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Disrupting Ableism and Audism in Academic Accommodation Systems: A Resource List

Perturber le capacitisme et l’audisme dans les structures d’accommodement académique : une liste de ressources

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Abstract

Résumé

Le capacitisme et l’audisme sont systémiques dans l’enseignement postsecondaire canadien, perpétuant des résultats éducatifs inéquitables pour les étudiantes et étudiants handicapés et sourds. Ces formes d’oppression sont omniprésentes dans nos environnements d’enseignement et d’apprentissage, ainsi que dans les structures d’accommodement académique censées favoriser l’accès. Malgré l’attention croissante que leur portent les travaux scientifiques, il demeure difficile d’imaginer d’autres façons de conceptualiser l’accessibilité qui dépassent le *statu quo*. Le présent article aborde ce défi en examinant de quelles manières l’accessibilité pourrait être réimaginée au moyen de pratiques qui résistent au capacitisme et à l’audisme dans l’enseignement supérieur. À partir des résultats d’une recherche web menée dans le cadre d’une analyse environnementale plus vaste, nous identifions et analysons des ressources numériques qui proposent de nouvelles manières de comprendre et de mettre en œuvre l’accessibilité au sein des établissements postsecondaires. Au total, 33 sources numériques ont été retenues, puis classées selon leurs producteurs et leurs publics cibles dans les catégories suivantes : (a) ressources destinées aux établissements (n = 10); (b) ressources produites par/pour les conseillères et conseillers en accessibilité (n = 2); (c) ressources produites par/pour les enseignantes et enseignants (n = 9); et (d) ressources produites par/pour les étudiantes et étudiants (n = 12). Nos résultats mettent en lumière des tendances ainsi que d’autres voies possibles au sein des structures d’accommodement académique. Ce qui donne à ces résultats leur importance tient non seulement au fait qu’ils montrent que d’autres options existent, mais aussi à leur capacité à servir de ressources pour le corps professoral, les instances administratives et l’ensemble des parties prenantes engagées dans des démarches anticapacitistes et anti-audistes.

Keywords

Critical access; Disability Cultural Center; Access-centered pedagogies; Disability justice; Postsecondary education; Anti-ableism; Anti-audism

Mots-clés

Accès critique; *Disability Cultural Center*; pédagogies centrées sur l’accessibilité; justice pour les personnes handicapées; enseignement postsecondaire; anticapacitisme; anti-audisme.

Introduction

Ableism and audism are systemic in Canadian postsecondary education (PSE), perpetuating inequitable educational experiences and outcomes for disabled and deaf students. These forms of oppression are prevalent in teaching and learning environments as well as in the academic accommodation systems relied on to promote access for disabled and deaf students (Dolmage, 2017; Comeaux et al., 2021; Stapleton, 2016; Brown, 2020; Cheang, 2020; Shanouda, 2019).

Academic accommodation systems often fail to create equitable learning conditions for several reasons. First, navigating accommodation processes can be taxing, draining, and financially burdensome. Second, despite the taken-for-granted notion that academic accommodations are available to all disabled students, it often takes a level of white, middle-class, linguistic and other forms of privilege to navigate these systems. Third, accommodations are specific to individual students, which means that exclusionary teaching and other institutional practices remain intact. Finally, the kinds of

¹ Deaf scholar Tom Humphries first used the term “audism” 50 years ago; nevertheless, it remains undertheorized within critical disability scholarship. In this paper we draw from Bauman’s (2004) discussion of *systemic audism* as a power relation that is based on assumptions of hearing superiority, and which saturates institutional structures like the university in ways that maintain hearing privilege and disprivilege deaf students, instructors, etc.

² Some deaf students may identify as part of a linguistic and cultural minority, often indicated in writing by using the upper case *Deaf*, and some may not (yet). In this paper, we use the lowercase *deaf* in an inclusive way, to recognize these as well as other experiences (e.g., hard of hearing, deafblind, deafdisabled), in a manner similar to the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes (2025).

accommodations granted are often insufficient, providing partial and limited forms of access.

