Identity & Practice in
Higher Education-Student Affairs

Do Better

Critical Narratives of Disabled Graduate Students in Higher Education

Sarah E. Schoper
Amy E. French

Do Better

This page intentionally left blank

Do Better

Critical Narratives of Disabled Graduate Students in Higher Education

Sarah E. Schoper
Lindenwood University, USA
Iowa Central Community College, USA

Amy E. French
Bowling Green State University, USA

emerald
PUBLISHING

United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83708-735-8 (Print paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-83708-733-4 (Print hardback)
ISBN: 978-1-83708-734-1 (Ebook)

Typeset by TNQ Tech
Cover design by TNQ Tech

About the Cover Image
In 2019, the Disability Pride flag was created as a symbol of disability solidarity, pride, and acceptance. Originally the flag featured zigzag stripes representing how disabled people have to maneuver around barriers they face. However, it was later edited to straighten the stripes and mute the colors a bit so that it would not cause problems for those with visually triggered disabilities. The stripes were also reordered to accommodate people with red-green colorblindness. The creator, Ann Magill, waived copyright so that everyone is free to use it.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

From most theoretical perspectives on disability, it is not possible to understand disability-as-identity without also seeking to understand ableism-as-ideology. Simply put, the act of defining a person as disabled requires an idea of what ablebodiedness and ablemindedness are. Once those ideas are established, a person can be labeled as "other" than ablebodied and/or ableminded. However, even a cursory review of what we mean by ablebodied and ableminded quickly makes clear that these concepts are rooted in the concept of ableism. Ableism, broadly speaking, suggests that designing real and imagined spaces without affordances for disabled people to use them is a politically and socially neutral act and that having a body or mind that is "free" of disability is preferable to being disabled. All that ableism has to say about the world is nothing more than an ideological system built to maintain an inequitable status quo, but it is nonetheless the taken-for-granted starting point from which most of us begin our journeys toward understanding disability. Sarah and Amy's book should be required reading for many reasons, but the first reason that we highlight is their unsparing attention to ableism—both the ableism that they and their participants have experienced in the world as well as ableism that they had to confront in their own understanding of self and society.

Once one accepts the premise that ableism and disability are intertwined, it is also important to recognize how very complicated disability is as a sign and signifier. As a term, disability means everything and nothing, or as we have argued previously, disability is a multivalent concept. It contains multitudes, but its precise meaning can vary from person-to-person, across time, over the lifespan, and among and between environments. Still another way that Sarah and Amy's book is brilliant is in their recognition of the fundamental complexity of disability through the narratives of student lives; this complexity means that we must approach any attempt to understand what disability is and how to support disabled people with flexibility and care. As such, while acknowledging that ableism is first and foremost an ongoing choice to exclude rather than include, this book seeks to call people in through thoughtful examples and by creating the opportunity for structured reflection. The mantra of the book is notably "do better" and not "be perfect." The grace and humility that Amy and Sarah display in sharing their own learning over time and in discussing the experiences of their research participants with nuance is an impeccable encapsulation of the "do better" philosophy.

In this book, and indeed in their scholarship more broadly, Sarah and Amy also make clear that there are profound human stakes associated with the choices we make to reify or resist ableism. They take care to convey disability as a joyous, life-affirming part of many people's disabled lives as well as a deeply frustrating, highly personal part of many of those same lives. But ableism, they are clear, is always the worst. It is the worst when someone is born with a disability apparent from birth and is never able to know a world where their negative experiences of disability cannot be decoupled from broader ideologies of ableism. It is the worst when someone acquires a disability later in life and they must learn (often for the first time) how deeply ableist they have been and still are. And through this all, yet another reason that Sarah and Amy's book is needed is that it makes clear how disability is experienced by a person and the version of ableism-is-the-worst that they encounter is deeply conditioned by their constellation of multiple identities and the intersecting systems of oppression to which they are linked.

They show how this complexity plays out in participant's narratives that are carefully crafted to reflect the real lived experiences of these future and current professionals. First, they introduce disability as part of getting to know each participant. Second, they describe the history and etiology of each participant's disability and then the twist comes: Amy and Sarah take care to separately describe the etiology and history of a person's disability diagnosis. In the world of disability, diagnosis matters a great deal. Access to highly trained, highly qualified diagnosticians is stratified by race, class, and gender. Moreover, what kinds of disabilities these same medical providers recognize in bodies and minds is also structured by what bell hooks has called the white supremacist heteropatriarchy. Ableism is not simply the worst, always; but ableism also shows up in deeply varied and insidious ways as it co-constructs and is co-constructed by interlocking, intersecting systems of oppression.

