and gender-fluid or trans students. Not only that, but when there was an intersection with racial identity on top of being a disabled woman, differently abled women of colors' experiences were more convoluted. While the sample was small yet diverse, my interpretation of the data suggests that more barriers are encountered when students are multiply marginalized.

Several participants revealed how gender identity shaped their disability experience, even if indirectly. Micah Renn, a non-binary student, conveyed frustration that their professors often defaulted to gendered language and assumptions, despite listing their pronouns. Similarly, Dr. Rivera, acknowledged how her embodiment as a woman of color with a non-normative communication mode (ASL) shaped others' perception of her professionalism. Regarding the intersection of disability and gender identity, biases were often implicit as connotations were often subtle, yet discriminatory. In particular, this was evident with gendered conditions.

Additionally, efforts of advocacy were not taken as seriously among women and non-binary differently abled students. Therefore, these inferences corroborate the significance of gendered scrutiny in disability research that authors such as Kafer (2013), and Garland-Thomson pushed for. Sòl shared her experience of encountering disbelief in academia regarding her intersection of her conditions and gender identity. For example, Sòl shared:

> Especially as someone who looks like a woman or is just not a man, you [must] fight your way even harder to be taken seriously. And then you add on the accommodations like, "Oh, they're just lazy," which is what I have heard from professors before. (Sòl, October 24, 2024)

Participants such as Sòl noted that appearing as someone who "is not a man" often meant having to advocate more forcefully for legitimacy and support. When seeking accommodations, they reported being perceived as lazy by some professors, an experience that reflected the intersection of gender bias and systemic ableism. Their account demonstrated how credibility in academic spaces was not distributed equally, and how multiply marginalized students must work harder to be believed.

Interviewees elaborated on how their disability experiences were heavily affected by their gender identity. In particular, this was with regards to academic recognition and believing diagnoses. One participant stated that her inattentive ADHD symptoms were overlooked by others and went undiagnosed until adulthood. Another participant, a White woman, opined that she perceived herself to be taken more seriously regarding accommodations and belief of her symptoms compared to her counterparts of other marginalized sociodemographic backgrounds. Taken together, accounts such as these highlight how gendered notions mold the how and when of disability recognition and who is granted institutional support and legitimacy. Hannah shared that:

> Part of why I wasn't diagnosed with ADHD for so long is because I am a woman and… Women with inattentive ADHD typically don't get diagnosed until like teenagers, even until like 30s… That has really presented the most like conflict. (Hannah, April 25, 2025)

Also, Emily stated:

> My only other marginalized identity besides being disabled is that I am a woman. I am not sure if there was a huge overlap or interaction between those two, but I did notice that as a White woman [or] a White person with a disability that I probably was more likely to be taken seriously as a disabled person. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

Sòl shared, "I'm non-binary but not at home. I assume by she/her with family because they don't get it… At school, I feel like that's the place where I can be my own gender identity and be comfortable with my disability" (October 24, 2024). Although not directly related to disability itself, the campus culture Sòl attended at was inclusive regarding her gender identity more so than her impairments. This contrast demonstrates how HEIs play a role in identity formation. Moreover, not only through formal inclusion policies, but as cultural zones that shape how students view themselves and navigate multiple marginalizations.

According to Riley, "If you're a woman talking about [being in] pain, people just think you're [being] dramatic" (January 14, 2025). Her account reflects broader patterns in which student experiences of disability are filtered through cultural assumptions about gender, ultimately shaping access to care, support, and credibility. Moreover, it is an example of how believability is gendered specifically regarding symptoms of a disability when they are voicing them. Riley expressed in her interview that she was disregarded in both academic and medical spheres. This highlights how chronic pain is trivialized and how disabled women in college are subject to patriarchal minimization and ableist skepticism.

SWDs stories reflected gendered dimensions of being differently abled. This was specific to emotional labor, credibility, and societal expectations of them. Celeste elaborated on how her delayed diagnosis of ADHD and autism was underpinned by social constructions of femininity. Moreover, Celeste confirmed that she often masked the characteristics of her conditions such as emulating neurotypical behaviors to adjust to norms in her classrooms. According to Celeste, this was 'something [she] learned to do early [on]" since gendered stereotypes of women are that they are typically compliant, polite, nurturing, and accommodating, and quiet. Celeste's reluctance to request accommodations corroborate previous researchers' suggestions that gendered expectations veil and postpone the recognition of disability among women and non-cisgender people (Pohl et al., 2014; Russell et al., 2016). Moreover, neurodivergent women tend to be undiagnosed from feeling like they must perform neurotypical behaviors. In other words, through masking, women SWDs have the additional burden of their disabilities being undetected and not taken as seriously when they speak out.

Celeste shared, "Because I wasn't socialized like a neurotypical person, I just didn't; I don't understand that little box [that] we're supposed to be in. I'm not in it, and people don't like that… especially if you're a woman." She stated that she tended to be judged by others if she missed social cues or spoke loudly. In other words, masking was her coping mechanism to blend in with her peers due to gendered stereotypes in conjunction with ableism. Micah, on the other hand, discussed that as a nonbinary SWD, they were also subject to scrutiny of their credibility in explanation of symptoms to medical professionals and faculty. Emily reflected on the difficulty of navigating both her gender and disability identities in academic spaces by sharing:

> It’s like people expect you to perform competence in a certain way, like to be quiet, perfect, and just handle it. But if I need help, suddenly I’m not competent. I’m just “emotional” or “distracted.” That double standard hit hard, especially as a woman with a mental health diagnosis. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

Avery’s narrative exemplifies the unique gendered labor expectations placed on differently abled women in academic environments. Furthermore, she described how her experience of uterine fibroids, accompanying anemia, and pain were not only medical issues, but also deeply gendered ones shaped by the cultural silencing of reproductive health and the institutional failure to acknowledge these conditions as disabling. Avery took on extensive care labor in assistantship roles under prominent faculty, internalizing burnout as part of the expected feminine role of quiet endurance and servitude. Additionally, her contributions to large projects usually went unrewarded, and her physical and mental health struggles were minimized by faculty such as her advisor. Similarly, Lina, a Deaf Asian American woman, recounted the expectations of being both a woman and differently abled in college. In group settings, she reported being overlooked, spoken over, and her contributions devalued due to the communication labor required to include her as a Deaf student. So, gendered expectations and assumptions about passivity and deference just exacerbated her exclusion on campus in addition to ableist biases among peers.

Overall, SWDs did experience a profound connection between their gender and disability. Collectively, their stories spoke about constant downplaying of their requests for support or when they stated that they were experience symptoms such as chronic pain. Moreover, they were met with indifference across different institutional incumbents including ableist faculty, staff, and even classmates. In the following section, I will elaborate on my analysis of sexual orientation and disability intersections.

Queer Identity & Disability Experience

Conversational partners reported that if apparent to others, their orientation appeared to influence the receptibility of their open dialog regarding their accommodation needs. Participants also mentioned feelings of campus isolation, specifically if disability was mentioned by way of heteronormative or medicalized scaffoldings. However, differently abled queer students strived for more collective advocacy and mutual support to challenge systemic ableism in HEIs.

Rowan's identity as a non-binary SWD placed them at a compounded disadvantage what they refer to as a "stacking" of their otherness. For example, Rowan stated, "I could almost feel it like stacking onto my professors… everything was like one more way that I was like a problem to them." This quote superlatively captured how queer identity interacts with ableism in higher education, transforming accessibility into a site of identity-based resistance and exclusion. Despite presenting femme and being read as cisgender, Rowan encountered consistent microaggressions that signaled a broader systemic neglect for queer-disabled students.

Gaps in Institutional Support

Participants' reflections revealed how institutional gaps in communication and rigid cultural norms about who "counts" as disabled prevent many students from accessing necessary support. Riley, for example, admitted she did not realize that her condition qualified for accommodations because her disability, characterized by chronic fatigue, was not visible. This internalized misconception underscores a broader institutional failure to clearly articulate the full range of disabilities covered under accommodation policies (e.g., IDEA). When students believe that only those with mobility aids or sensory impairments are entitled to support, it signals a critical deficit in outreach, education, and inclusive framing. Institutions must do more than provide services. They must actively dismantle ableist assumptions embedded in public understanding of disability eligibility. Without proactive messaging, students are left navigating a system that appears inaccessible even before they attempt to engage it.

Student descriptions in their responses showed the ways that systemic gaps in notions of *who* counts as differently abled keeps many SWDs from accessing needed supports. Avery mentioned that:

> Somehow identifying as disabled is exploitative. Similarly... Identifying as nonbinary...Now feels like I'm... An older... Academic... Wanting to capitalize or add that...As a form of cultural capital to my identity. And so, if I... Started...Doing more of the like... Like dressing non-binary... Or using they-them... It feels like it would...As a student... It was more invisible and, in the background (Avery, November 8, 2024).

Participants also elaborated on how having intersectionally oppressed identities reshaped their academic experiences in both exhausting and complex ways. Differently abled students speak to the emotional fatigue of disability management in addition to confrontation of their invalidation from others which is tied in with their sexuality in this section. For some interviewees, it was a balancing act to choose which battle to fight in terms of being either genderqueer or disabled, especially on days where doing both felt close to impossible. Narratives, although brief on this topic, revealed a glimpse into how HEIs can act as a terrain of conflicting expectations and social gatekeeping regarding intersectionality. Therefore, queer disabled students are not just underrecognized; they are typically expected to self-advocate who they identify as constantly which in turn renders a need to tactfully withhold parts of themselves to evade further marginalization.

This is where both UDI and UDL become significant. Both frameworks proactively anticipate a spectrum of SWDs' needs without needing them to repeatedly disclose their identities or request accommodations. In particular, differently abled queer students benefit from UDI and UDL as these frameworks mitigate effects of constant self-advocacy by laying the foundation of flexibility, accessibility, and representation in the very structure of campus policy, course design, and student services from the inception. By doing so, HEIs may actively counteract social gatekeeping and various eligibility misconceptions that conversational partners elaborated on. This in turn renders more navigable learning environments for those whose additive/intersecting identities place them at multiple margins.

Also, the layer of parenthood, specifically of children with disabilities, further magnified difficulties of SWDs' experiences. For example, participants found that academic content (modules) that cover childhood development and disability have triggered anxieties regarding personal competence or the well-being of their children. Collectively, these intersecting identities played a role in the multifaceted experience of marginalization, thus amplifying the psychological and emotional hardships that SWDs carry in higher education.

Interviews suggest that status quo assumptions that use ethnic/racial groups, sexuality, gender, and disability as manageable categories that are discrete need to be challenged. Moreover, student accounts highlight how it is a constant negotiation about what facets of their identity they should disclose, defend, or downplay contingent on contexts of the space they are in (e.g., academic or social). There is an apparent expectation of oppressed individuals to consistently provide clarity regarding their identities for the comfort of others which reflects a wide sociocultural demand for legitimacy. This in turn burdens people living outside of heteronormative frameworks. Such rigorous emotional labor is hardly discussed in pedagogy; however, it molds differently abled students' ability to succeed, accessibility of resources, and sense of belonging. Therefore, conceptual frameworks that place intersectionality in the center need to reckon with the relational and structural contexts that make queerness delegitimized in practice in addition to the coexistence of multiple identities.

In sum, responses on the intersection of sexuality and ability figuratively sets the stage to critique in depth how HEIs contribute to the reproduction of ableism through more than merely gaps in policy, but by way of academic norms, institutional cultures, and societal expectations that go unchecked. Chapter 6 turns toward theorizing these insights more deeply offering a synthesis of key findings alongside critical implications for policy, practice, and future research. It proposes a shift from fragmented, compliance-based models to a reimagined educational framework rooted in inclusion, equity, and collective responsibility.

Chapter 6: Transition from High School to University and Aspirations to Ameliorate Students' Experiences

Introduction

The final findings chapter focuses on how SWDs experience educational transition points, from secondary to postsecondary education, and what aspirations or reimagined futures they expressed in response to institutional constraints. The broad themes clustered here into sections include *Transition Challenges into Higher Ed*, *Student Aspirations & Imagined Futures*, *Faculty-Student Collaboration & Support*, *Existing Institutional Supports*, and *Physical &*

Digital Accessibility Barriers. These themes address the third major research question, which asks how students describe both the challenges and the possibilities they envision within higher education. Participants recounted experiences of disorientation upon entry into college, especially when prior support structures like IEPs or 504 plans disappeared. Yet they also expressed powerful hopes for transformation, some rooted in UD, others in community, mentorship, or institutional reform. This chapter emphasizes the tension between SWDs' lived barriers and their creative visioning, suggesting that the path forward must blend structural change with sustained attention to student voice. The transition from high school to higher education emerged as a uniquely challenging stage, specifically for differently abled students that have intersecting marginalized identities.

Transition Challenges into Higher Ed

Participants generally had a negative experience during their transition from high school to the university level due to the lack of guidance for SWDs, especially among differently abled first-generation college students. However, those from college educated family backgrounds, the navigation of seeking accommodations reported having support from their parents since they are more familiar with the process. High schools are supposed to prepare a student for higher education so inferred from the data is that the secondary environment is a broken piece as well. One participant stated, "it was a shock in terms of 'what do I do now' because certain things do not transfer over to the university level like IEPs or any other accommodation [such as] 504 plans." Emily: "For me, the transition went well because my parents, especially my mom, have always been a big advocate for me and helped me navigate these things. When I was very young, she would go to the IEP meetings that even I could not attend because I was a kid and could not advocate for my needs [myself]. I would struggle if she just let me go to college on my own without any guidance through that. She helped organize meetings with the disability office, the person [staff] who was in the disability office to discuss accommodations and really find out information about what I needed to do because I know it is very different than high school in terms of accommodations."

According to Emily, "It was helpful that my mom was there to support me and model those skills for me. So then when I went to graduate school, I was able to [navigate] that process on my own based on what she had shown me."

Emily stated that the lack of interactive activities led to issues with her transition from high school to university. "In high school, at least, it led to behavioral issues where I was messing around, being disruptive because I had nothing to do. I was not having the problem that I knew I would not finish in time. So maybe [teachers should] be mindful of things like that [of] making sure everyone is done, because it would have only taken me a couple extra minutes. It is not like it would take twice the time or something, but they always would start going through it before it was done."

Emily's reflections highlight the pivotal role of early modeling and relational support in cultivating self-advocacy skills which are a form of social and cultural capital often unevenly distributed among disabled students. Parental intervention served as a valuable asset for disabled students to lean on if they had that type of support to help navigate the unfamiliar terrain of seeking access to accommodations. This underscores the intergenerational and relational nature of institutional literacy as a form of knowledge that higher education frequently assumes students possess but rarely teaches. In tandem, Emily's account of high school behavioral issues rooted not in defiance but in disengagement thereby exposes how rigid instructional pacing and lack of differentiated support can misinterpret disability-related needs as disciplinary problems. For her and others interviewed, negative instructor attitudes only worsened her sense of isolation. Together, these insights affirm that inclusive education must extend beyond legal access and into the realm of meaningful engagement, relational mentorship, and early intervention. Transitional success for SWDs hinges not only on accommodations, but on systems that are reflexive to their pace, needs, and learning trajectories from the start.

