

Barred From Entry: How Inaccessible & Neoliberal Post-secondary Institutions Alienate the Disabled Student

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Abstract

This thesis examines the historical eugenic influences that came to shape how Canadian post-secondary institutions operate and what values they hold. 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. From there, I argue that post-secondary institutions operate under neoliberal principles that function under Rawlsian ideals of who is deemed fit to cooperate within society. I posit that the impacts of neoliberalism and eugenic ideology lingers on and contributes to the university's lack of accommodations and persistent ableist physical and social structures. I examine the shortcomings of accommodation and accessibility within post-secondary institutions by relying on statistical data and secondary research from existing literature and databases. Lastly, I aim to conceptualize a new theoretical model of disability, which I coin as the institutional model. This model aims to highlight how institutions have a unique perception of disability and relation to disability, requiring a framework beyond the medical, social, or political-relational models to understand disability. Within each chapter, I honour my experiences as a disabled person by utilizing it as a way to simplify and break down my academic writing to the reader. In doing so, engaging in a form of resistance against the notion that lived experience cannot be considered academic.

Preface

As I set out to write this paper, I contemplated the different ways in which I can honour academic integrity and the typical standards set out by academia, while also honouring my own experiences and taking them as fact and true knowledge despite what the academy might think. Oftentimes knowledge is not taken seriously if not conveyed in an academically-sufficient way from reputable sources. This in turn alienates the experiences of individuals with disabilities and many marginalized groups for that matter because it invalidates lived experience as a reputable mechanism of supporting arguments. How I have chosen to go about writing this paper is splitting each section of my research up into two components. One that focuses on the traditional ways of collecting and arguing knowledge through the use of written scholarly work with the addition of a second section dedicated to a more reflexive, autoethnographic approach to honour my own personal experience and to include it into research as an equally-valid and contributing source of knowledge.

Dedications

This honours thesis is in memory of my late Grandfather Hamad Hassan who I lost last year. This wonderful human being was the source of light in my life and believed in me to the fullest extent. He used to call me his smartest Grandchild and the next Prime Minister. Above all, he never failed to make me laugh on the phone whenever we spoke. He was immensely proud of the work and of the thesis I was writing.

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Introduction

University degree completion among students with disabilities is at a drastically lower rate than those students without disabilities. This paper posits that the reason for this discrepancy is due to the ableist and eugenic foundations of the university. As critical Disabilities scholar Tanya Titchkosky notes, these tendencies are irreducible to a single phenomenon, remarking that “[t]he intellectual, physical, electronic, and all other aspects of the university environment make participation by disabled people questionable” (Titchkosky 2011, 25). Despite the recent rise of critical disabilities studies, and a somewhat misleading push for improving accessibility, the University has never 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.

Putting ‘best intentions’ to the side, students with disabilities are left to compete in an environment that ignores or is unwilling to host their diverse needs. For example, assignments are expected to be completed according to standards met more easily by those who can type, read, navigate a lab, access library databases, etc., often in written format. Students who are unable to meet these able-bodied standards, yet while offering alternative solutions, are likely to be met with demeaning and ableist skepticism, as though there were no other way to demonstrate comprehension and intelligence beyond the standard essay now easily mimicked by machines. Additionally, space is often designed with a lack of consideration for mobility equipment, only further exacerbated by poorly contemplated retro-fits. “The nature of the “retrofitted” accommodation,” remarks Critical Disability scholar Jay Dolmage, “requires that [the university] make no lasting changes to pedagogy or to the culture of the university”

(Dolmage 2017, 106). Namely, retrofits offer quick fixes to deep institutional problems that the institution is unwilling to address in entirety. Retro-fits, such as ramps, are band-aid solutions that allow the real damage (ableist and eugenic tendencies) to be invisibilized. Culturally, disability is swept under the rug so that conversations around disability and the institution's role in inflicting and addressing it aren't properly discussed. Disability culture is almost entirely absent from the universities. The university fails to acknowledge the disabled as a marginalized group, completely overlooking the prevalence of disability and excluding it from its more sensational advocacy and acknowledgement efforts directed toward other special interest groups.

Shifting to a more reflexive and personal mode, what inspired me to write this thesis was this continued and ongoing experience of academic ableism on campus. I have cerebral palsy, a condition which affects primarily my lower limbs, making me mobility-device-reliant, whether that be through the use of a walker or a wheelchair. My disability however also affects other areas like the ability to write for an extended period of time or to speak without the presence of a periodical stutter. Nevertheless, I am expected to complete a similar project to my peers, for whom writing, speaking, reading, and moving come more easily. I question the rationality behind an institution that recognizes my potential (evidenced by my participation in an undergraduate honours program) as well as my particular circumstances, yet continues to treat me and expect from me the same as my peers without first enabling me to participate equally by providing accommodations. Unfortunately, this is not the first occasion ableist standards have been put before me. From the moment of applying to the university to the present day I have been met with one challenge after another. My positionality is one of direct experience, one that is constantly fighting against ableist tendencies, misconceptions and alienating practices which – at least try to – push me out of academia. I have struggled with getting accommodations that I need

to adequately succeed within my program. My requests for accommodations have been denied on the grounds of many excuses, ranging from budgetary concerns to academic integrity. These experiences are what motivated me to embark on a research-driven journey exploring how academic ableism is deeply rooted within our academic institutions, and how a new model of disability could recognize institutional ableism and work to address it.

Ableism within the post-secondary structure is deeply rooted within the everyday operations and practices of the university, in part resulting from the university viewing disability through a medicalized lens. The question I intend to answer in this thesis is: how can a new institutional model of disability aim to reconstruct ableist norms and bridge accommodation gaps within the education system? I will show how ableist and eugenic university policies pertaining to education and accommodation are implicitly guided by a complicated fusion of neoliberal and Rawlsian ideals. Taking this ableist neo-liberal/Rawlsian paradigm into account, I argue that actually addressing disability within post-secondary education requires a new institutional model of disability.

Framework

The theoretical engagements that ground this research are primarily critical disability studies in education (Dolmage 2017), compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer 2016), models of disability (Kafer 2013), and a critique of Rawlsian theorization posited in his Justice as fairness model. Critical disability studies in education seeks to examine and be critical of educational structures and their exclusionary practices, beliefs, and thoughts within the context of disability studies. “Compulsory able-bodiedness” is the societal expectation that the ideal is to be able-bodied (McRuer 2016) while the models of disability define how disability is perceived by

society through social, medical, and political-relational lenses (Kafer 2013, 4-5). Finally, I draw on the concept of equality advanced by John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice*, and *Political Liberalism*, which both emit subtle neoliberal undertones. I argue that many ableist decisions made by universities can be rationalized by appealing to an unexplored compatibility between Rawlsian concepts of equality and broader neoliberal ideals that leads to an undervaluing and, ultimately, rejection of disability based on concerns of intellectual productivity and output. Combined, these frameworks guided my research design and methods to conduct research that was grounded in both critical disability and critique of the neoliberal education structure. The theories of Dolmage, McRuer, and Kafer are important frameworks for my research because understanding ableism in education, the models of disability, and compulsory able-bodiedness are essential for understanding the structure of the neoliberal education system. As well, I am able to apply these theories to the experiences of disabled students in post-secondary education to strengthen my findings.

Methods

Using the above theoretical frameworks, I approach my research with two methods: a most-different-systems-design (MDSD) and autoethnographic research. MDSD is opposed to a most-similar-systems-design which compares the *similarities* between two variables. In contrast, MDSD is when you compare the *differences* between two variables (Anckar 2008), in this case, I will be comparing the quality of education for disabled students against abled students. This will be most evident in my third chapter where I discuss Ableism in the university. Autoethnographic research borrows from ethnography the observation and detailing of experience, but in autoethnographic this experience is autobiographical, i.e. my own experiences confronting and

challenging ableism in academic institutions. I've constructed my research design around these methods in order to collect qualitative and quantitative results for my research. Most of what exists in the discipline of critical disability studies is theoretical but some data exists through empirical evidence and personal accounts. I chose to use a MDSD approach in order to examine the experiences and quality of education between disabled and fully abled students. MDSD allows me to closely compare the differences between two distinct categories within a specific topic; in this case I am using it to compare disabled students and non-disabled students. This allows me to assess the differences in how the education system operates when interacting with disabled students versus non-disabled students and the quality of education they receive.

Additionally, I chose to utilize autoethnographic research to both honour my own personal experiences and to connect my lived experiences as a disabled student back to the discourse and data I've found. Allowing the reader to immerse themselves with the challenges that I have personally faced within the educational system aims to help situate and ground them within the experiences of disabled students. It also provides contextual instances in which they can better comprehend the discussions and analysis throughout this study.

There are limitations to my methods as although I aimed to collect a variety of evidence, examples, or data there are restrictions to what is available in the discipline of critical disability studies. Without having the ability to conduct interview-based research, I do not have access to new primary accounts of disabled experiences. Instead, the available primary research data (that is not my own experience as a result of autoethnographic research) is limited to accounts that have previously been used in research. This is also a contributing factor to why I will utilize autoethnographic research.

Conceptual Definitions

Before advancing further into this paper, I would like to make it easier for my readers to follow along, as this thesis is intended for the general public to further awareness of ableism within our academic institutions in hopes of fostering a more engaged, civil society within the fight against societal and systemic ableism.

