

Disability Invisibility in Academia: How to Support Disabled People in Research and Beyond

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Imagine that you have found the ideal new member for your lab with the perfect skills and background to contribute. Best of all, the individual has accepted your offer to join the lab! After you share the offer letter, the Office of Disability Services contacts you about the new lab member. Do you have any idea what accommodations this person might need? Have you fostered a spirit of inclusion, leading to this person disclosing their disability to you?

What qualifies as a disability? The United States Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines disability as “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity.” However, because this definition is a matter of United States law, it means that the definition is a legal one that includes individuals with any record of a disability and individuals who do not openly identify as having a disability even if they meet these criteria.

Many disabled individuals feel that there is a stigma associated with identifying as disabled. Throughout most of their lifetime, disabled people are implicitly and explicitly told by society that having a disability is a bad thing. Society tells children not to stare and not to ask about differences. Disabled people are called “differently abled” or “people with special needs” instead of people with disabilities (Poe, 2018). This is often due to the stigma of having a disability.

Aside from people with very noticeable physical disabilities, disability has been a relatively unacknowledged identity until recently. Within diversity initiatives at most universities, disability is not considered an important part of a diverse academic system or important to academia. There are many disabled scientists working in academia who are leaders and contribute to highly important findings within their field. However, many disabled people hide their disability out of

fear of judgment and stigma. In this essay, we explain why fostering an accessible environment can make a huge difference in the lives of any disabled person in academia. And, although this article focuses on the academic setting, many of the issues discussed are also relevant to settings outside of the academic world. Indeed, accessibility in general is important for creating a welcoming environment for disabled people in any profession. Specific accessibility needs and solutions will differ, but there is a universal need to be accommodating to anyone with a disability.

How to Support Disabled Individuals in Academia

Disability is rarely considered by funding agencies or within demographic surveys in academia and rarely analyzed with intersectional identities such as race, class, religion, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Individuals who openly identify as having a disability are often underrepresented in academia (Brown and Leigh, 2018; Swenor et al., 2020). Ableism (discrimination against disabled individuals), stigmas (cultural biases), and inaccessibility in academia may be several reasons that students, staff, and faculty often choose to hide their disabilities (Brown and Leigh, 2018; Marks and Bayer, 2019; Ramírez, 2019). Abled people (people without disabilities) need to consider how inaccessibility, lack of understanding, perpetuation of ableist language in research, and lack of openly disabled representation can harbor an unwelcoming and even hostile environment to anyone in academia with a disability.

To create a welcoming environment for disabled people, abled people need to be willing to learn from people with disabilities themselves, acknowledge when they are uninformed about a topic, and reach out for resources about how to implement accessibility at their university or other workplace (Burgstahler, 2012).

Here are some of the questions that each person needs to ask. Do you know how to get accommodations at your university or workplace? Do you know who to contact, and what you would have to do? Do you know what accommodations are offered? Is your course, lab, and/or building accessible to those with disabilities already and if not, can it be made accessible?

Types of Accommodations

Accommodations for people with disabilities can look drastically different depending on the person and their needs. These are just a handful of potential accommodations for disabled people: (1) flexible work hours; (2) later start times for a sleep disorder; (3) physical lab accessibility for sitting down/mobility aids; (4) a standing desk for back pain; (5) ergonomic lab equipment for fine motor disabilities; (6) captions in Zoom meetings and recorded lectures; (7) providing screen reader accessible material and alt-text in images; (8) moving a desk to a different part of the room due to light sensitivity; (9) adding dampers to the side of a door that slams for hyperacusis; and (10) installing flashing alarms for people who are deaf or hard of hearing (Adler et al., 2019) (for more examples, see askjan.org/a-to-z.cfm). Many people in academia may have multiple disabilities, and sometimes, even conflicting accommodation needs exist within the same person, leading to changing accommodations based on fluctuating needs for dynamic disabilities.

Most disability services do not focus on making research accessible but rather on classrooms. And even this can be hard for disabled students to acquire without confusion or judgment from professors. The issues mentioned may contribute to disabled students, faculty, and staff getting left behind, dropping out, or deciding once they graduate to leave academia completely (Marks and Bayer, 2019). There are systemic barriers to being a disabled person in academia, and these often go unacknowledged. However, by becoming aware of accessibility issues and including disabled people in these conversations, everyone can be part of a large positive change and foster better inclusion within the scientific community.

How to Implement Accessibility

What Does Physical Disability “Look” Like?

People who have physical disabilities may use a wheelchair, crutches, a cane, braces, or orthotics or not use

any mobility aids at all. Some people may use some mobility aids or none depending on the day, as most disabled people have dynamic disabilities.

IK: “I am a relatively ‘young’ looking person who often does not use mobility aids but still needs to take the elevator due to my physical/pain disabilities and cannot walk long distances. People almost never assume I have a physical disability unless I use a mobility aid, which they then assume is a temporary injury, and people stop me to ask me invasive questions such as ‘What happened?’ while I just want to go about my day.”

ERK: “Most people are surprised to learn that I receive disability accommodations because I have a doctorate in audiology. This could suggest that those who have disabilities are not able to successfully achieve such pursuits, which is inaccurate and why I think it is important to advocate for those who have disabilities.”