Moreover, experiences such as these illustrate the frustration that specifically first generation, low-income SWDs often face when attempting to navigate the 'red tape' of disability accommodation processes. For example, those who did not have parents that attended college were oftentimes 'lost in space' regarding knowing which point of contact for requesting an accommodation would be most sufficient. Therefore, not only does the foundation of what students are used to in high school dramatically shift, those who are first generation college students are on their own to figure out who to best get in touch with regarding their accommodation requirements to succeed in their new educational setting (i.e., the university). Participants were asked about what this transition should look like and what their recommendations are for university administration to assess incoming students should be. Mostly, participants advocated for on ramps to be included such as mandatory training and in-depth informative sessions available for incoming students during orientation week.

According to other participants, disability had a profound impact on their secondary school experience and academic performance. For example, Claire explained that "It had a big impact on me in high school because I had [small] symptoms pretty much my entire life, but they all culminated when I was [around] 16." Claire stated further that she felt the need to drop out.

This account was a common theme among participants in terms of the consequences of facing difficulties such as discrimination during the transition from high school to college. Many stated that the environment was starkly contrasting between the two types of institutions. One of the main reasons cited is the sudden shift in what legal protections are in place in secondary school that vanish in postsecondary settings. This juxtaposition challenges dominant assumptions about higher education as a progressive, accessible space. Instead, Claire's story reveals that postsecondary institutions often present a more complex and less forgiving terrain, where accommodations are bureaucratized and disability support is conditional. Her success at Greenhill, a smaller college, further supports the idea that institutional scale, relational closeness, and individualized attention play crucial roles in creating disability-affirming environments. Rather than viewing dropout as a failure of the student, her story invites a critical reframe that traditional education systems, both high school and higher ed, are often inhospitable to neurodivergent and differently abled learners, and students' creative paths to reentry (e.g., GED programs) should be recognized not as detours, but as valid and self-determined routes through educational inequity.

Moreover, participants explained further that small-sized campuses were ideal in both the secondary and post-secondary education settings. Students generally felt more comfortable with professors that knew them personally as opposed to large classrooms with perceived inaccessible instructors. This was common at small HEIs as many large universities do not have small class sizes until upperclassmen and graduate level seminar settings. Furthermore, those with instructors who knew them on a personal level were described as more accommodating even without formal medical diagnoses from physicians.

The takeaway from narratives like this was that tightly knit communities based on familiarity in rural settings contrasted from those in metropolitan areas, although this is not a comparison study between high school and college or even rural and urban universities. For example, Claire grew up in a small town where the high school community was familiar with her family and educational spaces were centered around social familiarity as opposed to being shaped by professional assessments of hidden impairments. Moreover, it was more difficult for students like her to seek help if they were not believed there was anything wrong with them. As she noted, the physical manifestations of her condition such as dislocations or herniated discs were invisible without medical testing, and this invisibility contributed to a broader institutional denial of her needs. The narrative that she did not receive a diagnosis until age 18, after leaving high school, exemplifies the systemic failure to identify and accommodate disability early on, leaving her to navigate education unsupported for years. Her story underscores the importance of diagnostic justice. Timely, credible recognition of disability, paired with responsive educational supports, is essential not only for academic success but also for identity formation. Moreover, her experience challenges educational institutions to develop systems that do not rely solely on documentation, but that can recognize embodied distress and learning barriers as valid, even when diagnoses are absent or delayed.

The transition from high school to college marked a seismic shift for many participants. Those with family support or college-educated parents reported smoother transitions, while first-generation students often felt overwhelmed by institutional red tape. Several participants noted the abrupt loss of individualized education plans (IEPs) or 504 accommodations, with no clear guidance for navigating higher education's accommodation model. Claire, who had to leave high school and obtain a GED before attending college, offered a powerful narrative of self-advocacy in the face of systemic neglect. This theme underscores the lack of transitional infrastructure and the erroneous assumption that students will arrive at college fully self-aware and ready to advocate for themselves.

Sol captured another overlooked dimension of the transition which include the psychosocial demands of independent living. “It was the life side that was really hard because I’m an only child… Learning how to live by yourself made school slightly harder but life itself just was a lot harder because I didn’t have that like structure that I had my whole life.” Their narrative illustrates that transitional hardship often stems less from academic content and more from the abrupt withdrawal of environmental consistency. Similarly, Hannah, who lives with ADHD, noted that the lack of external accountability in college magnified her executive functioning challenges. Hannah shared that:

> I think every student struggles with this transition, but personally having ADHD and then coming into college where I’m not being managed and I do have the free will to just say, well, I don’t want to go to any of my classes… That was really the biggest transition. (Hannah, April 25, 2025)

SWDs’ perspectives point to an urgent need for universities to implement transition programs that encompass not only academic readiness but also skills for managing daily life, maintaining motivation, and navigating complex social systems.

For students with undiagnosed or invisible disabilities, the transition to higher education was even more disorienting. As another participant, Rowan, explained, “I had to Google what accommodations even were before I got to campus. No one talked to me about it in high school. No counselor, no teacher, nothing.” For these students, college did not just demand adjustment, it required catching up on years of unprovided support and self-education about rights they had never known existed.

The contrast between students with college-educated parents and first-generation students was particularly evident in how they navigated accommodation systems. As mentioned before, Emily described how her parents' prior experience, even without direct disability-related support, still made a difference. She further shared that, "They are familiar with the process of helping with the transition and seeking accommodation… they were in college in the 1980s… but they were familiar with college in general." Conversely, others reported floundering through confusing processes. Tyler described his orientation experience as "just a bunch of PowerPoints about general stuff. Nothing about disability, [and] nothing that told me how to get help unless I already knew I needed it." This lack of anticipatory guidance reinforced a structural expectation that SWDs already understand how to navigate university systems, a presumption that disproportionately burdens those with learning, cognitive, or mental health disabilities.

Several students also spoke to the emotional cost of internalized ableism during their first year of college. Zahra shared that, "College broke that version of me. I had to unlearn so much, like, that rest isn't laziness, or that asking for support isn't weakness." Her story points to the deeper identity work many disabled students undergo in the transition to higher education which was perceived as an unlearning process in which productivity myths, hyper-independence, and shame are gradually replaced by new understandings of interdependence and access. Mariana, who lives with ME/CFS, similarly reflected, "I had to learn that my body comes first now. Not grades. Not deadlines. My health is the thing I take with me long after college ends." These accounts reinforce that successful transition is not merely about surviving institutional processes, but it involves personal transformation, redefinition of success, and letting go of values shaped by ableist schooling.

The theoretical takeaway is transparent. Adjusting to college involves more than logistical adaptation. It entails a fundamental renegotiation of identity. The ability to ask for help, establish new boundaries, and resist the pressure to overperform requires not just simply procedural knowledge, but also a psychological resilience. Transition support programs must therefore be designed with an understanding of disability as an evolving identity, and not just a legal status. Participants widely advocated for earlier and more consistent disability education not just for SWDs but also their peers, faculty, and administrators. As Imani argued, "There just needs to be more understanding about disability from a disabled perspective instead of just having non-disabled professors teaching courses about disability without having that lived experience." Moreover, she added, "I'm not expecting the class to be about disability all [of] the time. I'm expecting the class to have some sort of subject matter, some sort of unit [module] that focuses on disability from a disabled perspective." In this sense, the transition to college should not merely accommodate disabled students but actively equip them and their communities to thrive within a system that still marginalizes them by default.

Student Aspirations & Imagined Futures

While most faculty participants were more familiar with UDL in name and theory, several students described course features aligned with UDL principles, even if they did not use the terminology. Celeste, for instance, emphasized the significance of predictable due dates, early access to syllabi, and recorded lectures. These are all design elements that supported her learning without requiring her formal disclosure or constant accommodation requests. Celeste reflected that a particularly organized and flexible course "was the perfect class," precisely because she "didn't need to ask" for accommodations. Similarly, Micah, a graduate student and teaching assistant, criticized rigid course structures that fail to accommodate chronic illness, and argued that more flexibility and proactive design are essential. Such student narratives point to the broader value of UDL-informed course design. In other words, one not merely as a compliance strategy, but to foster dignity and autonomy for differently abled learners.

Participants also critiqued the widespread assumption that amplification is optional. This seemingly small oversight exemplifies how performative access gestures can undermine actual inclusion when professors prioritize their own comfort or norms over accessibility. Rowan shared:

> In terms of classroom layout, I know that there's good guidance on this, but in addition to the basic stuff, everybody should be able to easily see the board, but chairs should be considered for all kinds of bodies. I've become much more into disability and fat activism. I'm always aware of chairs when I look at them, and we're leaving out a third of the population [by doing] this. Or, if you think about the chair and the gap to the tabletop, so many of these things can be a non-starter. In terms of audio, depending on how large your classroom is, a professor needs to be microphoned, and I can't tell you how many times I've seen professors or people doing speeches [say] they don't really need a microphone right now, and it's like, no you do! I think material being available in advance that students can access in a reliable way [would be helpful. For professors to shift how they do things all semester long, [it] can help a lot. [For example], like [using] reliable heating and air conditioning. (Rowan, December 9, 2024)

This quote is significant in that it captures dreamscapes highlighted by Rowan providing examples of what the ideal classroom should look like from their perspective. SWDs generally expressed a preference for recorded lectures that they would be able to access online to go back and listen to regardless of virtual or in-person classes. Rowan further stated that:

> I personally benefit so much from being in a classroom tangibly and interacting with my peers face to face. But I also think that goes hand in hand with having a

> reasonable attendance structure where students should be encouraged to stay home if they’re sick, so they don’t get other students sick. (Rowan, December 9, 2024)

Many SWDs emphasized the importance of pedagogical structures that offer consistency without rigidity, especially in relation to assignment deadlines, communication practices, and participation-based grading. One student shared, ‘I struggle with unflexible assignment due dates because I really think that students need structure… I put everything off until the last possible second. That’s just how I did things.’ While structure provided a helpful academic scaffold, rigid enforcement without consideration of executive functioning barriers often worsened SWDs’ difficulties. Many SWDs expressed an appreciation for courses where instructors allowed more self-paced work or when they were offered cumulative submission models. These policies, far from lowering academic expectations, demonstrated an awareness of neurodivergent learning rhythms and honored diverse pathways toward demonstrating mastery.

Faculty members in the study corroborated this gap between intent and practice. Dr. Rivera, who teaches in an embodied pedagogy field, emphasized that “traditional classroom norms often fail my students who communicate differently or need more processing time.” She also noted that many instructors default to fast-paced, lecture-heavy formats that privilege verbal fluency and quick cognition structures that exclude students with auditory processing disorders, trauma histories, or mental health conditions. Dr. Rivera advocated for differentiated instruction and peer-pairing strategies as not only beneficial for SWDs but enriching for entire classrooms and the overall student body. Her call for reform aligns with UDL principles, which emphasize the multiple means of engagement and assessment as essential to equitable instruction as mentioned in previous sections.

Rowan pushed further on this idea, arguing that classroom relationships must be reimagined altogether. They shared that, “It really has to be a partnership between the professors and the students” (December 9, 2024). They described being frustrated by the idea that meaningful pedagogical care is often reserved for advanced or upper-level courses, opining that, “I don’t think you should have to weed through classes to get to a higher level [of] instruction where somebody cares about you” (December 9, 2024). In their view, good teaching means knowing how students learn, and not merely just how to deliver content by ‘talking through students’. They also emphasized that instructors should recognize various participation styles without penalizing students who prefer listening or written reflection to verbal engagement. “There is a way,” Rowan said, “to engage your yappiest students and your students who would absolutely hate to be put on the spot” (December 9, 2025). In other words, participation should be inclusive, not prescriptive.

This was echoed by Imani, who pointed out that instructors’ assumptions about who participates “appropriately” often reflect ableist biases. Imani shared: “There just needs to be more understanding about disability from a disabled perspective instead of just having non-disabled professors teaching courses about disability without having that lived experience” (July 7, 2025). She advocated for both more differently abled faculty and more courses that center disability as a cultural and epistemic identity, and not merely a medical category. This perspective challenges participation-based grading norms. Furthermore, Imani’s broader point that classrooms should integrate lived experience into both design and instruction calls for pedagogical reform that is informed by, rather than merely about, disability.

Dr. Rivera supported this view, adding that the lack of institutional investment in inclusive pedagogy leaves instructors underprepared. She opined that, “There’s no real funding for the kinds of things that would make classes more accessible [such as] interpreters, captioning, or just time to redesign a class" (April 28, 2025). Without administrative support, inclusive practices remain ad hoc or dependent on faculty "champions," rendering both uneven and unsustainable conditions for both educators and SWDs. SWDs often felt that they bore the burden of navigating these inconsistencies alone.

Taken together, these narratives make a compelling case for pedagogy that is relationship-centered, flexible in design, and structured with awareness of disability-related barriers. Participants did not reject structure, but instead they sought out structures that were thoughtfully designed, communicatively transparent, and capable of anticipating rather than reacting to overall student needs. As Dr. Moran observed, the real challenge lies not in technical difficulty but in shifting institutional mindsets. According to Dr. Moran, "We must stop thinking about access as an add-on. It needs to be built into how we imagine education in the first place" (March 24, 2025).

In sum, when asked of SWDs, faculty, and staff what their imagined ideal classroom environment would look like, many mentioned interactive classrooms. This includes being able to ask professors questions while they are giving a lecture, inclusion of small group discussions, and other interactive activities. Other related suggestions included ceilings equipped with grid patterns. The concept behind this is that it helps visually impaired students due to the design of ceilings with enhanced acoustics since there is heavy reliance on hearing for the visually impaired. For example, muddled sounds in loud spaces may be confusing for students who are hearing impaired. Additionally, visually impaired students recommended wayfinding walls to differentiate between spaces while navigating campus.

Variability Across Learning Contexts

The implementation of UDL was often perceived as inconsistent across different instructional settings, revealing a gap between theoretical endorsement and practical integration. As Dr. Serrano observed, “Even innovative instructors… they use so many modalities… But what does accessibility and UDL look like in a lecture? In a lab? A group project?”

SWDs frequently pointed out these disparities. Tyler described how group projects became particularly fraught by sharing, “If your group doesn’t take your access needs seriously, you’re left doing double the work. Advocating and trying to participate at the same time” (April 7, 2025). Similarly, Alex noted that while he could often get extensions on papers, there were no mechanisms to address inaccessibility within hands-on lab work or real-time peer collaboration. These inconsistencies revealed how disability accommodations were more readily accepted in individual work but were neglected in collective or time-sensitive tasks. Dr. Rivera shared that, “In ASL courses or interpreting labs, you can’t just hand someone a PDF and say the class is accessible. You [must] consider the line of sight, lighting, pacing, and even spatial arrangement of the room” (April 28, 2025)

The Pitfall of Syllabus-Level UDL

“The instructor had worked so hard on the syllabus… but the student felt their individual needs weren’t being addressed.” (Dr. Serrano, April 15, 2025). This quote encapsulates how even well-thought-out measures by faculty still fail to fully accommodate students despite aiming for UDL guidelines. Other participants echoed similar notions.

To foster student empowerment, Dr. Rivera also recommended a for-credit self-advocacy course embedded into freshman orientation upon university matriculation. This would address gaps in knowledge many first-generation and disabled students have about navigating university systems after transitioning from secondary to postsecondary institutions.

