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Access Denied: Eugenics, Neoliberalism, and the Persistence of Ableism in North American University Education

Accès refusé : eugénisme, néolibéralisme et persistance du capacitisme dans lenseignement universitaire nord-américain

Hussain A. Alhussainy, B.A. (Honours)
MA Candidate in Political Science
University of Alberta
halhussa@ualberta.ca

Abstract

This paper examines the historical eugenic influences that shape the values and operations of Canadian post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, I explore how the university's physical structure itself is designed to bar disabled people from full participation, acting as a mirror opposite of an asylum. The modern-day university upholds these practices through limitations to accommodations and accessibility, influenced by deeply-rooted eugenic ideals. Additionally, this paper explores the gaps and lack of accommodation within the university structure. Currently, accommodation must be earned rather than given as a right, which creates not only gaps in quality but also places the burden on the disabled individual. The university continues to be an inaccessible environment that bars disabled people from full participation because of its eugenic histories, but also through the ongoing influence of neoliberalism. Neoliberal values award students based on perceived merit without consideration of external factors. These disabled and otherwise marginalized students who need additional resources to complete their post-secondary education are perceived as less "meritorious" despite facing greater barriers than students deemed more meritorious and "valuable" to the university. I conclude that universities are unlikely to provide accommodations or resources unless they create more value for the university.

Résumé

Cet article explore les influences historiques de l'eugénisme qui continuent de façonner les valeurs et les modes de fonctionnement des établissements d'enseignement postsecondaire au Canada. Il examine également comment la structure physique même de l'université est conçue de manière à entraver la pleine participation des personnes handicapées, agissant comme un contremodèle de l'asile. L'université contemporaine perpétue ces dynamiques à travers des restrictions en matière d'accommodements et d'accessibilité, héritées d'idéaux eugénistes profondément ancrés. L'article met en lumière les lacunes persistantes et le manque de mesures d'accommodement dans l'organisation universitaire. Aujourd'hui, ces mesures doivent être « méritées » plutôt que

reconnues comme des droits, ce qui engendre des inégalités qualitatives et transfère la charge sur les personnes handicapées elles-mêmes. L'université demeure ainsi un espace largement inaccessible, excluant les personnes handicapées de la pleine participation, non seulement en raison de son passé eugéniste, mais aussi sous l'influence continue du néolibéralisme. Les valeurs néolibérales récompensent les étudiantes et étudiants sur la base d'un mérite perçu, sans considération pour les facteurs contextuels. Les étudiantes et étudiants handicapés et autrement marginalisés, qui nécessitent des ressources supplémentaires pour mener à bien leur parcours postsecondaire, sont perçus comme moins « méritants », malgré les obstacles plus importants qu'elles et ils rencontrent comparativement à leurs pairs jugés plus « méritants » et « utiles » à l'institution. L'article conclut que les universités sont peu enclines à offrir des accommodements ou des ressources, à moins que ceux-ci ne génèrent une valeur ajoutée pour l'établissement.

Keywords
Disability; Ableism; Eugenics; Neoliberalism; Accessibility; Higher Education

Mots-clés
Handicap; capacitisme; eugénisme; néolibéralisme; accessibilité; enseignement supérieur

Introduction

University degree completion rates among students with disability are drastically lower than those of students without disabilities, and the reason for this discrepancy is due to the ableist and eugenic foundations of the university. Despite the recent rise of critical disability studies, and a somewhat misleading push for improving accessibility, it could be said that the university has never been, and was never intended to be, an inclusive institution. Ableism is literally and figuratively embedded in its institutional foundations, from the structure of the buildings to the lack of critical disability content offered in departments, to the university's guiding principles. In this article, I argue that despite its occasionally stated intentions to the contrary, university policy is guided by ableist principles refracted through a prism of neoliberalism that prioritizes inclusion on the basis of productive cooperation. Indeed, while these principles are deeply grounded in the capitalist political economy of disability (Orchard & Jones 2024),[1] I suggest that contemporary ableist tendencies emanate from a foundational eugenic origin that I refer to as the "historical university." The historical university, I argue, is an inherently exclusionary institution determined by its co-development alongside the asylum. The current university structure is both physically and socially fundamentally ableist.

