Promoting a Paradigm of Parity

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Abstract

Individuals who are part of the higher education community sometimes choose not to disclose their disabilities, believing that self-disclosure might have more costs than benefits. Implementing campus-wide initiatives that better sensitize faculty, staff and students to the needs and experiences of individuals with disabilities might result in the provision of more reasonable accommodations; however, even so it seems unlikely that self-disclosure will be the universal choice of disabled people. If postsecondary institutions more fully embrace universal design, the needs of students and personnel with and without disabilities might be better and more easily met.

Stigmatizaton and stereotyping of disabled people are still commonplace. Not every disability is associated with the same degree of stigma (Thomas, 2000): People having some disabilities are more stigmatized than others once their type of disability is self-disclosed (Hinshaw, 2007). Campaigns conducted to challenge stereotypes about people with serious mental illness have not resulted in improved attitudes toward people with mental illness: attitudes have become more negative since the 1990’s.

Some students with unapparent disabilities—sometimes referred to as hidden disabilities (Goffman, 1963) or invisible disabilities—prefer to try to pass for normal. If that means they will maintain a C average without receiving reasonable accommodations instead of achieving a B+ or an A average with accommodations, they might feel content with the C average, particularly if they have no aspirations of pursuing a graduate degree.

Both written and anecdotal information support the opinion that some individuals who populate the halls of higher education—students, faculty and staff—feel they have more to lose than gain by acknowledging the presence of a disability. Social psychologists have explained that people typically take their time to divulge very personal information about themselves when they are in the process of a establishing a relationship with someone new (Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A.; Laurenceau, J., Barrett, L. F., & Pietromanaco, P. R., 1998). Acquaintances are unlikely to be told highly personal information. It seems to be part and parcel of human nature to categorize objects and living creatures automatically. Personal construct theory, the personality theory developed by George Kelly (1963), suggests we make rapid classifications in order to know what to expect in the here-and-now and what to anticipate in the future.

It comes as no surprise that some disabled students might feel uncomfortable about divulging the need for reasonable accommodations before the semester begins since their professors will have no likely inkling about what type of student the person requesting the accommodation might be. Likewise it is not surprising that some noted academics with hidden disabilities like Kay Jamison (1996) and Elyn Saks (2007) did not openly disclose their disabilities or to their university’s administrators until they were well established. By contrast, Margaret Price (2011) disclosed her disability somewhat earlier in her career and her writings have precipitated a closer examination of the college experience.

Some colleges are intent upon following the letter of the law and are chiefly concerned with being in indisputable legal compliance when providing reasonable accommodations to disabled people. Unintentionally, these colleges might be creating chillier campus climates—ones that don’t promote a feeling of belongingness among diverse groups of people. To create a better experience for disabled individuals at postsecondary institutions, sensitivity training of faculty might be helpful; workshops for students that impart information about disabled people might be helpful as well. However, no matter how effectively and how frequently the appropriate offices publicize the services they can provide to disabled people, no matter how knowledgeable everyone becomes about disabilities, in all likelihood, some disabled people will never self-disclose the presence of their disability.

Why is that? Research indicates that 50% of students who were identified as having a disability prior to college no longer believe they still have one (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Some disabled people do not truly consider themselves to be entitled to reasonable accommodations; some students and employees feel it would be better to keep the presence of their invisible disabilities unknown to the individuals who have to grade or evaluate their performance in courses or in their work settings. Disabled students sometimes believe their classroom experiences will be quite dissimilar from those of their nondisabled peers once they identify themselves as having disabilities, and that belief prevents their self-disclosure (Kranke, Jackson, Taylor, Anderson-Fye, & Floresch, 2013). In order to receive classroom or workplace accommodations, neither the disabled student nor the disabled college employee has to divulge the specific nature of his or her disability directly to the people who evaluate his or her work; however, being eligible for reasonable accommodations identifies them as having some kind of disability—more information than some people want their professors or employers to know.