Overall, SWDs emphasized their aspirations that were usually entangled within realities of navigating accessibility obstacles. Conversational partners elaborated on how framing disability shaped their ambitions in nuanced manners instead of viewing it as a limiting factor. For instance, Hannah discussed her aspiration of becoming an instructor and utilizing her lived experience as a Deaf student to influence the future of inclusive education. However, Hannah additionally stated fears of how systemic barriers carry the potential to inhibit those goals, such as limited accommodations and inaccessible certification tests. A notion reinforced by faculty and staff was that SWDs oftentimes internalize institutional messaging regarding what is deemed to be “realistic,” that may have a daunting effect on ambition. Although SWDs persisted to be optimistic, their imagined futures were formed simultaneously by structural constraints and personal resilience.

Despite widespread barriers, students offered compelling visions for what accessible and inclusive learning environments could look like. These student-generated proposals included scent-free classrooms, flexible seating for diverse body types, predictable and transparent course structures, lecture recordings, and diversified assessment formats. Rowan’s account of “yapping extroverts” and quiet thinkers illustrated the richness of UDL’s engagement principle when thoughtfully applied. These ideas were not abstract; they emerged from lived experiences and often reflected students’ attempts to accommodate themselves in systems not built for them. This theme revealed a counter-narrative, one rooted in possibility, student expertise, and pedagogical reimagination.

Beyond accounts of exclusion, conversational partners also articulated hopeful visions for reform, reimagining inclusive classrooms and pedagogical transformation grounded in UD principles. Many SWDs expressed a range of imagined accommodations that they felt would better serve the total student population, including other students with a wide range of impairments, both visible and invisible. One conversational partner stated that:

> So, I'm like flickering through things that need accommodations and turning it into UD. And again, it's been years since I've read specifics on UD. So, I'll just tell you how I feel. So, I think it should be a classroom norm that it's a scent free space, and it should be in a building that is physically accessible and either has parking or reliable transportation. I know at Greenhill they had a special bus that would pick up disabled students that is notoriously terrible [by] just leaving disabled kids out in the snow for like two hours because they fucked up the schedule or are like 'oh sorry, we can't pick you up today and it's like how I get to class. (Rowan, December 9, 2024)

While many instructors cite their syllabus as evidence of inclusive teaching, participants repeatedly emphasized that UD cannot begin and end on the first day of class. Students and faculty alike noted that checklist-style accessibility, such as posting a recording policy, mentioning the AAC, or including a generic flexibility statement falls short when not reflected in the ongoing culture and structure of a course. As one participant put it, "In terms of classroom layout, I know that there's good guidance on this, but in addition to the basic stuff. Everybody should be able to easily see the board, but chairs should be considered for all kinds of bodies" (December 9, 2024). The design of seating, desk spacing, and environmental features like temperature regulation were recurrent examples of often-overlooked access needs. Rowan stated that:

> I've become much more into disability and fat activism, and I'm always aware of chairs when I look at them. We're leaving out a third of the population by doing this. Or, if you think about the chair and the gap to the tabletop, so many of these things can be a non-starter. (Rowan, December 9, 2024)

Students expressed a consistent preference for recorded lectures that could be revisited asynchronously, regardless of whether the course was online or in-person. Also noted was the contradictory experience of needing both structure and flexibility. For example, Rowan shared:

> I struggle with unflexible assignment due dates because I really think that students need structure. There are so many demands on students, and I experienced this by putting off everything until the last possible second. That's just how I did things. I found [it helpful] if I ever had a class where a professor said, 'You can just turn everything into me at the end of the semester. (Rowan, December 9, 2024)

Alongside assignment flexibility, SWDs also emphasized the need for consistent feedback, interpersonal engagement, and a sense of care throughout the term, and not just in the first week. Rowan said about depersonalized lectures:

> I can't imagine because I can't learn that way. Is anybody learning in those situations? I think instruction should be intimate no matter how basic the topic is, and I don't think you should have to weed out through classes to get to a higher level where somebody cares about you. It really [has to] be a partnership between the professors and the students. (Rowan, December 9, 2024)

Their reflections highlight how even well-meaning accessibility practices can fall short if not accompanied by pedagogical intimacy and responsiveness. On the other hand, participants pointed to social anxiety and other non-apparent disabilities as areas often neglected in grading structures tied to class participation. Several students advocated for instructors to consider multiple modes of engagement when evaluating students, including recognizing strong written work or attentiveness during discussions as valid indicators of learning. “I can see and tell which students are genuinely thinking about it versus the students who are shopping online on their computers,” one explained while noting that internal engagement does not always translate into verbal participation (Rowan, December 9, 2024).

Rowan also shared how their understanding of learning styles and anxiety evolved by witnessing their partner’s experience. “My husband gets really into his anxiety in classes and thinks he’s not smart enough to answer [a question] or that he’s going to be wrong, even though he’s totally right.” She added that some of her best instructors acknowledged and gently redirected her own habit of over-participating, offering a model of responsive pedagogy by sharing that “Most my professors who I thought were teaching well would respond to my constant, ‘I have the answer, I have the answer!’ by saying, ‘[Rowan], I don’t want to hear from you anymore.’ And I would be like, ‘I understand’” (December 9, 2024).

The depth and nuance of students’ feedback on pedagogy revealed that their ideal classrooms included interactive design, peer engagement, and sustained professor responsiveness. Students imagined learning environments where questions could be asked during lectures, group work was facilitated rather than forced, and access was not something students had to fight for, but was already built in.

Emily proposed that disability services themselves should mirror this same logic of specialization and proactive care by stating that:

> I think more staff in the Center for Inclusive Learning would have been a big game changer for a lot of people… When I went to Northern Prairie University for grad school, my person for accommodations was the ADHD person… Other staff were there for physical disabilities, mental illness… Something like that, where people can specialize in accommodations for certain kinds of disabilities, might be helpful (October 18, 2024).

These reflections demonstrate that UDL cannot be reduced to a blanket policy or a one-time syllabus insertion. It must be integrated into every layer of instructional planning, classroom culture, and institutional structure. As Dr. Moran noted, "By the time you get any kind of accommodation on paper, it's well past the time you need them… It's just too many details going through it formally" (March 24, 2025). Her critique speaks to the bureaucratic inertia that renders well-intentioned accessibility centric policies practically ineffective.

In sum, students were not asking for leniency but for partnership. In other words, an approach that sees access not as a checklist but as a pedagogical ethic, enacted daily and co-constructed with learners. Their visions for inclusive education reflect a desire for just learning environments that exceed minimum compliance, cultivate human connection, and respect the plural ways people exist and learn in the world.

Systemic and Architectural Barriers

Institutional barriers were often physical and bureaucratic. Multiple participants, including Imani and Zahra, highlighted the challenges of maneuvering inaccessible buildings and outdated infrastructure. Elevators were unreliable, doors were heavy, and accessible bathrooms were distant or locked. Faculty member Dr. Serrano emphasized that many accommodations were inconsistently applied due to departmental silos and lack of cross-campus coordination. These accounts demonstrated that ableism is often embedded in the very structures of the institution including its architecture, scheduling, and departmental isolation. Regarding architectural compliancy, Hannah shared that:

> A lot of buildings around here aren't ADA compliant. And just because they were built beforehand… And then also just like… existing spaces within there, like for example the Lakeshore State Student Shop, the aisles don't meet the minimum spacing required for like wheelchair users. I think they're short by like a whole foot. (Hannah, 25, 2025)

Hannah noted significant architectural barriers on campus, citing outdated building design, inadequate signage, and insufficient aisle widths in key student spaces. She observed that while the university had made strides in deaf accessibility such as offering ASL interpretation and captioning services, the efforts to address mobility and sensory needs lagged. Her insights revealed the piecemeal nature of campus accessibility initiatives, and the need for comprehensive, intersectional approaches to both new and legacy infrastructure.

Dr. Rivera also spoke about the ways infrastructure undermines pedagogical accessibility opining "The building I teach in was never designed with visual learning in mind. I teach ASL. Sightlines are everything. But seating is tiered, and students can't always see each other's hands. I have to physically rearrange the classroom every semester." Her reflection shows how architectural ableism does not just obstruct movement, but it disrupts learning itself. Instructors committed to inclusive practice often found themselves contending with the built environment as an adversary, forced to work around, rather than with, the structures provided by the institution.

Participants shared that physical inaccessibility was compounded by procedural inaccessibility by having to locate a single elevator tucked behind dumpsters, or navigate through multiple offices to obtain accommodations, creating demoralizing and unnecessary delays. Emily described how the only working elevator in her academic building was located "in the back where the dumpsters are… it's dark and smells bad. People in wheelchairs shouldn't have to go through trash to get to class." The symbolism of that experience, the disabled entrance as secondary, hidden, and unpleasant, was not lost on her or other students.

Several participants noted that accessible features often existed "in name only." Automatic door buttons frequently malfunctioned; elevators were poorly maintained or out of service; signage was outdated or inconsistent. These failures were not just logistical inconveniences; they conveyed a message about who campus spaces were designed for. Zahra remarked, "It just makes you feel like you're not supposed to be there. Like they added a ramp because they had to, not because they actually wanted you in the building."

Dr. Serrano tied this to broader systemic problems, explaining that without centralized oversight, accessibility initiatives were fragmented and inconsistent. "You might have one department that's very invested in UD, and right next door, another that hasn't updated their building or practices in decades." This siloed approach meant that differently abled students experienced radically different levels of access depending on their major or the buildings in which they had classes. Rowan similarly noted, "If you're in the arts or humanities, you might find really empathetic professors. But my friend in business, none of her professors ever used microphones or made their slides available."

Participants also drew attention to time-based and scheduling barriers. Class times that overlapped with disability-related medical appointments, long commutes between buildings without sufficient break time, and expectations of back-to-back attendance all disproportionately impacted students with chronic illnesses, pain, or mobility impairments. These scheduling structures, taken as neutral by able-bodied faculty, functioned as exclusionary design. Together, these narratives reveal a structural form of ableism embedded in both the visible and invisible elements of university life. The very layout of classrooms, the locations of administrative offices, the assumptions of what a "standard" body or schedule looks like. These are all reflections of normative expectations that exclude disabled people. SWDs were not simply asking for buildings to be retrofitted, but for their respective institutions and overall to reimagine their priorities from the ground up.

In line with critical disability studies, this theme challenges the compliance-based mindset that treats accessibility as a reactive legal obligation. Instead, it advocates for a justice-based framework, where access is foundational and proactive. The insights of participants like Imani, Zahra, Hannah, Rowan, Emily, and Dr. Rivera underscore that without a commitment to infrastructure *and* institutional change, even the best intentions fall short.

Accessibility & Accommodation Processes

Accommodation processes were described as essential but simultaneously insufficient. SWDs often arrive at college unaware of their eligibility for support or unclear on how to navigate the processes involved. Professors and staff agreed that the disability office at their institution often serves as a vital intermediary yet emphasized that accommodations tend to be reactive rather than preemptive, failing to resolve larger systemic and design-based issues. Timing emerged as a persistent concern. For example, SWDs were usually expected to request alternative format textbooks weeks in advance, despite syllabi and book lists frequently being finalized shortly before the semester begins. This disjoint between institutional procedure and academic reality left many SWDs scrambling or falling behind from the start.

Faculty like Dr. Rivera spoke to the infrastructural limitations embedded within widely used platforms such as Canvas, especially for students using visual or ASL-based communication. She shared that captioning must be done manually and that students are sometimes expected to pay for additional software like GoReact which consists of costs that disproportionately affect those already navigating financial hardship. One practical solution she proposed was the use of color-coded accommodation markers within course management platforms, allowing instructors to more easily support students without letting anyone "fall through the cracks." These types of modifications would bridge the gap between compliance and meaningful access.

The mismatch between audio-centric technologies and visually based pedagogies such as in ASL or Deaf studies reveals deeper biases in platform design. While legally compliant, many systems still operate within ableist assumptions, reinforcing barriers rather than dismantling them.

Emily described the wide variance in faculty willingness to accommodate. Her experience included both flexible, understanding professors and others who questioned the legitimacy of her mental health accommodations. She received extended test time, flexible deadlines, and occasional attendance leniency, but noted the overall experience depended more on the instructor than the policy.

Claire, another participant, listed her accommodations including an emotional support animal, assignment flexibility, extra test time, and permission to use devices for notetaking.

While she appreciated these supports, she echoed a common frustration that the process was not user-friendly or adaptive to students' changing needs over time.

The experiences of both Emily and Claire illuminate the ways that accommodations are shaped more by the uneven willingness of faculty to implement and interpret them than just merely the existence of policy alone. Therefore, the inconsistency displays a wider institutional issue: academic support systems usually manifest as checklists that are static instead of everchanging practices which reflect SWDs' contingent needs along with their intersecting (i.e., additional) identities. In this manner, navigating accommodations becomes disproportionately burdensome for differently abled students themselves, since they have to negotiate both societal conceptualizations attached to what is recognized as differently abled (i.e., disabled) and the logistical process of attaining access. Therefore, these patterns connect directly to the latter half of Chapter 5, where conversational partners underscore how multiple marginalizations such as race, queerness, gender, and disability weave together to mold reception and availability of accessibility in HEIs.

Rowan addressed the systemic nature of these inconsistencies, pointing out that because universities are structured like businesses, decisions around accessibility often come down to cost-benefit analyses. This emphasis on budget over inclusion is particularly harmful during early adulthood, a period when many students first experience mental illness. Participants widely emphasized the importance of accessible health care and mental health resources on campus not only for sustaining academics but for enabling timely diagnoses and support during pivotal developmental years.

Rowan reflected on the need for empathy in institutional practices sharing that "There has to be some gentleness to understand that students are all figuring it out every day and they do not come [in] knowing all of the answers." She and others stressed that college timelines vary. Some students may take five, six, or even ten years to complete a degree, and these trajectories should be normalized rather than stigmatized.

Emily advocated for more campus visibility and representation such as disability student clubs, peer support, and most importantly, differently abled professors. "I think it's important to feel like you're not the only one there," she said. Representation helped foster a sense of belonging and gave students tangible examples of academic success with disability.

Students also spoke of the value of small campuses or classroom settings, where they were more likely to interact directly with professors and discuss accommodations informally. Emily emphasized that being able to ask questions and participate actively helped her succeed, but noted that not all instructors were receptive, even in smaller classes.

Finally, the rigidity of institutional infrastructure, both in terms of physical campus layout and bureaucratic structures was repeatedly cited as a barrier to timely accommodation. SWDs who were undiagnosed at the start of college or who acquired disabilities mid-program faced substantial delays in accessing support. "Depending on the accommodation," Emily noted, "it could take a significant amount of time in some cases for the accommodation to actually be met."

Dr. Rivera and others agreed that the current structure places the burden on students to self-identify, navigate complex paperwork, and adapt to systems not designed with them in mind. Without major investments in proactive support and UD, the accommodation model will continue to fall short. Not because it is unnecessary, but because it remains structurally and culturally misaligned with the lived realities of SWDs.

Student Perspectives on UDL (UDL)

While most SWDs who were interviewed did not explicitly articulate a fully envisioned UDL-designed course, some conversational partners described pedagogical and environmental features that they found helpful, or they wished were implemented. This suggests that SWDs have valuable and experiential knowledge relevant to UDL, despite if they do not label it as such.

For example, Hannah, who has ADHD shared how notetaking had been a persistent challenge and praised courses that offered captioning, recorded lectures, and transcripts readily available. These are all core elements of UDL. Hannah was also appreciative of classes that were equipped with dual projector screens to provide increased visibility. She criticized the use of traditional whiteboards due to their lack of clarity, specifically for students seated in the back of the classroom. According to her perspective, a classroom that balances visibility, mobility, accommodates different sensory and attentional needs, and offers multiple means of engagement is one that is well-designed.