[1] There is an abundance of resources that unveil the multifaceted entanglements between capitalism and ableism/disability. See, for example: Oliver, M. (1994); Capitalism, disability and ideology: A materialist critique of the normalization principle; Clifford, E. (2022); The war on disabled people: Capitalism, welfare and the making of a human catastrophe. Bloomsbury Academic; Chouinard, V. (2025). Remapping an ABLEIST world: Disability and oppression under capitalism. University of Toronto Press. However, as these studies pertain to the labour-market aspect of the said entanglement, they leave a notable lacuna on how these market-based metrics permeate the university's disability policies. The cited source above, which was published recently, provides a good contribution in that regard. My article, too, adds another layer to this discussion, albeit by primarily tackling the eugenic dimension of it.

Therefore, I contend that the logic of meritocracy—meaning the underlying cost-benefit logic of rewarding students based on their achievements rather than acknowledging and promoting their social status—is essential in how the university determines which students are valuable and therefore deserve funding for accommodations. In addressing the said cost-benefit logic of accommodations and its implicit eugenic traits, it is instructive to recall that the term "meritocracy" first appeared in 1958, in Michael Young's satire of the looming neoliberal era, where he argues that merit supersedes the historical "heredity" factor of defining the "elite." This perceived "elitism" is not merely defined by intelligence, but also by effort; merit is a compound of both. In that sense, where "the lazy genius is [no longer] one" (Young 1958, 98), intelligence does not only lose its complexity and specificity across minds and bodies, but also becomes bound by the core markers of neoliberalism: self-help, productivity, and independence. These values are at odds with the world-making ideals of disability. In this reading, it could be argued that what would be perceived as a "post-eugenic age" is rather a new-eugenic one in which eugenics is twisted from its traditional/hereditary predetermination into new fixations, marked by the political economy of post-modern discourse of 'freedom' and 'equality.' While this ostensibly opens scopes for some people with disability, it also actively plays to their elimination. The critique of the supercrip stereotype seems a pertinent correlation to this discussion, as it tackles its double-layered logic of elimination, that is, the elimination of the other "less achieving" disabled people, and the elimination of disability itself as a challenging condition that mandates different needs/expectations (Grue 2015). To invoke Young's satire again, "every selection of one is a rejection of many"

(Young 15). This leads into my critique of accommodations and the access to accommodations within post-secondary institutions, which highlight the embedded exclusion towards disabled students.

The Historical University

To understand the contemporary university structure and the role eugenics plays in its functioning, I start with coining and contextualizing the 'historical university.' This term refers to the university's shared roots with the history of the asylum and institutions meant to incarcerate disabled people, where the influence of eugenics can be strongly seen. As Jay Dolmage identifies, there is a historical relationship between the university and the asylum; the two were almost always constructed near each other. Asylum schools "were built in the long shadow of the universities, also as their perverse mirror-image" (Dolmage 2017, 105). Both the university and the asylum mastered technologies of exclusion. While asylums were meant "to forcibly keep the public out and the deviant in; college gates keep the public out and the elite in" (46–47). The asylum and similar institutions increased the elitism of universities, at the expense of promoting ableism by exclusion. By using persons with disability as research subjects, these universities built their reputation on the exploitation of disabled bodies in their very pursuit of knowledge. As Dolmage suggests, "higher education has needed to create a series of versions of 'lower education' to justify its work and to ground its exceptionalism" (3). Moreover, the university sometimes relied on the asylum to function, as the patients became the site of research. Multiple universities, such as the University of Mississippi and the University of Texas, found unmarked gravesites of asylum patients on their land or mere miles away from their

campuses (50). This evidence is not only a manifestation of the dark history of asylums but also the eugenic history of academic institutions well-practiced in the erasure of unfit subjects. Eugenics has long been a formative ideology in influencing how institutions operate. Eugenics is built on the notions of "fit" versus "unfit," and eugenic policies are always in search of ways to include whoever is deemed fit and exclude whoever is deemed unfit (McWhorter 2009).

The university's connection to the asylum is merely the most conspicuous manifestation of its far-reaching eugenic apparatus; since its inception, the university has been a breeding ground for eugenic policies and thought. The exclusion of the unfit historically was often carried out in far more explicit ways than in contemporary society, going beyond being shut out from certain spaces or opportunities, and expressed through more invasive and sinister motives to work towards the elimination of undesired characteristics. This is not to deny that similar forms of exclusions are recurring nowadays with certain levels of explicitness, but rather to draw attention to the profound exclusionary practices grounded in the moral acceptance of eugenic ideology. The medicalization of disability, or the depiction of disability as something to be cured, links to the eugenic ideals of desirable versus undesirable. Therefore, disability and disabled people were studied with the intent to eradicate disability.

