Social Safety and Disability Erasure: The Sacrifice of the Disabled Body

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Over the last three years, COVID has created a broader cultural reflection on the bodymind and has called into question the stability of "ability." As a whole, the COVID-moment has shifted how the public thinks about access and has also shifted the language of accommodation to make it more ubiquitous across communities. While this presents an opportunity to transform public understanding of disability towards a more socially recognized model, it simultaneously highlights the ways in which a non-disabled-oriented society has not, does not, and will not reform itself for the disabled body. Our paper questions the ways in which disability, ability, and access are made meaningful within our current cultural context of the COVID-19 pandemic, using disability in higher education as our central framework. The question we are raising in our presentation is simultaneously one of hope and of skepticism: how can we leverage the opportunities provided by increased attention to access during the pandemic while not diminishing the ongoing discrimination and challenges faced by disabled people in large part because of the pandemic? While we admit that our paper may raise more questions than it answers as we continue to live through and learn within the confines of the pandemic, our hope is that this essay will generate more complex conversations around disability to lead us toward greater change.

It is important to note that our discussion, definitional framework, and exploration of disability focuses on the United States. As a result, the terminology we use is largely based around disability language, identity, and legal definitions as they are defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Disability Studies field in the United States. Additionally, we specifically explore the intersection of disability and COVID-19 within the context of higher education. We contend that higher education can serve as a case study on COVID accessibility issues that exist in society, and in many ways individuals in the context of higher education may experience some increased effects of COVID-19, including higher rates of anxiety and

depression,[1] particularly for people with disabilities.[2] As Wang et al. indicate, young adults with disabilities were likely to experience more social isolation during the pandemic than older adults, likely because they are "at significantly higher risk for severe illness and death due to COVID-19 than their nondisabled peers."[3] With these findings in mind, we believe higher education is a vital area to study the intersection of COVID-19 policies and beliefs and disability, as universities often function as micro-environments wherein we can take a closer look at access, its impact on physical and online spaces, and the people who inhabit those environments. As both faculty and staff in higher education, we bring to light our unique experiences, shared responsibilities, and individual ideas about disability, access, and accommodations.

"Silver Linings"

As the public became subject to more access barriers due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many non-disabled people became aware of the need for accessibility measures that they may not have previously considered reasonable. Telecommuting, for example, became a norm in many industries for disabled and non-disabled workers alike, and some researchers wondered whether increase in telework may be a "silver lining" for workers with disabilities if the COVID-era "new normal" could be carried into a post-pandemic world.[4] Even among Disability Studies scholars, there was an early tendency to try to find potential positives in the accessibility

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1. Alyssa M. Lederer et al. "More than Inconvenienced: The Unique Needs of U.S. College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Health and Education Behavior* 48, no. 1 (2020); 14-19, https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198120969372.

2. Eleonora Iob, Andrew Steptoe, and Daisy Fancourt. "Abuse, Self-Harm and Suicidal Ideation in the UK During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *British Journal of Psychiatry* 217, no. 4 (2020); 543-546, htttps://doi.org/ 10.1192/bjp.2020.130. They found that people with disabilities were twice as likely to report thoughts of self-harm and three times as likely to engage in self-harm behaviors.

3. Ken Wang et al. "Predicting Depression and Anxiety Among Adults With Disabilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Rehabilitation Psychology,* Advanced online publication (2022); 8, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/rep0000434.

