

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Higher Education Has a Problem: Holistic Disability Inclusion and Belonging

By Whitney N. West and Iman Riddick

Health impacts individuals from birth and throughout life. When health is compromised, shame, fear, and denial often arise. The hidden majority of chronically ill individuals face challenges in higher education and career progression, including disclosure, resource availability, and navigating career expectations. Current disability efforts in higher education primarily focus on students, leaving a gap in inclusion for faculty and staff. Failure to consider these individuals hinders disability inclusion and belonging in universities. The importance of including faculty and staff in disability-related processes cannot be understated. Disability must be a part of diversity to keep true to the goals of higher education.

Health is one of the few things that is cared about from before one is born, and those implications carry on throughout life. It is often said that many do not care about their child's gender as long as they are healthy. So, what happens when they are not? It becomes a point of shame, fear, denial, and rejection. This sentiment stems from a natural concern for the well-being of their offspring. However, this preoccupation can have unintended consequences when children are born with health conditions or disabilities. Simultaneously, if one does not look ill, they are often disregarded, and their truth denied. The chronically ill are the hidden majority in that more than half of the population deals with at least one illness defined as chronic. But few people

disclose or discuss having these illnesses for a variety of reasons that are rooted in ableism. This decision is influenced by several factors, including the fear of being stigmatized, the desire to avoid special treatment or pity, and concerns about how others will perceive them. This hidden nature of chronic illnesses can contribute to a lack of awareness and understanding about the challenges faced by those who live with these conditions. It can also perpetuate the stereotype that only visible or severe disabilities are worthy of attention and support. In addition, about 27 percent of Americans have a disability and 16 percent of the global population is disabled (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2023). For someone who has a chronic illness that is intermit-

tent or progressive in nature, there are many challenges to attending an institution, working in higher education, and growing in that career. Challenges can include whether and to whom to disclose their condition and how much about the condition to disclose, how to find resources, whether resources are available for staff and faculty, whether resources are for physical illnesses, and how to navigate career expectations.

The focus in disability is often student centric, as students are often listed as the key stakeholder in strategic enrollment management (SEM) efforts. As Gotthiel (2018) mentions, higher education SEM goals have not always included and fully integrated diversity while current court rulings even put current efforts in jeopardy. However, faculty and staff are often excluded from this focus, and it is usually perceived as an individual issue as opposed to an integrated part of higher education diversity (Cory 2011). If faculty and staff are left out of the conversation, a huge gap is created in the disability inclusion and belonging of a university. Faculty and staff members who have disabilities should have access to the same level of support, resources, and advocacy as students. This includes ensuring that physical spaces, communication methods, and workplace policies are accessible and accommodating to a diverse range of abilities. The faculty and staff cannot advocate for, encourage, or benefit from processes that do not consider them in the population of importance. By recognizing and addressing the challenges faced by faculty and staff with chronic illnesses or disabilities, universities can foster a more equitable and welcoming environment for all members of their community. This inclusive approach not only benefits individuals but also enriches the educational and professional experience for everyone involved. It aligns with the broader goals of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

Literature Review

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed by Congress in 1990 to remedy the social problem of able-bodied Americans' discrimination against disabled Americans (Abram 2003). The lesser-known Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which focused on the government, was

the ADA's predecessor that protected the rights of the handicapped. However, it was rare for the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to be used litigiously until the ADA was enacted in 1990 (Abram 2003; Rothstein 2015). Current research on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and disability in higher education primarily focuses on student issues, although some shared concerns, such as architectural, technological, and food-related issues, affect both faculty and staff (Rothstein 2015). Previous studies that did not center on students primarily examined faculty, neglecting the unique issues and needs of staff (Finesilver, *et al.* 2020). Despite this, Abram (2003) points out that "few college faculty members are disabled," which contradicts national data indicating that 60 percent of Americans have a chronic condition, and 26 percent have a disability (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2022; Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2023; Grigely 2017).