The link between the eugenic origins of the university, with its idealized able-bodied subject opposed to the excluded disabled, and neoliberalism is prestige, which I conceptualize here as both the 'good' produced by academic labour and the *perception* of this good. Although in theory the university appeals to numerous values (equal education,

inclusion, altruism, truth and knowledge, etc.), the pursuit and maintenance of prestige has become an increasingly central priority (Blackmore 2015; O'Meara & Bloomgarden 2011; Baker & Brown 2007). Prestige is an institutional value that maintains the elite image of universities as "educating the best social and intellectual sections of the nation" (Alemu 2018, 215). In pursuit of prestige, universities systematically exclude those who failed to enhance, or even maintain their elite status, casting the "unfit" as inherently inferior and undeserving of higher education.As Alemu (2018, 213) notes in relation to Western higher education, particularly in the Platonic tradition, the goal of the university was "the pursuit of truth in learning, and dedication to the advancement of knowledge and the training of scholars for its own sake and the betterment of the life of the individual and the society." While Alemu is referring specifically to the Western institution, I would add that similar values were upheld in many other traditions, for example, in African Islamic institutions of higher education established centuries earlier, as well as in Latin America and the Middle East, where institutions of higher learning developed later. When I speak of the "historical university," I mean its Western incarnation, which shifted from an ethos of shared knowledge to a project infused with colonial and eugenic ideals. Capitalism, as discussed, was a defining factor in that shift. During the 19th and 20th centuries, universities began to prioritize commodities, competition, profit, and prestige, making it unattainable for those deemed unfit under these "standards". (Alemu 2018, 216) The ensuing eugenics and exploitation of the disabled body stem from that very shift toward commodifying knowledge and promoting elitism.

Understanding Neoliberalism

Having contextualized the historical university, now I explore the consequences of neoliberalism on the persistence of eugenics in post-secondary education. Neoliberalism typically refers to a collection of policies developed in the 1970s and 1980s, aimed at deregulation of the markets, in favour of business and corporate endeavours. However, while foregrounding the market, Wendy Brown notes that neoliberalism also "involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action" (Brown 2015, 40). The essence of neoliberalism—and this is also true of capitalism—is thus more than policies but rather the transformation of non-economic values into economic ones. This process of economization extends to the ways in which we view human beings as rational value-adding productivity machines; access is valuable only insofar as it provides economic opportunities for industries, as opposed to true access in disability justice frameworks. In her essays on capitalism and disability, Marta Russell argues that disability is not merely a biological reality, but one that is produced by modern capitalism. She notes how the welfare system is manufactured to urge the disabled into a state of "premature death" while, in parallel, it opens new niches of revenue for the abled, instead of a fundamental shift of the political economy of disability, one that "fights for resources and social justice" (Russell 2019, 61). Accommodation, she proceeds, follows that very revenue calculus. The university, its academic labour, hence, is but another manifestation of the political economy of the larger society. This resemblance also highlights the university's inseparability from the market, both in theory and practice.

Effectively, neoliberal policies shift financial responsibility solely to the individual instead of collective responsibility. Social democratic forms of government put more

pressure on the state's responsibility for ensuring the basic needs of its citizens are met, whereas individuals are responsible for personal economic goals and prosperity (Brown 2015). In contrast, neoliberalism is a mode of reason and scheme of valuation that places more emphasis on individual contribution (21). Accordingly, "both persons and states are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value" (22). Neoliberal values shape the ways in which politics are exercised within society, where policy is influenced by economic interest and centered on individualism rather than collective and social benefit.

Neoliberal policies can co-exist with rhetorics of inclusivity and diversity, especially in a country such as Canada that enshrines multiculturalism as a goal. Despite the appealing rhetoric, promoting diversity is not the ultimate intention of neoliberal policies and ideology, it is motivated by economic prosperity. Neoliberalism operates in society by taking "the values of free choice, flexibility, and deregulation and translat[ing] them into market reforms and policies designed to maximize profits, privatize industry, and exploit all available resources" (Dolmage 2017, 139). Furthermore, "neoliberalism should be seen as a system that powerfully masks inequalities and readily co-opts concepts like diversity, tolerance, and democracy" (139). Under neoliberalism, democracy is co-opted by corporate interests to the neglect of disabled individuals, among the other "unfit."