Moreover, Hannah elaborated on how the course policies (e.g., automatic three-day extensions) and syllabi changed her perception of deadlines. Although intended to expand flexibility, it sometimes exacerbated her executive functioning challenges which highlights how UDL should also be carefully implemented and be dynamically responsive to unintended consequences.

Now, from the faculty perspective, Dr. Serrano reported the key principles that SWDs benefit from, such as access to multiple modes of instruction, digital accessibility tools, and proactive course designs that mitigate the need for reactive (i.e., after the fact) accommodations. But she also noted the risk UDL initiatives can sometimes overshadow individual accommodation needs, specifically when faculty think that "universal" approaches remove the need for any further support.

Physical & Digital Accessibility Barriers

UDL intervenes not just through teaching methodologies, but also by removing technological and infrastructural barriers. For instance, my research questions address this theme in the inquiry of better on-ramps towards student success. While many challenges were interpersonal, SWDs also identified pervasive infrastructural and digital barriers that shaped their day-to-day educational access. Claire described a non-traditional entry to higher education due to medical barriers. For example, Claire mentioned that “Going to Greenhill was a big help because Greenhill’s so small.”

Micah, a graduate SWD, recounted the way inaccessible public infrastructure exacerbated the burdens of commuting to campus. However, it was unclear if the institution had any responsibility over this experience. As someone who intermittently used mobility devices, Micah shared that reaching the bus stop from their apartment required either a substantial detour or physically lifting their walker across grassy terrain, an exhausting endeavor on flare-up days. Moreover, this experienced illuminated the oftentimes invisible, yet deeply consequential, barriers that differently abled students encounter when simply attempting to access educational spaces, thus demonstrating the way accessibility should be understood holistically and not restricted to university or college property alone. Micah stated that:

> I sometimes need to use mobility devices to get around… basically the paths for me to get from my apartment to the bus aren’t really, like I would have to go such a long way out of my way to stay on sidewalks. So, like I’m either having to lift up my walker… on a day where I’m, you know, having a bad day and I need to use a walker, I need to like pick up the walker to be able to use it on other surfaces. (Micah, December 3, 2024)

Isabella added another dimension by describing faculty insensitivity to invisible impairments. She further shared that, "Even after I told them I had chronic fatigue, my professor said, 'We all get tired, you need to manage your time better'" (March 26, 2025). Her experience exemplifies how ignorance and ableist assumptions among faculty contribute to the marginalization of SWDs. Such dismissals of hidden disabilities function as microaggressions that erode away at the trust in academic support systems and reinforces ableist and narrow understandings of legitimate need to accommodate SWDs.

Participants' narratives also pointed to a broader insight that both analog and digital environments can reproduce exclusion. For instance, while institutions may invest in modern classroom technology, these tools are often designed for normative users. Audio-based platforms that lack live captioning or incompatibility with screen readers undermine accessibility, particularly for Deaf and visually impaired students. Dr. Rivera noted the misalignment between platforms like Canvas and visual languages such as ASL, observing that manual captioning is time-consuming and often unfunded, leaving the burden on either instructors or students.

This coexistence of physical and digital inaccessibility reveals how disability is materially mediated, constructed and constrained by the design of spaces, platforms, and tools. Rather than relying on post hoc accommodation, inclusive design must be proactive, user-centered, and intersectional. SWDs and faculty alike advocated for a transition from compliance-driven models to those rooted in lived experience, flexibility, and co-creation.

Accessibility must be understood as a system-level obligation that exceeds the classroom. Whether navigating the terrain between home and campus, confronting dismissive attitudes, or interfacing with inaccessible digital systems, students' accounts emphasize that true equity demands a reimagining of infrastructure including the physical, procedural, and technological alike. UDL, when enacted with fidelity, demands not only differentiated pedagogy but also a comprehensive commitment to removing the environmental and bureaucratic barriers that impede access from all angles.

Legacy Infrastructure as a Barrier

Legacy infrastructure, not only physical buildings but also administrative systems and outdated norms, surfaced as a hidden but powerful barrier. Dr. Serrano critiqued how higher ed systems default to “how things have always been done,” from lecture-based learning to hierarchical assessment practices. This resistance to redesign or decentralize traditional teaching models created a major barrier to UD implementation. Similarly, participants voiced that older buildings lacked elevators or push buttons, and retrofitting was often deprioritized due to funding. These observations show how entrenched structures reproduce exclusion.

Participants varied in their responses concerning campus buildings and their navigability for students and others. Moreover, students lost trust in administrative offices after ableist experiences. One student (Emily) explained that “As you know if you cannot get up the steps [then] you cannot access the classrooms because there is no elevator or any ramps for the stairs so that excludes a lot of people with mobility issues.” Claire also stated that, “It took them two months to fix my broken window.” These quotes speak to the delayed institutional response to student needs overall. The broken window was reported as it exacerbated Claire’s conditions during times of inclement weather.

Lina’s experiences navigating physical and digital spaces that were not designed for Deaf users illuminated how legacy infrastructure remains a significant hurdle. Despite having official accommodations in place, she had to frequently remind professors to enable captions, and group discussions often moved too quickly for her to keep up with interpretation. Loudspeaker announcements, inaccessible classroom layouts, and uncaptioned media represent architectural and technological infrastructures built without students like her in mind.

Hannah stated that Lakeshore State University's, 'The Claw Stop' aisles do not meet the minimum spacing required for wheelchair users rendering physical navigation challenging or not possible in certain spaces. Additionally, the physical inaccessibility of older campus buildings was a recurring source of trauma for students like Rowan. Rowan stated that, "There was an elevator I was supposed to use to get to the critique studio… but someone kept locking it. I'd have to call security every time [to unlock it]." Such incidents revealed how outdated infrastructure is not merely an inconvenience. Moreover, it is a constant disruption to learning, participation, and safety. It reinforces the theme of legacy design impeding true inclusion and displays how physical space can exacerbate institutional roadblocks.

According to Micah, "The accessible entrance to the art museum is in the back… but there's no sidewalk between the theater and the museum. The lot was not maintained. I took the wheelchair down this super bumpy path to get to the entrance." As described by Micah, legacy infrastructure does not just inconvenience SWDs, but it actively segregates. When accessible routes are out of the way or poorly maintained, SWDs are forced into undignified and often unsafe conditions. Such infrastructural oversights are structural indicators of how disability inclusion persists as an afterthought regarding campus planning. In other words, the placement of accessible entrances in the backs of buildings, combined with dangerous or neglected pathways reinforces a spatial segregation that speaks volumes about both institutional priorities and neglect.

Micah's narrative explicitly addressed the built environment as a site of exclusion. They described multiple campuses where elevators were unreliable, ramps were poorly placed, and older buildings lacked basic accessibility features. When they experienced limited mobility after his/their spinal injury, these barriers became acutely apparent. The physical campus layout, designed decades ago with no consideration for disability access, created logistical and emotional obstacles to full participation. This form of ableism which was embedded in the literal infrastructure of the university was augmented by digital inaccessibility and course platforms that were not compatible with many students' cognitive needs. Similarly, Celeste reported that many online tools lacked compatibility with assistive technology or had confusing interfaces that exacerbated her executive functioning challenges.

Chronicity & Lived Disability Timeline

Many of the conversational partners have had long lasting impairments while others reported having temporary conditions that affected both their personal and academic life ranging from childhood to their time at the university level. It is important to note that some participants reported symptoms and self-awareness of being differently abled but did not become diagnosed by a medical professional until later in life. The reasoning varied, but certain factors that were consistent among participants were their familial conceptions of disability. According to Emily:

> I consider myself fortunate because I was diagnosed very young, and I have been receiving treatment since. I was diagnosed with ADHD in kindergarten, bipolar [disorder] in second grade, anxiety [disorder] some[time] in elementary school, and sensory processing disorder also as a very young child. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

Other SWDs such as Hannah shared that, "Before, I had this really negative self-identity... Once I was diagnosed, it was like OK, there's a reason, not an excuse" (April 25, 2025). This quote encapsulates the shift that mirrors Charmaz's (2006) model of ‘the loss and reconstruction of self’ post-diagnosis.

Describing her experience with a fluctuating chronic condition, Riley explained how difficult it was to gain faculty understanding when her health rapidly deteriorated after periods of seeming wellness. She remarked that professors usually struggled to grasp how she could appear fine one day and be incapacitated the next. Her experience demonstrated how the episodic nature of chronic illness does not fit neatly within academic timelines or expectations, usually leading to a lack of appropriate support or empathy.

According to faculty members such as Dr. Rivera, students transitioning from high school to college often lack knowledge of how to request interpreters or services. This highlights a developmental gap in institutional onboarding and points to the need for transitional programming.

> Migraines are unpredictable. Sometimes I wake up and I know the day’s already shot [ruined]. If I push through it, I pay the price later, puking, light sensitivity, needing to lie in a dark room for hours. And because I commute from home, it’s not like I can just crash somewhere on campus. I’ve had to take the train while in a full-blown migraine. It’s hell. (Jae, February 17, 2025)

In this quote, Jae described the relentless unpredictability of chronic migraines, emphasizing how a sudden onset could derail an entire day. As a commuter, he had no accessible place to rest on campus and sometimes endured the journey home while acutely ill. This account highlights the gaps in campus design and disability policy for students whose symptoms are episodic and severe.

Zahra shared that, “I started experiencing symptoms of POTS in high school, but I wasn’t diagnosed until my sophomore year of college. That delay? It messed [with] my head a lot. I kept thinking it was in my mind, or I was lazy.” Zahra’s journey with POTS and anxiety began long before a formal diagnosis, with years of unexplained symptoms and self-blame. Only after receiving a clinical label did she begin to reframe her struggles as medical and not moral, which then became a turning point (i.e., pivot) for seeking assistance. The temporality of disability, marked by delays in recognition and support, profoundly shaped academic and emotional trajectories. This suggested that disability is experienced as an evolving timeline, not a static state, and support systems must respond dynamically rather than waiting for definitive labels.

Dr. Rivera shared examples of differently abled students with emerging or progressive conditions, including vision loss or students who had never learned to request interpreters because such services had always been provided by schools or parents. This illustrated the need for a developmental approach to support student self-advocacy. The often unpredictable and fluctuating nature of disability emerged as a consistent theme. Faculty and students shared their accounts of the limits of institutional timelines assuming that there should be a linear and stable learning trajectory. Dr. Moran shared that a lot of policies surrounding attendance, extensions, and grading rubrics were premised upon the model of performance consistency. This may disadvantage SWDs (e.g., those with episodic or chronic impairments). Hannah stressed that her needs varied depending on her stress levels, class workload, and environmental triggers. Despite this, only a few professors accounted for this dynamic. Conversational partners shared that the lived timeline of being differently abled does not line up with academic structures that assume predictability. Moreover, participants generally said that adaptive and flexible course designs would better support students whose accommodation needs are not static (i.e., shifts over time).

Faculty-Student Collaboration & Support

Across multiple interviews, SWDs described a complexity when deciding whether to seek academic help or initiate conversations around their needs. This hesitancy often mirrored the broader dilemmas of disability disclosure, where students feared being misunderstood, judged, or seen as seeking unfair advantage. Even when formal accommodations were in place, students reported feeling reluctant to advocate for themselves, particularly in classrooms where instructors had not cultivated an open or approachable dynamic.

However, participants also highlighted the transformative potential of proactive faculty engagement. Instructors who noticed students struggling and took the initiative to check in were consistently described as not only helpful but deeply humanizing. These actions although seemingly small gestures of concern did signal that professors saw their students as whole people rather than passive recipients of instruction. In doing so, they created pathways for trust, support, and honest dialogue.

> If I am struggling, it is my responsibility to reach out to the professor to see how I can make up an assignment or figure out how to do better. But the ones [professors] that would reach out to me because they saw I was struggling was helpful to show that they really cared and were concerned about my progress and well-being. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

Emily’s reflection speaks to the relational dynamics at play in educational spaces. While she acknowledged the personal responsibility of initiating support, her most meaningful experiences came from faculty who interrupted the silence first, those who did not wait for a crisis to manifest, but who paid attention to patterns of participation, missed assignments, or shifts in student engagement.

In many of these cases, rapport-building emerged not from grand pedagogical redesigns but from intentional presence. Faculty who learned SWDs' names early in the semester, who provided multiple channels for communication (e.g., office hours, email, anonymous check-ins), or who simply voiced their openness to feedback helped to normalize help-seeking and lower the stakes of interaction. These practices are aligned with trauma-informed and disability-justice approaches, which position care and mutual accountability as foundational to learning, and not ancillary.

This section also highlighted the role of relational UDL which is UD not just in instructional materials or course structure, but in the affective and interpersonal practices that shape the classroom climate. Collaboration between faculty and students, especially when initiated by the more empowered party, was often the difference between struggle and survival for SWDs. Furthermore, SWDs like Rowan emphasized that faculty collaboration extended beyond support for academic performance. It also included validating SWDs' experiences, advocating for more inclusive departmental policies, or making real-time course adjustments based on student needs. In these moments, professors functioned as allies, less like gatekeepers of knowledge, and more as co-creators of equitable learning environments.

Taken together, these insights suggest that meaningful accessibility cannot be achieved through paperwork alone. It must be lived and enacted in the everyday rhythms of teaching, advising, and interaction. Faculty-student collaboration, when grounded in empathy and proactive care, becomes a powerful pedagogical tool, not just for meeting accommodation needs, but for resisting ableism and affirming student dignity.

Disability Justice & Pedagogical Vision

Reflecting on her experience with SWDs, Dr. Serrano spoke with admiration and urgency. She described these students as imaginative, committed, and full of potential, and questioned why academic systems so often fail to accommodate or celebrate them. For example, she shared, “The students I work with are brilliant and creative and funny and committed to building something different… And we don’t build systems with those students in mind. But we should.” Her comments reflected a broader call for disability justice in education, where students are not merely “included” but are seen as central to reimagining what inclusive education can be. These findings revealed the persistence of stigma as a shaping force in SWDs’ academic and social experiences.

A central thread emerging across the data was that the movement toward accessible and inclusive pedagogy is not a binary of success or failure, but a spectrum involving an evolving process shaped by both aspirational vision and material constraints. Several participants articulated a disability justice-informed pedagogy that embraces imperfect action, community accountability, and ongoing revision. This vision resists the notion that accessibility must be fully implemented before it can be meaningful. Instead, as Dr. Moran expressed, progress should be measured not only by end goals, but also by the willingness to begin.

Pragmatic Universal Design & Incremental Change

According to Dr. Moran, “We can’t make the course as completely fully accessible and inclusive right away as we would wish. But I would also say… I wouldn’t want that to be an excuse for not taking the steps forward that we can take.” Dr. Moran concluded our conversation by naming the tension between idealism and pragmatism in UD. Her call was not for perfection, but persistence in a steady, reflective commitment to making courses more inclusive, one modification at a time. This ethos of incremental change is rooted in the core principles of disability justice, which center interdependence, flexibility, and the transformative power of collective action. Instructors were urged to begin with what is within reach, whether it be offering flexible deadlines, sharing slides in advance, or incorporating multimodal engagement strategies. The next steps would build from there. Such an approach acknowledges structural constraints while still affirming that inaccessibility is not a neutral condition, but a curable one.