Research on the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education has gained increased prominence in recent decades, with a particularly heightened focus brought about by the global pandemic. This body of scholarly work has delved into various dimensions of their academic journeys, aiming to unravel the complexities of their experiences, challenges, and the support systems available to them within the academic milieu. While the focus was not on faculty and staff, these critical investigations also applied to this population in some manners. One critical facet of this research has centered on the accessibility of physical spaces within educational institutions. This inquiry encompasses the identification of architectural barriers that hinder mobility and independence for individuals with disabilities. Moreover, scholars have scrutinized the availability and efficacy of assistive technologies, which play a pivotal role in bridging the accessibility gap (Hutcheon and Wolbring 2012). These studies have yielded invaluable insights into the tangible hurdles that students with disabilities encounter, highlighting the pressing need for structural changes in the higher education landscape.

Recent evidence suggests that the underrepresentation of faculty and staff with disabilities may be attributed to issues of disclosure, influenced by indi-

viduals' comfort with their diagnosis, willingness to identify as disabled, and concerns about its impact on their abilities and career progression (Brown 2020; Finelilver, *et al.* 2020). Faculty and staff often rely on their respective universities' civil rights and diversity efforts to determine whether to disclose their disabilities. Dolmage (2017) argues that the initiatives developed in the name of diversity and inclusion fail to effectively address the ableism inherent in higher education, which contributes to the invisibility of faculty and staff with disabilities. Research has found that faculty and staff with disabilities experience job discrimination and harassment, which leads to underreporting and low requests for accommodation (Shigaki, *et al.* 2012; Gierdowski 2020). Current research on students has cast a spotlight on the effectiveness of accommodations and support services provided by universities. However, this research is not sufficient for faculty and staff as their processes are different and are more akin to employment issues. It is through such rigorous examination that institutions can refine their support mechanisms to ensure that they meet the diverse and evolving needs of faculty and staff with disabilities (Gierdowski 2020, Franke, *et al.* 2012). These efforts, rooted in empirical analysis, are indispensable for fostering an inclusive academic environment.

The implications of disclosure and the lack of inclusion for faculty and staff in higher education are still not fully understood. Although Abram (2003) acknowledges that faculty with disabilities are in small numbers, she also recognizes that “those who are may face significant difficulties in preserving their jobs.” Faculty and staff often perceive disclosure as potentially detrimental to their current employment and future opportunities (Brown 2020). The potential for disparate treatment makes the benefits of disclosure less appealing compared to passing as able-bodied (Brown 2020).

This issue is particularly salient for disabled faculty and staff of color, as disability in higher education has predominantly been approached from a white-centric perspective, with limited consideration given to the intersection of disability and race (Ramirez-Stapleton, *et al.* 2020; Peters 2011). Disability shares similarities with

other marginalized identities, such as sexual orientation, race, and low socioeconomic status, although it is the only identity that can be acquired in an instant (Bell 2011; Ehlinger and Ropers 2020). The study of both race and disability has existed independently, but the conflation of both identities creates tension, stemming from historical denial of rights between the two groups (Pickens 2017). Existing accounts fail to adequately address the multiple intersections of race, disability, and gender, which are often experienced by individuals within the higher education academy (West 2023). Research on faculty and staff of color with disabilities in higher education is limited, but it is important to address the intersectionality of race and disability in academia. Faculty and staff of color often face challenges related to diversity and inclusion in their work environments, which can create a sense of isolation and frustration (King 2020; West 2023). When disability is added to the equation, these individuals may face additional barriers and challenges.

Ableism in the Academy

Efforts to counter ableism are efforts that benefit all who enter the campuses of higher education institutions. These efforts and lack thereof can determine whether a student attends or a faculty or staff member accepts an offer from the moment they enter campus for a tour or interview. Talia Lewis defines ableism as:

A system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, colonialism, and capitalism. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's appearance and/or their ability to satisfy [re]produce, excel and 'behave.' You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism (Lewis 2021).