Neoliberal values, like eugenic values, might not always be explicitly stated, but influence decisions made at institutional and individual levels to the extent that maximizing marketable values is prioritized above competing values. I argue that these neoliberal norms often interlock with eugenicist thought and ideologies that benefit the

white, able-bodied individual who can physically and mentally perform to the ideal standards, effectively deeming marginalized communities and, subsequently, individuals with disabilities as inferior due to the hegemonic norms. On the surface, neoliberalism might seem to promote diversity (for example, when certain commodities and services target a diverse set of consumers), not just within the economy but across society. But ultimately, the economic factor drives this system to be market-focused by prioritizing activities coded "masculine" or "white" over those coded "feminine" and "black" (Fraser 2000, 118). Indeed, as race is no longer predetermined but rather reproduced through class-based material relations of inequality (Fields & Fields 2012; Michaels 2006; Reed 2000), similarly, these neoliberal structures commit economic subordination by privileging affluent able-bodied students over socio-economically disadvantaged students with disability.

Neoliberalism in Universities

At institutions like the university, when accommodation threatens to reduce profits, it will be neglected. Neoliberal ideology shapes the structures of most institutions, which in turn strengthens and circulates neoliberal ideology throughout the general population; a prime example of this process is the pervasion of neoliberal ideology in the university. University campuses across Canada have increasingly shifted their operations to resemble a business rather than a place of discourse, innovation, and benefit of public good through the expansion of knowledge and ideas (Brown 2017; Washburn 2008). The neo-liberalization of the university reduces opportunities for collaborative research to a battleground of competition that extracts innovation and ideas for profit and prestige.

Consequently, I suggest that the university's primary goal is prestige and recognition in national and international rankings, rather than the quality of the education.

Universities increasingly compete for recognition by adopting processes of privatization, commodification, and corporatization in the hopes of gaining access to more financial (and non-financial) resources. As critical disability scholars Shanouda and Spagnuolo observe, "we see neoliberalism's effects in the reduced funding and corporatization of universities and colleges, and in the influences of market rationalities on planning, investment, and implementation" (2020, 531). In that sense, "responsibility for learning has been shifted solely to individuals, undermining justifications of learning for the common good, and displacing blame for systemic failure onto individuals" (Guo 2014, 485). The continual privatization of universities through neoliberal economic policies increases the strain on students, and even more so on disabled students. Any benefits of privatization, commodification, and corporatization accrue to the universities, rather than the students, since there are no policies rooted within the system to ensure that student needs are met.

The University Structure

Current mechanisms of segregation and exclusion in universities function implicitly as a result of the university's artificial selections of who gains opportunity, resources, and access to knowledge bases. When these same rights are not afforded to disabled students, the result is segregation in effect, if not in intention. Segregation manifests in the ways we physically build our campuses to literally and metaphorically uplift individuals imagined as worthy of an education by creating an environment in which success comes

from “stepping” upwards academically and physically in ways that exclude people with disability. This leaves disabled bodies emotionally and physically deprived and unable to advance academically or socially on campuses.

For Dolmage, the use of steep steps in the architecture of universities offers a telling example of the university’s latent ableism. Stairs are seemingly an essential part of campus construction, not only for their physical uses but in the way that they symbolize the elitism of higher education, even though such designs render the buildings inaccessible to many. Therefore, according to Dolmage, “the steep steps metaphor sums up the ways the university constructs spaces that exclude (…) regardless of the architectural style(s) of a campus, steep steps are integral” (2017, 45–46). The metaphor also “puts forward the idea that access to privilege is a movement upwards—only the truly ‘fit’ survive this climb” (44). Again, steep steps are one example; in actual practice, the mechanisms of exclusion may vary. In most cases, they will be imperceptible to the able-bodied. Steep steps or not, notions of superiority still linger and are present in today’s university culture, alienating the work of marginalized students to prioritize prestige and exclusionary practices. Forms of thought or action that challenge the hegemonic standard are categorized as undesired and excluded.

