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Towards Accessible Futures: Re-imagining Space and Inclusion in Higher Education

Cecelia Kaufmann

Honors Thesis
Advisor: Dan Trudeau, PhD
Macalester College Department of Geography
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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the disability community. My work could not have been possible without you, your vulnerability, and your resilience. I dedicate this work to disabled individuals in higher education and college. Your courage, resilience, and perseverance are beautiful and strong in the face of adversity. Rather than continuing with my words, I would like to leave you all with the words of Stacey Park Milbern, a Korean-American Disability Justice activist. She helped create the Disability Justice movement and advocated for fair treatment of disabled people. She passed away in 2020. However, on June 13th, 2019, she gave a speech for disabled students at the UC Santa Cruz Disability Resource Center graduation ceremony, where she said:

> There is no reason for us to feel shame for who we are. We were born into this world exactly as we are. We are who we were meant to be. That doesn't mean we can't grow and change and be better. Grow. Change. Be better. But also know you are a beautiful human being who deserves love and tenderness and care as you are. You do. We do. We deserve to have our boundaries listened to. We deserve respect. We deserve dignity. We deserve to have our humanity seen. We deserve an opportunity to contribute to society. We deserve the ability to make mistakes…..
>
> We are not the only ones who deserve all of these things. Every living being on this planet does. Your experiences of ableism and with disability can give you a greater ability to understand the pain of the world if you let it. As so many people have demonstrated, when you are a free person, you have an obligation to help other people get free. It's our responsibility to make this world more just and loving, to fight for people to have all the things they deserve as people have fought for us. We get much further in all our endeavors when we lift up our people as we work. This is very different from the message mainstream society tells us to focus on our own immediate needs. This is very different from the message we hear that disabled people have nothing to offer (Park, 2019).

Lastly, I dedicate this to my brother. I love you. I wish the world would step up for you. This work will be one slight movement in the right direction.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank several people who have made this research possible. I express my profound gratitude and appreciation to those I interviewed for this work. This research would not exist without your honesty, bravery, and sincerity throughout this process. Whether I talked to you one-on-one or you filled out the survey, thank you for trusting me and sharing your stories of pain and resilience with me.

I have to express my gratitude to my advisor, Dan Trudeau. You have been one of my guiding mentors. From my first day of college at eighteen amidst a pandemic to today, as I begin my next chapter of life, your guidance, advice, and support have and always will help to steer me towards what's next. I would like to acknowledge Lauren Milne and Eric Carter, the members of my honors defense committee. Your dedication as professors in my academic explorations and advice through this process has influenced my experience. I owe my heart to the rest of the Geography Department, specifically Laura Kigin. Laura, you have guided me the last two years, and your tireless work to make the Geography Department a place where all can feel supported is something that I have felt during my time and have grown to appreciate deeply.

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I owe endless appreciation to my dear friends, who have been working on their research with me. Thank you for your guidance on the days filled with success and encouragement when it was more than needed. My roommates T, B, and A, thank you times a billion for being the best friends and supporters one can have!

Lastly, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my loved ones. Thank you to my family for supporting my work, my investment in research, and cultivating my love for reading, writing, and understanding the world around me. From belly laughs and bright red hair to tough love, support, encouragement, and endless moments of "back to the drawing board" over the years, my family is the origin of this work and why I kept coming back. To B, thank you for your support and listening to my excited rants and love throughout this process. Thank you, thank you, thank you to all. I am forever grateful!

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Chapter One: Introduction

Higher education institutions shine as beacons of knowledge, enlightenment, and progress. However, beneath the surface of scholarly pursuits lies a story of discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Ableism in academia is concerning because it creates a learning environment in which individuals with disabilities often feel excluded, isolated, or subjected to discrimination (Abes & Wallace, 2012; Amakid & Brownfield, 2019; Francis et al., 2019). This makes it difficult for individuals with disabilities to feel like they belong and have a chance to thrive in higher education. In this thesis, I argue that rhetoric promoting able-bodiedness and the physical design of spaces within higher education institutions both reinforce academic ableism, hindering the possibilities for individuals with disabilities. In higher education, ableism manifests itself in various forms, from inaccessible physical spaces to discriminatory practices and policies, called academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017). The overarching definition of academic ableism, as used by Jay Dolmage, is a driving force for this research and is distinct from "regular" ableism. Individuals with disabilities often encounter barriers that impede their access to educational opportunities, limit their inclusion in academic activities, and challenge their academic success. Whether it is a lack of accommodation opportunities, the absence of inclusive pedagogical practices, or the reproduction of ableist attitudes, ableism in academia perpetuates systemic inequalities. It reinforces power structures in higher educational institutions for both disabled and non-disabled students, staff, faculty, and instructors.