Despite growing scholarly attention to these challenges (Dhanota, 2023; Brown, 2020; Shanouda, 2019; Dolmage, 2017; Waterfield & Whalen, 2017), it remains difficult to imagine alternative ways of conceptualizing access that move beyond the status quo. This paper addresses this challenge by exploring how access might be reimaged through practices that resist ableism and audism in higher education. We situate this work within a boarder disability justice framework that defines access as a collective rather than individual responsibility.

Drawing on findings from a web search conducted as part of a larger environmental scan, we identify and analyze digital resources created and authored by instructors, students, access professionals, and advocacy organizations, as well as various postsecondary institutions. These resources, we suggest, offer new ways of understanding and practicing access within postsecondary institutions. Our goal is to highlight examples tha

The Politics of Accommodations

In PSE, disability and access are normally treated as problems to be assigned to the disability services office (DSO) (Shallish, 2015; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012). In practice, students with disability-related access needs are directed to register with the DSO to obtain accommodations, often via a standardized statement on their course syllabi. When students connect with the DSO, decisions about disability and accessibility are informed by hegemonic practices of medicalized screening (Johnson et al., 2025). Moreover, students often have little say over the actual accommodations provided (Dolmage, 2017) and continue to experience what disability scholar Cynthia Bruce (2020) describes as precariousness: Will instructors implement accommodations consistently and promptly? Will accommodations be meaningful? Will they be enough?

Even as accessibility is siloed to one institutional office, the work of getting or achieving access is placed on the shoulders of disabled students. That is, students experiencing ableism, audism, and overlapping forms of exclusion and oppression are made individually responsible for navigating accommodation processes and expected to take on significant labour to secure access to learning (Bruce, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Johnson et al., 2025). Students must disclose disability, clearly articulate their needs, and be prepared to self-advocate or otherwise compensate for discrimination (Karpicz, 2020). These practices are taken for granted in a university setting; how else could support needs be identified and access distributed?

Accommodation systems open doors for many students who might otherwise be shut out, including those positioned outside the imagined able-bodied, neurotypical, hearing, (English) speaking, sighted, independent, and punctual university student around

whom pedagogical, extracurricular, admissions and other ordinary features of the university operate. Nonetheless, assumptions that accommodations will work narrowly in these ways ignore the racist, classist, and ableist dynamics that are also/already at work in the university. As feminist sociologist Roxana Ng (1993) reminds us, structural inequality “leaks into and becomes integral to the academy, mean[ing] that we do not participate in the academy as equals” (p. 196)—this includes its accommodation apparatus. For example, students with the least access to economic, social, and cultural capital continue to be underserved by accommodation systems and experience institutional barriers to registration, including costs of institutionally required assessments and documentation (Waterfield & Whalen, 2017).

Yet, medicalized disclosure and documentation requirements are assumed to be neutral measures on which to base decisions about access (Dhanota, 2023). Far from neutral, such mechanisms privilege those students who can more readily navigate the healthcare system without risking exposure to medical racism and cisheterosexism (Lynch, 2020; Gorman, 2013; Dhanota, 2023; Johnson et al., 2025). Investigations into institutional accommodation processes that apply a critical race perspective reveal that *who* is viewed as deserving of accommodations is bound up in a set of ideas about disability that are imbued with medicalized authority and saturated with whiteness (Gorman, 2013; Dhanota, 2023; Stapleton & James, 2020). Institutions claim objectivity and neutrality by insisting on a medicalized process that ignores the ways academic ableism is, for many students, shaped by racism, sexism, classism, and other oppressive systems. As a result, accepted narratives of disability—and the ways in which students are

expected to tell their stories—are centered around a white, cis-male, middle-class disabled subject (Gorman, 2013). In order to be perceived as making legitimate requests of the DSO, disabled and deaf students of colour are required to fit their experiences into such a narrative, leaving out any mention of racism or sexism (Dhanota, 2023). This can be an impossible task, effectively disqualifying students whose experiences are shaped by ableism *and* racism, among other forms of oppression. The studies cited here work to expose the racist power dynamics that pervade the university accommodation apparatus and highlight the ways in which racism operates routinely and structurally in PSE.