Stairs are not the only infrastructure criticized by critical disability scholars. For example, Dolmage is also critical of the storied use of gates around and within campuses. Most contemporary universities lack physical gates, yet different mechanisms of exclusion continue to bar entry to students with disability, erecting the modern equivalent of the physical gates that marked early universities and asylums. Indeed, even though campus

security is becoming an increasing concern, almost anyone except disabled students is advantageously able to access the institution. Today's gates, though not often physical, continue to present new challenges and obstacles to participation and access. Here, the parallels between the university and the asylum become clearer. In both cases, infrastructure was designed to separate and purify spaces by containing certain people in specific domains, while keeping them out of others, reinforcing the eugenic process of separating ideal traits from unwanted traits. Asylums "also had steep steps and ornate gates, meant to hold the public out and to imprison people within, ensuring that the excluded couldn't mix with others within society" (Dolmage 2017, 3). Accordingly, the disabled student is a disruptive presence to the university's primary logics of exclusion and inclusion. The presence of disability on campuses goes against what the university has historically represented: a place filled with those who do the research, in contrast to the asylum, filled with those who were researched. The agency of the disabled individual who refuses to be studied and insists on their status as a knowledge creator challenges the eugenic biases embedded in the university's social and physical infrastructure.

The university, in its neoliberal form, sees students as consumers and researchers as labourers who produce intellectual capital and prestige. As I have highlighted throughout the discussion, eugenics, neoliberalism, and commodification are heavily intertwined in the university structure. The steep steps metaphor emphasizes the connection between productivity-driven commodification and eugenics; it is one profound way that disabled people are excluded from the university strictly because they are considered incapable of contributing to the productive economy. This is because eugenics

supports the idea that having an optimal body-mind is the only way to capably contribute to the neoliberal economy; the steep steps were also associated with forms of work and class, which "classed citizens and linked their value to this labour-output" (Dolmage 2017, 63). Universities often operate based on economic and labour-output returns that contribute to the overall output and prestige of the university. In this context, the university's willingness to accommodate is constrained by a cost-benefit analysis, which considers the extent to which the proposed accommodation would result in a net positive return on investment.

Neoliberalism and Cost-Benefit Analysis

Within institutions, neoliberalism justifies how services and/or products may be offered or distributed. In making decisions, the benefits outweigh or remain at the same level of cost for it to be a worthwhile endeavour. Universities employ this logic when considering what accommodation or support services they can offer to the student. The ensuing restrictions often disadvantage the learner as they limit what accommodations students can access. Canadian higher education works on a system of retributive justice which "favours market-individualism and is based on the claim that individuals deserve and are entitled to differential rewards in accordance with their differential contributions to productive and competitive processes" (Gale & Densmore 2000, as cited in Guo 2014, 484). The implications of this use of cost-benefit analysis will be explored further in the following section.

Present-day neoliberal policies determine how we choose to fund our educational institutions or assess the amount of aid given to disabled and marginalized students.

Therefore, this cost-benefit analysis approach results in post-secondary institutions that are physically, socially, and academically unable to accommodate disabled people, and unable to accept new waves of academic advancement of disability justice and equity beyond solely viewing disability with a medicalized framework. Disability ways of knowing are viewed as inferior forms of research and contributions to overall understandings of disability, which effectively alienates both the disabled student and academic within the institution.

Within the neoliberal university, cost-benefit analyses are a primary calculus. For example, universities employ cost-benefit analyses to weigh potential courses of action based on what will produce the most rewards versus risks, the goal being to maximize benefits and minimize costs (structural or financial). At the university, this decision-making matrix is applied to various situations, such as the types of projects to be supported, including the provision of accommodations.

Merit, on the other hand, is given upon the ability to cooperate with society. Cooperation and pace are the ability to perform at a standard that is prescribed by a person who is not disabled, and that merit is determined based on how much you give in return. Within a societal context, to link with Young's thesis again, it might be through economic return, but it can also extend, within the university context, to how much you contribute to the prestige of the university, research production, and public recognition. Merit corresponds to receiving what one deserves. In conducting cost-benefit analyses, merit is considered as the extent to which a person deserves the accommodation, ignoring the fact that merit is measured on ableist standards. The merit argument is also a

deterrent for accommodating, suggesting that the knowledge and achievement of disabled people are questionable or invalid if certain accommodations assist them in completing work.

After establishing the neoliberal rationale behind accommodation services, I will evaluate the tangible reasons for a lack of accommodations by discussing funding for disabled students and post-secondary institutions in general. I aim to demonstrate the inherent gaps in the quality of education between able and disabled students because of these failures in accommodations and ableist notions that group disability into one homogenous category.

