**Investigating the Cultural Locations of Disability in American Colleges and Universities: Campus, Curriculum, Culture**

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**Abstract**

Disability studies has always sought to critique and reform American higher education. From one perspective, colleges and universities provide venues for organizing and empowering disabled communities. From another perspective, colleges and universities—as inherently conservative institutional systems ingrained with ableist beliefs and practices—serve as important sites where new communities agitate for access, hone rhetorical strategies, and establish a revolutionary discourse. As enablers and adversaries, colleges and universities have been key to the formation of our story of disability studies in the United States. This article demonstrates three progressive moments in the evolving relationship between disability studies and the institutions of higher education it critiques. First, I examine the ways student activism functions within disability studies histories of the Disability Rights Movement, putting college life at the center of our founding narratives. Second, I demonstrate the central role curricular critique played in the establishment of disability studies as an academic discipline—one to counterbalance and reform the traditional knowledge-making practices of medical and applied fields. Finally, to our present moment, where Disability Rhetoric has emerged from the field of composition-rhetoric with the aim of critiquing the practices, values, and ideologies of higher education more broadly. At each step of this progression, the nature of disability critique of higher education has broadened and grown more sophisticated: from demanding campus access, to asserting disciplinary authority, to critiquing the educational enterprise itself as ableistic. By teaching disability studies at American colleges and universities, we continue this history of agitation, empowerment, and critique.

*Keywords:* Higher education, activism, history, disciplinarity, rhetoric, composition-rhetoric

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This article examines the ways institutions of higher education fit within the broad movements of American disability rights and academic disability studies. In the first section, I draw from social histories published by disability studies scholars to argue that mainstream American colleges and universities have served as important hubs for disability cultural formation in two senses. First, as campuses began admitting significant numbers of disabled students, large public colleges became important gathering places for groups of disabled students to meet, organize, and forge collective political and cultural identity. At the same time, as newly politicized populations of disabled students began engaging in public action, institutions of higher education became important socio-political battlegrounds for inclusion and access. As I will show, the fight for equal access to public higher education during the 20th century represented a key turning point in the history of disability activism. This story of campus organizing is central to the arc of published histories of disability in the United States.

In the second section of this article, I will describe the rise of disability studies (DS) as an academic counterpart to disability activism, including the field’s tradition of scholarly critique of colleges and university systems. In this transition, we see disability critiques of higher education broadening from questions of campus access to the politics of curricular reform. Initially, disability studies scholars focused their critique on the applied fields—medicine, rehabilitation, special education, and other academic disciplines that historically claimed specialized knowledge about disability. Indeed, through a generation of critique, DS critics have shown how applied medical fields contributed to spreading dangerous, stigmatizing stereotypes about disabled people, contributing to their oppression throughout society and their poor treatment by medical authorities and educational institutions. Scholars such as Simi Linton, Paul Longmore, Sharon Snyder, and David Mitchell argue that these fields, which approach disability through the lens of pathology or disorder, are fundamentally unable to address the social and cultural realities of life as disabled people actually experience them.

Empowered by the feminist ideology that the personal is political, activist scholars developed a new curriculum for disability knowledge-making in higher education. The new DS curriculum privileges the expertise of disabled people themselves—their experience as community members, their shared history of oppression and civil engagement, their values as a large and diverse culture. This curriculum for DS knowledge-making offers a direct corrective to the applied fields’ traditional monopoly as academic experts on disability. As I will show, this movement to reform the disability curriculum of the academy directly spurred the development in the of DS as an established interdisciplinary field comparable to women’s studies or other social-identity based disciplines.

In my final section of this article, I will turn to a recent wave of DS scholarship associated with the sub-field of Disability Rhetoric, which emerges from the English discipline of writing studies—the issues of writing pedagogy in higher education, among other topics. As DS approaches became more established in the humanities, scholars within composition and rhetoric began applying DS approaches to broader questions of teaching and learning at the college level. These teacher/scholars—including Margaret Price and Brenda Jo Brueggemann—show how traditions of writing instruction have previously ignored the unique needs and capacities of students and faculty with disabilities, especially those with learning disabilities or other forms of cognitive or psychological difference. By focusing on the reality of “invisible disability” in the college classroom, these scholars have done more than expand the scope of DS, which had traditionally focused more on externally observable forms of disability such as mobility or sensory impairments. Indeed, members of the Disability Rhetoric movement have used the disciplinary tools of writing studies, and Writing Program Administration (WPA) studies specifically, to marshal broad critiques against the traditional practices of American higher education—not only how we teach college classes, but also how we assess professional competence in academic spaces. By focusing DS critiques on the everyday practices of academic life, Disability Rhetoric scholars have begun to demonstrate how academic institutions are suffused with ableist traditions that systematically exclude disabled people from both the student body and academic profession. As the most recent wave of DS scholars to critique higher education, this movement does more than offer new tools for naming the locations of disability oppression in American colleges and universities; indeed, it expands the praxis of academic DS, asserting that disability studies is not only a political and intellectual movement, it is also a pedagogical movement.