Finally, Sarah and Amy's book is brilliant for the care that they have for their research participants and for the student affairs profession. These two are student affairs educators through-and-through. Their care for the participants as people first and contributors to a research project second comes through in the way that they think and write about their lived experiences. That care is very much consistent with the way that student affairs educators should approach their commitment to holistic student development and well-being. But if that were the only act of care that motivated this work, it likely would not have resulted in a book like this one. As you read it, you will get the impression that Sarah and Amy would have been just as content talking to lots of interesting students and never writing the book but for the fact that the student affairs profession is not nearly as just, not nearly as inclusive, and not nearly as equitable in its practice as it claims to be in its founding philosophies.

Student affairs is a profession populated almost exclusively by talented, well-meaning, smart people with deep commitments to social justice, but disability is not a major feature of most student affairs prep programs. Disability does not feature prominently in the competencies for the profession, and many student affairs professionals hold ideas that are deeply ableist and antithetical to common principles of accessibility within disability justice communities. Although accessibility is often discussed in student affairs spaces, disability often gets a self-selecting audience—when disability is the topic of conversation, those doing the discussing are usually there because they want to be. Not because disability is discussed at length, in multiple contexts, and all the time. Sarah and Amy provide narratives intended to disrupt the structures of ableism that inform the relative lack of disability talk, and in so doing, they try to set aright a field that has never been as attentive to disability as it should be. By showing how the individual decisions, career choices, and student affairs practice have played out in their own lives and in the lives of the early career student affairs professionals with whom they spoke, they make it clear that we do need changes in how we do what we do, but we also need to change the systems and structures within which these decisions get made. We need to "do better" so that the student affairs profession might "be better," and this book is a tool to do just that.

Ezekiel Kimball,
Interim Dean,
Professor of Higher Education,
The University of Maine, USA

Rachel Friedensen,
Associate Professor,
Leadership and Higher Education,
Saint Cloud State University, USA

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sarah would like to specifically thank Stephen Yokich, Mary Tregoning, Alice Mitchell, John Nathan Salazar, all the students and colleagues who respond with grace and support as she's learned to navigate with disabilities, all the caregivers who believe in her, her writing partner, Amy French, the directorate members of the Coalition for Disability, and her dog, Optimus Prime. Thank you deeply for offering hope and demonstrating love.

Amy would like to uplift Gena Day and Corbin Stewart who exuded radiance throughout their lives by teaching her humility and tenacious friendship. Both of these strong disabled women taught her how to live courageously and unapologetically (albeit in their own spirited ways!) Amy would like to thank Sarah for the invitation to embark upon this book project, her family for always believing in her, her friends for going along with her antics, and her dog pal, Boss Chewy McScruff.

Finally, we acknowledge the additional labor put into this book's creation not only because it was born during a pandemic, but because openly sharing one's experiences can be intense, vulnerable, and taxing. We are grateful for our participants' patience and their willingness to share their experiences with others in the field. The recent pandemic demonstrated how technology can be used to make the educational environment more accessible. We can only imagine that with the rise of artificial intelligence more advancements will be made, yet technology cannot make all contexts anti-ableist. What is needed, is for all of us, to take intentional steps to remove barriers for disabled people.

This project was funded by ACPA: College Student Educators International.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Sarah E. Schoper is an Instructor at Lindenwood University in the Higher Education track of the Educational Leadership master's degree program. She holds a PhD in Counseling and Personnel Services from the University of Maryland- College Park, a Master of Science from Miami University (Ohio), and a Bachelor of Science degree from Texas Christian University. Her research interests include transformative learning, disability experiences, and first-generation college students. Dr. Schoper's teaching areas include student development theory, organizational learning, and practicum/internship experiences. She actively consults about transformative learning, racial experiences and racism, curriculum development, and disability justice.

Dr. Amy E. French is an Associate Professor in the School of Counseling, Higher Education, Leadership, and Foundations at Bowling Green State University. She also serves as the Program Coordinator for the College Student Personnel master's program. Dr. French holds a PhD in Higher Education Leadership from Indiana State University, a Master of Arts from Loyola University Chicago, and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Kentucky Wesleyan College. Her research interests include social justice issues related to race, identity, and disability. Dr. French's teaching areas include student development theory, leadership and administration, and equity and justice. She approaches the field of student affairs with a scholar-practitioner lens.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this book is to provide you, the reader, with narratives from disabled graduate students to help all higher education educators and students recognize ableism and identify ways to redefine the harsh realities experienced by those with disabilities. The participants in this study offer meaningful and rich examples of their lived experiences within and through postsecondary education as they pursued a graduate degree in higher education and/or student affairs. Whether you are involved in a collegiate setting or not, this book offers new perspectives about ways to be inclusive of those with disabilities, whether that be in the workplace, school, community, or at home without relying on accommodations as the sole answer for workarounds.

There is much work to be done around supporting disabled graduate students in the higher education and student affairs arena, whether that be in the classroom, graduate assistantship, practicum, or social settings. This book highlights both the challenges disabled graduate students face in their educational pursuits and offers insights and strategies for how to incorporate more inclusive practices into the whole higher education environment. Often these strategies include minor tweaks to practice such as considering in advance of a meeting how to share information with those in attendance, reaching out to a student who disclosed a disability to understand how a course or process could be accessible to them, speaking up when institutional bureaucracy impedes considerations for reasonable accommodations, and a whole host of other approaches that are discussed.