Merit and Cost-Benefit Analysis

One way that post-secondary institutions are ableist is in the emphasis placed on merit. Namely, students supposedly deserve the recognition they receive (through awards and grades) because of having earned it through effort or natural talent. The educational system is tailored to a merit-based system that rewards the individual regardless of the obstacles they do, or do not face. As a result, this system caters to students who do not experience external factors that would affect the outcome of their merit, such as the need for accommodations. Students who need additional resources in order to properly compete in a post-secondary environment are perceived as less meritorious despite facing more obstacles than able-bodied students. Achievement of disabled students is essentially negated, and their efforts are devalued since they require more resources to reach levels of contribution comparable to other students. This notion, fueled by neoliberal productivity, allows universities to continue to resist providing adequate support for

disabled students, staff, and faculty. From a neoliberal perspective, universities should not provide funding or resources for accommodations if that accommodation is unlikely to result in a net positive benefit to the university, in prestige as much as in profit. At the same time, students who require access supports are discredited for their achievements, making it seem as though they are less meritorious and thus less likely to be afforded accommodations or funding. This cycle ultimately traps disabled students at the bottom of the institutional hierarchy.

The cost-benefit analysis by the post-secondary institutions is bound to the likelihood of the return on investment in relation to the disabled student; if the likelihood of investment in an accommodation results in a substantial enough return to the university, the investment is deemed reasonable (Sunstein 2007). As such, if decision makers anticipate no return value, they deny such an accommodation on the basis of the accommodation being expensive. Students who cannot participate to the same extent as able-bodied students face substantially more obstacles, and often lack appropriate economic and educational support; ultimately, they will slip through the cracks. A shift in paradigm dictates that in order for rewards to be issued by merit, students with disabilities need to be properly accommodated, which could include the provision of note-taking scribes, mobility through campus, readers, seating arrangements, lab assistants, special software, and interpreters (Parsons et al. 2021; Bolt & Thurlow 2004).

Accommodations

Historical eugenic beliefs and neoliberal influence transform into a tangible set of decision-making practices that exclude matters of disability, accessibility, and

accommodation. Universities must transform the value and perception of disability. In the meantime, disabled students are left fighting for specific accommodations. However, the provided accommodations are merely a surface-level solution masking a deeper problem. Universities neglect to address barriers to accessibility as a result of financial constraints and a lack of willingness to restructure the operations of the institution as a whole to revalue disability and ableism. There are many issues within accommodations, from the utter lack of accommodations, shortcuts taken to provide inadequate accommodations, and the accommodations themselves not serving the disabled student. Ultimately, the issue of accommodations goes beyond financial constraints: it is deeply rooted in the eugenic premise of the university and its subsequent neoliberal turn that views disability as something to be erased, whether overtly (by minimizing true access based on merit) or covertly (by subsuming achievement as a mere by-product of accommodation). This means that while disabled students advocate for proper accommodations, it is not an issue resolved simply by increasing funding. Properly including disabled students in post-secondary education requires dismantling the ableist notions that define the historical university.

While students with disabilities benefit from, or simply *need,* accommodation in their daily university experiences, many accommodations are only afforded to the student for exam writing or summative assessments. Common examples of exam accommodation include dictated response (using software to write the paper) and time extensions. However, studies show that both of these forms of accommodation are insufficient and ineffective (Bolt & Thurlow 2004; Parsons et al. 2021; Dryer et al. 2016). One of the most

common arguments against providing accommodations is that it gives disabled students an advantage that allows them to unfairly outscore their able-bodied peers. Based on a study conducted by Bolt and Thurlow, this assumption is generally not supported by evidence; students who use accommodations for assessments do not gain a considerable advantage. Of the results they evaluated, it is true that in some instances, disabled students outperform their peers (Bolt & Thurlow, 2004), but there is nothing to prove that it was a result of the accommodation rather than the student's own capabilities.