Ableism is the process of outlining and mandating compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness. It is the positive reinforcement of typicality and the “normal” body, a set of standards that can only be met by fully able-bodied folks. In contrast, *disablism* portrays disability as inherently negative and treats disabled folk accordingly. Within the context of post-secondary education, I want to recognize, as Dolmage does in his book *Academic Ableism*, that disablism is, in fact, present within academia, as one may argue that the active non-inclusive policies do more than enough to create a culture where disability is actively viewed as undesirable. “But I want to make clear that academia powerfully mandates able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, [...] and this demand can best be defined as ableism” (Dolmage 2017, 70).

Compulsory able-bodiedness is an underlying understanding in society that perceives disability as something lesser and undesired, suggesting a cultural expectation that everyone should act and perform under the standard of being able-bodied (McRuer 2016). It is embedded into the hegemonic structure of Canadian society that value desirable traits like being able-bodied and white and deem those with undesirable traits as inferior. Compulsory able-bodiedness has its legacy in the eugenics movements. It operates under the assumption that able-bodiedness is the ideal standard and should be sought after, which alienates people with disabilities.

Disability is how you are socially othered within society, whether that be through physical and material structures like inaccessible buildings, or how you are perceived as an impaired individual, socialized as the “other”, carrying misconceptions of reliance, inability, and need of individual care. Therefore, disability occurs in a context that is greater than the individual, meaning that the impaired individual is rendered “disabled” because of the societal and environmental barriers. Joshua St-Pierre describes disability as “a complex interaction between corporeality and social, discursive, and material processes” (St-Pierre 2021, 11). I take his definition to mean that disability is the relationship between nontypical bodies and minds and society’s lack of preparedness to host their diverse needs for full participation. The university in and of itself empowers and breeds the presence of disability through its physical inaccessibility, spaces, cultural lack of awareness and preparedness, and its ongoing practices that are influenced by and founded upon eugenic policies. The university as an institution was built around keeping specific groups of people out that were deemed to be inferior and to foster a community of elitism with the desirable genetic pool. Dolmage writes, “North American academics systematically developed the means to segregate society based upon arbitrary ideas of ability—the university was the place for the most able, the mental institution or asylum or school for the ‘feeble-minded’ the space for the ‘least’” (Dolmage 2017, 15). Though it may not be apparent at first glance, present day universities are highly segregated spaces built for the ideal able-bodied subject, while simultaneously being built to keep out that ideal subject’s opposite. . The universities’ lack of action in accommodating and recognizing disability, perpetuates compulsory able-bodiedness by failing to tend to the diversity of bodies and minds on campus.

Eugenics is the selective process of euthanizing and segregating individuals who possess “undesirable” qualities from the societal gene pool, while also targeting its focus on collectively breeding normalized and “desirable” qualities in order to produce the “best” genealogical outcomes according to “a wide array of scientists, policy makers, philosophers, and social reformers across the political spectrum, many of whom had a long-standing interest in population control” (Dyck 2013, 5). Due to this, medical intervention and science were used to support that people of colour, Indigenous people, disabled people, and those suffering from mental illness were inherently inferior and that they possessed qualities that posed a risk to society and its evolution. Dolmage defines eugenics as “the ‘science’ of controlling who lives, who procreates, who thrives, and who dies, based on flawed ideas about our genetic makeup” (2016).

Impairment is the presence of a biological “abnormality”, as defined by society’s tendencies to categorize divergence as a problem that needs to be medically “fixed.” I distinguish the definition of impairment from the definition of disability on the basis of impairment being a physical deviance from what is traditionally seen as “normal”. Medical impairment is what universities use as a basis of judgment for the presence of disability in order to offer accommodations. Hence, in this regard disability cannot be recognized without the legitimizing presence of an impairment. This returns to the medical paradigm that imagines disability as something that needs to be cured– or rather solved. According to this logic, disability is a temporary misfortune that will one day be ‘cured’ or ‘erradicated,’ and thus not dealt with in a more significant way. An example of this is when universities implement access enabling retrofits without addressing deep institutional problems that provide far larger obstacles to participation (e.g., the format of course-work and delivery of lectures). In this case, the ramp is a

temporary fix that betrays the silently held desire for disability to either assimilate or disappear without disrupting the ableist norms that undergird the university's functioning.

The Veil of Ignorance: I will define the veil of ignorance in more detail below in my second chapter. However, as a prefatory note, Rawls presents this as a conceptual thought-experiment in his work *a Theory of Justice* that someone is to use when making decisions from a 'so-called' neutral standpoint. I will be making continual reference to the veil of ignorance, especially in chapters 2 - 4, but less as a temporary conceptual thought-experiment, and more as an operative framework that guides institutional decision-making.

Chapter One: The Historical University and Neoliberalism

By the end of this paper, I will have shown that, despite its occasionally stated intentions to the contrary, university policy is guided by ableist principles refracted through a prism of Rawlsian equality and neoliberalism that prioritizes inclusion on the basis of productive cooperation. In this chapter, I demonstrate 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 Historical University

To understand how the contemporary university structure is composed and the role eugenics plays in its functioning, it is necessary to contextualize what I've coined 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 Dolmage identifies, there is a historical relationship between the university and the asylum (or similar institutions); the two were almost always constructed in close proximity to each other. "The asylum schools," he writes, "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 were also necessary to increase the elitism of universities. 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 literally 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, have discovered unmarked gravesites of asylum patients on their land or mere miles away from their campuses (50). This evidence is not only an insight into the dark history of asylums but also the eugenic history of academic institutions well-practiced in the erasure of unfit subjects.

The university's connection to the asylum is merely the tip of the eugenic iceberg, since its inception, the university has been a breeding ground for eugenic policies and thought. . 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 as fit and exclude whoever is deemed as unfit (McWhorter 2009). The exclusion of the unfit historically was carried out in far more explicit ways than what is seen in contemporary society, often going beyond merely being shut out from certain spaces or opportunities, and was carried out through more invasive and sinister motives to work towards elimination of undesired characteristics. The medicalization of disability (depicting disability as something to be cured) was inherently linked to eugenic ideals of desirable versus undesirable. Seen as the latter, disability was studied and disabled people subjugated by institutions (including the university) for the purposes of eradicating the disability.

Historically, eugenics has been implemented through explicitly discriminatory policies, such as segregation laws against African Americans or forced sterilization of Indigenous and disabled people (McWhorter 2009, 203). In contrast to these more obvious forms of eugenics, many institutions today, including universities, perpetuate concealed eugenic logics. Nevertheless, these logics remain "baked in" to the institution, undercutting otherwise, well-intended efforts to improve access. Consequently, Universities function almost exclusively

on the medicalized notion of “cure” which views disability as a problem to eliminate, rather than a socially mediated condition.

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 the ‘good’ produced by academic labor. Though, in theory, the university appeals to numerous values (education, altruism, the pursuit of truth and knowledge, etc.), the pursuit and maintenance of prestige has become an increasingly central priority (sources). Prestige is necessary for maintaining the elite image of universities as “educating the best social and intellectual sections of the nation” (Alemu 2018, 215). As universities have felt it necessary to maintain and pursue prestige, they have also needed to exclude whoever did not improve their prestige or hindered their elite status in any way. Consequently, those described as unfit were deemed as inferior and undeserving of that education.

It emphasizes this eugenic idealized view of what human traits one should encompass: fully abled, white, heteronormative. The term “historical university” in this context does not look to describe the inception or origin of how universities came to be. What I intend to describe and emphasize when referring to the historical university is how it underwent a transformation of colonial and eugenic ideals from its original intention of knowledge sharing. Universities and hubs of knowledge were created for the preservation and sharing of ideas, thoughts, and procedures. The earliest of higher learning institutions within Greece, Africa, the Middle East, and Medieval Europe believed “the goal of higher education and 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” (Alemu 2018, 213). Within the 19th and 20th centuries, universities started to shift their focus to commodifying

knowledge and elitism, making it unattainable for those deemed unfit. Universities began to prioritize commodities, competition, profit, and prestige (Alemu 2018, 216) which is why they shifted to being institutions dependent on eugenics and exploitation of the disabled body. Thus, the historical university is what higher education institutions came to be when co-opted by exclusionary eugenic notions.

Understanding Neoliberalism

Having contextualized the historical university, we can now explore the consequences of neoliberalism upon the persistence of eugenics in post-secondary education. Neoliberalism, in its simplest sense, typically refers to a collection of policies developed in the seventies aimed at deregulation of the market favoring business and corporate endeavors. 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 is thus more than particular 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. For example, access is valuable only insofar as it provides economic opportunities for industries. Effectively, neoliberal policies shift financial responsibility solely to the individual instead of sharing that responsibility as a collective society. 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 were 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 values, like eugenic values, might not always be explicitly stated, but seeps into the 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 eugenic thought and ideologies that benefit the white, able-bodied individual that can physically and mentally perform to the ideal standards, effectively deeming marginalized communities and 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 is what drives this system to be market focused by privileging activities coded “masculine” or “white” over those coded “feminine” and “black” (Fraser 2000, 118). Similarly, I argue that these neoliberal structures commit economic subordination by privileging affluent able-bodied students over economically disadvantaged students with disabilities.

Neoliberal policies can co-exist with rhetorics of inclusivity and diversity, especially in a country such as Canada that enshrines multiculturalism as a goal to be achieved. Despite the appealing rhetoric, promoting diversity is not the ultimate intention of neoliberal policies and ideology, it is motivated by economic prosperity. Dolmage perfectly summarizes how 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” (2017, 139). He goes on to

articulate that “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 the interests and wills of corporations to the neglect of disabled individuals.