This book allows you opportunities to find ways to be more inclusive in your practice and daily life. The first part of the title of this book was spoken by a participant who, in a moment of frustration, challenged everyone to "Do Better" because the possibility exists to do just that. We, the authors, accepted this dare to “Do Better” because we, too, have learned a great deal about how to humbly move forward with a commitment to improve the environment. It is important to share that both of us have disabilities, which we discuss below. For now, know that even as disabled scholars who consciously attempted to design an inclusive research study about disabilities, we did not fully anticipate how we would be impacted by this project nor how our participants would challenge us also to “Do Better.” We accepted this challenge and invite you to do the same.

SARAH & AMY’S JOURNEYS

Both of us identify as individuals with disabilities, although we came into our disabilities in different ways. We are also both White women with doctoral degrees who work in higher education. All these identifiers limit and expand the privileges afforded to us within society. We know the intersection of disability and other salient identities can be messy, and we remain committed to uncovering more about disability identity within this book. Just as these courageous individuals—who eagerly responded to our call for participants—shared their powerful narratives, we offer our own narratives about our experiences as disabled scholars.

Sarah’s Story

In January 2015, I woke up with multiple invisible and visible disabilities after having been a fully able-bodied person until that point. Still, I had determination to continue working in higher education. I loved the work I did and knew that I would return to being a successful, if not even better, professional. I just needed to figure out how to maneuver in my environment with my disabilities, which was not easy. I spent my whole first year comparing what I now had to do to what I used to be able to do. I was continually reminded of all that I (self-proclaimed) “lost” when I gained my disabilities. It felt like revictimization every day. Despite feeling extremely alone, I knew others were most likely having similar experiences in higher education. So, at a spring conference, I approached Amy with a research idea.

At the time, my research primarily focused on the experiences of graduate students enrolled in higher education preparation programs given their role in the future of the profession. Additionally, I studied transformative learning, or as I call it, “the kind of learning that sticks with you.” I truly believe that all people are capable of learning and that promoting transformative learning is a primary purpose of higher education. These beliefs lend themselves to the need for me to continually work on my own transformative learning, as well as challenge how I go about partnering with others on their learning journeys. Consequently, as I found myself suddenly experiencing the world with multiple disabilities, I saw how my personal beliefs about being open and inclusive to those with disabilities fell short. In fact, way short. In hindsight, I should have expected that I would need to do work.

At that point, I had spent years as a professional learning about the experiences of those with marginalized identities going through our world and I continue to do so. Yet, disability was not directly on the list of identities I explored. Now, I could blame this on the lack of high-profile folks in higher education with a disability, or at least a lack of those who openly disclose a disability. After all, statistics on faculty and staff with disabilities are hard to find (Schumm, 2022). [According to the National Center for College Students with Disabilities 4% of faculty members are disabled (Grigley, 2017).] I could also point to the structure of higher education, which makes it so that all too often the responsibility of interacting with folks with disabilities belongs to those working in a disability services center (Edelstein et al., 2020; Schoper & French, 2021). However, these rationalizations would also work for many other identities I had tried to understand, so why not disability?

When I pause and really think about it, the truth is that the concept of disability was not something I considered because I did not see it. I was ableist and lived in an ableist world. Ableism is, “a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion of people with disabilities…privileg[ing] temporary able-bodied people and disadvantage[ing] people with disabilities” (Griffin et al., 2007, p. 335). Furthermore, disability was not something elevated within higher education as a problem to be addressed. For example, I knew the low graduation rate of various minoritized racial groups compared to White students across higher education. I also knew the importance of affinity groups and spaces for those belonging to such groups. Likewise, I was aware of the unique challenges of first-generation college students due to my experiences in various professional environments, and my father sharing with me his own experiences. Still, my socialization in higher education conditioned me to contact someone from the disability services office on campus as the expert to accommodate for a student’s disability unless, truthfully, a student disclosed a disability to me that was easy to accommodate. In other words, I did not think about how I could enhance spaces under my influence so that they were accessible from the start. Furthermore, I did not deeply consider the power dynamic involved in disclosure and the role of implicit bias. Now, after acquiring all my disabilities, I can tell you that my “friendly” approach to disability was not enough. I truly began seeing the choice higher education makes to be ableist (Friedensen & Kimball, 2017).

Amy's Story

I was born with multiple disabilities and have no concept of what it would be like to exist in the world as an able-bodied person. Due to the severity of some of my congenital disabilities and the commitment my parents had for me to live life to the fullest, I spent a significant amount of time seeking care at university medical centers as a child. My parents advocated on my behalf from infancy onward and sacrificed a great deal to support me. They also taught me to advocate for myself. Even at the age of five, my mother would not speak on my behalf when doctors asked her questions about how I felt or how my body reacted to a certain treatment or medication. Instead, she redirected the doctors to ask me. Although this proved challenging at times, I learned the importance of describing what I experienced and how to ask questions to understand what the doctors said.