Concerns regarding academic integrity and fairness constitute some of the hesitancy around providing exam accommodations, but financial reasons also play a large role. Institutions often replace costly requested accommodations with ones that avoid straining the university's economic resources. Accommodations like dictated response and extended time are inexpensive for the university. Specifically, the use of these accommodations for assessments has no financial or material cost; their main cost is time. Perhaps providing that time does come with a cost in the form of paying the instructor present to proctor a student with extended time or hear the dictated response. However, it is not a significant enough financial cost for it to be considered an unreasonable request for accommodations (Stein 2003). When some people hear the word accommodation, they think of massive infrastructural overhauls, but meeting accessibility needs does not have to be so dramatic. Institutions often cite funding as a reason to not adequately accommodate students with disabilities, but this reason is not universally applicable to accommodation types, as many accommodations are either not dependent

on money or the associated costs might be offset through inclusive resource distribution (Bakshi et al. 2013).

Extended time is one of the most commonly accepted types of accommodation, though often at the expense of satisfying students' actual accessibility needs. Offering extended time is especially counter-productive to satisfying the student's needs if viewed as a way to make up for the lack of other accommodations, and it will always be insufficient. There are many situations in which "more time" is an insufficient solution, as for disabled students, it is not always a matter of the speed at which they can complete a task, but the physical ability. For example, someone who is visually impaired will not be adequately accommodated if they are given extended time but no access to large print materials or auditory technology options.

Dictated response is another common solution, although it is also often resisted by accommodation services. Dictated response is an alternative method in delivering an assessment that does not depend on the student's ability to write themselves; instead, they orally communicate their answer to a computer, scribe, or the instructor. Data would suggest that students benefit exceptionally within math-based assessments while using dictated response and perform significantly well when utilizing a scribe instead of a computer or are given planning time in addition to the accommodation (Bolt & Thurlow 2014, 145–6). This does not make dictated response an unfair advantage, because how a student transcribes their responses does not impact the response itself; It is the response,

not the method of its transcription, that is being evaluated.[2] At the same time, dictation is more often than not a disadvantage to the student because a dictated response has different expectations from a written response simply by its nature. That is, an in-person dictated response means the student has to memorize what they want to articulate and cannot revise or edit their response. Meanwhile, if spoken to digitize the response to text, it can be inaccurate or of a poorer quality of writing due to shortcomings of technology.

Even when students are given access to accommodations, these accommodations do not always serve as an exact replication of how able-bodied students experience their learning. In the case of Alternative-to-Print Format (AF), "a computer voice cannot match a human reading aloud with proper enunciation and emphasis" (Parsons et al. 2021, 51), which is an unavoidable discrepancy between students who use AF and those who do not. Furthermore, "since it does not enable text skimming, AF can make reading short bits of information, such as on multiple choice exams, cumbersome and time-consuming" (Parsons et al. 2021, 51). Another consideration is that many institutions only permit usage

[2] Even studies that link accommodations to improved academic performance have not conclusively attributed higher grades to the accommodations themselves. For example, Kim and Lee (2015) acknowledge that "the total amount of explained variance for academic performance through each accommodation was quite a small portion (…) there may be the possible existence of other variables that could impact GPA" (44). Additionally, findings across studies remain inconsistent. A more recent study that was conducted at "a medium-sized university in southeastern Ontario" found that even with accommodations, students with disability still lag in academic performance as compared to their "non-disabled" peers, even though some show improvement, but essential reasons behind that accommodations were not sufficient in addressing the students' needs (Parsons et al 2021). These contradicting findings support both of my proposed points: the lack of sincerity in providing accommodations, the parallel merit-based logic within it, and the fact that accommodation does not confer advantage.

of accommodations during examinations and not throughout the course. This creates unfamiliarity with the accommodations and therefore "poor performance on a test may be the result of failure to learn skills that the student would have learned had he or she been provided the accommodation during instruction" (Bolt & Thurlow 2014, 149). This means that even if provided with necessary accommodations, discrepancies still exist, so it is important to recognize the inherent advantage of fully abled students even when accommodations are provided. Ultimately, the university institution, its methods of assessment and content delivery, are developed for able-bodied students and exclude disability.

Access to Accommodations

Another barrier within the education system regarding accommodations is the process of acquiring them. Access to accommodations is riddled with obstacles that prevent many students from being able to even request improved accessibility for their education. There are many reasons why lack of access to accommodations and accessibility services exacerbates barriers and reinforce ableism. Many studies illustrate these difficulties. For instance, Toutain (2019) and Burgstahler and Moore (2009) suggest that the challenges to access most prominently include a lack of knowledge and compassion from accessibility services staff and unnecessarily complicated processes to qualify.