Neoliberalism in Universities

At institutions, such as the University, when accommodation comes at the cost of profit, that accommodation and accessibility will be neglected, pursuant to neoliberal values. 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 penetration and perfusion of neoliberal ideology throughout the university institution. 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 exchange of ideas (Brown 2017; Washburn 2008). The neoliberalization of the university reduces opportunities for collaborative research to a battleground of competition that extracts innovation and the exchange of knowledge for profit and prestige. Consequently, the University's primary goal has become prestige and recognition on national and international rankings and not the quality of the education or experiences available to students.

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 write, “within education, 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). The authors remark that, as a consequence, “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 as a result of 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

As an institution, Universities embody principles and deep-rooted histories founded upon eugenics. Even today, as Dolmage observes, “we continue to actually build universities in service of eugenics, lifting some bodies upwards towards privilege upon the footings of segregation and oppression” (Dolmage 2017, 105). Present day mechanisms of segregation and exclusion may not be explicit but rather 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 intention. Segregation manifests in the ways we physically build our campuses to literally and metaphorically uplift individuals deemed worthy of an education by creating an environment in which success comes from “stepping” upwards academically and physically in ways that exclude people with disabilities. This leaves disabled bodies dormant and unable to advance physically, academically, or socially on campuses.

For an astute theorist such as Dolmage, the use of steep steps in the architecture of universities perfectly evidences 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 despite the fact that 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. It seems as though, regardless of the architectural style(s) of a campus, steep steps are integral” (2017, 103). Steep steps physically prevent people with disabilities from accessing the institution, but the metaphor also “puts forward the idea that access to privilege is a movement upwards – only the truly ‘fit’ survive this climb” (Dolmage, 2017, 103). Again, steep steps are just an 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 very much 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 are literally and figuratively 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 disabilities, erecting the modern equivalent of the physical gates that marked early universities and asylums. Indeed, as campus security becomes an increasing concern, it is clear that almost anyone except disabled students are able to access the institution. Today’s gates, though not often physical, continue to present new challenges and obstacles to participation and access.

It is here (with regards to infrastructural design) that 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 spaces, while keeping them out of others, reinforcing the eugenic process of separating ideal traits from unwanted traits. Dolmage notes that 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” (2017, 3). Accordingly, the disabled student is a disruptive presence to the university 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 which was often 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.

Neoliberalism transforms the university by converting non-market values into market values which are then reproduced through the transmission of neoliberal ideology to how individuals may be expected to deliver based on productivity as opposed to viewing individuals within the university as learners, researchers, and contributors. Namely, the neoliberalized university sees students as consumers and researchers as labourers who produce intellectual capital and prestige. As highlighted numerous times thus far, eugenics, neoliberalism, and commodification are heavily intertwined in the university structure. The steep steps metaphor further ties together these notions, emphasizing the connections between productivity-driven commodification and eugenics. According to eugenics, able-bodiedness is the only way to contribute to the neoliberal economy and be seen as capable. Steep steps mark one way that disabled people are excluded from the university strictly because they are considered incapable of contributing to the university’s productive economy. According to Dolmage, “historically, steps were also closely associated, eugenically, with cognitive levels and forms of work. Thus

these steps also classed citizens and linked their value to labor-output” (Dolmage 2017, 103). Universities often operate and make decisions based on economic and labour-output return, i.e., research that contributes 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 (prestige and research output).

Neoliberalism and Cost-Benefit Analysis

Within institutions, neoliberalism serves as a justification for how services and/or products may be offered or distributed. In making decisions, benefit needs to outweigh or remain to the same level of cost for it to be a worthwhile endeavor. Universities employ this logic when considering what accommodations or support services they can or are willing to offer to the student. Oftentimes this comes to the detriment of the learner as it limits what accommodations they 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” (Guo 2014, 484). The implications of this use of cost-benefit analysis will be explored further in the following section, but it's acknowledgement is essential when discussing neoliberalism. One historical example to understand the measures taken for cost-benefit is when universities began to offer grants for disabled students.

University aid and accommodation in general was not taken seriously until the return of injured and disabled veterans after the First World War. This was due to the introduction of disabled student grants in 1918 to support disabled veterans who wanted to complete their

education after the war. The government viewed its sponsorship of disabled veterans as a cost-saving measure, front loading massive costs to assist disabled students with the goal of graduates being able to be reintegrated into society where they would “contribute” to the economy. Instead of disabled veterans becoming what the government considered burdens, by being educated and employed, the government would ultimately reap more benefits in the long run. Governments wanted to lift and shift the responsibility of financial care and independence back to the people it found disabling its financial and social systems. It was merely a way for them to reduce costs in the long run by offering financial support for disabled veterans to go back to school so that the state would not have to support the veterans and their families for the long term.

The neoliberal attitude towards education within our current day structures determine how we choose to fund our educational institutions or access the amount of aid given to disabled and marginalized students. The lack of appropriate funding due to this cost-benefit analysis approach results in post-secondary institutions that are physically, socially, and academically unable to accommodate disabled people and conceptualize and accept new waves of academic thought advocating for the advancement of disability justice and equity beyond solely viewing disability with a medicalized framework. Disability ways of knowing are viewed as less than or illegitimate forms of research and contributions to overall understandings of disability which effectively alienates both the disabled student and academic within the institution.

Autoethnographic Account

As I researched and wrote this chapter the connections and experiences within my own campus flooded my mind. To start, the asylum as a mirror-image to the university serves as an interesting

comparison for positive and negative eugenics. Both styles of institutions bar people out, whether it be keeping in those with a perceived lack of ability to be integrated into society or the elite segregating themselves from the unworthy. It is a way to concentrate the unfit and the fit into their own institutions, separated from one another. A practice that supports negative eugenics within the asylum and positive eugenics within the university. In my everyday commute in and around campus, I see elements of this ideological practice embedded within the structure of the campus at the University of Alberta.

Our buildings are designed without disability in mind, the large ornate doors are not able to be fitted with automatization, which in some instances would not even make a difference since there are stairs at those entrances. These stairs, doors, and gates are structured similar to how asylums were built. Extravagance and exclusion are pinnacle to design in asylums and universities. One could argue our inclusionary ideals have progressed to include more marginalized individuals, the physical structure does not follow suit, keeping mainly physically disabled individuals out of these buildings. The steep steps metaphor and gates discussed by Dolmage are evident on our campus, where most buildings only have one entrance that is accessible to me. I am barred from entry in ways a fully abled student is not, and oftentimes it is the case where those entrances are blocked by construction or the accessible features have broken down, further showing how the university shuts out disabled students.

As I continue to write on the eugenic and later neoliberal influences upon higher education I couldn't help but think about how university institutions and hubs of knowledge came about and the purposes that they served. Thoughts immediately raced to the creation of the first university in Morocco and knowledge keeping hubs like The House of Wisdom (Arabic: بيت الحكمة), also known as the Grand (public) Library of Baghdad, in present day Iraq and the library

of Alexandria in present day Egypt. Questions began to flood my mind as I wondered about the point of transformation from universities and similar institutions being used for the advancement and education of individuals to institutions that have been co-opted with colonial and eugenic ideals. In which we saw post-secondary institutions evolve into hubs for the elite to segregate themselves while building institutions like the asylum to mirror that separation to study the disabled body, to maintain the eugenic necessity for a cure.

Neoliberalism is the ideology that continues and reinforces the values and practices of the historical university. Neoliberalism puts a greater emphasis on how the student or instructor can benefit the university and bring them maximum profit, outright creating and maintaining an environment where different learning needs are prioritized. Instead, these diverse needs are calculated against a cost-benefit analysis approach in order for the university to maximize its profits. In addition, atypical bodies and disabilities in general are seen as a liability because of the compulsory able-bodiedness and production outputs expected of individuals in the university. The production outputs and research is deeply connected to the rankings and prestige of the university so the university forces unattainable standards within the disabled community with no regard for the diversity of needs and accommodations potentially necessary for those standards to be met, reinforcing the notion disabled people cannot contribute academically.

Chapter Two: Rawls

Having conceptualized the historical university as an originally eugenic institution that exploited mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion to the benefit of the able-bodied researcher (and to the disadvantage of the disabled researched), I will now critically engage political theorist John Rawls's use of personhood and the veil of ignorance in his theory of justice as fairness, revealing the problematic assumptions underlying his notion of equality and how this notion has seeped into the university. I will show how the conjoining of Rawlsian equality with neoliberalized eugenics creates a space whereby the disabled are invisibilized as non-contributing members of the research community.

American political philosopher John Rawls is best known for having formulated what an ideal and stable society should look like and how it should function in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice* (1991). He outlines his principles of justice which suggest that:

- (1) Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.
- (2) Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
 - (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and
 - (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity (266).

Essentially, his two principles suggest that first, each person should have as many basic liberties as possible so long that each person is granted the same liberties. And second, inequality in society is permitted so long as benefits can be offered to those most disadvantaged and they are provided the same level of opportunities despite the inequalities. Though this sounds good in

theory, disability is persistently excluded from Rawls's considerations of the ideal society. Stacy Clifford (2011) refers to this as Rawls's epistemological disavowal of disability, and argues that this is not incidental to Rawls's theory of Justice, but rather grounds his conceptualization of "justice as fairness."