From time to time anxiety delays or prevents someone’s self-disclosure about disability. Olney and Brockelman (2003), reported the following from a disabled student:

Yeah, like I’m always afraid to ask for help because I hear that we have like test taking rooms and I want stuff like that because I really need a quiet room. But I’m always afraid of what people will think. I don’t want professors to be like ‘Oh, what is she whining about? Like I’m really scared to ask for it. (p. 44).

Some students do perceive an actual change once they reveal a disability. Another student in Olney and Brockelman’s (2003) study related this:

Suddenly they knew—and it changed everything. Just even the way I’m treated today. I mean there’s no way I can recover any of the respect that they used to show me around the department. I’ve now have been reduced to a label (Olney & (pp. 45-46).

When a student decides to give professors notification of accommodations letters at the beginning of a semester an unusual exchange is taking place between two people who know very little about each other. No reciprocity is expected here. Ordinarily, people are not expected to divulge such personal information when they first come into contact with another person. When people are interested in establishing a more comfortable, long-term or intimate relationship with another person such personal information might be disclosed only once some sense of commonality or sense of acceptance seems to exist. Expecting college students to identify themselves as having a disability as opposed to that information’s automatically following them from grade to grade puts quite a number of disabled students in a new and stressful situation.

As a professional who has discussed reasonable accommodations with more than a thousand disabled students by now, it is clear to me that I could not say the same things to disabled faculty or staff members about the possible long-term consequences of self-disclosure as I have said to students. In actuality, our office is not responsible for assisting anyone but students with getting reasonable accommodations and support services. Some students enter our program’s offices because they are on the verge of being dismissed from school or continuing to receive poor grades in classes in part, they acknowledge, because they decided to forego asking for reasonable accommodations. They felt they were strapped for time when taking their exams without accommodations, for instance, and would have had sufficient time to answer questions if the exam had been read to them. Disabled students voice their concern about what their peers might think of them if they were absent from classes on days their peers would be taking classroom exams. Students with disabilities might expect their peers to wonder why the might be given permission to use an audio recorder in a history class or a calculator in a developmental math class.

My response with regard to concerns about what peers might wonder about a student’s absence from the classroom during exam time might include the statements that sometimes students taking exams don’t pay attention to much more than how they are doing on the exam, that they might never encounter these peers after they graduate, that there is a difference between peers and friends and that people typically don’t lose true friends because of their status as a disabled person. I underscore the importance of figuring out if their eventually being able to get an associate’s degree, pursue a bachelor’s degree and/or eventually pursue degree-related employment currently matters more to them than what their peers think about them: particularly if they never had to have contact with these people after graduation. For faculty members and staff members who are hoping to remain at the college where they are currently and are hoping to be considered for future positions with greater institutional responsibility and at a higher pay grade, consideration of the possible ramifications of self-disclosure for the rest of their professional lives is something from which they cannot easily escape.

Steele (2011) wrote that for women in advanced college chemistry, for African-American students in school in general, for older people returning to school, for Caucasian sprinters in elite sprinting, there are stereotypes loose in the house that make these situations different for them than for people from other groups. My suspicion is that for disabled students, who might belong to some of the above groups, there are likely to be other influential stereotypes loose in the house. After self-disclosing the need for testing accommodations to their professors, disabled students might be more affected by stereotype threat. For instance, when students with a learning disability sit down to take a multiple choice exam with double time their performance on the exam might be influenced by their awareness of the stereotype that students with learning disabilities are not as intelligent as students without that disability. Taking the exam outside of the classroom in order to receive more time and other reasonable accommodations might be more likely to trigger the threat than sitting in the classroom with other students. When stereotype threat is being experienced, heightened activity in the neurological area associated with social and emotional processing—the ventral anterior cingulate cortex of the brain—takes place at some expense to other brain regions that might otherwise have been more effective in dealing with the task at hand (Steele, 2011). Steele and Aronson (1995) suggested that stereotype threat might interfere with performance by increasing arousal, engendering overcautiousness, precipitating low expectations, or reducing effort. Disabled students, at some level, might be aware of the deleterious impact stereotype threat has on their focus and surmise they might have something to lose when they take examinations after having acknowledged their status as disabled students.