Ableism is woven into the fabric of higher education just as intricately as racism and sexism. Early disability activists like Ed Roberts had to fight for entry into the academy as administrators claimed to have “tried cripples” before. The disqualifier was only his disability

and what the university was unprepared or unwilling to offer as an accommodation. Roberts spent his time in college living in an infirmary, initially alone then joined by other disabled students. However, the students had to continuously fight to stay enrolled as rules allowed for their dismissal due to the cost of their accommodations. These undue and unnecessary barriers are persistent in higher education today as the requirements of the ADA have become the bar instead of the ground floor for accessibility for students, faculty, and staff.

Disability in higher education is often researched as a measure of compliance and not from a qualitative lens that would allow for the humanizing of disability. Shallish (2015) notes that unlike race and gender diversity, which have become known to benefit a white-centric academy, disability is seen as something to overcome as opposed to a held identity by a group of students, faculty, and staff. The findings of recent research into intersectional disability identity revealed that the practices and resources related to ADA accommodations are inadequate not only for the participants in this study but also for the broader disabled community (West 2023). The participants who served as ADA officers reported significant understaffing in their offices, which hampers effective communication and outreach to faculty and staff. Additionally, respondents noted a lack of racial diversity within their offices, which could directly impact the trust required for addressing such a sensitive topic (West 2023).

It is common for universities to prioritize ADA compliance by relying heavily on legal professionals, a field that historically lacks diversity. However, to truly advance disability and accommodation efforts within the framework of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB), there is a need to consider intersectional identities and recognize how these identities can hinder individuals with disabilities from engaging with ADA offices. The experiences and visible identities of Black women respondents directly influenced their comfort levels in seeking assistance. This points to a lack of success in overall inclusion and belonging activities in higher education, which reveals a need for a realistic in-depth study into what is happening and how it can be improved.

Barriers to Equitable Treatment

In higher education, the pursuit of equitable treatment for individuals grappling with disabilities or chronic illnesses stands as a cornerstone of efforts to cultivate a truly inclusive and accessible academic environment. While legal protections have been established and awareness surrounding these issues has grown, it is imperative to acknowledge that a multitude of formidable barriers still stubbornly persist. These barriers cast shadows over the prospects of individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses, obstructing their path to full participation and equitable opportunities within the educational landscape. As institutions of higher learning, it is incumbent upon us to take a proactive stance in addressing these multifaceted challenges faced by faculty and staff who contend with disabilities or chronic illnesses in the pursuit of their academic and professional aspirations. By doing so, institutions not only honor the principles of fairness and inclusivity but also harness the potential for a more diverse, enriched, and harmonious academic community that thrives on the contributions of all its members.

Physical and Architectural Barriers

One significant barrier to equitable treatment is the presence of physical and architectural barriers on campuses. Inadequate accessibility features, such as inaccessible buildings, lack of ramps or elevators, and insufficient restroom facilities, hinder mobility and independent navigation for individuals with disabilities. Such barriers limit their access to classrooms, labs, offices, and other campus facilities, thereby hindering their full participation in academic and professional activities. A significant barrier that has been seen often is stairs within classrooms as well as limited clearance for mobility aids within the space. Faculty and staff who must use these facilities are greatly limited. Many universities also have buildings that have not been renovated and therefore do not have elevators and have not been required to input them. This can prohibit faculty from lecturing in these spaces, and faculty nor staff are able to use these facilities for events and meetings.

Limited Access to Accommodations and Support Services

Another significant challenge lies in the limited access to accommodations and support services. Although legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandates the provision of reasonable accommodations, the process for obtaining these accommodations can be complex and burdensome. Faculty and staff may encounter bureaucratic hurdles, long waiting periods, or inadequate resources, impeding their timely access to essential accommodations such as accessible workspaces, assistive technology, and flexible work arrangements (Grigley 2017; Shigaki, *et al.* 2012). This limited access undermines their ability to fully engage in the academic environment and perform to their full potential without fear of losing their job or not being granted tenure (West 2023).