My disabilities do not fit into a box. I describe them as "a little bit of this and a little bit of that" because I have been diagnosed in a myriad of ways based on the type of medical professional treating me or depending upon which medical facility I visited. This continues to complicate my care plan and the acquisition of necessary resources such as physical therapy, braces, or medical equipment because insurance companies approve coverage based on specific diagnoses. The reality of my disabilities coupled with my ambiguous and ever-changing diagnoses informs my understanding of disability.

I agreed to engage with Sarah about the creation of this book because she agreed that we would focus on the lived experiences of disabled graduate students rather than on specific diagnoses. I will not reproduce in my own scholarship the box-like approach US society puts disabled people into using the medical and legal models of disability. In other words, I would not have agreed to work on this project with Sarah if that approach were to have been taken. My resistance to self-identify as a person with a disability is directly informed by my inability to put myself into a category, classification, or a box. For example, I remember being frustrated my senior year of high school when scouting for eligible scholarships. Since many of my disabilities do not fit cleanly within certain diagnoses, I could not apply to scholarships for students who have certain syndromes or diseases. The ambiguity associated with my existence as someone with disabilities remains jarring. I do not fit the medical model accepted by society and due to this reality, I remain hesitant to openly acknowledge my identity as disabled.

I mention the fact that my diagnosis changes based on the medical professional's expertize and their experience treating people with bodies that function outside the norm to problematize the medical model of disability. The medical model of disability relies on a diagnosis from a medical professional. Kimball and Friedensen (2021) point out how this model relies on the judgment of medical professionals and creates room for biases related to race, class, gender, geography, and other social identities (Annamma et al., 2013; Broderick & Leonardo, 2016) to creep in. Due to the emphasis in society on the medical model, I internalized the complexities of my disabilities and resented being called "disabled" for a vast majority of my childhood and into young adult life. I had come to disassociate myself from the word disabled because "dis" did not appropriately describe my spirit nor highlight my abilities. Instead, I perceived the word "disabled" to focus on limitations, exclusion, and ostracization. Now I understand that disability is both a health factor and socially constructed (Kimball & Friedensen, 2021).

When I moved to college, I embraced certain aspects of my disabilities, but made sure to demonstrate my independence. For example, when my peers nominated me for homecoming court, I was recovering from a major foot surgery and was using crutches to get around. When the homecoming court met to do a "walk through" I boastfully asked my escort to hold me up rather than use crutches while entering and exiting the field. He, a dear friend who also played football and could physically oblige my request, did so. This may seem like an innocuous example, but it demonstrates the role pride, independence, and societal expectations play in my comfortability to publicly accept the limitations environments create for me as someone with disabilities.

I navigated my undergraduate campus without seeking accommodations. Instead, I communicated with my roommates about certain needs that I required in my living space. I also secured vocational rehabilitation money from the state to help fund my education ($500 each semester for books or other materials). I received these funds until junior year when the hassle of completing the requirements to justify my disability became unmanageable. Specifically, I was required to meet with a state official twice a semester which involved a 60-minute round trip drive and loads of documentation. The cost of gas and the time commitment did not fit within my budget, nor my schedule, because I was completing an internship. Even though my medical bills were high due to a recent surgery, I decided to forfeit those funds to plan for my future more effectively at the time.

How the Project Started

Over a meal at the ACPA-College Student Educators International (ACPA) annual conference in 2017, Sarah and I met and instantly began talking about disability; it was a safe space for us to share our experiences. During the conversation Sarah asked Amy to be her research partner. This was after Sarah mentioned a desire to collect and share the narrative experiences of those with disabilities preparing to work in higher education with Amy. We agreed that narratives can influence peoples' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014), as well as build compassion and empathy for others (Paluck, 2009). We also knew that narratives could serve as a foundation upon which to build future research. Moreover, since we both have disabilities, we thought we could build trustful partnerships more easily with those who participated in our research.

Approach to the Research

We both agreed on the definition of the word disabled as the "ways in which people's activities are restricted by their environments" (Evans et al., 2017, p. 5) and acknowledged that disability can be a consequence of individual and environmental causes and interactions (Shakespeare, 2013). The overarching research question for our study was: What are the lived experiences of emerging student affairs professionals with disabilities? Secondarily, we examined the way in which ableism manifests within various experiences. We chose to use the self-authorship interview framework (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007), as we knew it was open ended and allowed participants to guide the interviews. Additionally, we knew that it would allow us to learn how meaning was being made through a focus on the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions of development.[1,2] We also used the categorization of environments within *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004) to organize the various contexts within our participants' experiences, as we viewed them as encompassing a holistic approach to environmental classification.[3] These environments include: social contexts, academic contexts, institutional contexts, and we added the professional contexts within the field of higher education and student affairs because our study focuses on the disabled graduate students in higher education and/or student affairs preparation programs. Finally, we established that the guiding philosophy of our work would be a critical constructivist approach. Constructivist in the sense that we believe meaning is made between the interaction between people and their environment,

---

[1] The field of human development provides more information about the dimensions of development in the meaning-making process. See specifically, Baxter Magolda (2009) and National Research Council (2012) as starting places to learn more.