Ingrained in routine accommodation procedures is another significant power disparity: students have little power to determine what they will say, how they will disclose, or make decisions about their accommodations (Dhanota, 2023; Shanouda, 2019, Dolmage, 2017; Hamraie & Khúc, 2021). Such power inequities are intensified for deaf students when working with hearing access professionals who may lack knowledge of deaf culture or the experiences of deaf, deafblind, and deafdisabled students, as well as linguistically diverse learners who use signed and spoken languages beyond American Sign Language and English (Dhanota, 2023; Arndt, 2010; García-Fernández, 2020). As a result, the quality of accommodations provided, and level of access experienced by these students, is frequently diminished.

Theoretical Framework

Disability justice is a movement and “liberatory framework” (Kafai, 2021, p. 15) developed by disabled organizers of colour (Sins Invalid, 2019). A disability justice framework argues that a single-issue disability rights framework that treats oppression as something uniformly experienced by all disabled people “is not enough to explain the full extent of ableism and how it operates in society” (Sins Invalid, 2019, p. 16). Informed by theories of intersectionality and matrices of oppression advanced by Black feminist theorists including Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), bell hooks (2015), and Patricia Hill Collins (2009), disability justice understands ableism as experienced differently based on intersecting power hierarchies (Sins Invalid, 2019; Mingus, 2011).

Lastly, we are also informed by Ng’s (1993) discussion of anti-racist and anti-sexist work in the university—what she calls *working against the grain*. Ng urges educators and other institutional actors to confront the unequal power dynamics that saturate the university, which was never designed for bodies outside the privileged white, settler, cis-male, able-bodied, neurotypical, and hearing norm. Ng (1993) calls for the development of a “critical awareness of the power dynamics operating in institutional relations, and of the fact that people participate in institutions as unequal subjects” (p. 199), and she stresses the need to “rupture [the] ways university business and interactions are ‘normally’ conducted” (p. 198).

Together, these frameworks guide our analysis toward an understanding of academic accommodation as an institutional process that works unevenly and reproduces ableist and audist power imbalances in the university. Race, class, gender, immigration status and so on shape *how* students experience accommodation processes and even *if* they will engage with them (for an excellent discussion, see Dhanota, 2023).

They also direct us to think of accessibility not as an individual task but something the university community is always engaged in, albeit by creating access for some bodies and not others. By integrating disability justice, critical access studies, and Ng’s (1993) call to work against the grain, we frame academic access as a collective and liberatory project that challenges the institutional reproduction of ableism and audism in higher education. It is our hope that this paper serves as a resource for readers to deepen their critical awareness of the power dynamics operating within institutional accommodation processes and to imagine new ways of practicing access in PSE.

Environmental Scan Methodology

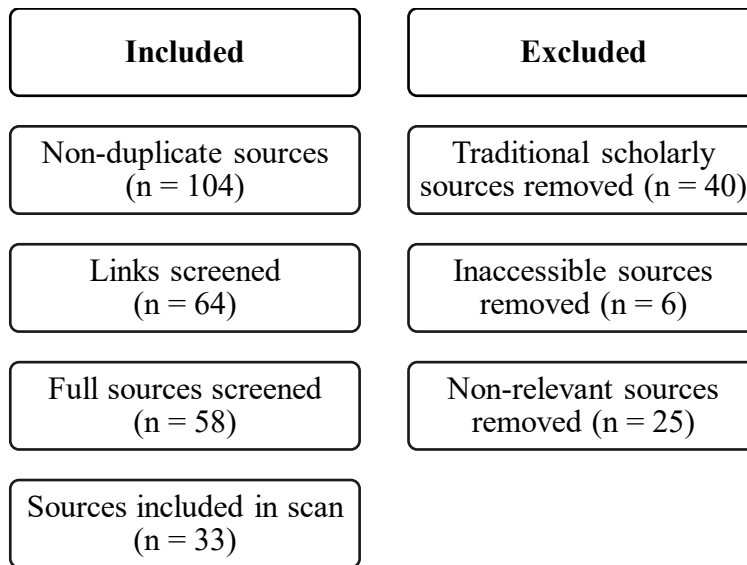
Search Method

We started our search by looking at PSI websites and hoped to identify institutions outlining academic accommodation procedures that did not require students to provide medical documentation. This proved too time consuming as most websites we looked at outlined medicalized processes (i.e., the status quo). We then initiated a broader second phase using primarily Google. Keywords included disability; higher education; accommodations; (non)disclosure; (non)documentation; practicum; academic integrity; disability justice; critical access; and access-centered. We also added new search terms as we identified exciting possibilities that we wanted to explore further and included a

small number of sources known to us through our work in disability studies or shared by interview participants.