The veil of ignorance (118), also referred to as the original position (15), is an essential philosophical device to Rawls's theorization. In brief, the veil of ignorance is a thought-experiment one undertakes when deciding on what principles of justice should be selected for society (12). In this idealized decision making process, individuals in the position to make decisions (the original position) should do so from behind a veil of ignorance. Meaning that, their decisions are based on the 'greater good' of society, rather than factors that may influence their decisions in societal structures such as race, gender, and ability, because the veil of ignorance does not permit those individuals in the original position to see those factors (13). For Rawls and supporters of Rawlsian thought, the veil of ignorance is seen as the most fair and objective way for decisions and policies to be made. Those in the original position do not know where they'll end in society, nor do they account for where those they are representing will end up. This 'blind' approach to decision making is what Rawls suggests leads to policies that are for the benefit of the greater good.

I want to engage critically with the fact that Rawls continuously excludes disability from considerations under the veil of ignorance. With other identity factors, like race or gender, he suspends them temporarily. The concept of the veil of ignorance in decision making is meant to construct a foundation for a fair society, regardless of where individuals end up and what identities they may hold. Rawls is not advocating for a society without diversity, yet he consistently draws the line at disability. As I will discuss below, the problem is not necessarily

the veil of ignorance as a theory but in how Rawls determines who counts as a cooperating member of society.

Rawls's View on Disability

Rawls's theory of justice is an *ideal* theory of justice. Amber Knight defines ideal theory as "a theory that is constructed through abstraction...to make social reality appear simpler than it actually is" (2020, 373). While simplification can be disadvantageous, scholars (e.g. Charles Mills 2005) argue those advantages come at the cost of significant distortion. In "Disabling Ideal Theory," Knight argues that in the case of Rawls's justice as fairness, ideal theory distorts political reality and often misconstrues the lived experiences of disabled persons. Namely, Rawls's theory of justice is 'idealistic' because it abstracts away from an overly complex (i.e., real) social context to produce a simplified version of society to be analyzed. Crucially, disability is one such over-complication for Rawls. Though some scholars attempt to reconcile Rawlsian political theory with disability (Pendo 2003; Richardson 2006; Brighthouse 2001), the place of disability within Rawlsian theories of justice are not minor concerns, or oversights, but constitute persistent disruptions to his system, something Rawls himself was well aware of (Nussbaum 2009, 333). Moreover, two of Rawls's most prolific contemporaries, Amartya Sen (2011) and Martha Nussbaum (2007), have criticized Rawls's theory of justice precisely on the grounds that it is inherently incapable of accounting for disability.

Within the context of Rawls's theory, abstraction (simplification) is used to hypothesize a highly idealized and neutral subject position – the original position – from which normative principles can be deduced. From behind the veil of ignorance, subjects are ignorant of their race, gender, socio-economic status, and religious affiliation. From this position, the idea goes, people

would be inclined to select the principles of justice that Rawls proposes will best guide his society. Notably, disability is intentionally excluded from this list. For Rawls, disability is not a social matter, but a disadvantage of a different kind entirely. He clarifies this position in *Political Liberalism* explicitly putting “aside for the time being these temporary disabilities and also permanent disabilities or mental disorders so severe as to prevent people from being cooperating members of society in the usual sense” (1996, 20). Rawls defends this decision on the grounds that “while we begin with an idea of the person implicit in the public political culture, we idealize and simplify this idea in various ways in order to focus first on the main question” (20). This is precisely the sort of move that defines ideal theory. Ideal theory naturalizes the exclusion of disability by consolidating a normal, able-bodied, subject. Rawls’s theory of justice is explicitly *not* for the disabled, their status is effectively suspended – to be decided at a later date. However, as many have noted (Clifford 2011; Nussbaum 2007; 2009; Sen 2011; Knight 2020), this deferral is permanent, the disabled are *never* factored into the calculations that determine an ideal society, they remain a nuisance for Rawlsian social theories. There is no room in Rawls’s ideal society for full disabled persons.

Much of the reason for this continuous deferral of disability arises from Rawls’s conception of personhood. Rawls writes that “since ancient Greece, the concept of the person has been that of someone who can take part in, or play a role in, social life, and hence who can exercise and respect its various rights and duties” (2001, 29). As Stacy Clifford observes, “in these passages, Rawls’s person is cooperative, social, and cognitively sophisticated” (2011, 5). In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls also writes that “persons as citizens have all the capacities that enable them to be cooperating members of society” (1996 20). To this, Knight remarks that “disabilities clearly do not qualify for the usual sense of cooperation.” Here is where we can see

the similarities between Rawls and neoliberalism. It is true that Rawls is not often considered a neoliberal. Yet, I argue Rawls's conceptualization of personhood shares clear resonances with neoliberal ideology which values persons insofar as they are productive members of society.

According to Clifford (2011), Rawls makes two disavowals with regards to disability: first he conceptualizes personhood in such a way that invariably excludes the disabled; second, he brackets disability from consideration when behind the veil of ignorance, the original position from which the guiding principles of an ideal society will be drafted. This "epistemological double disavowal" is, at best, counter-productive. as Knight points out (2020), because the exclusion of disability from the original position is not as neutral as it appears. All that remains is the idea of disability as imagined by the able-bodied subject, which is not as neutral as Rawls's pretends it is in his theory of justice. Knight argues this is because able-bodied people are historically poor at understanding life with disability (2020, 377-8). People are likely to take the medical perspective to disability, seeing disability as something medicalized and, curable rather than social and political. Rawls does not challenge this but reinforces this perception. Clifford goes further arguing that "Rawls's original position marks disability as naturally deficient and pitiful" (5).

Ultimately, disability is not just deferred in Rawls's theorization, it is foundationally excluded (Clifford 2020). Disability is consistently erased: from citizenship, the original position, and existence (19). Behind Rawls's conceptions of personhood and exclusion of disability from the original position lies the eugenic assumption that people with disabilities are something exceptional and a burden to the norm. Rawls's would-be ideal society is ableist insofar as he "presumes that human beings are in full health and perfectly capable of walking, seeing, hearing, and exercising reason, and then arranges human affairs to accommodate and

reward these traits" (Knight 2020; summarizing Campbell 2009). Disability is figured as something regrettable, something to be erased. In *A Theory of Justice*, after an extended discussion concerning how the "difference principle" can redress inequality, Rawls notes that his discussion up to that point has not considered the possibility that a society may intervene into "nature" to over time reduce the need for redress. At this point, Rawls writes that for a society willing to go to such measures "it is possible to adopt eugenic policies, more or less explicit" (1999, 92). Although stating that he "shall not consider questions of eugenics" he adds "it is also in the interest of each to have greater natural assets... parties want to insure for their descendants the best genetic endowment (92)" He continues,

Thus over time a society is to take steps at least to preserve the general level of natural abilities and to prevent the diffusion of serious defects... I mention this speculative and difficult matter to indicate once again the manner in which the difference principle is likely to transform problems of social justice. We might conjecture that in the long run, if there is an upper bound on ability, we would eventually reach a society with the greatest equal liberty the members of which enjoy the greatest equal talent. But I shall not pursue this thought further (92-3).

The eugenicist's ideal society where disability is erased resonates with follows explicitly from Rawls's theorization. The eugenic premises and potential of Rawls's theory of justice is not left to the imagination but stated outright by Rawls.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that Rawls does at times differentiate between "mild" and "severe" disabilities. Those disabilities that Rawls would consider mild are "above the line," meaning they possess the "minimum essential capabilities required to be a normal cooperating member of society" (1996, 183). In the course of Rawls's subsequent theorization, his main focus are those lying above the line, or those who fall temporarily below the line since it is only, as Rawlsian scholar Henry Richardson (2006) writes, "these people we might realistically try to restore to cooperative membership in society" (2006, 426). The severely disabled on the other

hand, per Richardson, “refers to those permanently below the line” (426). In the end, the inclusion of mild disabilities in Rawls’s updated theory of political liberalism does not counter the eugenic tendencies in his work since the permanently disabled are perceived as incapable of contributing to society. The permanently disabled remain an exception for Rawls, one to be invisibilized and (with time) removed if possible.

Education

In the context of Rawls’s theory, the veil of ignorance is used as a conceptual thought experiment, but I argue that the aforementioned implications of the ‘original position’ constitute a more general framework embraced by the public at large. Namely, the medicalized interpretation of disability, the exceptionality of disability, and the underlying desire to ignore (if not outright erase) disability that follows from the premises of the veil of ignorance describe what is perceived as logical and common sense. In other words, Rawls presents a problematic view of disability in his notion of the original position as much as he re-presents pre-existing attitudes held by broader society. As Clifford writes, “Rawls’s treatment of disability mirrors and cements society’s own anxieties about who does and does not belong within society” (2011, 1). This goes for the university as well. Within the context of the post secondary institution, the veil of ignorance is not merely a hypothetical theory but portrays how these institutions operate. Any time that the university disregards disabled students from consideration in decision making, it is utilizing the Rawlsian ideals that inform the veil of ignorance. For example, EDI initiatives often try to come up with inclusive policies that may go to benefit those of specific minorities within the University (e.g., race, gender), yet disability is rarely (if ever) incorporated into these decisions. This is one way in which disability is not taken into consideration from behind the

actual use of the veil of ignorance in universities. Universities already operate behind a “veil of ignorance” complete with all the incumbent consequences that entails. I argue that the veil of ignorance is a framework actively being used to engage in resource distribution and policies across institutions. However, by not separating the veil of ignorance from the idealized society it was originally contextualized under, Rawls’ notions of disability permeate understandings of inclusion and justice. The university holds the same Rawlsian ideals surrounding disability as they exclude and alienate disabled people, depending on if they consider them cooperating and contributing members of their campuses. The university approaches disability similarly to Rawls on the grounds of cooperation. For the university, cooperation comes by complying with the university structure both physically and academically. A student in need of accommodations is inherently perceived as unable to contribute within the system, and the extent to which a student is afforded accommodations depends on the predicted value of their potential contributions. Therefore, insofar as university’s operationalize Rawls’s veil of ignorance in decision making, a student with a mild or temporary disability is considered to still be a cooperating member, whereas a severely or permanently disabled student would not be wanted on campus.