[2] It was important to us to take a holistic approach, in order to avoid our participants becoming only understood as their disabilities. We believe that all people are more complex than any one identity they hold, and that they experience all of their identities at once as they interact with the environment around them.

[3] Similar to our belief that our participants are more than just their disability identity, we believe that they experience the whole higher education environment as they interact with it. Yet, we also knew we needed to bring attention to specific aspects of the higher education environment. We found the model offered by Keeling (2004) to be an easily understandable way to categorize our participants' interactions with their environments. Furthermore, we find the model reflective of how most higher education environments are structured.

and critical in that we believe reality is shaped by historical, social, political, economic, ethnic, and gender values and that these values form systems that manifest over time.

After establishing our framework, we put a call for research participants together, obtained a grant from the ACPA Foundation, and found ourselves with 24 interested participants. All participants self-identified as having at least one disability. We allowed all participants to select the contexts and experiences they shared as we went through the interview process, and given the robustness of our interview protocol, the narratives are full of rich, thick descriptions. In the end, we ended up with 22 participants in total. To honor the participants appropriately, we split the participant pool into two groups: one focused on disabled graduate students and one focused on the job search through the first three years of employment. The 13 narratives from the disabled graduate students serve as the focus of this book. Our participants are geographically situated across the United States and attended a wide array of graduate programs. More specific demographic information about the participants can be found in the Appendix.

We conducted, recorded, and transcribed three open ended interviews with each participant. We intentionally disclosed our own disabilities with the participants, which helped establish rapport such that the participants sometimes asked us about our own experiences. We each did our best to stay authentic to the relationships, while also respecting the position in which we found ourselves in their minds—disabled higher education professionals who are openly discussing disability.

Credibility was brought to the study through prolonged engagement with the participants, as well as through member checking. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes in length. We invited a doctoral candidate to join us in the coding process. The inductive data analysis process we used started with us each individually coding the interviews, looking for themes related to the environmental contexts, and the presence of the three dimensions of meaning making. Once coded, we shared our findings with each other, and discussed areas of similarity and difference until establishing a common understanding. We admit that our beliefs guided our analysis, and that by the time we had conducted the third interview, the participants often seemed to pick up on the process we used to conduct the interviews.

We acknowledge that at times, the participants shared deeply intimate, private information and indicated that they were comfortable doing so. However, we sometimes felt that we were less comfortable due to stigmas and historical discrimination of those with disabilities. Furthermore, as you read the book, you will notice that we do not focus on diagnoses or specific disabilities. Our goal is not to convince you of what should be defined as disability or to emphasize specific characteristics associated with certain diagnoses. Rather, our goal is to assist you into accepting that those who disclose a disability are being honest. We do not intend to minimize the unique experiences that individuals with similar diagnoses encounter, but instead demonstrate how the removal of this medical terminology allows the experiences of the participants to shine. This decision provides an additional level of anonymity to the participants too. Throughout the book, we oscillate between using person-first language, which is commonly used in the K-12 educational system, and disability-first language that is more prevalent in the current disability justice movement.[4] Our intent is not to offend anyone, but rather to be true to the stories captured from our participants. Finally, we hope each of these choices assists you in seeing the broad range of what a disability can be, how they are experienced, and the privileges and challenges that exist between disabled people and their environment depending on if their disability is visible or invisible.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

We do not profess to write the true stories of these participants' lives, but we do commit to sharing reasonable interpretations. We focused on recognizing what we brought to the study, so that we could leave space for the participants' experiences to be shared, and we invite you to do the same as you read each narrative. This book is a call for you to explore your practice, to examine and recognize the insidious nature of ableism, and identify ways to dismantle it in your own areas of influence. Having captured these stories, we conclude that ability needs to be included in all efforts to advance a more equitable and socially just environment or we will simply perpetuate current systems. In other words, higher education environments will continue to overwhelmingly exclude those with disabilities unless we all make strides to "Do Better."

We encourage you to read the book in its entirety to learn from the narratives. However, each chapter can also stand alone. As you finish reading each chapter, we invite you to ask yourself the following questions.

- Where does ableism manifest within this story?
- Identify ways that the disabled graduate student could have been supported more effectively.
- List three lessons that you learned from reading this chapter that you will incorporate into your work and life.