Search Results

Figure 1. Exclusion Process



Description: The figure has two columns with the left one titled ‘Included’ and the right one titled ‘Excluded’. Under each header are boxes summarizing the steps in the inclusion and exclusion processes, with the number of sources listed at each stage. Small arrows show that the process reduced the number of included sources from 104 to 33.

These 33 sources include websites (n = 10), webpages (n = 8), blog posts (n = 7), PDFs (n = 5), videos (n = 1), wikis (n = 1), and Google Docs (n = 1). Most originated from U.S. PSIs, organizations (e.g., student groups), or were authored by U.S.-based scholars (n = 26), with fewer by Canadian counterparts (n = 7). Excluding websites, webpages, and wikis, all other sources were published between 2017 and 2023. Analysis of websites prioritized “home” or “about us” webpages. Finally, we sorted the 33 sources into the following categories based on producer/user: (a) resources for institutions (n = 10); (b) resources by/for access advisors (n = 2); (c) resources by/for teachers (n = 9); and (d) resources by/for students (n = 12). Table 1 reports the full list.

Table 1. Resource List

Title (hyperlinked)	Type	Reference
Resources for institutions		
1. Guiding Principles	Webpage	(Cornell University, n.d.)
2. Documentation Guidelines	Webpage	(Syracuse University, n.d.)
3. Information for Students	Webpage	(Portland State University, 2025)
4. Connect with DRC	Webpage	(The Arizona Board of Regents on behalf of The University of Arizona, 2025a)
5. Who We Are DCC	Webpage	(UC Regents, 2025)
6. Disability Cultural Center	Webpage	(The Arizona Board of Regents on behalf of The University of Arizona, 2025b)
7. Disability Cultural Center (DCC)	Webpage	(Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, 2025)
8. Disability Cultural Center	Website	
9. Disability Cultural Center at UNCA	Website	
10. Disability Cultural Center	Website	
Resources for access advisors		
11. Refocus 2.0	Website	
12. Making Online Learning Accessible for Deaf Students: A Guide for Disability Services	PDF	(National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes, 2020)
Resources for instructors		
13. Check Your Syllabus 101: Disability Access Statements	Blog post	(Wool, 2018)
14. Basic Needs Security and the Syllabus	Blog post	(Goldrick-Rab, 2017)
15. Syllabus Language	Blog post	(Brown, 2017)
16. Accessible Syllabus	Website	
17. Disability Justice & Access-Centered Pedagogy in the Pandemic	Video	(Hamraie & Khúc, 2021)
18. Open Access Pedagogy: A Manifesto	Blog post	(Rice-Evans, 2020)
19. Consent-Based Pedagogy and “Low Stakes” Assignments	Blog post	(Polish, 2017)
20. Accessible Teaching in the Time of Covid-19	Blog post	(Hamraie, 2020)
21. Welcome to Universal Design: Places to Start	Wiki	(This wiki is connected to Dolmage, 2015)
Resources by/for students		
22. UC Access Now Demandifesto	PDF	(Lynch, 2020)

23. The Access Advocacy Project	Google doc	(Access: Student Disability Union, 2021)
24. Hybrid Access Now: Statement by UCLA Student Coalitions	Blog post	(Disabled Student Union, et al., 2022)
25. Maddening Carleton: A Mental Health Framework	PDF	(Ahmed et al., 2022)
26. Beyond Accommodations: Accessible University Education for Disabled Students in British Columbia	PDF	(Cheang, 2020)
27. Students for Barrier-Free Access	Website	(Dhanota, 2023)
28. Disability Culture Club	Website	
29. Duke Disability Alliance	Webpage	(Duke Disability Alliance, n.d.)
30. Disability Empowerment for Yale	Website	
31. Disabilities United Collective	Website	
32. Disability Justice at Brown	Website	
33. Handbook for students with disabilities: a draft/imagination for a full flipbook	PDF	(Dhanota, 2023)
	(Appendix A)	

Findings and Discussion

We have written elsewhere about the results of the larger environmental scan (Johnson et al., 2025; Fernandes et al., n.d.), summarizing web-based findings that supported the identification of emerging trends in academic access, explored more fully in key informant interviews. While those publications focus on a subset of resources (#1–4), here we analyze all 33 resources to demonstrate the range of alternatives—those practices challenging medicalized and compliance-oriented approaches to access—identified in our data.