The lack of adequate support for faculty and staff with disabilities or chronic illnesses is another substantial barrier in higher education. Despite efforts to address accommodations and support services for students, less attention has been given to the needs and experiences of faculty and staff. Limited resources, inadequate training, and a lack of institutional policies or practices tailored to their specific requirements exacerbate the challenges faced by these individuals (Grigley 2017). Consequently, faculty and staff may encounter difficulties in performing their duties, participating in professional development opportunities, or advancing in their careers due to systemic barriers and a lack of appropriate support mechanisms.

Stigma, Discrimination, and Lack of Awareness

Stigma and discrimination remain persistent barriers that affect individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses in higher education, especially faculty and staff. Negative attitudes, stereotypes, and misconceptions surrounding disabilities can lead to marginalization, isolation, and unequal treatment. For faculty and staff, the consequences of these insidious biases are felt acutely. Prejudice, bias, or unconscious discrimination can silently infiltrate daily interactions, casting doubts over the competence and contributions of individuals

with disabilities or chronic illnesses. This insidious discrimination can corrode opportunities for career progression, restricting the ambitions and aspirations of talented academics. Furthermore, it fosters a disheartening climate in which the innate sense of belonging within the academic community is eroded, replaced by a disconcerting awareness of difference and otherness. Adding to the complexity of this issue is the extensive lack of awareness and understanding among peers and colleagues. This knowledge deficit further perpetuates the cycle of stigmatization, consigning individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses to the margins of academic discourse and engagement. The consequences ripple beyond the affected individuals themselves, affecting the broader academic community by robbing it of diverse perspectives and unique talents.

Intersectionality and Multiple Marginalized Identities

The intersectionality of disabilities or chronic illnesses with other marginalized identities poses additional barriers to equitable treatment. Individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups, such as women, racial or ethnic minorities, or those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, may face compounded challenges. They experience the intersectional effects of discrimination, bias, and systemic barriers, which can further limit their access to resources, opportunities, and support in higher education (West 2023). This highlights the importance of adopting an intersectional lens to address the unique needs and experiences of individuals with multiple marginalized identities.

Promoting equitable treatment for faculty and staff with disabilities or chronic illnesses in higher education necessitates a comprehensive approach that addresses the multifaceted barriers they encounter. Faculty and staff are integral in achieving the goals of the university especially as it pertains to retention and reimagining strategic enrollment management as the disabled population of students are more likely to not be retained if these barriers persist (Harvey-Smith 2022). Overcoming physical and architectural barriers, ensuring accessible accommodations and support services, combating

stigma and discrimination, and acknowledging intersectional identities are crucial steps toward achieving greater inclusivity and equity. Higher education institutions must adopt proactive measures, develop inclusive policies, and foster a culture that embraces diversity to create an environment where individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses can thrive academically and professionally. By dismantling these barriers, higher education can truly become a space where everyone has an equal opportunity to learn, work, and succeed.

Beginnings of Problem Solving

Implementing operational improvements in higher education to enhance the experience of students, staff, and faculty with disabilities and chronic illnesses requires a multifaceted approach. Firstly, it is crucial to go beyond simply mentioning the existence of an ADA accommodation process within the human resources department. Instead, institutions should strive to normalize and educate individuals about the conditions that may qualify for accommodations. Many prevalent conditions, such as heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease, stroke, Alzheimer's, diabetes, and chronic kidney disease, are leading causes of death and disability in the United States, yet individuals living with these conditions often lack awareness of available resources and support. Following the examples set by no-smoking, mental health, and obesity campaigns, offices can proactively inform and educate the campus community about these conditions and the resources available for success in academic and daily activities.