---

[4] The Association on Higher Education and Disability encourages the use of identity-first language. https://www.ahead.org/professional-resources/accommodations/statement-on-language

CHAPTER 1

AARON

ABOUT AARON

Aaron is a White, cisgendered male with a hearing impairment. At the time of his final interview, he was completing his second year of a student affairs and higher education master's degree. He pursued an undergraduate degree in theater and a master's in theater studies thinking he wanted to teach theater. During that graduate program, he realized that teaching a big group of students was not how he wanted to educate people. After finishing that degree, he moved to Chicago and worked a variety of different jobs such as a composer, sound designer, and restaurant server. He enjoyed being, as he described it, "the hearing-impaired sound designer." During his time in Chicago, he began to explore other career paths. He realized he liked higher education and learned about student affairs. This path appealed to him, and he grew interested in disability services offices. When he looked at jobs of interest, he noticed the positions required three to five years of experience and/or a master's degree. This led him to pursue a graduate program in student affairs, and he attended interview days to secure admission into a program and a graduate assistantship. He stated, "I loved every minute of it. It was so thorough. It was like an orientation to the program and the university before you even get accepted … This experience solidified my decision to pursue a degree in student affairs."

Do Better, pages 1–12

doi:10.1108/978-1-83708-732-720251002

Aaron secured a graduate assistantship position in the office of disability services. He loves the work and plans to apply to jobs in disability services following graduation. Aaron finds irony in this career path because he only used his Individual Education Plan[5] once throughout his K-12 education, and now he wants to assist students in obtaining accommodations as his professional practice. Additionally, Aaron did not utilize any accommodations in college, did not seek them out, and recalled considering himself a "regular" student. Despite his minimal use of accommodations, Aaron went on to clarify that he does, "identify as a person with a disability and it is a big part of [his] life." This moment in his career journey excites him and is challenging him to interrogate what he thinks about disability issues, how he can learn more, and what he can contribute to the field.

ABOUT AARON'S DISABILITY

Aaron was born with a syndrome that impacted his ear canal, eyes, and brain. It is caused by the skull fusing prematurely resulting in some structural complications. When he was four, he had surgery to expand his skull and allow more room for his brain to grow and function properly. The surgery also prevented additional complications from occurring, and he participated in speech therapy as a part of the recovery process. Aaron has worn hearing aids since he was very young because he has profound hearing loss. As a child, doctors assured his parents that he could hear with hearing aids, so he did not need to learn American Sign Language (ASL).

PASSION FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

His passion for working in disability started when he learned about Deaf theater. In 2003, the Deaf West Theater mounted a revival of the musical *Big River*, which is the Huckleberry Finn story. The group performed at the Tony awards, which aired on television. Aaron witnessed a musical performance by Deaf people who were dancing and singing in a group composed of hearing and non-hearing people. Specifically, some hearing people signed as they sang, and the Deaf people signed with the hearing people. Aaron stated,

---

[5] Individual Education Plans remove barriers and provide specialized instruction and services to students that remove barriers so that they can develop skills that their disability makes it harder for them to learn. (McKinney, 2024, https://exceptionallives.org/blog/iep-vs-504/)

> While I never learned sign language, it was a revelation for me because they were doing theater. This is what I have always done. They were not only people with disabilities who were doing theater, but they were incorporating disability into the art. I was fascinated by that.

Aaron wrote some papers on Deaf theater in college and this experience and passion led him through his first master's program. He stated, "the impetus for my personal connection with the world of disability was through performance." Deaf West recently performed *Spring Awakening*, which Aaron described as "equally wonderful." This was the first Broadway production to ever have an actor who used a wheelchair. Deaf theater has since grown in popularity and Aaron enjoys studying and researching more on this topic. He stated,

> Acceptance really only comes from visibility and so much of that visibility of marginalized people stems from art and culture. I feel like disability and performance are sort of the last big conversation that needs to be mainstreamed; this idea of creating art with people with disabilities and casting people with disabilities, and roles that are written as disabled.

STUDENT AFFAIRS GRADUATE PROGRAM

Social Justice Focus

Aaron started his first graduate degree in theater immediately after completing a bachelor's degree. He says this allowed him to connect to the cohort in his student affairs program because, while he was older in this master's program, he remembers going straight from a bachelor's degree into graduate school. He tries to share the perspectives he gained through his first master's with his current cohort, who mostly came straight from undergraduate school to graduate school, such as working to become a better professional rather than only focusing on grades. In the first semester he shared, "I had a big realization…I had a lot to bring to this field and it was okay not to feel as advanced or comfortable as I would have liked because it is a brand-new field to me." The age gap did not end up mattering as much to him or to his cohort because they were able to connect on their passion for the field and growing together. Aaron stated,

> One of the things I like about this program, and most of higher education in general, is this sort of acceptance of social justice methodology and language, and a growing push towards diversity and inclusion and what that actually means in terms of [our] work.