**Part One: Disability Activism Goes to College**

Colleges and universities play many important roles in our core narratives of the American disability rights movement. This is true in at least three senses: campuses as gathering places, as sites for coalition building, and as proving grounds where important activists learned to exert their power. Throughout these narratives, institutions of higher education come through as inherently conservative agents, whose wealth and authority reside in their campuses, the grounds and buildings that construct the institution (Heumann, 2020; Pelka, 2012; Shapiro, 1994; Fleischer & Zames, 2011). Any liberal impulse to promote inclusion or justice for disabled students stands out as an exception to the rule of academic life, so that disabled people who are admitted to the student body quickly find that, while they are welcome to be a student, there would not be any new accessibility ramps put in any time soon.

Historian Lindsey Patterson (2012) argues that three regional and institutional hubs were key to the early lives of several important leaders in the disability rights movement: Illinois, California, and New York (p. 474). These hubs emerged in no small part because of the limited number of options facing disabled students in choosing colleges that would admit them. As Patterson puts it, many “disabled students [had] to choose schools according to architectural accessibility rather than academic merit” (p. 482). The University of Illinois, for example, had one of the first established programs for admitting and supporting disabled students. Its approach, however, heavily emphasized the physical rehabilitation and fitness of students with mobility impairments. One former student commented,

This whole thing was a public relations strategy by the University of Illinois to promote an image of people with disabilities as people who can fit in, people who can be competitive, people who can be physically independent. That idea of physical independence was extremely important, because that’s what they thought was the basis for a lot of the negative ideas about disabilities—that people were dependent. (Mary Lou Breslin, as cited in Pelka, 2012, p. 109)

As she describes the ethos of the Illinois program, Breslin points out how the institution is able to benefit from the good public image related to admitting disabled students, while at the same time putting high expectations on the students themselves to deal with issues of accessibility through brute force. These programs exist to prove that these disabled students who have been admitted are not dependent (like other disabled people are seen to be). Breslin goes on to compare this program’s philosophy to one with a disability-rights mentality:

Nobody ever said, “Let’s start to think about disability as a political issue. Why is it that the Rehab Center is promoting its philosophy that if you can’t get in the building you should crawl up the steps? That unless you’re willing to make that commitment, you can’t come to school here?” (Mary Lou Breslin, as cited in Pelka, 2012, p. 112)

There were relatively few programs like that at University of Illinois, with the prominent exception of the City College of New York’s Health Guidance Board and physical rehabilitation course system, which have yet to be explored in our disciplinary histories (Storey, 1913; Condon 1960, 1962). Gradually, colleges and universities took less interest in rehabilitating student bodies.

Most other colleges and universities that admitted disabled students took a more hands-off approach, with fewer programs focused on physical fitness and rehabilitation. Instead, in California and New York, we find students who were admitted and then largely ignored at an institutional level. One example that is central to most histories of the disability rights movement is Ed Roberts, who sued for admission to University of California, Berkeley, and was given housing in the campus’s medical facilities since no other accessible residential building existed (Shapiro, 1994, p. 45; Pelka, 2012, p. 118; Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 38 ). Judy Heumann, who was admitted at Long Island University, describes an emblematic moment that revealed her institution’s attitudes toward accessibility:

The steps in and out of the dorm and in and out of the bathrooms were not very convenient, to say the least. But not everyone agreed about how to handle the issue of accessibility. The head of the school of psychology was quoted in a school newspaper article as saying that it would be better if disabled students didn’t go to LIU at all because it was psychologically traumatic for us to be in an inaccessible environment. (p. 41)

Each of these instances reflects the kind of essentialism Heumann describes in this anecdote. While these institutions saw their admissions policies as permissive, they fundamentally saw access as a concern of the disabled individual, whose impairments were the root of their difficulties. Ironically, by admitting these disabled students and then denying them full access and respect, these institutions set the stage for the community building and activism that would come throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Colleges became an essential site for community organizing, not only because they were full of barriers to address but also because they often provided the first opportunity disabled students would have to meet and get to know other disabled students, including those with different impairments and life experiences from their own. Across these regional hubs, students formed cross-disability groups such as the Rolling Quads, founded by Ed Roberts and his peers at UC Berkeley (Shapiro, 1994, p. 43; Pelka, 2012, p. 191). At Brooklyn College, in the City University of New York (CUNY), activist students including Fred Francis, Pat Figueroa, and Frieda Tankus helped form the Student Organization for Every Disability United for Progress (SOFEDUP), which worked to establish cross-disability activist groups across the CUNY system’s then eighteen senior and community colleges (Patterson, 2012, p. 481; McQuade, as cited in Allison, 2001, p. ?; Pelka, 2012, p. 191; Francis, 1971, 1981). Across all of the examples from this time, disabled students were invested in the common goals to confront the apathy of their institutions and seek to change the conservative attitudes that governed how colleges and universities responded to the presence of disabled students.

