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Is it Worth Ruining Your Health?
A Review of *Diagnosis Grad School, A Podcast* by Olivia Dreisinger

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Diagnosis: Grad School, a podcast, addresses crucial issues concerning the place and treatment of students, staff, and faculty with disabilities at universities. As such, it is a must listen for everyone at all levels of the university, and anyone in the workplace. One statement stands out: "Is academia worth ruining your health over?' As a professor with disabilities, it is a question I continually ask myself.

Olivia Dreisinger zeroes in on key points about what we live through as disabled academics. Driesinger does this in a four-part podcast that is available on the website and on YouTube. The running time is approximately 150 minutes. Dreisinger takes an autoethnographic approach to the subject of being disabled in graduate school. She examines her experience through the lens of literary works as well as the experiences of other students and professors in academia. She does an informative and provocative job of presenting her material.

She focuses on the Frankenstein monster as being disabled. Indeed, monsters, just like some disabled people, look different, are different and are not accepted by society. Most people run away from the monster. Her example here addresses the deep ableism at the root of our societies: if you do not look like "us," and do things like "us," we will not make a space for you.

Dreisinger explains how academia does not make spaces for us as disabled academics. The university itself, being an "ivory tower," is inaccessible. It is elite and "high up" and one needs to be very able bodied to climb the tower. The tower does not want to let us in. Dreisinger also discusses the tower as the tower card in tarot, with lightning all around it. The tower card is the conflict, trouble, and unease card in the tarot deck. This is a very apt visual image that she uses on the podcast website. In other words, when disability comes to academia there is trouble, conflict, and unease.

What is the trouble? Disabled academics need accommodations to fit in and do the academic work that everyone else who is "normal" does. Accommodations in themselves are a problem because some disabilities are chronic illnesses that involve fatigue and unpredictability. Dreisinger tells us the accommodation system wants you to plan which accommodations you will need. As a person with chronic illnesses myself, I know, as Dreisinger says, we cannot predict even how our functioning will be the next day let alone over the school year. She finds that these accessibility services are often not helpful to people like her. In addition, one needs a disability diagnosis to receive services, and this was problematic for her, because she did not get a diagnosis for several years and had to drop out because she could not get services. The medical model reigns here—the medical system is still the gatekeeper. One cannot enter the realm of disability through self-identification, which the disability rights movement has always promoted. We know if barriers disable us or not.

It is here that Dreisinger makes a clever link with the title, *Diagnosis Grad School*—she asks herself if it is worth her health to be in academia? What is the diagnosis for disabled scholars? Is graduate school the disability? Academia is a place that never wanted us, as she points out with the work of Jay Dolmage (2017). The university is a medieval elite institution that never expected us or wanted us to be there. How do we know we are not wanted? Dreisinger provides evidence through interviews with graduate students and academics with disabilities. Dreisinger does not tell us whether the people talking are using their real names. Have names been changed for anonymity? I am assuming not, which means that it has taken a great deal of courage for disabled academics to speak. There could be ramifications to our careers as academics as a result of "complaining." But as Dreisinger points out, she and others must speak out in the podcast, as the issues are so pressing for so many of us and need to be heard. Her podcast is a rallying call for the university to address the barriers that confront disabled persons.

Another critical issue around accommodation is that it depends on your professor or administrator. Are they understanding of disability and accommodation and flexible towards doing things differently? Graduate students talk about how they received accommodations "no problem" with a certain professor and then the next professor says, "we don't do that and have never done that." This is a common experience for all of us with disabilities—we make allies who understand how they can support us. But the system does not change. When others replace our allies in those positions, we are out of luck again.

Somehow, the message around accommodation has not gotten through after 50 years of disabled people's advocacy. Ableism is the key issue that needs to be examined, which Dreisinger only mentions in passing. Studies have shown that "aversive ableism" (Friedman, 2018) is the problem in a society that thinks it is progressive and would never discriminate. A study on aversive ableism, has found that people who think they are progressive do not understand the deep seated ableist beliefs of our societies, and therefore reject that they may not be including disabled people. Afterall, they have nothing against disabled people. This analysis is particularly relevant in the university setting, where we assume we are all educated, forward looking, and on the cutting edge.

We are all ableist. I know that I am. I find myself telling myself ableist things throughout the day. Every morning I get up and say to myself, "I hope you can get lots of work done today." This of course, is my stern, productive, ableist voice telling me that to survive I better produce. I sigh, and tell myself, that is the old tape again, so do the best you can, it always gets done in one way or another. I have my own ways of pacing and doing things, and I have been able to work in academia doing it that way.

Dreisinger pushes the listener to question, what is disabled pedagogy in the university? This is an important question that often does not register as an issue at our universities. It is ignored in the push for equity and diversity on campuses, as it views disability inclusion only as a physical access issue. The university is a creature of habit—we have always done things this way. Dreisinger reminds us that flexibility is possible. She notes that during the pandemic deadlines became flexible, lectures were recorded and watched later, and zoom classes were held. She notes that after the pandemic students were told that these ways of doing things were not there anymore. To her, it says that accommodation is not permanent.

Dreisinger highlights disabled professors who practice disability pedagogy. That is, teaching is fluid, students have input into what works for them and in fact, there is no right or wrong in education. All modes of learning should be involved, not those that historically have been used.

This segues into her point that because you must continually remind professors and the institution that you are a disabled person, you become exhausted from advocating. You may ruin your health because the process of being accommodated is so hard. The university does not expect you to be there as a student with disabilities. In the end, Dreisinger says that academia does offer her more stability of living through funding and the ability for her to pursue her own ideas and research. However, the diagnosis of academia is poor for her, as she has difficulties showing up for set appointments, meeting deadlines, as on those days, she may be unwell.

As a student, I too, believed that academia would provide stability of income, a chance to research and write, and the ability to pass on what I have learned in the disability rights movement and in disability studies. All of this has happened, however, the system I work in, the university, is continually changing and this often means changes in computer systems, forms, ways of doing things that then become new barriers at work for me and others with disabilities. Time and energy need to be spent learning that new way to enter grades, that new way to fill out research ethics forms, and new computer systems that do not save your work, which is a real problem for someone with fatigue who cannot sit for an entire one or two hour period to fill out that form.

My diagnosis: new barriers every day, compounded with the old ones, make academia very fatiguing. As disabled academics, we must all continue to ask ourselves, is academia worth ruining our health over?

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