He shared that he has been "pleasantly surprised" at how conversations arise about disability within his cohort. For example, the faculty and his cohort mates have made it a routine to make sure that captions are always used when showing videos and to make transcripts available when possible. He stated,

> I am used to people, like my sister, who do not have a hearing impairment, being annoyed at the fact that if we are watching a movie or a video together, I need captions or ask about captions… it is usually an afterthought for someone who does not need them.

The amount of respect Aaron receives within the student affairs community in this regard astounds him. During his theater studies program, he wrote papers on disability issues in performance and Deaf theater, but the student affairs graduate program offers an opportunity to learn more about disability and disability issues on college campuses beyond theater.

Aaron contributed part of his pride in the graduate program to the fact that one of his faculty members is transparent about their disabilities, their needs, and their acquisition of disabilities. One of his classmates also has a disability who shares openly. These two individuals, plus Aaron, broaden the perceptions of disability and highlight the necessity to provide accommodations using universal design for the cohort. Conversations about captions, transcripts, the physical space, accessibility, universal design, among other topics frequently arise during class discussions. He boasted, “I am proud that by nature of my presence I am opening my classmates up to that particular identity.”

Learning the terminology in class to describe certain life experiences has benefitted Aaron as well. Learning definitions of terms like microaggressions, social justice, and identity politics allows him to see the world in a different way. He realizes how frequently disability remains excluded from a lot of the social justice conversation, but he stated, “it is fun to be involved in bringing it into the conversation.”

Classroom Layout

One challenge for Aaron in graduate school is the classroom layouts. One classroom allows students to sit in a circle and has low ceilings and carpet. This allows him to adjust his hearing aids to the room acoustics and learn effectively. The other classroom has tiled flooring, is large, and the seats are in a more traditional desk setting. The students create a big horseshoe of desks with a couple of desks in the middle facing forward. He needs to face the professor to hear and so he sits in the middle. He must turn around a lot and continue adjusting the volume of his hearing aids throughout class. The difference in these two rooms profoundly impacts his learning experience. He always sits close to the professor and his peers anticipate him doing so; Aaron described his experience in the classroom environment as “able to make do.” To Aaron, having class with the same professors in the same two classrooms with the same 30 students allows for his disability-related needs to be met. He stated, “I do not mean to minimize my experience as a person with a disability and [my classes] not being in the most accessible of spaces, but I really can make do.” He compared his experience to those of the students with disabilities he works with in his assistantship because they have numerous classes, professors, buildings, and students in each new classroom space,

> I think about my experience as someone with hearing aids in a tile [floored] room. Then I start to think about what my undergraduate students are going through. Then I think about the demographic report…where almost 75% of the students who retain accommodations through [my assistantship] office are students with unseen disabilities or non-physical disabilities. It is one thing to say every building needs to be accessible for people in wheelchairs. It is another to think of a physically accessible learning space…but what does it mean to have an accessible learning space for people with non-physical disabilities and how can I get professors and academics to wrap their heads around that issue and to buy into it? It seems like I am going to have to be the guy to get them to do that.

Aaron remains motivated to do this advocacy and education work in student affairs and higher education and appreciates the versatility his graduate degree offers him to pursue such a passion.

Deflecting Laughter in Classroom

Another significant experience is identified by Aaron because of how frequently the behavior occurs. This specific example happened in class with his student affairs cohort. Again, the cohort size is 30 students and requires a large room to seat everyone. Aaron described the classroom, “In this room the ceiling is pretty low, and the floor is carpeted so that helps with the sound. [Yet] Sometimes if I am on the opposite side of the room from someone who is speaking, I miss things.” Also, at the time of this occurrence, he only had one working hearing aid. He shared,

> A student made a humorous remark and said something about penguins. Everybody laughed and I interpreted it in one way and chuckled too. Later on in the class I made a point and referenced that joke, and I said the word pancreas instead of penguins because that is what I thought he said. Of course, everybody laughed at that because he was talking about penguins and why would I talk about pancreas? That is funny. I laughed too because this is a running joke in my life, and it is not the first time something like that happened.

After the laughter subsided, the professor pointed out that as humorous as this might be, it was a byproduct of Aaron being a person with a disability and everyone in the class needs to consider why they laughed. Aaron shared that this was a significant moment to him because it felt good to hear a professor speak up for those with disabilities like that. He also stated,

> I also realized that I had not really ever understood those moments in my life in that way before…It was fine to laugh with the other people at myself, but my professor was giving me permission to be able to say that they needed to speak up louder because I misheard them because of my disability.

Aaron shared that he continues to seek ways to advocate for himself because it does not come naturally.

The significance of this situation predates the specific scenario shared. Aaron can recall hundreds of times these types of exchanges occurred throughout his life and how he would deflect by making others laugh or find ways to make himself feel comfortable. The reason this particular classroom example became significant for him was because of the professor's identity as an individual with disabilities. He stated,

> The professor in that class was not only a person with disabilities, but a person who had acquired disabilities as opposed to living their whole life with disabilities. That, I believe, has given them a much more critical lens through which to examine or understand disability issues in education.