This Rawlsian understanding of disability becomes an issue as post secondary institutions determine their resource distribution and policy making. The people that hold influential, high power roles make decisions from the original position, behind the veil of ignorance. They want their decisions for the student population to be beneficial for the greater good of the university so they (ideally) do not consider the particular identities of students (their race, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status, etc.) or where these students may end up after they graduate. However, disabilities never factor into these administration decisions, as they never did for Rawls, and (also like Rawls) this disavowal implies an idealized normal student body that does not include

disability. In theory, the veil of ignorance leads to decisions (such as the regulations of funding, accommodations, and infrastructure) that will benefit students who are the least advantaged. However, the students most in need of such resources or policies, who are actually the least advantaged, are never considered in the decision making process to begin with, and are therefore excluded from the university.

Autoethnographic Account

I was first introduced to John Rawls in my political science 101 course, where we explored the dynamics of his conceptual thought-experiment - the veil of ignorance - informing his social contract theory. For me it was this conceptual thought-experiment of the veil of ignorance that set Rawls apart from the other social contract theorists, such as Hobbes and Locke, because unlike traditional contract theorists, Rawls's thought experiment is not meant to provide the reasons for which people will enter into society, but rather goes further to imagine an "ideal society." As we were going through Rawls's thought experiment and suspending different identity factors for decision making processes, exploring different principles from different vantage points, I realized that disability was not one of the possibilities covered in the veil of ignorance. As I learned, disability is not considered from behind the veil of ignorance, nor is it significantly considered by Rawls at all. When I inquired about this further, the instructor remarked that this was a genuine concern amongst scholars (especially Martha Nussbaum) that I should continue to investigate.

Why was this? Why was the exclusion of disability not seen as blatantly by others? I think there are a few reasons for this. First, would be the broader disavowal of disability that plagues our academic disciplines (critical disability studies is still not included in most syllabi). Second, a

cursory engagement with Rawls does not immediately reveal the extent to which he disavows disability, as who he considers part of his ideal society is found in other works than a Theory of Justice. The extent of Rawls's ableism becomes clearer the more he wrote.

I quickly realized that many things that are presented as universal, or aspire to universal inclusion (groups, policies, public infrastructure), overlook disability. Even where other identities are considered, the inclusion of disability is rarely part of the original intent or design. I have been involved in decision making processes when disability is not considered. For example, I was sitting on the council of student affairs and a representative from the University bookstore came to present us a model where students would pay an undecided flat rate fee and this fee would create an open-access library. Whether you are taking one class or multiple classes, or if the materials in your class are provided for free or must be paid for, it's all covered by the same flat fee. I asked the representative whether the textbooks would be available in alternative formats, since some people require a physical textbook, or alternative format (you can't read braille if it's digital). The response I was met with was "hmmm, I hadn't thought of that" and "would you be willing to work with me on this?" "I'd love to run some other accessibility concerns by you." "Of course," I told him, but I never heard from him again; luckily the proposal failed (it would have been disadvantageous for most students).

The textbook proposal essentially tried to provide a universal solution, much like the veil of ignorance, in that anyone would be able to access and use the textbooks regardless of socio-economic class, course load, or specific discipline, for a cheaper flat fee than students would normally pay for their textbooks. As usual though, the needs of disabled students were not taken into account when designing this universal model. This represents the similarities between the Rawlsian ideals behind the veil of ignorance and the university where both neglect disability

as part of the imagined ideal society. In my experience, the university is always acting in the interests of an ideal student subject in a way that is presented as non-discriminatory, but is always able-bodied. This can be seen in policy, infrastructure, knowledge distribution and making, and the way courses are taught and evaluated.

Chapter Three: Ableism in Education

Based on the prior discussions on neoliberalism and the Rawlsian influence in post-secondary institutions, it is no surprise that ableism exists within education that deeply affects how disabled students access knowledge and experience at university. From this point forward, I treat the veil of ignorance not as a conceptual thought-experiment but as an operative framework that the post-secondary institution uses to decision-making. By this I mean that the university follows Rawls in ignoring disregarding the disabled as part of the ideal society (institution). The university's ideal student is one that is able-bodied (including all ethnicities, Socioeconomic backgrounds, religions, etc.). In the Rawlsian society, from behind the veil of ignorance, all identities are possible, except for disability. Likewise, a student can fall into any identity category and still be included in the university's decision making process, as long as they are not disabled. In what follows, I will show how this institutionalized veil of ignorance negatively affects disabled students.

In this chapter, my intention is to shed light on more concrete issues and examples of the problems facing disabled students in the education system. I will describe how a cost-benefit analysis is used, as well as a merit-based system which dictates who is worthy of accommodation based on the chances of a considerable return on investment. Cost benefit analyses are used to calculate risk and rewards. 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 the society and cooperation, pace Rawls, is the ability to perform at

a standard that is prescribed by a person who is not not impaired, and that merit is determined based on how much you give in return. Within a societal context 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, 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 knowledge and achievement of disabled people is 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.

In this chapter I will discuss the specific issues with accommodations, considering the setbacks and nuances beyond a lack of funding. I will use dictated response, extended time, and Alternative-to-print Format as examples in this discussion as well as the issues facing the process in gaining access to accommodations. I want to unpack these issues because in doing so, it will reveal that accommodations serve more than just disabled students and breaking down barriers to accommodations benefits the greater university student body. Based on these findings, I will demonstrate how there is an inherent gap in the quality of education between able and disabled students as a result of these failures in accommodations and ableist notions that group disability into one homogenous category. I will conclude by emphasizing the value of disability within academia before speaking on my own experiences with accommodations in university and reflecting on this chapter.

Merit and Cost-Benefit Analysis

One way that post-secondary institutions are ableist is in the emphasis placed on merit. Namely, that students are assumed to deserve the recognition (through awards and grades) they receive as a result of having earned them 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 have to worry about external factors that would affect the outcome of their merit, such as 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, where their efforts are devalued since they depend on more resources to reach levels of contribution comparable to other students. This notion, fueled by neoliberal attitudes towards productivity, feeds into a cycle wherein universities resist providing accommodations. 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; for example, in prestige. At the same time, students who utilize accommodations are discredited for their achievements making it seem as though they are less meritorious and thus less likely to be afforded accommodations or funding in the future. The resultant cycle ultimately traps disabled students at the bottom of the institutional hierarchy.

This unfortunate cycle is how cost-benefit analysis functions within post-secondary institutions. The use of cost-benefit analysis by the post-secondary institution is used to determine the likelihood on 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). If no value is anticipated then

such an accommodation is denied on the basis of the accommodation being too costly. Those students who can not participate to the same extent as able-bodied students, face substantially more obstacles, and often lack appropriate economic and educational support will ultimately slip through the cracks. What the institution fails to recognize is 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 and Thurlow 2004). Next I will demonstrate how Rawls's conceptual thought experiment is transformed to a tangible set of decision making practices that ultimately leads to outcomes that exclude matters of disability, accessibility, and accommodation from consideration. The first administrative barrier I deal with is funding.

Funding

There are several examples of different forms of accommodations or distribution of funding that are not adequately provided to the students who need them. To end this chapter I will speak to my own experiences with this, but for now I would like to highlight how neoliberal influences can be seen in grant funding for disabled students in Canada. Shanoudo and Spagnuolo (2021) write, "Neoliberal efforts at restructuring disability-related educational funding in Canada have created severe barriers for disabled students accessing higher education" (549). These restructuring efforts aim at reducing available funds for supporting disabled students and offsetting most of these costs onto the student. In other words, disabled students (who often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds to begin with) are asked to take on the costs of their own accommodations.

Grants funding for disabled students emerged in Canada after World War I, and expanded in 1938 with the creation of the Dominion-Provincial Student Aid Program. Subsequently, over the last 25 years, various different grants have emerged and been refined to assist disabled students in their pursuit of education (Shanouda & Spagnuolo, 2020, 538). Data acquired by Shanouda and Spagnuolo constructs a timeline on how grant funding has changed from 1995 until 2016. While it may seem that there has been a continual increase in grant funding over the past two decades, “dividing those total [grants] in any given year by the number of recipients reveals how static funding has been over the 20-year history of these grants” (538). Moreover, though funding appears to be increasing, when inflation and the rising costs of new technologies is taken into account, Shanouda and Spagnuolo argue that funding has in reality been decreasing (531). Thus similar to most social services under neoliberalism, funding afforded to disabled students has become increasingly competitive and insufficient.