This framing also challenges dominant educational narratives that place undue responsibility on disabled students to self-advocate within static, often exclusionary systems. Instead, participants like Dr. Moran recentered the responsibility toward faculty and institutions, urging them to proactively imagine education not as a standardized product, but as a relational, dynamic practice responsive to diverse bodies and minds.

Financial & Logistical Barriers

Dr. Moran opined that "There are instructors who have very good intentions… but if they need to redesign their courses… it certainly takes time... It takes energy. Sometimes it can take financial resources… it may require funding to purchase the tools for the students." Despite this vision, several faculty members I interviewed acknowledged the weight of tangible constraints. Dr. Moran noted that logistical and financial limitations often obstruct UD implementation. Time scarcity, overloaded teaching schedules, lack of administrative support, and minimal access to training or assistive technology resources were frequently mentioned. In many cases, faculty were willing to do more but found themselves blocked by institutional structures that deprioritized accessibility, either through budgeting decisions, siloed planning, or reactive accommodation models.

This tension revealed a key contradiction. Universities claim to support inclusion but also fail to provide the infrastructure needed to realize that promise. As such, Dr. Moran's comments highlight the need for systemic investment in both human and material capital. Not simply training sessions or compliance checklists, but reallocation of funds and labor toward the full enactment of inclusive design.

When interpreting Dr. Moran's statements through a disability justice lens, they reflect a broader critique of austerity logic in higher education. Inclusion cannot be optional, nor can it be contingent on individual faculty sacrifices. Accessibility is a shared responsibility that requires real resource redistribution and cultural change across departments and disciplines. Without such shifts, UD risks becoming an underfunded aspiration, rather than a structural transformation.

Existing Institutional Supports

Academically, SWDs reported having to rely on a wide range of accommodations (e.g., closed captioning extra time on exams, sign language interpreters, and Braille). However, across interviews SWDs noted remaining gaps in support for intersectional needs, including tactile ASL for deafblind students. Course structures that failed to significantly address disability, specifically in education-focused majors, also elicited frustration among students. For example, Imani stated that "There needs to be significant discussion around disability, and it shouldn't have to be where I have to wait in time in my program to start talking about these [types of] things." Overall, this theme synthesizes narratives about the current climate of support that is already in place; existing support that may be insufficiently coordinated and often fragmented.

Socially speaking, SWDs' overall experiences were marked by a lack thereof peer understanding and inclusion. Although some classmates were supportive in each SWDs' unique experience in college, many were hesitant to engage deeply with others which reflects wider gaps in both educational and social approaches to disability inclusion. Imani, for example, connected her hesitancy to the segregation of differently abled students in K-12 environments, which left most university students underprepared to interact inclusively.

Micah opined, "I was on the accessibility steering committee for a major software company… educating software developers about web content accessibility guidelines was basically my job." Micah's experience as a software accessibility advocate offered a valuable perspective on how institutional support can function more inclusively. They served on an accessibility steering committee and led education around Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), indicating that inclusion, when done well, involved disabled voices not only being heard but actively leading. Their story disrupts the common belief that SWDs are solely the recipients of accommodations by highlighting their role in shaping accessibility policy itself. In other words, their expertise positioned them as both a beneficiary and an architect of accessibility. This dual role challenged the passive recipient narrative of accommodations and illustrated how individuals with disabilities usually do the institutional work of inclusion.

Celeste stated, "I didn't know how to socialize properly… I didn't do very well… It impacted my mental health very severely. To the point where I had to go home and live with my parents again." Celeste reflected on her first attempt at college, describing how the unspoken expectation to socialize in neurotypical ways left her feeling isolated and overwhelmed. She eventually withdrew and returned home, citing a severe decline in mental health. Her story highlighted how the transition to college can fail neurodivergent students when institutions focus solely on academic preparedness, neglecting the emotional and social scaffolding necessary for holistic success. Other participants such as Emily stated that:

> I feel like it was a little [supportive] both in high school and college. I had a good community at Greenhill. The Greenhill College Disability Coalition (GCDC) was a good group of students with disabilities that [made me feel] like I belonged there. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

However, as previously mentioned, student groups were reported as being mostly helpful support systems for differently abled students. For example, Emily stated that:

> I did have a good [student] group [with] 'GCDC', but I did not know what was happening. I had a couple of friends, and they were supportive of me to some extent, but they cannot really change the situation [I was in]. It was nice that they would listen to me, but nothing really could be done, it felt like at the time. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

SWDs reported differing accounts of support systems in place, including their institution's respective disability resource center. For example, Emily stated that, "I had the AAC. The person was mostly good. A couple times she made ableist comments, but I think she was trying to make a joke, it just did not go so well. Most of the time she was helpful."

Despite these challenges, SWDs also found strength in community, both formal support offices and peer-led coalitions provided vital networks of social solidarity. Emily stated that:

> There were other groups that did not accept me, and they bullied me for it. Sometimes I [would] get these funny looks and things like that [when] I would say something about [being] in therapy [since] that is obviously related to disability. People would judge me for that, and it made me feel like I did not want to share anymore. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

However, as previously mentioned student groups were reported as being mostly helpful support systems for differently abled students. SWDs mentioned that there was not enough staff employed at their campus' disability resource center. Therefore, employees were perceived as overworked which resulted in a lack of enforcement of accommodations for differently abled students. For example, Emily also stated that:

> I am not sure if they have hired more people for that position. I hope [the college] did because she was so overwhelmed, and we just were not getting our needs met. We, meaning the disabled students because she did not have enough time in her day to enforce all the accommodations that everyone was having issues with. But she was very knowledgeable about everything that needed to be done. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

In terms of peer supports, student run disability coalitions were mentioned as helpful among differently abled students. Emily discussed that:

> I was president of it for two years and ran the Facebook page. It was really a great support for me. I first joined GCDC because I wanted to introduce a club called 'Best Buddies' to the college, which did not end up happening. I ended up getting really involved with GCDC just as it was. That is when I developed my identity as a disabled person, because before that, I did not see myself as disabled. [For example], I knew I had mental health conditions, but I did not really see it as part of my identity. [When] I met people who had similar conditions [as] me and how they saw it as their identity [as] disabled, I embraced that. That was a really good way for me to get involved because I feel like if you see it as your identity, you are

> more likely to get involved with it and advocate for other people. (Emily, October 18, 2024)

As this quote highlights, support structures, while vital, are oftentimes expected to function as catch-all remedies for systemic failures. These findings suggest the need to redistribute institutional responsibility for inclusion beyond the confines of resource centers and into the daily practices of faculty and administration of postsecondary institutions.

According to Zahra, "So, I have extended time on exams, breaks during class if I need to step out, priority registration… But these supports didn't come automatically. I had to advocate for every single one, and that was draining." Although Zahra now benefits from several accommodations, she described the process of obtaining them as exhausting and adversarial. Each request demanded self-advocacy and persistent proof, rather than an assumption of need or good faith. Accommodation systems risk reproducing exclusionary dynamics by placing the burden of proof on students. Zahra's experience suggests that meaningful access hinges not only on available support, but on a paradigm shift toward trust and mutual understanding.

Conclusion to Data Analysis

Together, these themes point toward a need for structural reform, one grounded in UD, informed by SWDs' perspectives, and responsive to the intersecting realities of being differently abled in HEIs. Cumulatively, these insights demand that we navigate beyond surface-level inclusion baselines. They also point toward a model of postsecondary education that is relational, reflexive, and rooted in the co-construction of accessibility, not merely its provision. The analytic framework presented in this dissertation provides a basis for future replication or scale development that quantitatively measures student perceptions of ableism in HEIs. SWDs reported widespread faculty misunderstanding, which contributed to isolation and mistrust. These experiences highlight the need for wider institutional discourse on disability inclusion.

Chapter 7: Discussion

The potential impact of this research is to inform policy changes at institutions to improve accessibility and support services for SWDs. Other purposes are to raise awareness about the challenges faced by SWDs in HEIs, and to develop targeted interventions and training programs for faculty and staff to enhance their understanding of disability issues.

This study used constructivist grounded theory to analyze the lived experiences of SWDs at various Mid-western urban-serving universities in the United States. Influenced by works such as Charmaz' (2006) piece, my approach corroborates that knowledge is co-created between the researcher and conversational partners which allows nuanced understandings of how SWDs navigate both their academic and social spaces. The following sections will detail the analytic process, from my coding strategies to theme development, thus illustrating how theory emerged from the data rather than being pre-imposed upon it. Through this approach, the study sought to highlight student voices and illuminate the systemic barriers and microaggressions that have shaped their educational trajectories. Other highlighted voices included urban serving university faculty and staff members to form a cohesive narrative on campus inclusivity regarding accommodation for differently abled students and students overall. Although the sample is not statistically representative, the depth of qualitative insight generated offers conceptual generalizability that could guide future mixed-methods studies.

This study used one-on-one in depth interviewing to explore disability experiences in HEIs with differently abled students to understand their unique perspectives on navigating academic challenges, accessing support services, encountering accessibility barriers, and overall feelings about their college experience. I incorporated a semi-structured interview protocol to gather rich, detailed data from free-flowing conversations with participants. The experiences of a diverse sample pool are not represented in the previous literature to the extent of inferential saturation. In other words, previous studies have not sampled from diverse populations of differently abled students to explore the intersectional experience of being multiply marginalized in higher education. This study serves as having SWDs' experiences heard to become part of the canon of disability studies literature and vanguard of its expansion.

Corroborating National Trends: Disability Access and Postsecondary Outcomes

While this dissertation draws on qualitative data, many of its findings align with national survey trends on differently abled students' access, retention, and educational barriers. According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20), approximately 21% of undergraduate students report having a disability, but fewer than half reported receiving any accommodations through their respective disability services office (NCES, 2022). This gap was mirrored in my findings, where SWDs frequently described reluctance to disclose their disability, misunderstanding of accommodation processes, or experiences inconsistencies in institutional responses to their individual and collective needs.

Similarly, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) showed that SWDs were significantly less likely to graduate within six years than their abled peers. This disparity was echoed in SWDs' narratives on academic strain, personal burnout, and their HEI's inflexibility. For example, while many SWDs described struggling to meet expectations without tailored supports, they also mentioned misrecognitions, total dismissals of their disability, (e.g., "you don't look disabled") not enough proactive planning on behalf of their university or college. These realities reflect not just individual HEI failings, but national trends in student retention rates and accommodation access. Below is a brief table (i.e., Table 5) aligning selected findings from this study with nationally documented data points.

Table 5

Alignment Between Qualitative Dissertation Themes and Quantitative National Datasets

Qualitative Dissertation Theme	Quantitative National Dataset Finding	Source
Reluctance to disclose disabilities	Only ~48% of SWDs report receiving accommodations	NPSAS:20, NCES (2022)
Academic strain due to inflexible structures	Disabled students have lower 6-year graduation rates than nondisabled peers	NCES, Digest of Ed. Statistics
Lack of faculty understanding or UDL practices implemented	Most faculty report limited training in disability-inclusive pedagogy	EDUCAUSE Faculty Survey (2020)
Social stigma and non-apparent disability tension	Students with invisible disabilities report higher stress and underutilization of services	NCES, Fast Facts (2023)
Limited representation of differently abled instructors	Less than 4% of full-time faculty self-report disabilities	NCES (2022), IPEDS Faculty Report

Theoretical Framing

Themes emerged from the data which reinforced and extended the fundamental debates in both higher education and disabilities literature. Systemic ableism, evolving disability self-identification, and intersectional marginalization were core themes that mirror issues discussed in previous scholarship regarding exclusionary academic cultures (Dolmage, 2017; Annamma et al., 2016) and the limits of formal accommodation processes (Peña et al., 2016; Grimes et al., 2017). Surfacing theoretical insights served as an acknowledgment of how SWDs navigate layered experiences of fragmented support systems, misrecognition, and identity negotiation, frequently occurring synchronously. The use of grounded theory highlighted disability's entanglement with gender identity, race/ethnicity, institutional culture, sexual orientation, and even educational focus. My findings serve as a reply to calls in previous research for more intersectionally, student and faculty informed models of accessibility in HEIs.

Key barriers that I identified in the data include lack of awareness about UDL among faculty and staff resulting from insufficient training, biases toward hidden disabilities, and reactive accommodation models currently in use by many HEIs. Participants mentioned that the transition from high school to higher education brings additional complications in accommodation practices. Explored further were differences in pedagogical methods between in-person and virtual classrooms with preferences varying between participants. Each mode of instruction and learning carried pros and cons regarding accessibility contingent on student needs.

Classroom layouts often hindered effective teaching and learning interactions, which are crucial for communication modes including sign language. Emphasizing the need for better integration of technology to support ASL, interviewees pointed out issues with current platforms, particularly concerning accessibility resources for SWDs. Participants also advocated for improved self-advocacy training for first-generation college students and recommended establishing workshops that assist students in navigating university services, especially incoming students transitioning from high school. Moreover, conversational partners underscored the importance of accommodating diverse students' needs and called for increased resources and training for educators to ensure inclusivity for all university students.

Theoretical Implications of SWDs' Experiences

Across interviews, SWDs described navigating higher education as an emotionally and structurally precarious journey. This journey was defined as much by resilience as by systemic friction. Disclosure of hidden disabilities such as ADHD, anxiety, or depression typically involved indecisive emotional labor. SWDs weighed whether sharing their diagnosis would result in compassion or scrutiny, support or stigma. The continual fear of not being believed or perceived as incapable shaped how, when, and whether they looked for accommodations whatsoever.

Conversational partners described fragmented systems of support where formal accommodations were inconsistently implemented and mental health services were typically delayed, confusing, or inaccessible. As a result, many SWDs relied on informal workarounds, peer support networks, or self-created strategies to navigate their unique academic responsibilities. Although a few SWDs encountered professors who proactively checked in or tailored their teaching based on student need, the more common experience among participants was one of skepticism, gatekeeping, or procedural rigidity.

Interviews also revealed coalesced burdens experienced by multiply marginalized SWDs. Intersections of race, class, gender, and disability intensified feelings of exclusion, specifically in spaces where disabilities were either pathologized or ignored. As mentioned prior, interviewees expressed there should be at least some faculty and curricula that reflect their lived experiences and identities. In other words, a common recommendation across interviews was the integration of differently abled perspectives in course materials. Moreover, SWDs expressed desire for disabled perspectives to not be siloed in disability-oriented courses but embedded in their school's overall campus climate and pedagogies.

Participants' experiences did not only reflect individual struggles, but also systemic patterns deeply embedded in the architecture of HEIs. In assessing discussions, they appear to echo patterns in national data that show disparities in postsecondary access and persistence for SWDs, particularly for those from underrepresented backgrounds (National Center for Education

Statistics, 2022; Newman et al., 2009). Therefore, this research contributes nuance to those datasets by demonstrating how ableism operates not just at the policy level, but in the daily interactions, cultural norms, and built environments of academic life.

Taken together, themes that emerged from the data reinforce what disability justice frameworks assert; accommodations alone cannot resolve the underlying exclusions baked into institutional design. True inclusion demands structural transformation. Moreover, it requires an intentional reimagining of pedagogical spaces through the guidelines of UD, UDL, UDI, and DeafSpace Design[28] in postsecondary contexts. These paradigms stress collective responsibility, proactive design, and the recognition of differently abled people as integral, not exceptional incumbents of learning communities.