Furthermore, fostering collaboration and partnership between departments is crucial to meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities and chronic illnesses. While utilizing the traditional ADA/disability access office structure is a necessary starting point, institutions should strive to create safe spaces that allow open lines of communication between staff, faculty and administration. Such spaces may not be as formal as an FMLA request using U.S. Department of Labor forms,

as they aim to address barriers to success that may not be solely medical in nature. One-on-one sessions with leadership or other staff can provide opportunities for meaningful discussions and holistic approaches to resolving barriers that individuals may face. Policies and practices should promote equal opportunities for all, and these ideals should be effectively communicated to all community members, eliminating the need for individuals to explicitly ask for accommodations.

Flexible schedules can play a crucial role in supporting employees with disabilities and chronic illnesses. For instance, individuals experiencing neurologic fatigue may benefit from the ability to adjust their work schedule to align with periods of increased attentiveness. This flexibility allows employees to optimize their productivity and incorporate mental rest periods to refocus and reorient themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the effectiveness of teleworking and flexible schedules in accommodating the needs of employees with chronic illnesses and disabilities, and it is recommended that institutions continue to allow this flexibility based on departmental needs and the overall mission of the institution.

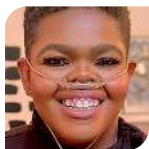
Moreover, providing private spaces is essential to support individuals who are easily distracted by noise or movement in their environment. In situations where private spaces are not feasible, employees should be encouraged to use noise-canceling headphones or close their office doors for a reasonable period that does not disrupt the office's operations.

By implementing these initiatives with minimal cost and effort, higher education institutions can effectively enhance the sense of belonging and inclusivity for all students, staff, and faculty on campus. Furthermore, these investments in accessibility and inclusivity not only align with ethical imperatives but also yield long-term dividends by fostering a more vibrant, innovative, and harmonious academic community that thrives on the diverse strengths and contributions of its members instead of homogeneity.