The approach Canada has to aiding disabled students is not generalized across the country so it is also important to acknowledge funding on provincial levels. For example, in the province of Alberta neoliberal conservative policies have had a huge impact on post-secondary institutions overall (Adkin 2023) and the impacts are only amplified for disabled students. The Alberta united conservative party’s ideological stance of privatization in post-secondary institutions has led to major funding decreases (Johnson 2020). As the 2019 budget declared, “advanced education’s operating expense is budgeted at \$5.1 billion in 2019-20, down five per cent from last year. Operating expenses are reduced 12 per cent over four years to \$4.8 billion by 2022-23” (Government of Alberta 2019, 90). Funding cuts place further barriers on post-secondary institutions in providing essential resources, such as disability support. As a result, the financial burden is displaced onto disabled students, such as when universities

increase tuition to compensate for decreased government funding, or “economize” accommodations (i.e., provide fewer) in an attempt to conserve limited funds. As is common under neoliberalism, responsibility shifts from the institution to the individual. Instead of being provided with the resources necessary to participate in higher education, disabled students are increasingly forced to paradoxically provide their own means of accommodation.

Accommodations

Ultimately, what is needed at universities is a transformation of the way disability is perceived and valued. In the meantime, disabled students are left fighting for specific accommodations. Accommodations that are provided often are merely a band aid covering up a deeper problem because universities do not want to actually fix barriers to accessibility as fixing the problem would require not just substantial amounts of money, but a reevaluation of disability and ableism at the university resulting in a restructuring in how the institution operates. 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 is more than financial. It is deeply rooted in the eugenic and neoliberal structure of post-secondary institutions that views disability as something to be erased. This means that while disabled students advocate for proper accommodations, it is not an issue resolved simply by increasing funding. To make disabled students properly included in post-secondary education would require dismantling the ableist notions that define the historical university.

While students with disabilities benefit from, or simply *need* accommodations 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 and 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 and students who use accommodations for assessments do not gain a considerable advantage (2014). Of the results they evaluated, it is true that in some instances, disabled students outperform their peers (2014, 145), 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. This is odd since many accommodations are not a significant burden on the university's economic resources. Accommodations like dictated response and extended time cost relatively little 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 student's 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 that it will always be sufficient. 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 are capable of completing 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 it is not 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. (sources). At the same time, dictation is more often than not a disadvantage to the student since a dictated response has different expectations than a written response simply by nature. Live, 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 a poorer quality of writing due to shortcomings of technology.

The shortcomings of technology become especially apparent if we consider how education has changed overtime. University education is now largely dependent on digital technology but is still a relatively new development. With the use of digital technology, there are new and evolving accommodations that have to adapt to increasingly integrated technological systems which can present their own set of challenges. For example, proctoring software blocks other accommodation software , having another person present might signal cheating, similarly spasms/ticks, fidgeting, getting up might be misread by the program.

Finally, accommodations include alternative-to-print format (AF), which “generally means converting text to audio using adaptive technology and is frequently recommended for students with vision, reading, or attention disabilities” (Parsons et al 2021, 51). AF also includes alternatives like braille, large print materials, and screen readers. This is an essential resource for many students, and also one that many non-disabled students find generally helpful. This latter point is commonly referred to as the curb cut effect. Though necessary to provide accessibility for people with wheelchairs who cannot make it over the curb to access the sidewalk, curb cuts are a benefit to everyone. The curb cut effect thus refers to accommodations that have an incidentally wider net-positive impact on the community. However, despite this advancement, adaptive technology remains challenging to operate since it does not always function in its intended use (Parsons et al 2021, 51). A reliance on technology can cause issues if that technology fails to function, potentially jeopardizing a student’s ability to complete their work.

Even when students are given access to accommodations, they do not always serve as an exact replication of how able-bodied students experience their learning. In the case of 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 for the downsides of accommodations due to the fact that many institutions only permit usage of some 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 will still exist, so it is important to recognize the inherent advantage of fully abled students even when accommodations are provided. At the end of the day, the university institution, its methods of assessment and content delivery, are developed for able-bodied students to the exclusion of disability.

Access to Accommodations

I have addressed how accommodations themselves are an issue that needs to be addressed, and identified the ways in which ableist notions contribute to the shortcomings of accommodations. Another barrier within the education system regarding accommodations is the process of acquiring them in the first place. 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 access to accommodations worsens barriers and why the accessibility services that exist on campuses further reinforce ableism. There have been many surveys and studies conducted to determine these difficulties. For instance, findings from Toutain (2019) and Burgstahler and Moore (2009) suggest 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 not experts in disability. This is not meant to criticize accommodation advisors as individuals, but these advisors significantly influence the outcome of a student's success in accessing necessary accommodations and more often than not, 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 actually viable accommodations more challenging. These attitudes reflect ableist beliefs and 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 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 be

faced with several more barriers. This is because, 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 also often is 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.

Quality & Homogenous

The gap between the quality of education given to abled students versus students with a disability is very much apparent in our higher educational institutions. Disabled students have varied and sometimes unique circumstances that manifest into the need for accommodations in order to access their education to the same extent as abled students. An example of this discrepancy in quality and the extent of access to education is understood through tuition. Aabled students pay a tuition to the university and, as a result, are supported in their studies; they pay then they receive the instruction needed to succeed in the courses they take in order to eventually

acquire their degree. In contrast, disabled students require additional resources to level the playing field and participate with their abled peers. Disabled students also pay tuition but the instruction they receive is not sufficient to help them succeed as in order to succeed in courses they need an array of accommodations.

This is where the consequences of the veil of ignorance are most pronounced. The Rawlsian double disavowal of disability (which disavows disability from a conception of normal personhood *and* consequently, from its considerations throughout the decision making process), contributes to a neglect of accommodation in education since disabilities are excluded, first from how the 'ideal' student is conceived, and second, from decisions made as though from behind the veil of ignorance. As a result, disabled students are placed into one homogeneous category which fails to recognize the many diverse conditions and disabilities that individuals may be born with or obtain throughout their life. Namely, a disabled student is included in an ideal student body they have already been pre-excluded from. This homogenous view of disability is a contributing factor in the band-aid approach to accommodations, in which university institutions fail to account for the different or unique needs of disabled students, instead trying to apply the same accommodations to them all. Rather than the undesired structurally born out student. This understanding of disability also fails to consider that many accommodations, like the aforementioned AF, are already utilized by non-disabled students. The students who use accommodations do not fall into one homogenous group, they are not even strictly disabled, so a better understanding of the nuances of disability is needed to improve accessibility on campuses. Some may wonder why some attempts at accommodation are made, when the university otherwise intentionally excludes disability. This is a good question, and there are many possible reasons to explain the university's contradictory behavior with regards to inclusion/exclusion.

For instance, despite the university being inherently eugenic and discriminatory, pressure from social activism and economic incentives with the emergence of industries that profit off the disabled student. The key thing for my argument is that even if the university is forced or incentivized to make concessions this does not change its inherently eugenic and exclusionary foundations.

Value of Disability in Academia

Failures to accommodate students with disabilities are a shortcoming of the university institution because it closes off a valuable perspective in academia. People from different cultures, traditions, and backgrounds do contribute indispensable richness to the originality of scholarly thought (Sen 2007). The diverse backgrounds and experiences of disabled people can contribute greatly to academic success and should not be shunned within these institutions. Building up academic contributions from diverse people, which extends to the inclusion of disabled people, also can challenge the foundations of neoliberalism, and the notions that link eugenics with education (Clark 2022).

Autoethnographic Account

The prevalence of the neoliberal market and ideology surrounding the allocation, validity, and access to accommodation is quite jarring. Merit is at the forefront of conversation and your ability and chance for success is analyzed with the cost and benefit of being granted what you need. In terms of merit, it is not the case that people with disabilities want to boast academic accomplishment and are simply denied a platform or recognition, but the grounds of merit are more so based in integrity. When students with disabilities request certain accommodations, they

are denied because administrators claim it violates academic integrity. Furthermore, the weight of cost against benefit greatly impacts what services the university is willing to make accessible and oftentimes that means countering accommodations requests with different options that were not asked for. In my case, one of my biggest requests was for the provision of a scribe and reader to complete work, and instead of providing these necessary accommodations, I was met with pushback and inconsistent claims as to why this could not happen, including violations of academic integrity and barriers in financial costs.

These hold little validity as truthful claims and are perpetuating ableist misconceptions about accommodations. Implying that academic integrity would be compromised if an assistant were to be hired advances the notion that neither my thoughts nor the knowledge I acquire and present through my assignments are my own and that the only way for me to succeed as a student is through the help of someone else which is incredibly ableist in and of itself. Furthermore, the argument citing budget limitations is a frustrating one to hear used when I request accommodations because the university is required to provide the basic needs of a disabled student so that they are able to perform on the same level as their peers under the Alberta Human Rights Act. Another thing to note is that these barriers have persisted only during my time in university as having access to a scribe and reader were accommodations offered throughout my secondary education as a legitimate and effective support.

Within my own personal experience, funding has been scarce and constantly needed to be justified in measuring its effectiveness in relation to its cost. Advisors constantly push for me to use alternative services to a scribe because they deem these services are more justifiable in relation to what I actually need and request. They are always seeking to minimize their involvement in paying or providing for a service, instead expecting the service to be funded by

agencies such as Alberta Student Aid or other non-profits/scholarship entities. The need for a scribe is unjustifiable in their view because there are more cost-efficient solutions that they claim grant me more autonomy. This is ironic because the recognition of my autonomy does not extend to my advocacy and requests for certain accommodations to be put in place. Instead, advisors expect me to confirm to their idea of autonomy or independence that allows them to minimize their commitment and contributions, failing to see independence or autonomy in seeking and obtaining the accommodations I need. Even where accommodation appears as a form of dependence, this actually enables me to act with greater agency than when restricted by ineffective technologies and accommodations that I have been told are suitable for me.