**Campus as Activist Proving Grounds**

Through campus-based organizing and activism, early disability rights activists learn to develop rhetorical strategies and share principles that would be essential in later achievements, such as the passage of the regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Patterson, 2012, p. 474; Shapiro, 1994, p. 69). One key principle was that students needed to reject the institutional and medical notion that disability is a source of deficiency; rather, disability is a source of community and power. Speaking of his time working within Ed Robert’s activist networks, Frank Bowe reflects,

Certainly, it never occurred to me in four years of college that Western Maryland College should accommodate my needs [as a deaf student]. I just never thought of it that way. I saw a college that worked the way it worked, and I thought my job was to adjust to that way—or get out. But once someone like Ed introduces a new way of thinking, it can spread—as it did! I was one of many who benefited. (Frank Bowe, as cited in Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 42, brackets in the original)

The way of thinking developed by Roberts and other campus activists questioned the notion that students should try their best to get along by instead insisting that it is their responsibility as students to interrupt the ways that “worked the way [they] worked.” Given their focus on physical accessibility, it is not surprising that much of this early activism focused on building architecture, transportation, and housing (Pat Figueroa, as cited in Pelka, 2012, p. 192; Patterson, 2012, p. 483). Rather than ending when any particular benchmark was met for campus accessibility, these cross-disability groups expanded their goals, grew their networks, and eventually formed organizations that would stretch beyond their campus homes. This growth would not have been possible without the context of higher education institutions bringing together groups of disabled students, while simultaneously working to resist those student’s needs for campus accessibility. This pressure allowed students to form coalitions and begin to establish political power.

In several historical narratives, the 1988 Deaf President Now (DPN) uprising at Gallaudet University as a powerful moment for disability organizing in higher education. Students at this majority d/Deaf institution publicly demanded that the university should hire a d/Deaf president to better represent the concerns and unique identity of the community (Shapiro, 1994, p. 77; Pelka, 2012, p. 394). When the university hired a hearing person for the role, students engaged in protest that drew media attention and eventually pressured the administration to bring in a d/Deaf president instead. In his 1994 book *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement,* Joseph Shapiro calls the DPN uprising “a defining moment for the disability rights movement [. . .] the closest the movement has come to having a touchstone event, a Selma or Stonewall” (p. 74). This moment pushed students to directly confront their administration, not just for the cause of providing access to school buildings, but on the grounds that the institution should recognize their identity as a d/Deaf community.

Occurring more than two decades after Ed Roberts and his peers first began organizing on college campuses, the DPN uprising demonstrates how institutions of higher education provide important pressures to help students form coalitions and find political power. The administration of Gallaudet responded harshly to students’ demands for change. As Jeff Rosen, a student at the time, describes the situation:

It was a problem to arrange anything on campus. They would not allow us to use any of the campus organizations because the Gallaudet administration was very strictly controlling of all that. In fact, they fired Paul [a professor] because he was helping with the arrangements, to make the reservations for the field that we used to hold the first stage of the rally. (Jeff Rosen, cited in Pelka, 2012, pp. 400-401)

The university’s attempts at intimidation certainly had the effect of interfering with the logistics of the demonstrations. This also caused members of the faculty and staff to withhold their support for the student protesters for fear of losing their jobs (Pelka, p. 401). This pressure, however, pushed students to operate from a shared perspective. Rosen describes the efforts he and his peers used to rally students to the cause:

We told the students over and over again: no students, no university. We told them that they do have the power, that they were going to decide the future of the university, not the administration, not the faculty, not the staff. That was our strategic approach. The faculty, the staff were all afraid to get involved because if they got involved they would be terminated and they didn’t want to risk that. And the administration, of course, was following the board’s directive. (Jeff Rosen, cited in Pelka, 2012, p. 401)

By recognizing their power within the college system, these students were able to articulate the need for solidarity and cohesion. Like earlier student demonstrations, the DPN protestors made ample use of the media as an amplifier of their message (Ed Roberts, as cited in Pelka, 2012, p. 116; Francis, 1971, p. 3). When they were victorious, these student activists were primed to take their new-found rhetorical skills and community consciousness outside the university for application on the national stage.