Postsecondary institutions have some choices about how to deal with the reality that some disabled students who are unwilling to disclose the presence of their disability are not learning all they could from their courses or demonstrating course mastery. Administrators, educators and service providers can hope that campus-wide initiatives will better sensitive faculty, staff and students to the needs and experiences of students with disabilities, with the result being that more students will be receptive to the idea of self-disclosing the existence of and nature of their disability to the office on campus responsible for facilitating students’ reasonable accommodations. Administrators, educators and service providers can accept that if a student with a disability chooses not to seek accommodations and imperils his or her academic longevity that the consequences are the student’s own doing. However, postsecondary institutions can also embrace universal design as fully as possible and in so doing open up more possibilities for students and postsecondary personnel with and without disabilities.

Many of the professionals who work with disabled people have moved as far away as possible conceptually from the medical model and believe social justice should be behind their actions. Disability is considered a socio-political construction that marginalizes disabled people (Smart, 2008). Nevertheless by requiring all disabled college students who want reasonable accommodations to allocate time to schedule and undergo intakes, we are relying on their self-advocacy-, time management- and organizational skills as well as their availability to participate in setting equal access in motion, things possessed in varying degrees by college students.

Universal design owed its genesis to architects interested in making structures more accessible to disabled people. Curb cuts that enable wheelchair users, for example, to get around campus more easily are appreciated by students with rolling book bags, bicycle riders who are looking to park, workpeople who are transporting equipment, and parents who have put the infants they have with them in baby carriages. Although universal design originally focused on the built environment it now includes other aspects of the learning environment (Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley, & Abarabanell, 2006.)

More likely than not, postsecondary institutions will never get to the place where universal design will anticipate and pro-actively address the needs of both disabled and nondisabled students in advance of their arrival on campus; nevertheless, it seems likely that many of the needs could be. With the under-preparedness of many college students having become a political issue, with the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of developmental and remedial courses having come under some legislative and academic scrutiny, it might be that universal design will pique the interest of administrators and educators with more clout than those who have been work in offices that are responsible for assisting college students with disabilities. Questions about the efficacy and necessity of noncredit remedial courses have been raised and there has been a push by some organizations to reduce the number of students taking noncredit remedial courses. Fueled by the financial backing of Bill & Melinda gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation, two organizations—Complete College America and Jobs in the Future—have been associated with the passage of laws in Connecticut and Tennessee responsible for placing more students directly into credit-bearing courses and responsible for a similar law’s being passed in Florida in May of this year which is not yet in effect (Mangan, 2013).

As things now stand, 40% of students are en route to satisfying high school degree requirements that will insufficiently prepare them for college and will inadequately prepare them to enter the labor market. Nevertheless, 68% of all high school graduates attend postsecondary institutions with the prospect of earning a degree (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Without enough career and technical courses to make their seamless transition to the world of work and without enough skills to easily transition to a postsecondary education, these high school graduates have become part of an educational underclass. Some members of the educational underclass do have disabilities, others don’t. Over one third of students who make their way to postsecondary education enroll in remedial or developmental courses (Aud et. al, 2011).

 21st century institutions of higher learning have been impacted upon by technology in a way that institutions of higher learning had not been until the last third of the 20th century. Certainly there are those who have suggested that the introduction of technology has had a negative impact on reading and concentrating (Carr, 2010). However, what is now available to a blind student was certainly not available to Helen Keller. Programs like Jaws are capable of reading all kinds of materials to blind students. Braillenote devices provide some blind students with the opportunity to take notes based on their professor’s spoken words. Greater independence is possible for many students with disabilities because of changes in technology. Deaf students with mobile phones can easily converse on-the-go with other students who have can accept and produce text messages on their cellphones.