4. Lisa A. Schur, Mason Ameri, and Douglas Kruse. "Telework After COVID: A 'Silver Lining' for Workers with Disabilities?" *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation* 30, no. 4 (2020); 521-536, Accessed February 25, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10926-020-09936-5.

measures put in place during the spring of 2020; as Block, et al. note, "We are already seeing the emergence of new technologies and socialities that have come into being as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic….In the midst of physical isolation, we have been granted levels of intimacy and access that some of us have never experienced before."[5]

The same was true on college campuses where the changing environment made disability and access visible for students, staff, and faculty who may have been previously unaware of its presence. Access no longer existed as a sole responsibility of the disability-services office. Instead, other offices on campus like residence life, libraries, and writing centers needed to address access within their own spaces, both in-person and virtually. For example, at Purdue, where Hunter works, the Disability Resource Center (DRC) is in conversations with the library systems to discuss training for staff members on ways to make the reference platform and student-librarian interactions more inclusive and accessible. Another example is the DRC's partnership with Orientation Programming, who recognized that offering multiple modes of "the student experience" could be made possible through in-person, virtual, and inclusive design practices.

Access changes also became necessary in classrooms, as the pandemic shifted the focus of access toward a more proactive rather than reactive model. Professors, TAs, and instructors began to automatically create accessible course content, like captioned media, flexible deadlines, extended time on exams, and lecture recordings. Prior to the pandemic, these accommodations were not usually included in course syllabi and were something that students had to often ask for to receive access in their classrooms. Understandably, many people with disabilities saw a potential shift in public understanding of disabled experience as an avenue to advocate for long-needed changes.

COVID Access Myth

However, despite the accessibility gains made possible in the pandemic, it is overly simplistic to frame COVID-era accessibility measures solely in a narrative of progress. There are

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5. Pamela Block et al. "Introduction to the Special Issue: Disability and Covid-19." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2021). Accessed February 25, 2022. https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/8440/6204.

certainly victories that can and should be celebrated, but those individual victories do not negate the systemic issues of ableism and inaccessibility that persist in (and in some cases are exacerbated by) the pandemic. In fact, in many cases, the existence of new accessibility tools has created a false sense of resources, information, and support. So, while COVID powerfully reshaped how we create access in a classroom, it simultaneously complicated and blurred the distinctions between access needs and personal preferences.

Essentially, the pandemic has created the appearance of universal access for all, even though new accessibility measures are primarily designed for non-disabled people affected by COVID-19 and serve those with disabilities as an afterthought. As Flowers notes, "responses to a world made newly inaccessible by COVID-19 have taken the disorientation of the able-bodied subject as their starting point, seeking to 'reorient' the able-bodied subject through technologies that serve to maintain the ways in which the able-bodied subject can reach those objects placed out of reach."[6] By continuing to center on non-disabled experience, COVID-era accessibility measures remain surface level and perpetuate the marginalization of disabled bodies for whom many of these new resources remain either insufficient or unobtainable.

While the pandemic may have broadened our concepts of an accessible world, we need to ask, *for whom is the world made accessible* and, *who is credited for the access?* While accessibility measures were openly available for non-disabled people, accessibility is often a *conscious* and a *deliberate* effort for disabled people. For many, the effort that goes into investigating and planning around accessibility needs comprises the "invisible work" of being disabled in an inaccessible world. [7] As Jan Grue notes in his article for the Guardian, "The only way to escape this work, short of a utopian remaking of the world, is to stop living. Disabled people know this. They know that they have the right to access, in principle and in law, but that

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6. Jonathan Flowers. "COVID-19 and the Disinheritance of an Ableist World," *International Journal of Critical Diversity Studies* 4, no. 1 (2021); 115-116, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/intecritdivestud.4.1.0107.

7. Arlene Kaplan Daniels. "Invisible Work." *Social Problems* 34, no. 5 (1987): 403-415, https://www.jstor.org/stable/800538. Kaplan's concept of "invisible work" critiques our social understanding of work as something that exists outside of the home and only valued as long as it relates to pay. The concept has also been applied to other forms of unpaid physical and emotional labor like that undertaken by disabled people to manage the emotions of non-disabled people and gain access to necessary resources.

they must work, continuously, in order to claim this right."[8] For non-disabled people, however, accessing the "new normal" was an accident, a collective coincidence because of the pandemic. Though many accessibility were beneficial for disabled individuals as well, it is essential to remember that the benefits to disabled people were merely side effects of the need to adjust to the normative bodymind.