As Patterson (2012) points out, our histories of the disability rights movement focus heavily on pivotal public demonstrations and the careers of the activists directing them. We too easily leave out the grassroots activism and organizing work these individuals did when they were college students (p. 474). When we observe closely, we can recognize that colleges and universities have been, and continue to be, central hubs for disability culture. Not only have they provided a space for disabled students to gather and organize, they have provided the social pressures that gave those students cause to rise and fight as one. We will see this same kind of internal pressure at play in other levels of academia, as well, as we observe how activism led disability studies scholars to critiques of various academic disciplines and push for accessibility in commonplace teaching practices.

**Part Two: From Disability Activism to Disability Studies**

Disability studies, as an academic discipline, traces its values and concerns back to the activist roots sketched above. Indeed, DS, like many academic fields with activist roots, continually rehashes the question of what distinguishes disability activism from disability studies. When disability scholarship is directed outside the university, for instance in public policy (in what Longmore (2003) calls “first phase” DS) we see clear examples where disability scholars use their academic posts to achieve activist ends. But in what sense can disability scholars who do work in the humanities or humanistic social sciences claim to be activist? Is there something inherently activist about DS by virtue of its social-justice roots, even as it is applied to such contexts as sophomore literature classes or graduate critical theory seminars?

We turn now to examine the transitional moment that occurred at the end of the 20th century when DS scholars who claimed activist roots began to lay out plans for reforming universities from within their own hallways. In one sense, this narrative describes the building of an academic discipline, and thus fits neatly with the early institutionalization efforts of women’s studies, black studies, and other interdisciplinary critical identity politics movements. However, because of the unique nature of disability as a social identity, and because of academia’s long history as a producer of medicalized “expertise” on disability, DS scholars came to articulate a politics of institutional reform that expanded beyond simply wedging open their own spot in the academy.

**Behind Enemy Lines: Disability Knowledge-Makers**

Universities have long been sites where disability knowledge is made. Indeed, since the mid-nineteenth century, research universities have been the hubs of the major fields that claim to specialize in disability: by now the list includes such fields as psychology, allopathic medicine, rehabilitative therapy, assistive technology design, social work, and special education. As Hunter College psychologist, memoirist, and activist Simi Linton (1998) observes, these fields traditionally share the same fundamental alignment: the practitioner of the discipline (the person doing advanced study in, say, special education or audiology) is assumed to be able bodied, and the person on whom or with whom the practitioner works is assumed to be disabled (p. 72). It is the practitioner, certified in the applied field, who is authorized to publish research on disability, and it is practitioners and their peers who design the curriculum for training new practitioners. Across the generations, these fields reinforce the idea that disability can be understood fundamentally as a medical abnormality, and that the fundamental goal for studying the topic is to devise interventions to treat the problem. This well-accepted approach to studying disability, obviously, does not sit well with DS scholars working in the academy.

David T. Mitchell and Susan Snyder each summarize this perspective on the state of disability knowledge-making in the traditional American university: “Historically, disabled people have been objects of study but not purveyors of the knowledge base of disability” (Snyder & Mitchell, 2010, p. 198). Indeed, it is this long history of disabled presence in university-authorized spaces that distinguishes DS from other identity-studies fields. Whereas feminists could point to the many academic disciplines and rightly critique them for excluding women and ignoring their experience in general, huge branches of the university system thrived on producing and consuming knowledge about disability (Linton, 1998).

Irving Zola’s work provides an important example of core role of disability studies as a critic of applied fields such as medicine and sociology, and which is often used to determine medical and public policy. Zola began publishing on topics including cultural understandings of health and illness and power within medical interactions beginning in the late 1960s, the same time the early student activist leaders were forming their first campus groups (Williams, 1996, p. 108). He provided a scholarly backing for the Independent Living movement, spearheaded by Ed Roberts, among others (Williams, p. 109). Like many DS scholars who would follow him, Zola connected his deeply personal academic interests to work outside the university—in his case, his sociological research into the cultural values and social behaviors of medical care, leading him to help develop the self-help movement in Boston (Williams, p. 125).

While Zola’s work continues to be important in the sociology of medicine, his broader impact remains in his work founding the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) in 1986 and establishing *Disability Studies Quarterly (DSQ)*, a new flagship publication venue for the emerging scholarly field (Society for Disability Studies, 2016); Williams, p. 108). One important function of disability-led institutions such as SDS and *DSQ* is to provide authority for the kinds of research and critique that were emerging from the activist world. Several historians site the importace of SDS and *DSQ* for setting the trajectory for the proliferation of DS scholarship that would follow as more academics from American and British universities began exploring disability issues in their scholarship (Williams, 1996, p. 117; Fleischer & Zames, 2011). As I will discuss, while this groundwork helped to establish the scholarly acumen of DS as a field, it also established the forum and values by which new DS scholars could examine the institutions they worked for and develop a new line of critique of disability values embedded within academic knowledge-making.