Those who work at disability or accommodations services are typically not experts in disability. This is not meant to criticize accommodation advisors as individuals, but insofar as these advisors significantly influence the outcome of a student's success in

accessing necessary accommodations and, often, advisors can become barriers themselves. Many staff within accommodation services self-report a lack of knowledge about disability and the need to improve skills in communicating with disabled students (Burgstahler & Moore 2009, 169). The attitudes of the staff make many students feel excluded or unwelcomed, as the ignorance and misconceptions make accessing viable accommodations more challenging. These attitudes reflect ableist prejudices such as holding disabled students to a lower standard than non-disabled students or suggesting that students with non-severe disabilities are exploiting their ability to access accommodations (Burgstahler & Moore 2009, 168). Students have reported feeling like they are not listened to and are immediately dealing with biases of the staff. Some experiences include being discouraged or told they do not actually need accommodations (Lyman et al. 2016, 129) or being made to feel like addressing their needs is too much of a hassle (Burgstahler & Moore 2009, 169).

Even if a student trying to access accommodations finds themselves working with someone who is knowledgeable about disability and treats them with respect, they may still face more barriers. At the administrative level, accommodation services are accountable to many bureaucratic processes before the students can access their services. One of these processes is verification of need (Toutain 2019, 300). Many institutions have a documentation requirement in order for students to qualify for accommodations, essentially requiring students to prove that they are disabled. For students with invisible disabilities, it can feel invasive and dehumanizing to reveal medical records to verify their request. It is also often the case that acquiring documentation can

be difficult. For students with learning disabilities, accessing documentation if they were diagnosed in their youth is not easy as many do not keep those records, or alternatively, to receive a new assessment of diagnosis while in post-secondary can elongate the process and present a financial barrier (Toutain 2019, 300). The burden of proof on the disabled students trying to access accommodations is further complicated when universities have strict regulations on what counts as "proper documentation" (Toutain 2019, 300). This means that in many instances, disabled students are sent through a long process of verification that may not guarantee them accommodations.

Conclusion

I began by recognizing that success in academia amongst disabled students is rare because of structural ableism that changes over time in response to larger societal changes. My main argument is that the ways in which the university structures itself views the disabled as subjects of exploitation and contributes to the lack of consideration for disability, both within the university's physical structure and social makeup. The historical university, embedded with eugenic beliefs, demonstrates that these institutions never intended to be inclusive towards disabled students. As outlined above, post-secondary institutions are designed to exclude disabled students through every facet, such as the physical structures that prohibit entry or through the ideology of productivity and merit.

Throughout this paper, I critiqued neoliberalism by highlighting how the university borrows neoliberal ideals to inform its decision-making processes based on perceived costs versus benefits, further entrenching barriers for disabled students. The influence of neoliberalism in university policy results in the prioritizing of prestige, profit, merit, and

value over genuine inclusion or accommodation, transforming education into something transactional rather than accessible. This ideology suggests that disabled people are less capable and less deserving of achieving an education because it views them as burdens. These are not merely misplaced values, but further, a part of a larger socio-economic discourse that "values" human beings only to the extent that they are deemed "productive" and therefore "capable" of increasing revenue. As a result, the accommodations available to disabled students are compromised, often being insufficient and difficult to access. Universities, therefore, fail in the crucial task of supporting disabled students, despite stated commitments to fostering inclusive spaces. The barriers faced by disabled students in universities are systemic, rooted in historical ableism and perpetuated by neoliberal ideology. I have argued that the universities must dismantle the ableist ideologies that frame disability as antithetical to academic success. Dismantling these barriers requires a collective effort to reimagine the university as a truly inclusive space that recognizes the many ways in which disabled students, staff, and faculty sustain higher education through their advocacy, service, teaching, and research.

Nevertheless, this research, while contributing to the greater body of literature on disability and its entanglement with capitalism, also opens avenues for further inquiry: as historically rigid categories of race, gender, and class are rebranded within different classifications under the new discourse of multiculturalism, diversity, and equality, one might question the parallel tweaks of eugenics across minds and bodies. Precisely, also inspired by Young's satire, how those who "slip through the cracks" of these institutional disability policies, gaining a public image of a "supercrip," are also, under the current

socio-economic order, inevitably embroiled in not only serving the "prestige" of their academic institutions, but also in reforming eugenics, wherein "natural selection" shifts from biological bases into neoliberal metrics of productivity, adaptability, and merit.

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