Inferences from interview data both corroborate and extend on the existing scholarship of academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017), showcasing how exclusion operates beyond formalized policy while cutting through informal cultural norms and biases. In particular, the role faculty played emerged as consequential. On one hand, when faculty were supportive and knowledgeable of disability, SWDs flourished; on the other, when they were dismissive and punitive, SWDs internalized stigma, experienced mental health crises, or even felt like dropping out.

The importance of disability disclosure was a common theme discussed. It is central to medicalized accommodation models commonly used across HEIs. Put plainly, disclosure was often described as a high-stakes and emotionally cumbersome endeavor for SWDs. Accordingly, SWDs' perspectives highlight limitations of a system that requires them to navigate personal

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[28] Developed at Gallaudet University, DeafSpace Design represents a distinct architectural paradigm that is grounded in the linguistic, sensory, and cultural needs of Deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Although not particularly incorporated in this study, I discovered this framework late in the research process and recommend it for future research, including my own.

vulnerability to access institutional legitimacy. Many interviewees, particularly those with hidden disabilities, chose silence over stigma. These decisions reflect the paradox immersed in higher education; institutions simultaneously depend on disclosure to provide support while failing to create a climate in which disclosure feels safe or welcomed.

Additionally, interview data reaffirm the value of an intersectional framework. Students of color, queer students, and first-generation students not only navigated ableism but they did so within HEIs also steeped in racism, classism, and CIS heteronormativity. Many SWDs did not view disability in isolation; they described an entangled system of oppression that molded how they navigated campus, formed relationships, and defined their academic success.

It was crucial that SWDs did not merely describe deficits; they offered visions. Their imagined classrooms, assessment models, and learning communities offered blueprints implementing principles of UD, UDL, and UDI in manners that assert belonging, dignity, and agency for differently abled students. These are not to be thought of as idealistic suggestions; they are grounded in the real material needs of SWDs who have long been undermined to contort themselves into inaccessible systems in higher education.

This way, data inferences navigate us from analytical critique to constructivist theory-building. Emerging is a conceptualization of academic space as a contested terrain where access is not given without negotiation, fighting for, and in some cases, they are denied. HEIs must augment from a compliance-based model of accessibility into a proactive, disability justice-oriented model that manages accessibility as a foundational ethic and not a bureaucratic checkbox.

Acknowledging Limitations & Directions for Future Research

These findings are situated within specific institutional contexts and should be interpreted as grounded insights as opposed to population-level estimates, though they nevertheless point to pervasive structural patterns among urban-serving HEIs. This dissertation contributes to the vanguard of an emergent body of literature that values qualitative insight not as a replacement for quantitative empirical evidence, but rather as a necessary counterpart for explanatory depth over breadth. Thus, this study serves as a call for researchers to follow up and bridge qualitative and quantitative traditions.

Implicit Bias & the Structural Embedding of Ableism

Despite implicit bias not being measured directly in this qualitative study, it has conceptual relevance that is both unavoidable and deeply intertwined in patterns that emerged from interviews. The decision to not operationalize and measure implicit bias quantitatively does not minimize its analytical significance[29]. In particular, interviewees' responses frequently pointed to both subtle and overt forms of attitudinal exclusion, such as instructors questioning the legitimacy of accommodations and conditions, discriminatingly enforcing policies, or expressing indifference when SWDs disclosed hidden impairments.

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[29] Past research has established that educators and institutional incumbents harbor implicit pro-White and anti-Black biases, often at rates comparable to or exceeding those found in the general population (Starck et al., 2020). These biases contribute to disproportionate labeling, under-accommodation, and varied expectations of differently abled students across race, class, and gender. While my research did not empirically test these dynamics, the structural presence of such bias was visible in SWDs' experiences navigating accommodation processes, interacting with skeptical faculty, and anticipating stigma during disclosure, if disclosure was made in the first place. Future studies may consider pairing qualitative inquiry with tools such as implicit association tests (IATs) or faculty climate surveys to better gauge how biases are manifested and impact decision-making at both the classroom and meso-institutional levels. Recognizing this limitation strengthens the call for intersectional approaches to disability research that consider not only policy and practice, but also the affective and perceptual terrain in which inclusion efforts unfold. The absence of direct measurement of implicit bias should not be interpreted as a dismissal of its relevance. Instead, its conceptual weight is acknowledged as part of the broader ecosystem of ableism in HEIs.

Past studies provided strong evidence that implicit bias in racialized and ableist forms incepts early in the educational pipeline and molds how SWDs are perceived, labeled, and tracked. Formative experiences such as these influence not just K-12 differential access but also expectations and interactions that SWDs carry with them into HEIs. This study embraced an intersectional scrutiny and exploration of ableism, recognizing that disability is never experienced in isolation from race, class, gender, or sexuality. As such, implicit bias operates as a mechanism through which ableism is reproduced in university settings, often covertly, and without being named by institutional actors (Dolmage, 2017; Friedman, 2023; Lòpez-Lòpez et al., 2023).

While the study did not test for bias directly, it underscores its ongoing presence as a structuring force. Future research may benefit from more intentionally measuring implicit bias in faculty or administrative decision-making, especially as it relates to disability disclosure, accommodation approval, and classroom interactions. In the meantime, this study contributed to a deeper understanding of how the lived experiences of SWDs are shaped by intersecting, often unacknowledged, systems of oppression.

A notable limitation of this qualitative piece is that the recruited sample cannot be determined representative nor the results be deemed generalizable. In other words, the results might not apply to all institutional contexts such as community colleges (i.e., 2-year institutions) or internationally as policy regarding disability accommodation varies abroad based on the country. Moreover, some SWDs who initially agreed to participate in an interview did not attend their scheduled Zoom or Teams meeting, resulting in a smaller-than-anticipated sample. While the existing data remains rich and meaningful, this reduction in anticipated interviews may have limited the range of perspectives, particularly from SWDs with more underrepresented experiences. Additionally, as with any interview-based study, the findings rely on self-reported retrospective data, which can be shaped by participants' memory, willingness to disclose, and comfort level with the interviewer. Moreover, the recollection of previous experiences can be subject to inaccuracies. While every effort was made to foster a safe and affirming space, future work should consider ways to complement interviews with ethnographic observation or institutional data, where appropriate. There is also the importance to note participant self-selection bias such as the possibility of conversational partners having more critical, activist orientations. Another limitation was the overrepresentation of certain sociodemographic as there was a heavy representation of White and LGBTQ+ conversational partners. Lastly, there was a focus on narratives rather than institutional documentation.

Future studies could operationalize emergent themes from this study into survey constructs for broader quantitative or mixed methods institutional studies seeking to benchmark accessibility practices and outcomes across demographic strata. There is also a strong case for longitudinal studies to track SWDs' experiences over time as institutions respond or fail to respond to an influx of calls for inclusive and UDL-based spaces.

Since some SWDs described classroom components that they either found accessible or not, future research can invite students to co-create UDL influenced courses. Thus, participatory design approach could yield valuable insight into how UDL functions from the learner's perspective to alternatively bridge gaps between theoretical ideals and real student needs. Moreover, future studies could evaluate UDL-related campus policies or legislation post implementation to scrutinize efficiency and changes in student outcomes.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This dissertation centered the voices of marginalized SWDs and critically explored the extent to which theoretically promising interventions, such as UD, can translate into meaningful inclusion within HEIs. Relevant frameworks like UDL and UDI expand on the original seven principles of UD to account for instructional modes and learning environments (Black et al., 2015). Prior research (Goode, 2007; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010) was corroborated by participants such as faculty and staff stating that implementing comprehensive UD, UDL, and UDI practices across HEIs require substantial time and financial allocation. Despite a robust body of previous literature, discourse around UD often centered on modifying physical infrastructure rather than engaging with the voices of SWDs to evaluate whether institutional models meaningfully addressed their educational needs (Dolmage, 2017). A diverse array of disabilities, as outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), remained underexplored in terms of how SWDs navigate institutional spaces and modalities.

In this study, conversational partners contributed first-hand accounts of navigating ableist structures and insufficient implementation of inclusive design in both instruction approaches and campus legacy infrastructure (Black et al., 2014; Black et al., 2015; Griful-Freixenet et al., 2017; Moriña et al., 2015). Testimonies revealed the inadequacy of focusing solely on structural design and emphasized the significance of culturally responsive pedagogy and disability justice principles in creating inclusive learning experiences for everyone (Berry, 2021; Brown & Leigh, 2020).

The findings of this dissertation affirm and expand upon the foundational contributions of UDL, UDI, and UD scholarship by showing that inclusive pedagogical design remains unevenly implemented across HEIs. Despite the potential outlined by Rose and Meyer (2002) and

Burgstahler and Cory (2008), SWDs continue to encounter learning environments where accessibility, flexibility, and proactive design are sidelined. This reinforces Bowe's (2000) call for an institutional shift in learning which is one not only inclusive but anticipatory of diverse embodiments and the learning rhythms of all students.

Consistent with past studies, conversational partners including SWDs, faculty, and staff frequently highlighted systemic barriers related to disclosure, fear of stigma, and inconsistent institutional responsiveness (Moriña et al., 2015). While physical accommodation was important, students expressed a stronger need for adaptive learning strategies, differentiated instruction, and inclusive classroom environments. Several SWDs reported spending much more time preparing for exams than their nondisabled peers, attributing these disparities to pedagogical rigidity and insufficient support (Black et al., 2015; Davies et al., 2013; Denhart, 2008; Moriña, 2015). Hidden disabilities further complicated matters due to inconsistencies in documentation, leading to a fraught transition from secondary to postsecondary education where proactive support was often lacking or nonexistent (Green, 2007; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

This study addressed persistent knowledge gaps by documenting the lived experiences of SWDs who the consumers of instructional design and accommodation services are, and whose needs typically went unrecognized in the absence of formal disclosure. A parallel knowledge gap existed at the institutional level, where disability-related policy and theory were present but rarely operationalized in practice. Participants consistently noted that while the rhetoric of UD, UDL, and UDI was prevalent in university mission statements, the implementation of these principles was sparse or inconsistent.

I use the term 'Institutional Ableism in Higher Education' to develop my own theoretical contribution. This framework encapsulates various systemic manners in which universities and colleges reproduce exclusion by way of policy, architecture, and pedagogy. Moreover, this framework builds on both DisCrit and Crip Theory, which foreground the disruption of normative assumptions regarding minds, bodies, and intersecting marginalized identities. Where DisCrit Theory illuminates racialized constructions of different ability, and where Crip Theory interrogates compulsory able-bodiedness, my own framing positions these insights in the HEI itself. Through way of naming *Institutional Ableism in Higher Education*, I stress the ways universities actively create and reflect inequities by choices in design, cultural norms, and the allocation of resources. In other words, this serves as my attempt to articulate an "academic Crip-DisCrit:" An institutional lens extending on both traditions and consistent regarding accessibility to practice, policy, and future scholarship.

A critical factor in shaping the educational experiences of SWDs was faculty engagement. Irregardless of the HEI's policy, student experiences were influenced by faculty and staff's awareness of disability issues, general attitudes toward accommodation, and their willingness to adapt to course design. Lack of faculty training and the limited presence of differently abled instructors likely contributed to their shallow interpretations of inclusion, even at HEIs publicly committed to diversity (Coraile et al., 2012; Dunn et al., 2006; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

National statistics underlined the urgency of these qualitative findings. Fewer than half (45%) of SWDs at four-year HEIs completed their degree programs, and even fewer (37%) graduated from two-year institutions (Hinz et al., 2017). These descriptive statistics highlighted the need for a more comprehensive and equity-oriented model of accommodation and support that this inductive study explored possibilities of.

In this qualitative study, the unit of analysis included SWDs from diverse demographic backgrounds with intersecting identities, faculty, and staff members. Participants were sampled from urban-serving universities in the United States Midwest region. Faculty including professors familiar with UDL, and staff from disability resource centers also contributed insights regarding institutional capacity and systemic challenges, including limited funding and inconsistent administrative support.

Overall, this study added a framework to the vanguard of research on disability inclusive higher education by advancing grounded, student-informed strategies to inform bridging the division between practice and theory. Moreover, it offered a call to action for faculty, staff, and university leaders to reevaluate how inclusive design is envisioned, implemented, and sustained.

The amplification of SWDs voices from diverse backgrounds uncovers the interpersonal, structural, and pedagogical dynamics that affect their experiences in HEIs. By way of deep, inductive, conversational inquiry, this dissertation demonstrates that different ability inclusion cannot be separated from broader questions of identity, justice, and organizational accountability.

SWDs interviewed did not just ask for better accommodation for themselves; they called for macro-level systemic change to benefit everyone. They asked to be seen, heard, and valued despite their disabilities, and experiences of living while differently abled in academic spaces. Further, SWDs asked for faculty who understand that disability is not a monolith, for syllabi that anticipate ahead of time rather than retroactively react, and for HEIs that treat diversity as a foundation as opposed to an afterthought.

The transition from high school to college was difficult for many SWDs as they explained the journey is marked by steep structural cliffs. SWDs shared stories of perseverance, but also of burnout, invisibility, and unnecessary suffering, much of which could have been mitigated through empathetic leadership and inclusive design.

This dissertation highlighted SWDs' lived realities across intersecting identities in urban-serving HEIs through centering their voices to explore the phenomena of overt and covert ableist structures. Through unearthing reported their K-12 to postsecondary trajectories grounded in the data emerged a continuum of systemic barriers rooted in the following: fragmented accommodation models, legacy infrastructure, and the entrenched misconceptions of disability among all levels of university incumbency. All of which impedes the full potential of student participation and sense of belonging on campus. Moreover, the collected narratives analyzed in this manuscript underscore the insufficiency of legal compliance in isolation. In other words, although the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act serve to safeguard baseline disability rights, there remains a lack to compel the type of relational, proactive, and equity-catalyzed practices to meaningfully augment higher education into the accessible public good it should have intended to be. Furthermore, conversational partners' urged for approaches to embed UD and its framework derivatives as institutional core tenets rather than optional enhancements.

Based on accounts of the conversational partners, there were layers of recommendations which emerged including:

1. High-Level (Macro) Policy Interventions (e.g., Law & State/Federal Funding)
    - Mandatory disability inclusion training for all university and college employees including faculty, staff, and teaching assistants.
    - Provision of aligning HEI disability policy with K-12 frameworks to streamline transitions and thus prevent the abrupt loss in support for incoming students.

    - The expansion of state and federal funding allocation to incentivize UDL implementation beyond baseline compliance currently and previously used.

2. Institutional & Campus-Level (Meso) Augmentations
    - Transition from the medical documentation and reactive driven accommodation models currently in place into proactive and universally designed environments which anticipate diversity and variability among learners.
    - Integrating the language (i.e., communicative modes) of accessibility and resources in each syllabus which will be reinforced by continual course delivery and not just merely at the inception of each semester (i.e., day one).
    - Establishing scheduled and recurrent cross-campus accessibility audits scrutinizing pedagogical, physical, and digital implementations.
3. The Transition from Secondary to Higher Education
    - The development of formalized bridge programs among HEIs and high schools to incorporate joint training for both secondary and postsecondary educators.