To describe their experience operating as DS scholars in the historically medicalized space of Western higher education, Snyder and Mitchell (2010, p. 188) identify the field as a subaltern, feral presence in the university, like a child raised by wolves being invited to royal court. Disabled people have been discursively excluded from the conversation by nature of the traditional non-disabled monopoly on disability knowledge. DS claims activist imperatives and espouses values attuned to activist ends—such as the belief that disabled people constitute a minority group that has been systematically disenfranchised by social policy and cultural bias against the disabled. This perspective remains at odds with the education received by most health science students (Linton, 1998, p. 87; Mitchell & Snyder, 2001, p. 196).

Snyder and Mitchell describe the daily indignities of walking the halls of their institution, George Washington University, where the disability studies department is situated immediately next to the health sciences departments. When disabled students and faculty walk the halls with white-coated students and faculty who make their careers in impairment-based research, they feel the press of their outsider status and the scrutiny of the diagnostic gaze (Snyder and Mitchell, 2010, p. 196). The discomfort goes both ways, of course—disability studies’ political critique cuts deep at the authority and ethics of the health fields. As Snyder and Mitchell assert (191-192), “These professions have always imagined their commitment to disabled people as their primary value, and hearing that disabled people—particularly those in disability studies—do not necessarily share this sentiment often comes as a shock.”

And yet, despite the fundamental ideological discontinuity between the approach to disability these two fields, they both recognize that they stand to benefit from some form of collaboration. While DS scholars prefer to engage with disability as a social and cultural phenomenon, they acknowledge that the medical interventions developed within the health fields have offered material benefit to the lives of many disabled people (Linton, 1998, p. 81). A medical establishment that understood and incorporated the perspectives of disabled people themselves—one that even welcomed disabled practitioners, for example—would be a great benefit to the disabled community, indeed the whole population, since everyone can potentially become disabled. Likewise, the health fields, by reaching out to include disabled people in meaningful partnership, could render themselves “beyond reproach in their humanitarian commitments” (Snyder and Mitchell, 2010, p. 190), thus access some of the political and ideological ethos disability activists bring to their academic work.

**Critiquing the Curriculum of Disability Knowledge-Making**

One avenue for DS scholarship in the humanities has been to identify sites of disability knowledge-making across the disciplines. For example, while much of Snyder and Mitchell’s published DS work focuses on literary theory and analysis of historical cultural texts, they also argue “Disability Studies must recognize that its critique should be trained on the institution of the academy as much as on the social and political context outside its walls” (Snyder and Mitchell, 2010, p. 196). In specific, Snyder and Mitchell aim their institutional critique at the standard curriculum for health science students, which they believe inadequately examines the experiences of disabled people and thus allows future health practitioners to avoid examining their own internalized ableist beliefs.

Simi Linton (1998) also argues that it is an important mission for DS to take on the university’s health-focused disability curriculum. Linton, herself a trained psychologist and experienced activist, taught at CUNY’s Hunter College, a campus with heavy investments in the fields of psychology, special education, social work, and rehabilitative therapy. From her position in close institutional proximity to these fields, Linton identifies a dangerous tendency in these applied fields to segregate disability as a specialty topic within the course sequence. For instance, because disability topics tend to be relegated to courses on special education, standard education majors tend to get taught about disability as a rare, exceptional occurrence, a topic sequestered from the standard education field; present in many applied fields, this “divided curriculum” reinforces the belief that disability can be understood wholly as an aberration from the norm, a physical anomaly, rather than as a standard feature of common human diversity (Linton, 1998, p. 82). These specialized, segregated fields—special education, rehabilitation counseling—tend to be poorly equipped to go beyond medical understandings of disability, thus they remain ill-equipped to examine the social, political, and cultural factors that affect not only the lives of disabled people but the general population as well (Linton, 1998, pp. 82-83).

To counterbalance this problematic history of "medicalized" disability, Linton argues in *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (1998), “it is time for courses in disability studies, from a liberal arts perspective, to be introduced into applied fields” (p. 83). These courses would center on ideas emergent from the disability rights movement: that disabled people’s lives are not defined wholly by their impairments; that disabled people can and routinely do lead complex, fulfilling lives; and that the strongest barriers disabled people face in leading fulfilling, independent lives emerge from the culturally pervasive bias against disabled people as well as inaccessible environments. These perspectives, Linton argues, are best approached through a humanities lens. One reason Linton offers is that humanities courses are better situated to incorporate the voices of disabled people themselves, often through the media of personal biography or cultural history telling. Indeed, in the time since Linton published this call for curricular change, curricular movements in the medical humanities and other related hybrid fields have become more commonplace.