Exacerbating this is the public perception of these measures as sufficient, in part because of the ways that the language of access and accommodation has entered the public vernacular. Once the purview of Disability Studies and disability services, the terms access and accommodation are now frequently used in public discourse surrounding COVID-19. As multiple communities borrow and revise these terms in the context of COVID there is a need to rhetorically analyze how these terms function in a disability context to distinguish between broader policies of inclusion and more person-specific modifications to the built environment. Accommodations, within the ADA, are a modification of policy.[9] Access, however, refers to "the power, opportunity, permission, or right to come near or into contact with someone or something."[10] In a Disability Studies context, the goal of accessibility is to achieve equity through opportunity. Therefore, while accommodations can contribute to access, they are ultimately a reactive method to achieving it. The pandemic blurred the distinction between access and accommodation by applying them to an array of human experience. For example, during COVID, closed captions on Zoom presentations provided access to a multitude of users (disabled or not) whereas pre-COVID, closed captions were often viewed as a specific accommodation for those with a hearing impairment. For those of us who work in higher education, we've recently been inundated with questions of: *how do I implement this as an*

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8. Jan Grue. "The High Cost of Living in a Disabling World." *The Guardian*, November 4, 2021, accessed February 25, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/nov/04/the-high-cost-of-living-in-a-disabling-world.

9. Department of Labor. "Accommodations. Office of Disability Employment Policy. n.d. Accessed 25 February 2022, https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/employers/accommodations#:~:text=Under%20Title%20I%20of%20the,done%20during%20the%20hiring%20process.

10. Bess Williamson. "Access," in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, edited by Rachel Adams, Benjamin, Reiss, and David Serlin, 14. New York: NYU Press, 2015. Accessed February 25, 2022. https://keywords.nyupress.org/disability-studies/essay/access/.

accommodation, or *how can I create access (equitable experiences) for all?* Tensions arise when things that used to be considered specific accommodations requiring case-based policy modifications are now more broadly understood as core features of classroom accessibility. Student, staff, and faculty expectations around what access and accommodation mean and what they look like in the classroom and campus environment are now being challenged in ways that we've never seen before.

Additionally, the processes for gaining access and accommodations have become increasingly complicated as we adjust to new forms of "normalcy." On the surface, new public perceptions of what is accessible should have simplified conversations around disability. However, as more people adopt the language of accommodation and access, the discussions we are having become increasingly more complicated. Who needs access? Who needs accommodations? Students now commonly use phrases like "My professor was very accommodating during COVID with online exams because they extended the time for everyone," or, "My professor is now less accommodating in the in-person environment. How can I get accommodations?" Essentially, the pandemic raised the bar for what access and accommodations look like on a day-to-day basis and changed public expectations of both. This expectational shift thus changed the way people have come to understand disability. For example, those who may have previously resisted identifying as disabled are now seeking disability diagnoses because of the access that the pandemic gave them. In higher education specifically, disability, access, and accommodations are increasingly at the forefront of conversations among students, staff, and faculty because of this uptick in students seeking formal accommodations.[11]

Disability Marginalization and the "Return to the Normal"

Unfortunately, as the pandemic persists into its third year, the social, cultural, and environmental flexibility of access and accommodation on college campuses conflicts with the

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11. Disability Resource Center, "Annual Report 2020-2021," Purdue University, n.d., Accessed February 25, 2022, https://www.purdue.edu/drc/about/report.php. The DRC at Purdue saw a 16% increase in students requesting accommodations between AY 18-19 and AY 19-20. While there was not an increase between AY 19-20 and AY 20-21, the office anticipates higher numbers in their AY 21-22 report.

availability of public and campus resources. For example, telehealth and telework options that allowed many disabled people to access medical care and continue attending school during the pandemic are now being removed as public health emergency (PHE) initiatives expire.[12] Public mask mandates and vaccine mandates that allowed many disabled people to safely leave their homes are being repealed[13] and, in some cases, banned.[14] [15] Within higher education, almost 90% of campuses returned to in-person learning for the 2022 spring semester, even though many haven't required students, faculty or staff to be vaccinated or to wear masks.[16]