References

- Abram, S. 2003. The Americans with Disabilities Act in higher education: The plight of disabled faculty. *Journal of Law & Education*. 32(1): 1
- Bell, C. M. 2011. *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions*. Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag. Available at: <books.google.com/books?id=2N8uMz6g02gC>.
- Brown, N. 2020. Disclosure in Academia a sensitive issue. In *Ableism in Academia: Theorising Experiences of Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses in Higher Education*, edited by N. Brown and J. Leigh. London, England: UCL Press.
- Cory, R. C. 2011. Disability services offices for students with disabilities: A campus resource. *New Directions for Higher Education*. 154: 27–36. Available at: <doi.org/10.1002/he.431>.
- Dolmage, J. T. 2017. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Ehlinger, E., and R. Ropers. 2020. "It's all about learning as a community": Facilitating the learning of students with disabilities in higher education classrooms. *Journal of College Student Development*. 61(3): 333–349.
- Finesilver, C., J. Leigh, and N. Brown. 2020. Invisible disability, unacknowledged diversity. In *Ableism in Academia: Theorising Experiences of Disabilities and Chronic Illnesses in Higher Education*, edited by N. Brown and J. Leigh. London, England: UCL.
- Franke, A., M. Berube, R. O'Neil, and J. Kurland. 2012. *Accommodating Faculty Members who have Disabilities*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Professors. Available at: <aaup.org/sites/default/files/disabilities.pdf>.
- Gierdowski, D. C. 2020. Accessible technology support for faculty with disabilities: Challenges and barriers to inclusivity. *EDUCAUSE Review*. March 30. Available at: <er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/accessible-technology-support-for-faculty-with-disabilities-challenges-and-barriers-to-inclusivity>.
- Gotthiel, S. 2018. Reflections on achievement, hitting the glass ceiling and breaking the mold. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*. 6(1): 1–4.
- Grigely, J. 2017. The neglected demographic: Faculty members with disabilities. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. June 27. Available at: <chronicle.com/article/the-neglected-demographic-faculty-members-with-disabilities/>.
- Harvey-Smith, A. B. 2022. *Higher Education on the Brink: Reimagining Strategic Enrollment Management in Colleges and Universities*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers
- Hutcheon, E. J., and G. Wolbring. 2012. Voices of "disabled" post secondary students: Examining higher education "disability" policy using an ableism lens. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. 5(1): 39–49
- King, C. 2020. Building an inclusive community for faculty and staff. *Rutgers University Division of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement (News)*. October 1. Available at: <nbdiversity.rutgers.edu/news/building-inclusive-community-faculty-staff>.
- Lewis, T. 2021. January 2021 working definition of ableism. (*Personal Blog*). January 1. Author. Retrieved from: <talilalewis.com/blog/january-2021-working-definition-of-ableism>.
- Peters, A. L. 2011. Black women faculty in educational leadership: Unpacking their silence in research. In *Women of Color in Higher Education: Turbulent Past, Promising Future* (Diversity in Higher Education Volume 9), edited by G. Jean-Marie and B. Lloyd-Jones. Leeds, England U.K.: Emerald Publishing Limited
- Pickens, T. A. 2017. Blue blackness, black blueness: Making sense of blackness and disability. *African American Review*. 50(2): 93–103. Available at: <doi.org/10.1353/afa.2017.0015>.
- Ramirez-Stapleton, L. D., L. E. Torres, A. Acha, and A. McHenry. 2020. Disability justice, race, and education. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity (JCScore)*. 6(1): 29–39. Available at: <journals.shareok.org/jcscore/article/view/128>.
- Rothstein, L. 2015 The Americans with Disabilities Act and higher education 25 years later: An update on the history and current disability discrimination issues for higher education. *Journal of College and University Law*. 41(3): 531.
- Shallish, L. 2015. Just how much diversity will the law permit? The Americans with Disabilities Act, diversity and disability in higher education. *Disability Studies Quarterly*. 35(3). Available at: <doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v35i3.4942>.
- Shigaki, C. L., K. M. Anderson, C. L. Howald, L. Henson, and B. E. Gregg. 2012. Disability on campus: A perspective from faculty and staff. *Work*. 42(4): 559–571. Available at: <doi.org/10.3233/WOR-2012-1409>.
- West, W. N. 2023. *Ready Player One: The Impacts of Segmenting Identity for Black Women with Chronic Illnesses in Higher Education* (doctoral project). University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

About the Authors



Whitney N. West

Whitney N. West, Ed.D., has been in higher education for more than fifteen years and is currently Director of Student Records at LSU Law. She has worked at universities in D.C., Maryland, and Louisiana. Whitney is a two-time graduate of The George Washington University and has a graduate certificate from University of Maryland Baltimore County. In July 2023, she completed her doctorate of education from

the University of Southern Mississippi. Her doctoral studies focus on the intersection of race, gender, and disability. In addition, she currently serves as Co-Chair for the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) Accessibility Task Force.

She is also a DEI/Disability awareness advocate and speaker who was diagnosed with a chronic illness in 2014 that almost took her life. From there, Whitney set out to make the most

out of life and live her best and most authentic life. She uses her platform and her position in higher education to help people appreciate their lives and advocate for themselves even when unexpected and uncomfortable things happen. She is also on a mission to educate the world on ableism and has spoken at National Co-op of Grocers, Aquent, AACRAO's Annual Meeting and Strategic Enrollment Management Conference, and Texas Women's University.



Iman Riddick

Iman Riddick serves as Registrar and Assistant Dean of Students at The Institute of World Politics in Washington, D.C. She is passionate about access and equity for all student populations. Having worked as registrar for Kennedy King College, one college part of the City Colleges of

Chicago, assistant registrar at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and associate director of enrollment services at the Johns Hopkins University, Center for Talented Youth., Riddick has contributed to policy creation supporting student success for students K-12 to graduate level. She has earned a Bachelor of Science from Chicago State

University and previously served the Chesapeake and Potomac Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (CAPACRAO) Committee. She currently serves as a committee member for the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) Accessibility Task Force.