The ultimate aim of Linton’s curricular reform was two-fold: most immediately, Linton (1998) argues for the epistemological power of DS perspectives. In overview, she claims that the knowledge produced across the university is deeply flawed in its inability to accurately and realistically understand disabled people’s lived experience (p. 115). She establishes the need for an interdisciplinary field of DS, which can function as a counterbalancing force in the academy. To demonstrate the utility of this field, Linton explicates how DS perspectives can open new avenues for socially progressive research in hard science, social sciences, and all fields of the humanities. Linton (1998) does not see this epistemological critique as merely academic. Indeed, she argues:

As currently rendered, the knowledge we generate in the academy and disseminate to students perpetuates a society in which disabled people are often cast as other, marginalized, and denied civil rights and economic opportunities; relegated to segregated and inferior education; and restricted in their opportunities for pleasure, social and sexual interaction, parenting, marriage, religious expression, and freedom of movement. (p. 130)

Here, Linton argues that the curriculum of the academy has direct repercussions on disabled people outside the university walls. By incorporating DS perspectives into a range of fields, Linton believes the university can also become a key force in producing a more disability-inclusive society. She closes *Claiming Disability* with a broad look at the possible applications of DS perspectives in a wide range of non-academic employment sectors. In her progressive vision, DS could provide training for a generation of HR directors, museum curators, architects, and travel agents (pp. 161-170). In effect, college DS courses could become an educational hub for spreading progressive attitudes about disability around the professions, thus helping to engineer a more accessible society for disabled people.

The epistemological critique forwarded by central DS scholars like Linton, Mitchell, and Snyder have had substantial effects. In the past twenty years, we have witnessed the flourishing both of DS programs (including BA, MA, and PhD programs), and the development of hybrid disciplines in the medical humanities. These disciplinary developments have allowed for new approaches to studying disability across a wide range of fields. In addition, by popularizing critical ideas from disability studies, it has become easier to identify and put into question the kinds of ableist ideologies that make some courses unwelcome to disabled students themselves. Indeed, the critiques of Linton, Mitchell, and Snyder name student access as among the primary aims of DS—that is, they believe promoting DS will result in more disabled students being able to participate in spaces of higher education (Linton, 1998, p. 113; Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, 198).

**Part Three: Toward a Disability Studies for Composition/Rhetoric**

But what, exactly, is meant to be the mechanism by which an increase of DS research will promote the inclusion of disabled students in university life? While Linton and other central DS figures have rightly taken aim at the academy and its history of ableist knowledge-making, these critiques of “the curriculum” tend to stay well clear of any engagement with college-level pedagogy. These critics do not discuss new kinds of classroom practice or new conceptions of student intellectual labor. This omission gives the impression that while DS offers new *epistemological* opportunities to the academy, its understanding of the intellectual work of teaching and learning fits perfectly well with the status quo. That is, aside from the content of the courses, DS courses are to be taught just like any other course.

This omission points to a serious problem in DS engagement with higher education. While disability scholars are equipped to critique the epistemology of academic professionals, the field has remained largely silent and inactive about the practical factors that keep disabled students from entering and succeeding in higher education. Admittedly, there may be serious professional risks involved in asking deep questions about student access and pedagogical practice in academia. However, as I will show in the following section, composition and rhetoric scholars have begun to demonstrate that DS approaches can powerfully influence classroom practice. With this growing movement of DS pedagogues, we see a new emerging praxis for disability reform in college instruction.

As an inherently interdisciplinary field, DS adapts itself to the research methods and practices of the academic practitioners it attracts. As scholars in composition and rhetoric began exploring DS, naturally enough, they connected disability issues with many of the major social justice discourses already present in the discipline.

There are many ideological concerns shared between mainstream composition-rhetoric discourse and the emerging subfield of Disability Rhetoric, the community of DS scholars associated with the Conference on College Composition and Communication Position Statement on Disability Issues and the online network disabilityrhetoric.org. First, we see attention to disability as a variety of student difference. Here, the earliest Disability Rhetoric scholars argued that teaching practices should be developed that acknowledged the cognitive, emotional, and psychological diversity of our students. This work essentially expanded on groundwork already laid down in understanding and responding to other sites of student difference, including race, gender, and cultural or sexual identity. Second, a related discourse emerged extending composition’s investment in examining and honoring non-mainstream cultural rhetorics. Third, we see Disability Rhetoric scholars taking composition discourses about institutionality. For instance, Disability Rhetoric scholars observe the ways disability identity plays out in admissions essays (Vidali, 2007), or the rhetoric of syllabus accessibility statements (Womack, 2017). This focus extends to methods of institutional critique. Composition has a rich history of scholarship about the field’s position within the broader university structure, including critical examinations of such matters as adjunct labor, tenure equity, turf battles within English departments, and the so-called “service mission” of composition as a field. Disability Rhetoric scholars have extended these branches of scholarship to examine the issues that directly pertain to disabled faculty working in our field, including issues of professional accommodation (Price, 2009) and the politics of self-disclosure (Vidali, 2015).