Category A: Resources for Institutions

Resources #1–4, drawn from institutional DSO webpages, illustrate academic accommodation processes in which medical documentation and diagnosis play a less central role. Most of these communicate to students that their description of access needs and any barriers they experience is an important form of documentation (Johnson et al., 2025). Traditional student accommodation processes take for granted the expertise of medical professionals to determine who does and who does not qualify (Rice-Evans, 2020; Shanouda, 2019). These examples, however, suggest growing recognition of students’ lived expertise and the structural inequalities that shape who can obtain medical documentation, creating space for self-report in the documentation process (Johnson et al., 2025).

For example, Cornell University explicitly acknowledges systemic disparities in access to healthcare and commits to “working with every student to find appropriate and creative ways of ensuring access in every aspect of their Cornell experience” (Guiding Principles, n.d., para. 1). Unlike Cornell, the other institutions indicate that medical documentation may still be requested (Johnson et al., 2025), and that self-report holds

varying degrees of importance. For instance, Portland State University (resource #3) only indicates to students that a diagnosis *may* not be required and that their experience will be considered when determining accommodations. The University of Arizona (resource #4) goes further, explicitly stating that students who do not have medical documentation are able to explore accommodations, and that student experience is central to the process.

Although these institutional examples remain partial, they reveal to us the possibility of accommodation processes that are less reliant, or at least not exclusively reliant, on medical authority. While it is important to note that claims to work with every student and accept forms of self-report articulated on institutional websites may not be realized in practice, these resources raise the possibility of alternative processes where access does not hinge so closely on practices of medical verification and checking (Johnson et al., 2025). The standard (i.e., highly medicalized) process reinforces the commonsense idea that accessibility is a scarce resource, which works to keep access at the legal minimum (Shallish, 2015; Lynch, 2020). This logic legitimizes racist, ableist, and other unequal power relations under which students face pressure to divulge personal information in sometimes traumatizing ways (Shanouda, 2019; Karpicz, 2020; Hamraie & Khúc, 2021). There is a need to co-develop alternative reporting procedures *with* students so that similar practices of mandated personal disclosure are not repeated under the guise of self-report (Johnson et al., 2025), and to make sure that processes change and improve on the ground and not just on institutional websites.

Resources #5–10 direct users to the websites of various Disability Cultural Centers (DCCs), all of which are based on US campuses (in fact, all 10 resources in this category

direct users to postsecondary institutions in the US, which must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act). According to Saia (2022) and Chiang (2020), DCCs present an alternative to the traditional approach to disability in the university as something shameful requiring concealment rather than part of campus diversity (see also Shallish, 2015). In contrast, these centers can provide important spaces for students to cultivate disability identity and community, from which anti-ableist action can be initiated (Saia, 2022; Elmore et al., 2018). For instance, many of the websites we engaged with describe events and activities that provide opportunities for students and the larger campus community to learn about disability culture and ableism, as well as outline commitments to improving the experiences of disabled students.

Moreover, as cultural centers, these spaces do not require students to provide documentation or disclose personal information; instead, students can come as they are, often exploring disability identity for the first time (Saia, 2022). Some students, however, may still need accommodations from the DSO to participate—for example, signing deaf students who use interpreting services within hearing-centric spaces. This raises questions not only about accessibility but also about whose knowledges and experiences are centered within campus spaces committed to facilitating change. Resultingly, while DCCs may focus on ableism, they can overlook audism.

During our search, we also found institutions using the name ‘Disability Cultural Center’ for the office responsible for determining and distributing accommodations—i.e., the DSO. Such examples were not included in our resource list. This practice of misnaming is an institutional maneuver that may function to derail student requests for an authentic

cultural center, or even temporary events and activities, by claiming that such a space already exists. As this example cautions, institutional promises to challenge ableism and promote diversity can end up reinforcing the status quo. Our intent here is not to discount the importance of spaces like DCCs, but to emphasize the need to work alongside students to make them more inclusive and more effective sites for action and social justice.