While these "return to normal" initiatives are often celebrated by non-disabled people looking forward to the end of the pandemic, disability rights activists emphasize that these rollbacks in preventative measures and protections are re-marginalizing disabled people after the potential for access was made clear. As disability rights activist Alice Wong notes in an interview with NPR, "There is a casual acceptance that the pandemic will turn into something endemic, an inevitability that 'everyone' will get COVID eventually…Leaders, medical professionals and public health experts have said something along those lines with zero acknowledgement that people will still die and those deaths will be disproportionately from high-risk groups."[17] Jordan Grunawalt refers to these "return to normal" movements as necropolitics

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12. Stacy Weiner. "What Happens to Telemedicine after COVID-19?" Association of American Medical Colleges. Last modified October 21, 2021, https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/what-happens-telemedicine-after-covid-19.

13. "The U.S. States That Are Ending Mask Mandates," *The New York Times* online, February 23, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/article/mask-mandates-us.html?auth=login-google.

14. Stacey Decker. "Which States Ban Mask Mandates in Schools, and Which Require Masks?" *Education Week*, Last modified February 25, 2022, https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/which-states-ban-mask-mandates-in-schools-and-which-require-masks/2021/08

15. Claire Raj. "How Bans on Mask Mandates Affect Students with Disabilities – 4 Questions Answered." *The Conversation*. Last modified September 10, 2021, https://theconversation.com/how-bans-on-mask-mandates-affect-students-with-disabilities-4-questions-answered-167024.

16. Josh Moody. "Most Colleges Resume In-Person Classes," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 6, 2022, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/01/06/colleges-resuming-person-classes-amid-omicron.

17. Lesley McClurg. "There's One Population that Gets Overlooked by an 'Everyone Will Get COVID' Mentality," *NPR* online, January 26, 2022, https://www.npr.org/sections/health-

in which "some lives (poor, elderly, disabled) are seen as weighing the country down, so they must be sacrificed in order for the majority to return to normal."[18] Overall, the accessibility measures and increased public awareness around disability and accommodation linked to COVID-19 should not be oversimplified as wholly positive when in fact such awareness and temporary accommodations can lead to the further oppression of disabled people as public concern over COVID wanes.

A Note of Hope

Despite these challenges, however, we wish to end on a message of hope. As much as the pandemic has highlighted inaccessibility and existing inequities, it also provides us with a fruitful opportunity. By attending to the ways in which access, accommodation, disability, and the concept of normalcy are defined and shaped within the purview of the pandemic and in the idea of a post-pandemic future, we suggest ways that higher education can continue to adapt to this ever-changing environment. We advocate continued change in three areas: ideological, practical, and social.

Ideological

As our previous discussions of access and non-disabled subjects have shown, COVID has helped non-disabled people in higher education understand access and disability as shared experiences as built environments on campuses were adapted to meet the broader accessibility needs during the pandemic. Indeed, on many campuses, including ours, problems that would have previously been the sole responsibility of disability services, human resources departments, or offices of institutional equity are now tackled by a larger range of campus partners.[19] The

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shots/2022/01/26/1075549754/covid-disabled-immunocompromised?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_term=nprnews&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&fbclid=IwAR2uKnWakZF07k2jdlhAOBLNDDkx0vy-8UCbOFag5aabmborEbgUMtxKz8.

18. Jordan Grunawalt. "The Villain Unmasked: COVID-19 and the Necropolitics of the Anti-Mask Movement." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2021). Accessed February 25, 2022. https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/8343.