Chapter Four: New Model

I come to the final chapter of this thesis having taken you, the reader, through the historical conceptions of the university and contemporary problems experienced by disabled people. Here I conceptualize a new model of disability that takes into account an often-forgotten layer of how disability is understood by and interacts with institutions. People are gradually starting to think about disability as a social disablement, inherently political, in addition to the traditional medical model, but we seem to neglect the influence that institutions have on how disability is perpetuated, treated, and perceived within our society. In this chapter I will first give a brief overview of the prevailing models of disability after which I will formulate a new institutional model, taking into account the shortcomings or strengths of the aforementioned models to conceptualize a model of disability that focuses on how institutions view disability. By doing this, I hope to fill in the gaps and place a much-needed layer into how disability is understood beyond the medical, social, and political contexts because the institutionalization of disability projects it as something less valuable or in need of fixing.

The medical model

The medical model has its roots deeply planted within post-secondary institutions as it pioneered eugenic ways of thinking. It also views deviant bodies as a problem inherently in need of fixing. The goal under the medical model is “to ‘treat’ the condition and the person with the condition rather than ‘treating’ the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people’s lives” (Kafer 2013, 5). This model has long been the widely accepted outline in understanding disability. It frames disability as a problem with the individual that can, and should, be resolved

through medical intervention. As the name suggests, this model emphasizes the medical perspective and, in a way, dehumanizes the concept of disability by perceiving it only through medicalized language and treatment.

While the medical model may acknowledge eugenic university institutions, it fails to account for ideology and social structures within a post-secondary context which is something I aim to address later on in this chapter.

The social model

The social model seeks to reshape how society views disability from an individual medicalized problem, to considering how society falls short in accommodating and fully accepting disabled people. The social model of disability distinguishes physical impairment from disability as a set of societal and structural inequities. These inequalities prohibit an individual from participating independently within their society, hence recognizing that the solution to disability is not through charity, medical intervention, or pity, but rather through organization for recognized civil rights that address structural oppressions (Shakespeare 2010, 216).

The political-relational model

The political-relational model offers a somewhat middle-ground approach between the medical and social models, recognizing that to claim the medical model is inherently bad is an over-simplification. What should be rejected is the idea that the acceptability of someone experiencing an impairment is for that impairment to be cured. The medical model focuses on eradicating the impairment rather than helping someone live comfortably with it. There can

certainly be space for someone to pursue treatments, if they choose to, but the medical model portrays this as the only option. Eradication of an impairment might not be the goal for some; treatment can just be a method for arriving at a more comfortable place with a disability.

The advantage of the political-relational model is that it affirms the positive aspects of autonomously sought-for treatments, without assuming that disability is inherently something to be cured. In this way a complete rejection of medical intervention can cause new issues to arise. The danger of rejecting the medical model entirely and seeing disability as purely a social construct, is that some impairments can be treated. Just as addressing cultures and ideologies of ableism can reduce the negative effects of disability, so too can pursuing treatment and medicine. The political-relational model “can be reframed to focus less on the individual experience of disability—or imagined experience of disability—and more on the political experience of disablement” (Kafer, 2013, 9). It insists upon the political dimensions of disability and specifically calls for a renewed critique of medical approaches to disability. It acknowledges that everything – the social and the medical– are inherently political. Since the political-relational model acknowledges, critiques, and identifies the strengths in the medical and social models, it takes a more middle ground approach in framing disability. But this model also goes much further, at its core, the political/relational model recognizes that disability is first and foremost relational. This applies even when the context appears as more than relational, i.e., economic, or material. If relations are ultimately what grounds disability, this means that the production of disability can be contested (St. Pierre 2019, 33). Unlike Rawls, and other ideal theorists who conceptualize their ideal societies through the exclusion of disability, the political relational model works towards a just society that includes disability by focusing on the non-ideal, relational ways that disability is excluded and regulated. a

Shortcomings

Starting with the medical model, its shortcomings are that disability is only conceived as a problem that needs to be fixed or cured (Kafer 2013). The medical model ignores other factors that contribute to disablement, simply narrowing its gaze to compulsory able-bodied solutions so that the deviant body is corrected to fit what is considered to be “normal.” With regards to the social model, while this model improves on the medical model by recognizing the way disability is socially produced, it minimizes the significance of real impairments.. Additionally, the social model is correct, disability is certainly socialized, but this view can fail to properly account for the especially significant role institutions play in disablement. Institutions are a particularly powerful agent in the construction of disability.

The matter is complicated when it comes to the political/relational model. Here it is less the model’s shortcomings, as much as shifting its relational mode of analysis to a more specific focus on institutions. According to the political/relational model, the world, subjectivity, and disability are all relationally mediated (St. Pierre 2019, 33). Working from this relational understanding of disability, I view institutions as non-human agents that are part of the participation production of disablement. This is a relational process because, as Kafer argues, anything that we come into contact with is a relation, this goes for human to human contacts, but also human and institutions. When we interact with institutions, the political relational model asks how do different people relate to these institutions? Who were they built for? Who do they welcome? Who target for inclusion and exclusion? As discussed in the first chapter on the historical university, the university was designed for particular uses with ideal subjects (informed by logics of eugenics) in mind. At the same time, this is political because determining who is and

is not considered a ‘normal body’ and thus who is and is not included in the ideal society (as imagined by Rawls or university administrators) is inherently political (34). However, I also argue that institutions are particularly powerful sites of disablement, or particularly strong actors in the production of disablement. This is why a specifically institutionally focused model is necessary that treats the institution as a primary producer of discourse.

The Institutional Model

I acknowledge that disability has been medically industrialized, socially alienated, and politicized but the respective models that I have outlined fall short in addressing how disability can be understood and defined within the particular context of institutions. When discussing my proposed model, I explicitly focus on the post-secondary campus as the institution of analysis because that is the target of this argument. However, the concepts I will outline can be applied to institutions more broadly, such as government bodies and corporations, which can be more closely analyzed in future research.

The institutional model suggests that from the perspective of institutions like the University, disability is primarily a resource to be exploited. Most simply put, institutions prioritize the success of the institution above accessibility, meaning it only tolerates disability if the disabled person is deemed to have extractable value. The institutional model of disability is a lens that is used to view how institutions have contributed to the alienation and degradation of disabled people. Understanding that this model is defining disability through the perspective of institutions, it is distinct from the existing models because of the role of commodification. Through the institutional model, disability is viewed as a commodity ahead of anything else. The employment of cost-benefit analysis of disabled bodies puts institutions in a position to

determine the value of disabled people and decide on incorporation or ostracization depending on where there is more benefit in profit. The view of disability that institutions have is based on the necessity of growth and gains.

The defining characteristic of the neoliberal institution is its exploitation of disability through commodification. Commodification is the only way that disability is included by the neoliberal university. As I argued back in chapter one, the historical university is inherently exclusionary, and wrought with eugenic undertones. This originary condition of the university is in tension with the neoliberal compulsion to commodify anything and everything. Thus the neoliberalization of the university results in an inclusive-exclusion whereby disabled bodies are included as anomalies to be exploited as a site of altruistic charity, medical research, creating and maintaining disability industries and bureaucracies, that place disabled students in cycles of crippling dependency. I will now explain each of these forms of exploitation as they appear within the institutional model.

Though it is possible that universities take measures to improve accessibility out of a genuine concern for disabled students, there are also benefits (prestige, tax cuts, grant-funding) providing incentives for “altruistic” behavior. This is what the institutional model analyzes under the category of charity. Under the medical category, the institutional model examines the commodification of the industry of disability and the use of the disabled body as a site of research and exploitation/extraction. I have two things in mind here: first, a critical awareness of the synergies between accessibility industries (e.g., the provision of specific softwares/hardwares, access tools linked to industries); second, a critique of programs (especially in the medical sciences) that view and use the disabled body as a resource for research. In both cases, the disabled body becomes a site of research and exploitation/extraction. There are entire

assistive technology industries built around accommodation (text-to-speech), and universities expect disabled students to pay into things that don't even work (text to speech, note-taking software, ipads) and when they do give students what they need, use is conditional on the institutions terms, so that they don't go over what they spend.

The administration and exploitation of disability creates a cycle of dependency. Institutions profit on disabled person's dependency, rather than addressing the problems as the disabled community request, disabled persons are forced to enroll in services that don't work, creating a profitable cycle of dependency that forces the student to use things that don't work but work for the institution. The particular student does not matter in this cycle, because they are replaceable/substitutable.

The final concept that is crucial to the critical lens provided by the institutional model is commodification. In many ways commodification is the big umbrella term from which the other terms descend. Commodification is the form of exploitation under neoliberalism; everything follows from the commodification of disability. For example, in the case of a deaf student commodification could take the shape of the software and hardware technologies that the institution forces them to use. The student may also be entered into medical trials (to cure deafness or treat it) and exploratory surgeries. From the perspective of the institution (recall the chapter on the historical university and the historical relationship between the university and the asylum), disability is seen as a burden, yes, but also a possible resource to extract. From the moment a disabled student enters the campus, they are a peculiarity, an anomaly, an exception, an other, to be treated as a case for study. What are the limits and opportunities of the disability? How does the disability fit into the institutional structure? What industries can be drawn upon to provide accessibility? What new bureaucracies and agencies can be created? When students

advocate for their needs, the university gets the credit and prestige for being accommodating. Disabled students enter the university and become a social experiment to launch committees, panels, and bureaucracies that pay staff and administration, and mine the student for their intellectual capital.