Each of these foci represents a moment of transformation, both for composition-rhetoric scholarship and for DS. On the one hand, disability topics offer new objects of study for composition researchers of many stripes. This is not to say, of course, that all disability-focused composition research has aligned with DS’s activist values; indeed, the same medical model/social model divide Linton (1998) describes in the broader university community exists within composition. Sometimes when compositionists approach topics like learning disabilities, they uncritically accept entirely medicalized views on the topic. At the same time, however, compositionists have in turn exerted their own disciplinary interests back on DS. On the one hand, they have provided in-depth study of disabilities that are common in college classrooms, like learning disabilities, attention disorders, and mental disabilities. These experiences had previously been under-theorized in traditional DS texts, which, by drawing their history back to the activism discussed above, tended to favor perspectives rooted in physical or sensory disabilities. Because of their disciplinary training in college-level pedagogy theory, compositionists are best equipped to bring the university itself into the purview of DS critique. Thus, we see in the rise of Disability Rhetoric a specific case study for two relatively young academic disciplines empowering one another’s legitimacy and diversifying one another’s discursive landscapes.

**Institutional Rhetoric and Disability**

One major intersection of composition-rhetoric research and DS focus is on the *rhetoric* side of the field. It is a central tenet of DS that disability is culturally constructed—that the way a disabled person lives their life is determined by the *beliefs* about disability privileged in their culture through language, narratives, social etiquette, and law. Each of these aspects of cultural discourse relies on the rich rhetorical power of disability. As Mitchell and Snyder argue (2001) in their groundbreaking literary study *Narrative Prosthesis*, fiction writers often rely on stereotypes of disability (as burden or punishment) in order to structure their narratives. Within the privileged able-bodied imagination, disability holds symbolic power to represent any number of abject states; we see this semantic connection in the easy linguistic slippages that occur, largely unquestioned, between language of impairment and general incapacity: to be blind is a metaphor for not understanding; to be crippled by something is a metaphor for being incapacitated; to be deaf to pleas or complaints is to be stubbornly apathetic. Notions of disability and impairment have impressive rhetorical power, although, in examples like these, the effect is also to confirm stereotypes that disabled people themselves are ignorant, incapable, or in need of cure.

The reverse image of disability’s rhetorical potency as a symbol of abjection is the reality that people with impairments are, by virtue of being associated with these stereotypes, disabled rhetorically. In myriad venues, disabled people are treated as if their ideas, desires, and requests are not of valid concern. This is especially the case for people with mental or intellectual disabilities, who are widely judged as not knowing their own best interest, as not having access to the rational abilities to hold authority as credible rhetors (Price, 2011). Much of the purpose of the early disability rights movement—including the Independent Living Movement and the movement for de-institutionalization of psychiatric patients—sought to establish means by which disabled people could exert their own desires for independence and self-determination in the face of paternalistic social systems that confined their movements and ignored their experiences. This is, in part, a matter of rhetorical reform.

**Disabling Institutional Critique**

The most recent wave of DS scholarship in composition takes up broader approaches to institutional critiques and applies them to questions of diversity, inclusive policy, and access. Many aspects of this critique stay within the common ground of composition-rhetoric: writing curriculum, classroom practice, and genre analysis. However, many scholars have recently turned to administrative and bureaucratic discourse to identify cultural locations of disability in higher education. For instance, in *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (2011),Margaret Price examines how popular conceptions of mental illness influence admissions and student behavior policies in colleges. Likewise, Stephanie Kerschbaum (2014) takes aim at administrative discourse about diversity, identifying how ideological underpinnings in the definition of *diversity* determine the pedagogical programs developed in its name.

Within this paradigm, DS scholars trained in rhetorical analysis and Writing Program Administration (WPA) are moving beyond studies of individual disability or case studies of individual disabled students. Instead, everyday administrative discourse and policy documents are becoming a vibrant site for investigating social and cultural manifestations of disability in higher education. This work follows an established tradition of critiquing college and university systems from within, using perspectives of disabled people to identify and combat sites of ableist bias.

Disability rhetoric scholar Amy Vidali provides useful insights on the power of disability rhetorical tropes within academic institutions, at both student and the faculty levels. For instance, in her *College English* article “Performing the Rhetorical Freak Show: Disability, Student Writing, and College Admissions” (2007), Vidali examines the ways students with learning disabilities discuss their disability identity in college admissions essays. Vidali finds that these students are savvy rhetors, well aware that admissions committee biases might have a big impact on their chances to get admitted. As she puts it, students must “manipulate both existing and unexpected rhetorical tropes [about disability] for their own ends” (Vidali, 2007, p. 616). However, the narratives students must use, which tend to focus on overcoming personal adversity (p. 623), put the students in a precarious rhetorical position: they must convincingly represent their experience of impairment (without seeming to be complaining) in order to claim the disabled identity that makes them unique. But they must also re-assure the admissions committee that their disability poses no significant obstructions to their college success. As Vidali writes, “such a difficult rhetorical task requires that they simultaneously ‘come out’ as disabled and ‘pass’ as able-bodied” (p. 634).