As the landscape of HEIs continues to evolve, the findings of this dissertation offer a conceptual, yet pragmatic roadmap to improve student retention. Participants' aim is to compel us to consider not just how we accommodate, but how we design too. Not only who we admit, but how we ensure they stay to succeed. And not only how we teach, but how we listen. In the words of Rowan, "Theory can sound good, but if you don't see it in practice, it becomes less true." "It is time to make inclusion more than theoretical. It is time to make it reality."

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Timetable

Summer, 2024	Connecting with staff to render sample feasibility.
Fall, 2024	First rounds of data collection and beginning of data analysis.
July 21st, 2025	Dissertation draft submission.
August 18th, 2025	Dissertation submission.
August 6th, 2025	Dissertation hearing.

Appendix A: Theory Chapter

This study advanced a relational theory of access grounded in Disability Justice, where structural ableism in higher education is not merely the result of inaccessible architecture or outdated policies, but a complex system upheld by cultural norms, disciplinary gatekeeping, and individualized frameworks of support. Drawing from interview data with students and faculty, the research foregrounds three key constructs, the burden and stigma of disability disclosure, the uneven distribution of inclusive pedagogy across academic departments (positional academic ableism), and the limitations of procedural UD approaches when divorced from relational engagement. These findings reinforce that access is not a neutral or technical process but a political and emotional one, requiring recognition of students' full humanity. Inspired by the work of Dolmage (2017), Kafer (2013), and Goffman (1963), this dissertation situates access as a collective right rather than an individual privilege, calling for a cultural transformation in how higher education understands, values, and designs for disability.

Various interviews included experiences that powerfully demonstrated the utility of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016) for better understanding how race, disability and gender coalesce to render unique barriers and identity negotiations in college. Student narratives revealed that disability identity is not formed in a vacuum; instead, it is deeply mediated by experiences of racialization and social marginalization. For example, Imani's reflections about being of the very few Black differently abled students on campus, magnified by skepticism regarding her autistic traits and blindness, emphasized inadequacies of a "one-size-fits-all" disability accommodation model and echoes the findings of researchers who documented increased stigmatization (Annamma et al., 2016; Peña, Stapleton & Schaffer, 2016).

Moreover, the necessity for onset and continual opportunities to discuss and disclose disability, preferably starting in K-12 and persisting through higher education resonated with disability studies literature that illuminates the role of educational environments in forming self-advocacy and disclosure (Shakespeare, 2006; Tichkosky, 2011). SWDs' comments corroborate arguments that higher education too often postulates that students will arrive "ready" to self-advocate, while ignoring the long-term relational process of resource navigation and identity formation (Grimes et al., 2017).

Furthermore, SWDs' collective disappointment with the lack of intersectional disability content in instructor preparation (i.e., training) curricula aligned with critiques of both diversity and special education initiatives, which oftentimes fail to meaningfully include lived experience or critical disability perspectives (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012; Dolmage, 2017). Participants call for more racially diverse and differently abled faculty and for curriculum formed by "disabled voices” echoes wider movements in disability justice that prioritize community accountability and representation (Pineda & Smith, 2021; Berne et al., 2018).

In synopsis, various stories integrated into the wider analytic narrative by grounding the data in intersectionality theory and extending the literature review’s argument that both cultural and structural barriers prevail within postsecondary education for multiply marginalized students. The qualitative insights in this dissertation do not only “give voice” to individual hardships but also point to broader institutional patterns identified within contemporary disability research and educational equity studies.

Disclosure and Stigma Management

The theme of disclosure emerged across interviews as a high-stakes negotiation wherein students must determine not only whether to reveal their disability status, but how much personal vulnerability they can afford in unsupportive academic environments. This act, often required to access basic accommodations, reinforces a system where access is contingent upon self-exposure. Drawing from Goffman's (1963) work on stigma and visibility, the findings support the assertion that disclosure functions as both a survival strategy and a site of emotional labor. Students frequently encounter instructors who are not trained to respond appropriately or empathetically, exacerbating anxiety and fostering mistrust.

This data suggests the need for structural change that decouples access from disclosure. Policy frameworks must include presumptive design standards where multiple modes of instruction and assessment are the norm, thus reducing the necessity for students to continually disclose to survive.

Positional Academic Ableism

The concept of 'positional academic ableism' arises from the observation that students' access to inclusive pedagogy is unevenly distributed by departmental culture and disciplinary norms. While some fields such as education and social work have integrated UD and inclusive values into their pedagogical practices, others remain firmly entrenched in traditional modes of instruction that resist flexibility.

This variation has significant implications: students with similar needs may receive vastly different levels of support based solely on their chosen major. Positional academic ableism reveals how institutional ableism is not uniformly applied but filtered through academic hierarchies, departmental histories, and disciplinary identities. Addressing this will require targeted faculty development programs and departmental policy audits to disrupt entrenched inequalities.

Relational versus Procedural Universal Design

One of the most revealing insights from the data is the distinction between procedural and relational approaches to UDL. Procedural UDL refers to a checklist-based implementation, syllabus adjustments, multimodal materials, flexible due dates, without any deeper engagement with students' lived experiences. In contrast, relational UDL recognizes access as a dynamic, context-sensitive process that emerges from mutual understanding between faculty and students.

The data strongly supports relational interpretation. Participants frequently noted that formal UDL efforts felt impersonal or insufficient unless paired with instructors' willingness to connect, adapt, and learn. This reinforces the Disability Justice emphasis on community, flexibility, and interdependence. For UDL to be transformative, it must be rooted not in compliance, but in a sustained ethic of care.

Institutional Recommendations

Considering the findings presented in this study, institutions of higher education must move beyond reactive, individualized accommodation models and toward structurally embedded, universally accessible frameworks. These recommendations, drawn from the grounded narratives of students and staff alike, are organized by institutional role and responsibility.

For faculty and instructional staff, the integration of UDL principles into course design is an essential starting point. Participants consistently emphasized the value of multiple means of engagement, including flexibility in how content is delivered and how students can demonstrate learning. Instructors are encouraged to incorporate accessibility statements into syllabi and to proactively invite students to share access needs without requiring justification or disclosure of sensitive diagnoses. Ongoing professional development in inclusive pedagogy is also critical, particularly training that engages with non-apparent disabilities, neurodivergence, and the social model of disability. Building trust and consistency in faculty-student interactions can reduce the emotional labor placed on students and help normalize access-seeking behaviors in the classroom.

Disability Services Offices (DSOs) also have a central role to play in reshaping the educational terrain. To better serve students, DSOs should streamline documentation procedures by eliminating unnecessary gatekeeping and acknowledging the legitimacy of self-reported experiences, especially for chronic or fluctuating conditions. Expanding peer advocacy programs and conducting proactive outreach, particularly in collaboration with student organizations, can make services more visible and reduce stigma. Furthermore, DSOs must engage in deeper collaboration with faculty, offering consultations and co-facilitated trainings that emphasize both legal requirements and pedagogical best practices. Critically, disability services must also adopt an intersectional lens, recognizing how race, socioeconomic status, gender, and cultural background influence how students access, or avoid, support.

At the leadership and policy level, universities must institutionalize disability inclusion across all areas of campus life. This includes embedding UDL and accessibility goals into strategic planning, curriculum review, accreditation processes, and campus-wide diversity initiatives. Hiring and retaining disabled faculty and staff, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, is essential for shifting institutional culture and providing meaningful mentorship to students. Leaders must also prioritize funding for accessibility retrofits and digital equity, ensuring that outdated physical and virtual infrastructures do not continue to reproduce exclusion. Finally, universities should commit to collecting and disaggregating data on disabled students' retention, graduation, and campus climate experiences. Such data should not merely track compliance but inform long-term efforts to cultivate equity and belonging.

Across all levels of the institution, there must be a collective recognition that disability is not a peripheral concern. Rather, it is a vital dimension of diversity that requires structural commitment, relational accountability, and a departure from deficit-based models. The voices of participants in this study make clear that access, care, and justice must be integrated into the architecture of higher education, not treated as exceptions to the rule.

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

(1) What is the nature of your disability, impairment, or condition, and do you consider yourself to be “disabled?”

(2) How long have you had the disability, impairment, or condition?

(3) How does the disability, impairment, or condition impact you?

(4) When you began enrollment at this university, who did you inform about your disability, impairment, or condition?

(5) What support has been set in place for you?

(6) If you have been given accommodations, are they meeting your needs?

(7) How do faculty/staff respond to your disability or condition?

(8) In your opinion, do you think that there is a need for disability training for faculty/staff in this university?

(9) How supportive are your fellow students?

(10) Can you describe any way that you feel your learning experience has been impacted by your disability, impairment, or condition?

(11) Is there anything that your university could put in place to further support you?

(12) How should the transition from school, college or work to higher education be managed for students with a disability?

(13) When should students with a disability identify themselves?

(14) How should the needs of students with disabilities be assessed?

(15) How should adjustments required for students with a disability be determined?

(16) How should adjustments required for students with a disability be coordinated and implemented?

(17) How was your transition from your experience in high school to your university?

Note: The following may be the type of follow-up questions that may be asked with respect to the IRB's guidelines regarding gender demographics and racial and ethnic identity:

I may ask if students choose to self-identify a variety of sociodemographic parameters such as their racial identity, gender identity, if they are a first-generation college student, their city of origin and how it compares to their urban university setting, and microaggressions that they may have experienced throughout their life as a student with a disability in addition to their intersectional identities.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form for Participants

Study title	**The Experiences of Students with Disabilities from Varying Sociodemographic Identities in Higher Education to Inform Universal Design for Learning and Instruction at Urban Serving Universities**
Researcher	Jesse Campa / PhD / Urban Studies

I'm inviting you to participate in a research study. Participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now, you can always change your mind later. There are no negative consequences, whatever you decide.

Overview

Purpose: Giving voice to marginalized students with disabilities of varying backgrounds/identities to inform and change university policy surrounding disability accommodation and course design.

Procedures: Semi-structured one-on-one interviews (can be in-person or virtually via Zoom)

Time Commitment: 30-60 minutes (more or less)

Primary risks: None

Benefits: Helping create more inclusive university settings for students with disabilities and students overall.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study will be to explore the experiences that students with disabilities of varying sociodemographic backgrounds encounter beginning with their transition from high school to higher education and how on-ramps to seeking disability accommodation poses challenges in the university setting.

What will I do?

I am asking for participation in a loosely structured interview catering to your accessibility needs and exploring how your educational experiences will help me inform policymakers to increase student success for students with disabilities.

The interviews will be between you and I, the researcher. I am looking for a diverse set of students to each have a conversation with. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may opt out of the study at any time with no questions asked. The types of questions asked will touch on topics such as what barriers you have faced, how the transition from high school to college was, and what you think the university you attend can do better to accommodate you. Everyone's experience is unique, and the goal is to give "voice" to you to help create change. Moreover, I am looking for a sample of students across a diverse array of identities regarding race and ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability status/identification so the results apply to the larger student population without leaving anyone out (which is the aim)!

I will use the information you give me to provide a detailed and informed analysis to present and publish for the benefit of campus inclusivity and universal design. I value your privacy and will do everything to ensure and maintain confidentiality between yourself and I.

The total time will be about 30 to 60 minutes (but feel free to talk to me as long as you like! I will NOT cut it short for the sake of time as I value your unique experience and perspective.

Risks

Possible risks	**How I'm minimizing these risks**
I will be forthcoming that certain interview questions MAY invoke emotional responses by discussing and recollecting your experiences as a student with a disability trying to navigate higher education and barriers faced along the way.	If any interview questions make you feel uneasy to discuss, we can proceed to a different question. They are worded in a way that seeks your experience and personal accounts on how things can be improved since you have been one of the many affected by institutional barriers in education and elsewhere in the world.
Some questions may be personal or upsetting	You can skip any questions you don't want to answer.

I do not know of any possible risks (other than the one mentioned) associated with this study.

Other Study Information

Possible benefits	• Universally designed university campuses.

	- Better transitioning protocols in place for incoming students. - Helping give voice to students with disabilities across different identities. - More inclusive learning environments. - Informing and improvement of disability awareness training of faculty and staff. - More legal protections for students with disabilities seeking accommodations. - Decrease in social stigma associated with having or disclosing a disability to faculty or among peers.
Estimated number of participants	25 participants (conversational partners) comprised of students and some staff members
How long will it take?	30-60 minutes or more plus perhaps a minute reading a thank you letter for participation.
Costs	None
Compensation	$10 Amazon gift card
If I don't want to be in this study, are there other options?	Instead of participating, you can refer anyone who you feel would want to participate in this type of disability justice study.

Future research	Your data won't be used or shared for any future research studies.
Recordings / Photographs	With permission only, I will audio record you (and video record you if conducted via Zoom if you opt for a virtual meeting). The recordings / photographs will be used for audio transcription and coding for similar and contrasting themes to create a cohesive analysis to present to the respective audiences. If you are comfortable with photographs of personal items such as how you take class notes, personal journaling of experience as a disabled student, etc. is totally acceptable. Further, personal information will be protected to respect your privacy. The recording / photography is optional, but highly encouraged so no important details are forgotten and left out of the study.
Funding source	Advanced Opportunity Program Fellowship and the Urban Studies Research Grant
Conflicts of Interest	Although confidentiality and privacy will be strictly enforced, if you are a faculty or staff member of the university you attend it is optional to participate.

Data Security

What identifying information will be collected and why?	I will collect your name (I will not mention your real name in my research), basic contact information you wish to provide, and your self-identifications (race and ethnicity, gender, etc. in order to maintain diversity in my sample of participants).
How long will my data be kept?	Your data will be encrypted in a secured location with all private information omitted/marked out (real names, etc.).
How is data kept secure?	Locked notebooks (when note-taking using a physical pad) and password protected electronic notes and audio/video recordings/transcriptions. All data will be encrypted and stored securely. I will also take the following measures: • All identifying information is removed and replaced with a study ID. • I'll remove all identifiers after the writing process of my dissertation project. • I'll store all electronic data on a password-protected, encrypted computer. • I'll store all paper data in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office.

	- I’ll keep your identifying information separate from your research data, but we’ll be able to link it to you by using a study ID. We will destroy this link after we finish collecting and analyzing the data. - As with any data collected online, there is always a risk of data being hacked or intercepted. We’re using a secure system to collect this data, but we can’t completely eliminate this risk.

Who might see my data and why?

The researchers	To conduct the study and analyze the data
The IRB (Institutional Review Board) at UWM The Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) or other federal agencies	To ensure we’re following laws and ethical guidelines
Anyone (public)	I plan to share our findings in publications or presentations. You will not be identified by name. If we quote you, we will use a pseudonym. Our funding agency requires us to make our dataset public so other researchers can use it.

This study has a Certificate of Confidentiality

To help us protect your privacy, we have a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). With this certificate, we can't be forced by a court order or subpoena to disclose information that could identify you. However, there are times when your identity wouldn't be kept secret, even with a Certificate of Confidentiality:

- If a government agency inspects the records, or to meet FDA requirements
- If you give someone written permission to receive this information, or if you tell someone the information yourself
- If you threaten to harm yourself or others
- In cases of child abuse
- If we're required to report cases of certain contagious diseases (such as HIV) to the state

Contact information:

For questions about the research, problems, or complaints	Jesse Campa (Researcher) Dr. Lynne Woehrle (Advisor)	(779) 256-1854 / jacampa@uwm.edu woehrle@uwm.edu
For questions about your rights as a research participant, problems, or complaints	IRB (Institutional Review Board; provides ethics oversight)	414-662-3544 / irbinfo@uwm.edu

Signatures

If you have had all your questions answered and would like to participate in this study, sign on the lines below. Remember, your participation is completely voluntary, and you’re free to withdraw from the study at any time.