19. For a fascinating example of these new cross-departmental collaboration, see the IACM beta app designed by the EPICS at Purdue in conjunction with the DRC to help students,

success of COVID-era accessibility measures and projects reveals the capacity of institutions to fix inaccessibility issues. As Aydos, Navarini, and Oliveria note, "If before the pandemic, companies used the lack of suitable technology or people's resistance to them as a reason to keep people with disabilities from the workplace, the pandemic evinced that these were no more than false excuses."[20] Pandemic-era measures illustrate that non-disabled faculty, staff, and administrators can and should prioritize accessibility needs as essential to university operations.

Practical

As many researchers have noted, COVID-19 illustrated the importance of student support services on college campuses, including disability services. As students' need for mental health support, virtual learning options, and accommodations grew, campuses and state legislators rose to the challenge by providing new funding sources and programming. However, it is vital to remember that these needs will not magically disappear as COVID cases decline. As Lederer et al. implore, student services, including disability services, "should be prioritized as a critical investment in student success" even as the inevitable post-COVID budget cuts roll in.[21] Additionally, institutions of higher education should continue advocating at the state and federal level for continued legislation supporting telehealth and technological access to student services and mental health counseling after COVID-era grants end and funding wanes.[22] Finally, offices of disability services should revisit and revise their procedures for accessing accommodations for students where relevant, as the increased need for accommodations is likely to persist and even grow as COVID-related disabilities continue to affect campus populations.[23]

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faculty, and staff identify map accessible entrances and tools on campus: https://testflight.apple.com/join/eKqfGQ4I.

20. Valéria Aydos, Daniela Navarini, and Bernardo Oliveria. "The Paradox of 'Remote Working' in Covid-19 Pandemic Times: Disability, Inclusion, and Accessibility in Brazil." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2021). Accessed February 25, 2022. https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/8359/6188.

21. Lederer et al., "More than Inconvenienced," 17.
22. Lederer et al., "More than Inconvenienced," 17.
23. Accessible Campus Alliance. "Beyond 'High-Risk': Update for 2021." Last modified August 25, 2021, https://bit.ly/accesscampusalliance.

Social

  The success of COVID accessibility measures on campuses was in large part the result of increased campus partnerships. As we look ahead to a post-pandemic future, campuses must make a commitment to maintaining relationships across departments that emerged as a matter of happenstance during the pandemic. Partnerships like those detailed above at Purdue between disability services and other campus departments cannot be forgotten in the "return to normal." In practice, offices of disability services should continue their outreach to these new partners to offer resources and support for campus initiatives and proactively work to make new initiatives accessible from the start. Additionally, other campus departments should welcome new collaboration opportunities with disability service offices to continually improve campus accessibility. With proper attention and planning, these partnerships could result in campuses that are built to be disability forward rather than relying on retrofits to meet student needs.

  In addition to fostering relationships across campus services, Disability Studies as a field can and should facilitate more communication between the academic and administrative sides of our work. The failure of the COVID-access myth is its continued centering of non-disabled voices, and it is essential to reposition the disabled bodymind experience back into the center of the conversation around access in higher ed as we emerge from the pandemic. The sad reality is that disabled voices are more likely to be found in the academic side of Disability Studies than in administrative offices. This makes it particularly essential to include academic Disability Studies scholars in administrative decision making and campus partnerships.

  That said, it would be just as easy to dismiss the importance of administrative Disability Studies in supporting ongoing disability initiatives post-COVID. It is vital to remember that our field arose out of the disability rights movement which was itself concerned with practical matters of legislation, equity, and accommodation. In the years since the passage of the ADA, many of the battles of compliance and accommodation have been fought in disability service offices by administrative workers. Administrative disability advocates have valuable insights and contributions to offer to academic conversation around disabled experience in part because of the contact they have with students and faculty in the accommodations process.

  In many ways, the pandemic is a unique moment for academic and administrative collaboration because it created new situations and led to new avenues for exploring what access can look like in higher ed. Our collaboration on this paper is itself a model of this kind of

relationship. We, in our partnership, bridge the gap between the academic side of higher ed and the administrative, and we believe these two sides of Disability Studies must also join forces to maximize the COVID moment for the sake of access.

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