The point of the first quote is that some people use the elevator instead of taking the stairs because they have physical disabilities that cause fatigue, pain, or limited motion without using mobility aids, and many people will not disclose this need to others. Taking the elevator may be seen as “lazy” to people who are not aware of that person’s disability. It is important not to assume that everyone you meet does not have a disability. Assumptions of ability often occur based on biases such as age, race, and gender. Think about the times you have made a judgment about someone else. Could those judgments be related to a person’s disability?

Physical Accessibility

Unfortunately, most labs even today are not created with accessibility in mind. Accessibility in research specifically has rarely been explored, especially in regard to diversity efforts. It is important, especially for people in leadership in academia, to consider that a student, staff, or faculty member may have a disability and to plan accordingly, regardless of whether someone has disclosed or not.

It’s important for nondisabled administrators, faculty, and even students to understand that there are many barriers for disabled people in the academic environment. Often, these barriers begin with not being able to physically enter and maneuver a space, whether it is a

building, research lab, or field research site, such as a ship. A graduate student can only perform research in labs that they can access.

General Mobility Accessibility

As a faculty member, when building a new lab, it is important to design in a universally accessible way, especially for wheelchair users. This accessibility provides many more benefits than just for that one potential future person who uses a wheelchair. Anyone can acquire a physical disability at any age, and that person might be doing research in this particular lab now or in the future.

Having an accommodating environment is inclusive of anyone who needs access to a lab, including collaborators, lab assistants, or any staff or student who needs access to the space or tools within your lab space and yes, even for the faculty member. Many academics today do research even into their 80s. Many older people develop disabilities as part of the aging process, whether this means arthritis, eyesight disabilities, or needing to sit due to an inability to stand for extended periods of time.

Having to maneuver through an inaccessible lab space as a disabled person can be painful and even lead to acquiring more disabilities by extending the limits of one's body. By designing every lab space with accessibility in mind, disabled people will be able to access this space and be included in research without being in pain or sacrificing more of their long-term physical health.

By ensuring that a lab is physically accessible, especially for wheelchair users, it is important to include bench space at chair height, with leg room underneath wide enough for a wheelchair, leg room under the fume hood rather than safety cabinets below, a lowered sink with leg room for washing labware, a separate lower handle for the emergency shower, and an extension pipe for the eyewash to incorporate leg room (Duerstock, 2014). It is also important to design the space with the width of a wheelchair in mind, so that the wheelchair users can maneuver easily through the lab (Duerstock, 2014). Providing physical accessibility will also help anyone who needs to sit in a chair rather than stand when doing lab work and/or anyone who uses a cane, crutches, or rollator to move around.

Physical Accessibility Outside the Lab

Physical accessibility extends outside the lab as well. Here are some questions to consider when assessing the physical accessibility of a research lab or classroom. Is there an automated door to the bathroom on the lab floor? Is the accessible stall in the bathroom actually large enough for a wheelchair user to turn around and close the door? Can a wheelchair user reach the soap dispenser and sink? Would a wheelchair user be able to get to the lab in your building and through the doors? Are there any stairs or steps within your lab space? Are all emergency exits accessible to individuals who use other types of mobility aids (e.g., use of windows and ladders for underground rooms)?

IK: "As someone who has invisible disabilities, I often notice when people are unaware of accessibility. Does the graduate program have a walking tour for incoming students and is that walking tour accessible? Are there accommodations or alternate routes available for tours? Does the lab pride itself on taking a hike every week, although this activity is not something in which every disabled person can participate?"

Although many abled people may consider these things to be a minor inconvenience, these are warning signs to disabled people that they have not been considered during the recruiting process and that they will likely face more barriers to accessibility in the future in that program.

Classrooms, Learning, and Accessibility

Most disability services in academia focus on classrooms. However, even accommodations in classrooms can be hard for disabled students to acquire without confusion or judgment from professors. Professors should not ask a student to disclose their disability when meeting about accommodations because this can make a student feel like they have to "prove" their disability.

Accessibility for Teaching

Another barrier to accessibility includes lack of captions for Zoom meetings. Software and course materials should be checked for accessibility with screen readers for people who are blind or have low vision. For people who have difficulty speaking due to anxiety, stuttering, or another disability, text answers

DISABILITY INVISIBILITY IN ACADEMIA

should be accepted as part of participation. Consider a person's communication preferences such as e-mailing, meeting by Zoom, in-person appointments, or phoning. It is important to remember that not everyone will disclose their disability to you, and what you may assume are preferences may actually be someone else's accessibility needs.

If a faculty member is unsure on how to make a course the accessible, it is important to seek out accessibility training from your university's accessibility resource center and/or get help from an IT department to help make the course accessible (Burgstahler, 2012). There are also many resources outside the university written by disabled people themselves that provide helpful information on how to mentor disabled students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, accessibility in research, classrooms, field sites (Healey et al., 2015), and many more is crucial to the participation of students, staff, and faculty with disabilities. Disabled people have the knowledge, passion, and creativity to thrive in academia (Marks and Bayer, 2019). However, inaccessibility and the stigma of disability in society even today is a large barrier to being able to do so. Please consider openly welcoming disabled people, advocating for them, accommodating them, and believing in their needs and talents. When in doubt, ask the disabled person directly about what accommodations they need. It's never too late to be more inclusive.

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