____

Name of Participant (print)

____ ________________

Signature of Participant

Date

____

Name of Researcher obtaining consent (print)

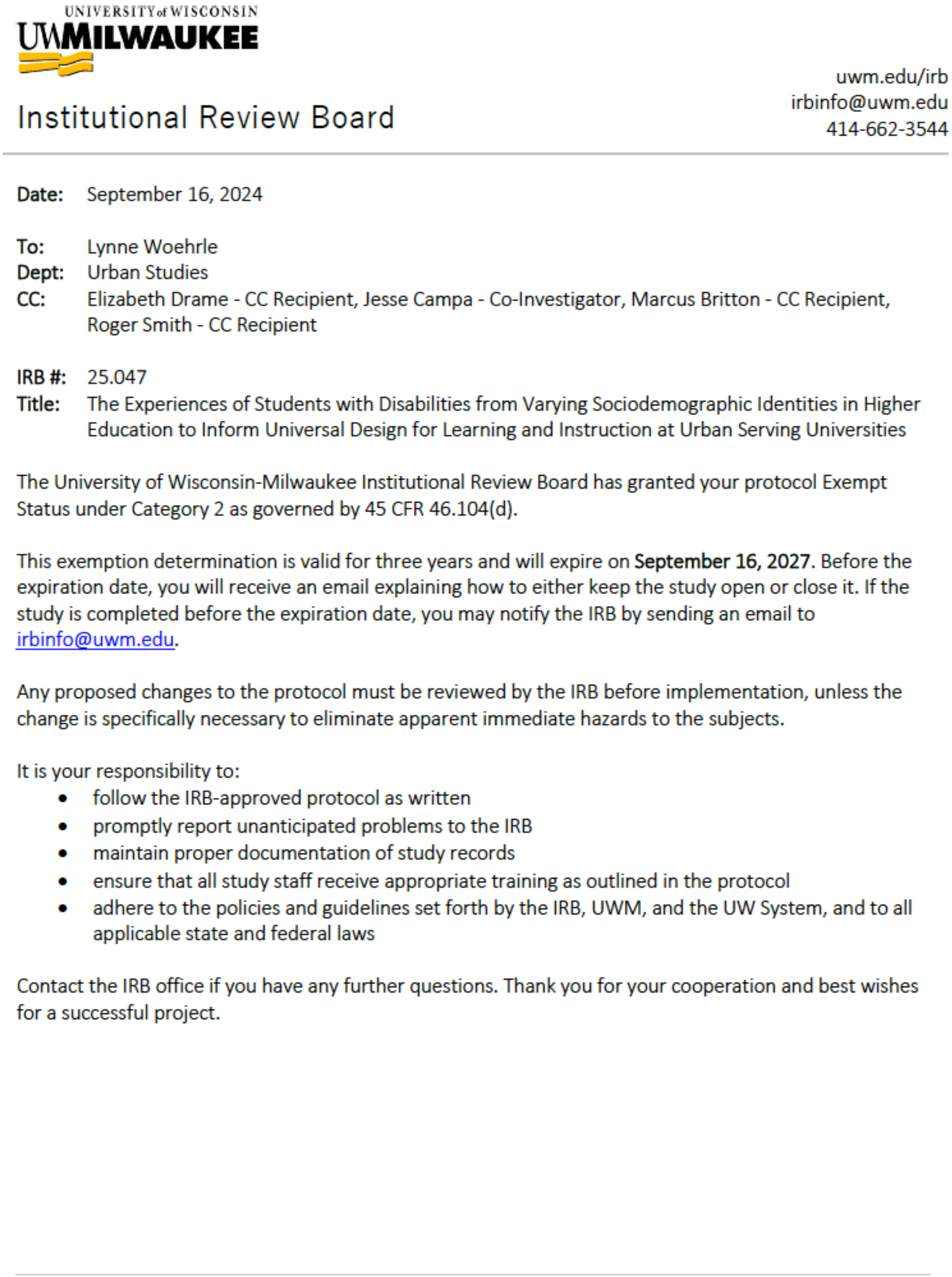
____ ________________

Signature of Researcher obtaining consent

Date

Remember, your participation is completely voluntary, and you’re free to withdraw from the study at any time. Do you have any questions about the study? Do you agree to participate?

Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter #1



UNIVERSITY of WISCONSIN
UWMILWAUKEE

Institutional Review Board

uwm.edu/irb
irbinfo@uwm.edu
414-662-3544

Date: September 16, 2024

To: Lynne Woehrle
Dept: Urban Studies
CC: Elizabeth Drame - CC Recipient, Jesse Campa - Co-Investigator, Marcus Britton - CC Recipient, Roger Smith - CC Recipient

IRB #: 25.047
Title: The Experiences of Students with Disabilities from Varying Sociodemographic Identities in Higher Education to Inform Universal Design for Learning and Instruction at Urban Serving Universities

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board has granted your protocol Exempt Status under Category 2 as governed by 45 CFR 46.104(d).

This exemption determination is valid for three years and will expire on **September 16, 2027**. Before the expiration date, you will receive an email explaining how to either keep the study open or close it. If the study is completed before the expiration date, you may notify the IRB by sending an email to irbinfo@uwm.edu.

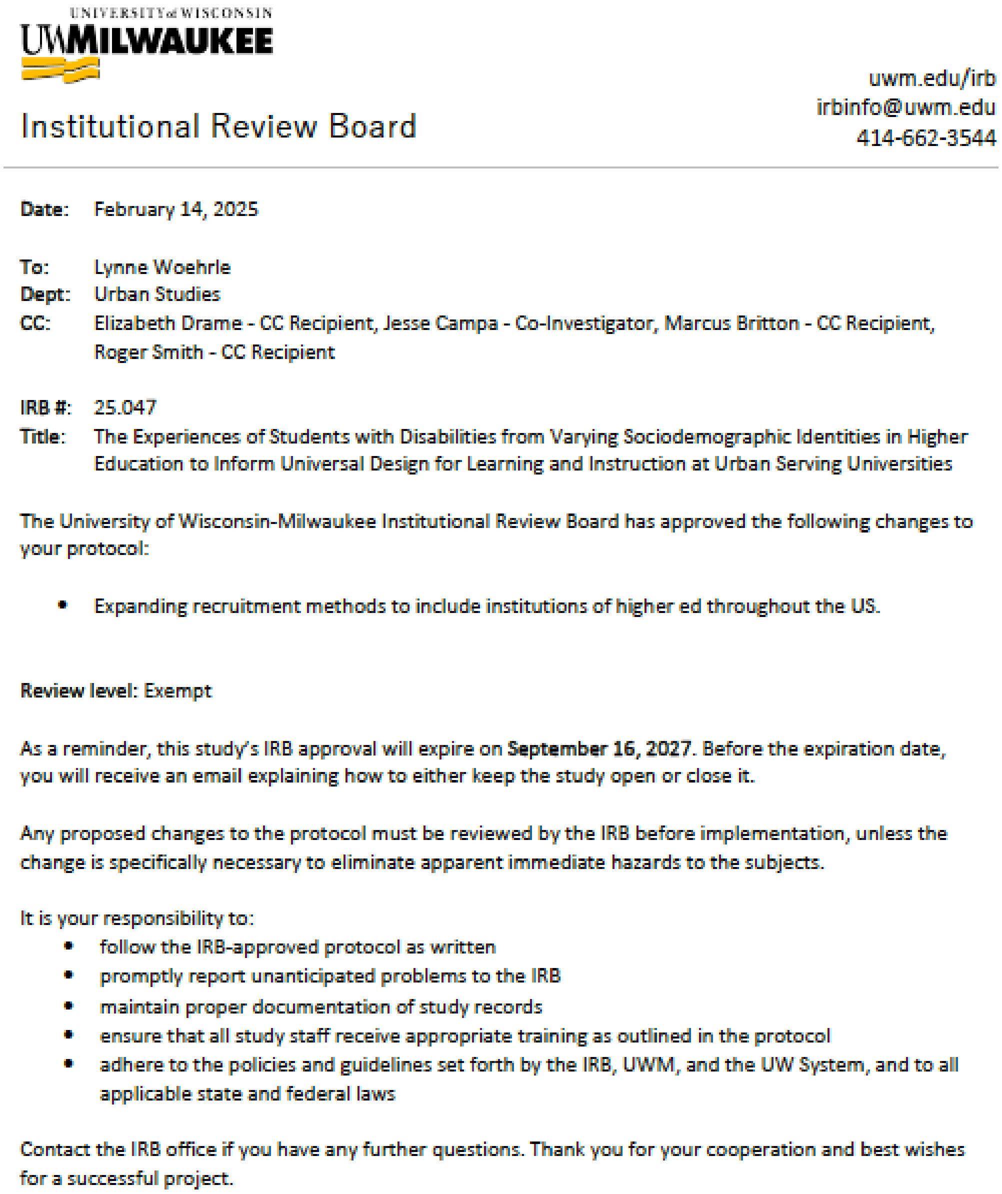
Any proposed changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the IRB before implementation, unless the change is specifically necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

It is your responsibility to:

- follow the IRB-approved protocol as written
- promptly report unanticipated problems to the IRB
- maintain proper documentation of study records
- ensure that all study staff receive appropriate training as outlined in the protocol
- adhere to the policies and guidelines set forth by the IRB, UWM, and the UW System, and to all applicable state and federal laws

Contact the IRB office if you have any further questions. Thank you for your cooperation and best wishes for a successful project.

Appendix E: IRB Amendment Approval Letter



UNIVERSITY of WISCONSIN
UWMILWAUKEE
Institutional Review Board
uwm.edu/irb
irbinfo@uwm.edu
414-662-3544

Date: February 14, 2025

To: Lynne Woehrle
Dept: Urban Studies
CC: Elizabeth Drame - CC Recipient, Jesse Campa - Co-Investigator, Marcus Britton - CC Recipient, Roger Smith - CC Recipient

IRB #: 25.047
Title: The Experiences of Students with Disabilities from Varying Sociodemographic Identities in Higher Education to Inform Universal Design for Learning and Instruction at Urban Serving Universities

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institutional Review Board has approved the following changes to your protocol:

- Expanding recruitment methods to include institutions of higher ed throughout the US.

Review level: Exempt

As a reminder, this study's IRB approval will expire on **September 16, 2027**. Before the expiration date, you will receive an email explaining how to either keep the study open or close it.

Any proposed changes to the protocol must be reviewed by the IRB before implementation, unless the change is specifically necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects.

It is your responsibility to:

- follow the IRB-approved protocol as written
- promptly report unanticipated problems to the IRB
- maintain proper documentation of study records
- ensure that all study staff receive appropriate training as outlined in the protocol
- adhere to the policies and guidelines set forth by the IRB, UWM, and the UW System, and to all applicable state and federal laws

Contact the IRB office if you have any further questions. Thank you for your cooperation and best wishes for a successful project.

Appendix F: Participant Recruitment E-Mail Template

Dear (Insert First and Last Name and/or job title),

I'm inviting you to participate in a research study around Universal Design in higher education to improve the experiences of students with disabilities. Participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now, you can always change your mind later. There are no negative consequences, whatever you decide.

I am asking for participation in a loosely structured interview catering students' accessibility needs and exploring how your educational and professional experiences will help me inform policymakers to increase student success for students with disabilities.

The interviews will be between you and I, the researcher. I am looking for a diverse set of employees from both the disability resource center and center for teaching and learning departments to each have a conversation with. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may opt out of the study at any time with no questions asked. The types of questions asked will touch on topics such as what barriers you have faced, how the transition from high school to college is for students with disabilities, and what you think the university can do better to accommodate students with disabilities or overall. Everyone's experience is unique, and the goal is to give "voice" to you to help create change. Moreover, I am looking for a sample of staff and faculty across a diverse array of identities regarding race and ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and disability status/identification so the results apply to the larger university population without leaving anyone out (which is the aim)!

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study will be to explore the experiences that students with disabilities of varying sociodemographic backgrounds encounter beginning with their transition from high school to higher education and how on-ramps to seeking disability accommodation poses challenges in the university setting. If you are interested in this survey, please complete this short survey. It will take about 1 minute to complete.

Overview **Purpose:** Giving voice to marginalized students with disabilities of varying backgrounds/identities to inform and change university policy surrounding disability accommodation and course design. Faculty and staff with qualitative data will also be collected. **Procedures:** Semi-structured one-on-one interviews (can be in-person or virtually via Zoom) **Time Commitment:** 90 minutes
Benefits: Helping create more inclusive university settings for students with disabilities and students overall.

All the best,

Jesse

Appendix G: Participant Recruitment Flyer

YOUR VOICE MATTERS.

The Experiences of Students with Disabilities

The purpose of this study will be to explore the experiences that students with disabilities of varying sociodemographic backgrounds encounter beginning with their transition from high school to higher education and how on-ramps to seeking disability accommodation poses challenges in the university setting.

IF YOU ARE 18 OR OLDER YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE

Benefits: Helping create more inclusive university settings for students with disabilities and students overall.

Jesse Campa
jacampa@uwm.edu
+1-779-256-1854

Jesse Campa
jacampa@uwm.edu
+1-779-256-1854

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jacampa@uwm.edu
+1-779-256-1854

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jacampa@uwm.edu
+1-779-256-1854

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+1-779-256-1854

Appendix H: Survey for Demographic Information

1. Gender identity (select all that apply):
    a. __ agender
    b. __ genderqueer or genderfluid
    c. __ māhū
    d. __ man
    e. __ muxe
    f. __ non-binary
    g. __ questioning or unsure
    h. __ two-spirit
    i. __ woman
    j. __ prefer not to disclose
    k. __ additional gender category/identity not listed (please specify below)
    l. Gender Identity ___________________

*Note: The identities listed are most common in North America. Many other gender identities exist and are recognized throughout the world.

2. Do you identify as transgender?
    a. __ Yes
    b. __ No
    c. __ Prefer not to disclose
3. Sexual Identity/Sexual Orientation (select all that apply):
    a. __ aromantic
    b. __ asexual
    c. __ bisexual
    d. __ fluid
    e. __ gay
    f. __ lesbian
    g. __ pansexual
    h. __ queer
    i. __ questioning or unsure
    j. __ same-gender-loving
    k. __ straight (heterosexual)
    l. __ stud
    m. __ prefer not to disclose
    n. __ additional category/identity not listed (please specify below)

Sexual Identity/Sexual Orientation _______________________

*Note: The identities listed are most common in North America. Many other sexual identities exist and are recognized throughout the world. When choosing which identities to include, consider the population of people you are surveying.

4. What is your age?
    a. 18 – 25 years old
    b. 25 – 30 years old

    c. 30 – 45 years old
    d. 45+
    e. Prefer not to say
5. Please specify your race/ethnicity.
    a. Asian
    b. Black
    c. Latinx or Hispanic
    d. Native American
    e. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    f. Other/Unknown
    g. Prefer not to say
    h. Two or More
    i. White
6. Are you an international student?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Prefer not to say
7. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
    a. High school
    b. Associate's Degree
    c. Bachelor's Degree
    d. Master's Degree
    e. Ph.D. or other (e.g., J.D., M.D.)
    f. Trade School
    g. Prefer not to say