Under the guise of inclusivity, institutions employ a discreet way of artificially selecting who is deemed to be of value through the extraction and subjugation of bodies. In this way, the institutional model is distinct from the medical model, which simply faults disabled people and frames them as a problem to be solved. The institutional model outwardly aims to promote inclusivity and acceptance of disability, but at its core is motivated by economic success, which alienates disabled people. Institutions alienate disabled persons because they are expected to conform to certain standards of output and productivity, that, if they cannot meet they become stigmatized as lazy and a burden.

Outwardly, neoliberalism aims to promote diversity, not just within the economy but in greater facets of society. However, this is inclusion of the wrong kind since it is only a matter of how disability is included for the purposes of getting something out of it, not even necessarily pure commodification, but there is always an economic incentive. Disabled people are never included on their own terms, on their own agency, but are expected to conform and contribute to how society sees them as valuable. Disabled students are always restricted to the spaces carved out for them by institutions that can only see them as potential sites for exploitation. But ultimately, the economic factor is what drives this system to be market focused to the extent that it employs standards that alienate non-white, disabled members.

Autoethnographic Account

The exploitation of disability in my case has come through the forms of mining my knowledge and expecting knowledge holders such as myself to share and teach others, ironically under a system that perpetuates the stigmatization and exclusion of disabled students.

For example, once I was approached to record an hour-long video module to be used to train students and staff in the principles of accommodation and EDI. Me, a student that is trapped within a system and largely unaware of the extent to which I am being exploited, agreed to producing the module. Even as I was agreeing to this though, I myself was still struggling to get certain access needs met and to be properly accommodated. An academic mentor suggested that this was a form of exploitation. This was because even as the university was unwilling to accommodate me by offering access needs, they were asking me to educate their staff and other students on the very thing they were denying me, as though approving the accommodation in theory (by letting me educate others about it), while continuing to deny the accommodation in tangible practice. The mentor suggested that I should ask them to provide the accommodations I had sought, or pay me for my time. When I brought this ultimatum to the University administration, I was left with no response. The university completely ignored me and never got back about my accommodations, nor compensation.

Neoliberalism values the self-made entrepreneur; but ironically when I tried to seek fair compensation for my skills and knowledge, the university decided to pass on my contributions. This is because the university saw me as a resource to be exploited rather than a person who should be compensated for their contributions.

Additionally, I along with other crip colleagues was involved in a push for the creation of a council on systemic ableism to address the gaps that the University fails to acknowledge regarding disability and inclusion on campus. The work of the council and the creation of the council itself was the sole place where I felt valued. Yet, the institution repeatedly and consistently fails to implement what we propose.

A final example: earlier this year (October 2023), I gave a speech to the general faculties council in which I provided four principles:

The first principle would be the principle of accommodation as it stands and the way the university has structured the accommodation system. The accommodation system here at the U of A removes autonomy and independence from disabled individuals when advocating for their needs. The U of A is not unique where an accessibility advisor requests a medical letter for your disability and then, based on that letter, they choose from a long list of accommodations, shortlist them into a shorter list and force the student to pick among that short list, even if the accommodation they need isn't on there, or doesn't tend to their access needs. If we are truly committed to equity, diversity and inclusion, students need the ability to advocate for themselves and to choose the accommodation that will tend to their needs. I will give a brief example from my own personal experience, but please do not reduce this message to a singular perspective. This is just to give an example for those wanting to understand better.

I have requested scribing services ever since I started at this university four years ago. The responses I get range from concerns over academic integrity – which is incredibly insulting because I got here on my own merit, I worked hard to get to the U of A, and it's not easy to get through – to “we have budgetary problems and cannot attend to your access needs” to “[the accommodation is] not required,” which legally does not stand because the U of A is responsible for making sure everyone has equitable access to education and for making sure that everyone has their needs met.

The second principle is access. Access is not simply just about accommodations, it's about how we are treated socially in terms of what resources we can access. And it's about the facilities and buildings we access in our day-to-day lives as students and staff members on campus. As of now, the U of A relies too heavily on retrofit designs. Retrofit designs are designs that are implemented after the construction of a building to address a particular accessibility need or concern that was not taken into account. Oftentimes,

these retrofitted designs meet legal standards on paper, but practically, they don't address the actual issue.

An example of this would be the steep ramps in HUB Mall that make it very hard for mobility aids and those with walkers, crutches or wheelchairs to go up and down (because of their steepness). Another example would be elevators. Elevators are usually incredibly small and don't fit the individual with their mobility aid and their backpack. Of course, these are only examples and I might be overlooking other access needs that have sadly been left unmet by retrofit designs.

I would encourage the U of A to implement the principles of universal design, which aim to encompass as many access needs and accessibility points as possible into one design. But even this is only a starting point. Universal design often overlooks the needs of the hard-of-hearing community or the Deaf community. So, I encourage the university to implement universal design elements in the construction, renovation and maintenance of their buildings. But they need to take it a step further and survey the entire campus community to make sure that the access needs that universal design does not address don't fall through the cracks.

The third principle is changing ableist culture and promoting disability inclusion, awareness and culture on campus. Ableism is unconscious and is very much present on campus, whether it be through the events hosted by the university, the Students' Union, other associations, faculties, departments and so on. Oftentimes, events are held in inaccessible places that individuals with a disability cannot access and for which sign language interpreters are often not provided.

One example of an inaccessible event is the poster sales that happen on campus. They are usually held in SUB, on the steps making it impossible for students unable to use those steps to see the posters. If we're truly committed to promoting equity, diversity and inclusion for disabled people, we need to make sure that interpreters are present, that the venue is accessible and that the activities are accessible.

I want to reiterate that for us to change disability culture and the perception of disability on campus, this change also needs to happen within our classes.

As it stands, the U of A primarily views disability through the medical model of disability, and neglects to view disability through the social model of disability, the political-relational model of disability and other lenses of disability. We must stop looking at disability as inherently something to cure, but rather as something that offers a different perspective within society. Critical disability studies and disability knowledge holders all offer unique perspectives on issues within our society and in various disciplines, whether it be the social sciences, the natural sciences, business and more. We must foster disability ways of knowing, because these perspectives enrich academia and provide progressive trajectories to a more just society. This will make campus and the broader society more accessible and welcoming for all.

Within junior-level political science courses, for example, we have weeks dedicated to different marginalized communities. If we are talking about immigration, we'd have classes or weeks that are focused on the struggles and challenges that people of colour face. We highlight the perspectives of feminism, religious minorities and people of colour; but, we tend to neglect perspectives of critical disability studies. So, I call on the institution to integrate these perspectives into their courses, even for a single class session, so that segment of the population is not forgotten and alienated.

The fourth point is for the commitment by the U of A in its entirety, to establish or embed principles of disability justice within each governing council, faculty or committee. I have the pleasure of being an undergraduate representative on the Council on Systemic Ableism, but the responsibility of ableism and accessibility cannot just fall on the shoulders of the members of the council. There needs to be a commitment from the students from the General Faculties Council, from every faculty, department, association and governing body on campus to centre and highlight these principles of accessibility.

If we are truly committed to the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion, we need to say no to ableism, and we need to make sure U of A campuses are accessible for all.

Following the speech I was approached by the administration and thanked for my “courage.” This was meaningful to me, but in the absence of actual change or concrete reflection of my recommendations, this gratitude has failed to materialize as anything other than lip-service.

The point of these anecdotes is to show how I, as a disabled student, only ever have my disability recognized as something to be exploited. Participating on the council on systemic ableism has been one of the most fulfilling and uplifting experiences of my academic career. At the same time, I have been disappointed by the institution's lack of follow-through on implementing the council's advice. In the example where I was asked to participate in the production of an educational module, the institution wanted to use me for legitimacy while ignoring the actual steps that could be taken to improve accessibility. Likewise, my speech was used as an opportunity to platform the institution's inclusivity and efforts to address accessibility, without making any significant changes. In both of these cases, my knowledge and my disability

has been treated as a resource to be mined for the institution's legitimacy and prestige. Real inclusivity is meaningless without follow-through. Accessibility has become a buzz-word signaling an opportunity to the institution for virtuous capitalization.

Conclusion

I started this thesis recognizing that success in academia amongst disabled students is rare and that this was due to a form of institutionally embedded ableism that is historical but remains active in the present structures of post-secondary education. My main argument has been that the ways in which the university not only thinks of disability but structures itself around the disabled as subjects of exploitation is what contributes to the lack of consideration for disability, both within the university's physical structure and social makeup. The university borrows Rawlsian ideals which inform their decision making processes and their employment of the conceptual thought-experiment transforming it into an employable, usable ideology, and not just a thought-experiment.

The new institutional model I have theorized helps in reconstructing disability and ableism within a post-secondary institution by focusing on an often-neglected aspect: how institutions specifically influence the ways in which we view disability. This mainly happens through the exploitative decisions that institutions make by exploiting the disabled subject through medical-scientific research, for the creation and further profitability of industries centered around 'assisting' the disabled (both inside and outside the university structure), or for intellectual capital. In developing this alternative model of disability, I am not discounting other critical models of disability (e.g., social or political-relational), but am building on the insights of these other models while drawing attention to the particular significance of institutions. By

highlighting the significance that institutions play in shaping all facets of society, whether social, economic, medical, or others, we are better equipped to deal with the radical changes that need to be made for disability to truly be accepted and valued for what it is, rather than what it 'ought to be' based on able-bodied standards.

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