³ We thank the anonymous reviewer who brought this point to our attention.

Category B: Resources by/for Access Advisors

Resources #11–12 include digital toolkits intended to support access advisors in finding ways to implement proactive changes to address ableism and audism in their everyday work. [Refocus 2.0](#) (build access into all campus spaces and activities. Resource #12 is centered around improving the experiences of deaf postsecondary students in online classes. It provides practical tips for DSO staff and administrators to be active in initiating changes that are not isolated to individual students, such as supporting instructors in using accessible course design and creating campus policies related to captioning (National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes, 2020).

These resources provide concrete ideas for shifting campus responses to ableism and audism by reorienting the work of campus access professionals and prioritizing interventions at the classroom and institutional level. Engaging with them makes it easier to imagine an institutional approach to disability and accessibility where campus

resources are committed to creating accessible spaces before students are forced to medically disclose. Under such an approach, the responsibility of ensuring accessibility is moved from individual students to the institution.

User tip: Look here if you are an access professional thinking about or already committed to working against the individualized grain of accommodations. If you are a hearing access professional and unfamiliar with deaf culture and the diverse experiences of deaf students, spend time reviewing resource #12 and discuss it with your team. This is the only deaf-centered resource on our list.

Category C: Resources by/for Instructors

Resources #13–21 outline various access-oriented pedagogies and classroom strategies by and for educators. The first four center around the practice of writing accessibility statements for course syllabi. Personally crafted accessibility statements can provide an

These resources outline numerous strategies for building accessible experiences collaboratively with students. They also challenge taken-for-granted assumptions that access must depend on medicalized disclosure. For example, one frequently described strategy involves meeting student requests for accommodation (e.g., deadline extension, alternative formats for assignments) without requesting medical documentation or approval from the DSO. Mimi Khúc (resource #18) put it best: “I believe students when they

say shit is going wrong in their life.... Because shit is going wrong with my life, of course shit is going wrong in their life, too” (Hamraie & Khúc, 2021, 19:20).

Category D: Resources by/for Students

Of all four categories, these student-authored resources present the most radical vision for academic access. Importantly, they make apparent that academic access requires a widespread transformation to campus culture and business as usual in the university.

The first five resources (#22–26) include materials created by disabled student organizers and allies as part of specific campus movements against ableism and other forms of educational injustice, as well as student-authored policy recommendations. In the [UC Access Now Demandifesto](#) (resource #22), disabled student Megan Lynch (2020) outlines demands for a campus-wide approach to academic access in response to the University of California’s reliance on a compliance-oriented approach. While there is too little space here to do justice to these demands, even a summary reveals a radically different understanding of access that lies at the heart of the Demandifesto. The student-led demands include: greater representation of disabled students, instructors, and staff, especially those who are multiply marginalized; anti-ableism training for instructors and staff; the incorporation of critical disability perspectives in all programs to ensure graduates are equipped to challenge disability oppression in their future careers; accessible and affordable campus housing; and anti-ableist/anti-racist admissions policies (Lynch, 2020).

Resources #27–32 include the websites or webpages of various disabled student groups in both Canada and the US. These seem to do much of the same work as DCCs, though likely with less institutional resources. For example, [Students for Barrier-Free Access](#) (SBA) at the University of Toronto (resource #27) offers a space for connection, community, and collective learning about disability justice. The SBA is also committed to campus advocacy on behalf of disabled and deaf students and community members. The final resource (#33) directs users to a digital guide to academic accommodations by and for students of colour. Websites for some of the student groups included in our list also provide practical supports, including guides to navigating accommodation processes. By outlining tips and tactics developed by students for students, these digital resources

challenge the dominant approach to accessibility that is based on a logic of scarcity and requires students to undertake significant forms of labour to meet institutional disclosure and verification demands. Reading them, we can’t help but ask: why does it have to be so hard? In this way, these resources point toward an alternative approach—one that is supportive rather than restrictive.

Conclusion

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