If some materials and technology typically developed for and originally used by disabled students hold the potential to make learning easier for the 40% of students who are underprepared for academia as well as the 60% who were sufficiently prepared for postsecondary education, institutions of higher education, as was mentioned before, might feel universal design would be beneficial to all and feel even more of an incentive to embrace it. If more students feel that having access, for example, to lectures in iPod format, to audio recordings of lectures, to classroom notes on Blackboard and to more time on exams helps them to accomplish and then demonstrate mastery of course materials, the more they will be disappointed if the availability of these materials and others don’t become more commonplace. Ideally no college students should feel as though they are on the margins of learning. Universal design will make it easier for disabled students to feel that their classroom experiences are more comparable to the experiences of their classmates and making changes that incorporate universal design in advance of a course’s beginning is likely to be more cost-effective than making changes to accommodate the more typical needs of disabled students (Bowe, 2000). Increasingly, disability professionals in postsecondary settings are advocating for the acceptance of universal design (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008; McGuire & Scott, 2006; Scott, Loewen, Funckes & Kroeger, 2003; Thorton & Downs, 2010). Although college classrooms have included an increasing number of disabled students since the 1970s, the educational experience might not have felt so inclusive. The workplace experience of faculty and safe might feel more inclusive because of the availability of new software like Windows 8 which has text-to-speech options built in them. Consequently, with this software faculty and other staff members with and without disabilities would be able to have their e-mails and other documents read to them without notifying anyone on campus of their need or interest in availing themselves of that computer-based option. Perhaps it would become more commonplace for employees to be able to use smart pens during meetings, thereby being able to write notes and have the option to make audio recordings of their meetings. Universal workplace design that does not focus exclusively on the physical environment of places of employment might become a subject of more interest on campuses as well, particularly when and if universal design has a profound influence on the learning environment of students.

Years before universal design was frequently discussed in the literature, a former supervisor, Dr. Anthony Colarossi, offered this advice to a professor wondering how she could reach more students: his suggestion was teach the class as though half of your students are deaf and the other half are blind. She found this advice helpful in the development and presentation of course-related materials. In *Universal Design in Education: Teaching Nontraditional Students*, Bowe (2000) gave numerous suggestions about how to prepare universally designed curricula and materials. He wrote that information should be presented in multiple ways. Consistent with what Dr. Colarossi had advised another professor, Bowe (2000) wrote that any written information should be spoken aloud and vice versa. Making it a practice to repeat key points and perhaps even slow down so that students have more time to process the information would be helpful. Since preparing materials on a computer offers the professor quite a number of options in how to customize information presented, it would be helpful to make sure that all materials were saved on a disk. The disk could be made available to students on request or posted on a web page. If the contents of the disk are posted on a web page some students who benefit from adaptive equipment and making the contents.

By providing multiple ways to learn the materials, students are likely to feel better able to and more motivated to absorb it. A number of students who would prefer to work independently to master materials. For other students working as members of a team would be a preferable learning experience. Students who might not feel comfortable speaking in class to ask questions or make a point might feel quite comfortable in posting comments on an instructor-sponsored listserv (Bowe, 2000).

Likewise, students are likely to appreciate having a variety of options for demonstrating their knowledge and skills. Taking tests and submitting term papers are preferable options for some. For others, providing portfolios of achievements or undertaking and performing demonstration activities in the community might be more appealing.

Human variation is the norm, a statement that certainly seems oxymoronic on some level. No two learners are identical. If podcasts of lectures become available to all students, if course notes are available to all, if more time on exams is an option for all students the needs of many disabled students’ disabilities would have been addressed without the students’ having to request reasonable accommodations by presenting documentation of their eligibility for audio recordings of lectures and extended time on exams. By providing the above options to all students, nondisabled students who fell short of taking comprehensive enough notes would have a better chance of reviewing and learning new material. When professors show captioned videos regardless of whether they have a deaf or hard of hearing student in their courses, ESL students might appreciate being able to associate the spoken words with the written ones and other nondisabled students might find it easier to retain information by both hearing it and reading it. If American publishers became obligated to send any purchaser of a new book a copy of a computer file containing the book, learning disabled students and students with limited hand use might not be the only ones who experience some benefits from being able to simultaneously see and hear the printed words. When more educational barriers are removed, the more likely it is that all students will understand that there is variation in how we learn. People who use exactly the same equipment in classrooms and in libraries whether they have a visible or invisible disability will more easily be considered to have even more things in common with each other regardless of their individual differences.

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