Had that event occurred in a classroom setting with an able-bodied professor, he doubts the situation would have been significant at all. He shared, "because the situation was so familiar to me, I would have just laughed along with everybody and brushed it off."

Given that this scenario occurred in a student affairs graduate preparation classroom, with students who routinely discuss diversity, inclusion, and social justice, Aaron believed that it could be described as a moment where people's perspectives "changed on a dime." He described it as "eye opening" for many in the classroom because the professor encouraged students to conceptualize disability in terms of diversity and inclusion rather than laughing at it or minimizing its influence upon interactions with one another. He stated, "It did not necessarily change everyone's philosophy as educators, but it introduced new questions for them to think about." After this experience, many of Aaron's classmates asked more critical questions about disability in classroom discussions and interrogated issues of campus accessibility. A few classmates who worked in different student affairs areas as part of their graduate assistantships reached out to ask questions about accessibility for events they planned. One peer, specifically, sought out his expertise as they planned a campus event for residence life. They talked through issues of disability justice and ways that groups can participate in events without being exploited. He stated, “I think that moment [in the classroom] helped plant a seed.”

GRADUATE ASSISTANTSHIP

The Disability Resource Center (DRC) hired Aaron to work in the office, and he values the Center’s commitment to student affairs because he has a personal connection to the work. His background in theater allows him to incorporate his artistic creativity into the cultural center. For example, Aaron uses the skills he learned in theater to collaborate with campus organizations. He stated, “I am proud to have the enthusiasm of being someone with a disability, having a fresh take on things that we can do together, and being someone who actually wants to do this work.” He has strategically reached out to certain campus organizations to raise the profile of the DRC and his supervisors have applauded his efforts by increasing his responsibilities. At the time of his first interview, he had just moved into his own office. He described, “it’s basically in a closet in between two Braille machines, but still is nice. I am being given more responsibility and I am proud of that because I am bringing a lot to the work.”

Aaron discussed how working in the DRC and creating more cultural programming for students remains significant for him because of how affirming he found it when he was an undergraduate student. Many of the hours in the Center are spent assessing and fulfilling accommodation needs, so programming gets overlooked. He shared, “I have been able to push my supervisors to realize [programming] is important and that we can also find simple and cheap ways to do this stuff. That has been significant for me.” For example, the DRC hosts film screenings and allows Aaron to set up open caption performances of plays. Specifically, Aaron collaborated with the theater department by making a huge television screen-size PowerPoint slideshow to the side of the stage and projects closed captions for the performances. He is very proud of this accomplishment and feels a sense of empowerment now to bring up disability during event planning and programming.

Professional Opportunity

Another significant experience occurred at a two-day Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) conference. Although he had been working for a semester in the DRC, he had not been around a lot of people with physical disabilities because many of the students he serves have invisible disabilities. Specifically, it had been a long time since he had been around a lot of d/Deaf people and the first day of the conference was life-giving for Aaron. During a social hour before dinner, he was seated in between two professionals who both used an interpreter. He shared,

> It was wonderful because I had not had a conversation with a Deaf person in a long time. I was reminded of the fact that because I have a hearing impairment, I am particularly sensitive to how communication styles need to change when you are communicating with someone who is hard of hearing or Deaf.

He emphasized how meaningful it was to have the opportunity to have a conversation with two hard of hearing professionals who work in the higher education field. He continued,

> Having hearing aids, but never learning ASL… and being raised 'hearing' for lack of a better term, but also still having hearing aids and being hearing impaired… I had never really felt like I belonged in one world or another. To be reminded that I actually have a more special or intrinsic connection with someone who is like me was really great.

This conference also reminded him of the importance of learning ASL, a goal he has now set for himself as an emerging professional.

Further, Aaron benefited from sharing ideas and learning from professionals as they discussed disability services. Specifically, he attended presentations about community colleges, large universities, and gained perspectives about resource allocation and budgetary decisions made by institutions. This afforded him insights regarding advocacy to his supervisors and university administrators. This conference was, in his words, "reassuring and inspiring" for him.

To Aaron, the AHEAD conference provided a space that centered accommodations and participants. For example, there was an ice breaker exercise where participants were tasked to list three things that the person wanted to do in life. One of the items Aaron listed was to learn ASL. This prompted a lengthy discussion within his small group about the differences between ASL and sign language elsewhere. One of the people in the group shared an experience traveling abroad and communicating with people who use different sign language. Aaron reflected,

> That shared experience moved the conversation along but there was no risk of having the conversation being all about how I acquired my disability [nor would it turn into] how I am the only person with a disability trying to explain what that is like to a non-disabled person.

Aaron expressed how this type of natural discussion about topics related to disability can go deeper with those who have a shared understanding