Vidali’s aim here is to confront the ways that disability tropes impact the institutional processes that regulate one of the most important writing evaluations of the student’s academic career. Indeed, college admissions essays represent just one of the many ways that members of the university community engage in important institution-sponsored literacy tasks. Each of these interactions—whether they happen purely in writing or in the real-time space of a faculty-hiring interview—is overlaid with complex cultural beliefs about normal academic ability and conventions about etiquette attuned to able-bodied tradition.[[1]](#footnote-2) Disabled students, faculty, and staff who don’t learn to understand and work within the implied ability expectations of this environment quickly get the picture that they are not welcome.

Vidali identifies one dangerous repercussion of this pervasiveness of disability tropes in higher education. In her article “Disabling Writing Program Administration” (*Journal of the Council of* *Writing Program Administrators,* 2015),Vidali demonstrates that the stories writing program administrators publish about their work tend to re-enforce dangerous narratives about both WPA work and disability, especially psychosocial disabilities like depression and anxiety. Stories of WPA work tend to present progress narratives, before-and-after stories wherein the “before” at the beginning features a WPA made anxious and depressed by some failed part of their writing program as well as inherent stress of WPA work; in the “after,” their program problem is in some way resolved, and, with it, anxiety and depression abate.

These narratives, as Vidali points out, conflate WPA’s emotional difficulties with poor performance of the job, suggesting that WPAs who are professionally successful necessarily are also mentally rugged and independently capable. By accepting and validating these narratives about our professional lives, WPAs are enforcing among their own ranks expectations (a) that we hide our anxieties and present a fully able-bodied persona to the world; (b) that this *persona work* is a mandatory component of our profession; and (c) that those who can’t handle this work are not equipped to be WPAs. As Vidali observes, the stigma surrounding psychological impairment in WPA work hurts us as a discipline. We don’t explore other options for WPA work, including more communal models for Writing Program leadership or professional practices that would more fully enable the participation of faculty with different abilities and interaction styles (Vidali 2015, p. 43).

**The Next Step in Institutional Ideologies**

What we see in the work of Vidali, Kerschbaum, Price, and others of the Disability Rhetoric movement is the next step in institutional critique that has been central to the American disability rights movement from its emergence in the 20th century. As writing teachers and program administrators, they are deeply invested in how teaching happens in higher education—not just what topics are covered but also what teaching methods are used and what beliefs about teaching and learning are imbedded in the environment. These institutional, cultural forces suffuse college life for faculty and students alike. And through the lens of institutional critique, Disability Rhetoric scholars observe the unique manifestations of disability and ableism that exist within higher education, those that relate to literacy, information access, and the unique social demands of academia.

As the movement for disability rights continues to evolve, we will surely keep our attention trained on the roles colleges and universities play in our lives and our work. While campuses are held to a higher legal standard for access than they were in the days of Ed Roberts and Fred Francis, student activists still agitate to get their institutions to remove barriers, both physical and technological. As a result of the rise in disabled students and faculty in the age of the ADA, there is now a richer tradition of student community building around disability identity and disabled student organizations are more common. As it has in other periods, the community-building precipitated by college life sets the basis for activism within the college itself. This agitation is felt at the faculty level, as DS courses proliferate—in part to satisfy the desires of students who want to study disability as part of their degree, and in part to offer alternatives to the applied fields that have monopolized academic authority about disability for so long.

Instead, these foundational DS figures articulated an intellectual project to recognize fields of culture, art, history, and philosophy as being essential knowledge areas in defining what disability is and why it matters. Now, several decades into the development of academic DS, scholarship is emerging to train the critiques of ableism at the institutional traditions and ideologies of higher education itself. This proliferation of DS critique of higher education suggests important growth on the horizon, where the institutional ideologies and policies identified by Disability Rhetoric scholars become the focus of new kinds of student activism, the spark for new kinds of DS disciplinary establishment. It will be important that we keep good histories of this moment, as we have for our early history. The next waves of DS and disability activism may well play out as did the previous ones did, in American colleges and universities.

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1. Margaret Price uses the term *kairotic space* to refer to academic/professional environments in which academic ability is assessed in real time, unscripted, interpersonal interactions. These kiarotic spaces traditionally favor the participation of non-disabled individuals (*Mad at School,* 2011, p. 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)