It is essential to recognize the profound impact that ableism in high education has on the lives of individuals with disabilities and the broader landscape of academia. Ableism not only denies individuals with disabilities opportunities and experiences in line with their non-disabled peers but also undermines the core principles of knowledge and inclusivity that are hallmarks of higher education (Easterbrook et al., 2015; Grimes et al., 2020; Shpigelman et al., 2021). Acknowledging how academic ableism is ingrained into higher education and the mechanisms that allow ableism to reproduce in this setting offers a unique opportunity to create an accessible future.

This thesis unpacks the power dynamics and spatial practices that create an ableist environment in higher education and how to dismantle these dynamics. The research at the core of this thesis focuses on the following questions:

- How do the built environment of campuses, social dynamics and interactions, and institutional power intersect to reinforce or challenge academic ableism in higher education?
- How does this empower or disempower students with disabilities?
- What strategies can dismantle academic ableism and foster inclusivity in higher education, shaping a more accessible future for all students?

I answer these questions through interviews and anonymous surveys conducted at Macalester College, a small liberal arts college in Saint Paul, Minnesota. This research aims to understand how exclusionary practices through rhetoric seep into the daily interactions and built environments of higher education institutions to reproduce instances of academic ableism.

Central to this research is the lived experiences of people with disabilities in higher education. Rather than focusing on policy, lived experiences allow moments of ableism that are prevalent but not recognizable to someone not within the community to become known. I utilize Michel Foucault's Theory of Biopower and Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space to understand how rhetorical and physical structures operate and, in turn, can be resisted. Therefore, academic ableism is a product of the built environment and, more critically, is integrated into academia's social and power structures. To remedy academic ableism, a change in conversation and rhetoric on disability in higher education is necessary. Further, there is a need to deconstruct ableist rhetoric in higher education that circulates unnoticed and is essential to creating accessible futures.

Understanding the construction, imagination, and perpetuation of space through power systems in higher education is critical for comprehending how power cycles replicate across space and time and how to shift spaces to create accessible futures. My research hopes to take in the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities on campus to create opportunities for individuals who may not always have the opportunity to advocate and express themselves safely, given the imbalance of power (or ableism). Shedding light on these narratives and providing the opportunity for people with disabilities in higher education to communicate with the broader community, I hope to reshape how we create spaces of social and physical accessibility on higher education campuses facilitated by firsthand experiences.

To advance this argument, this thesis is organized into six broad sections. First, I provide several definitions to situate the reader in the discourse surrounding accessibility and disability. Second, a review of the literature examines the political groundings for accessibility and disability in higher education. This section will also offer groundings on theory based on productions of power, conformity, normativity, and space. Third, the methodologies that situate the research within context. Fourth, the results of the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities aim to investigate and understand the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities within academic experiences, offering valuable insights into how ableism reproduces in academic environments. Fifth, there is a discussion about how these lived experiences relate to Foucault's and Lefebvre's writings. Lastly, the conclusion discusses how these results contribute to the larger picture of higher education and actionable steps to precipitate change in higher education, facilitating an accessible future.

This thesis argues that academic ableism is not merely an abstract concept but rather a tangible and ongoing barrier that impedes the academic and personal growth of individuals with disabilities in higher education. Understanding the mechanisms through which academic ableism operates is crucial for dismantling systemic inequalities and as a link to the broader call within academia for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts within academia. The goal is to challenge institutional norms and policies that perpetuate ableist attitudes at the case study institution, recognizing that this work can serve as a starting point for shifting the treatment of disability throughout higher education.

Before proceeding to the following sections of this thesis, I provide key definitions to understand the literature and the preliminary discourse surrounding disability and accessibility. These definitions have conventional or "dictionary" definitions but are also nuanced based on the person. This section features the dictionary definition, but later sections in this thesis complicate these definitions based on lived experiences.

Key Definitions

Ableism

Ableism manifests as discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities through stereotypes, attitudes, and practices, physical barriers in the environment, and larger-scale oppression (Plurang, 2020). Where accessibility aims to be more inclusive through the processes in which we construct physical and social spaces, ableism seeks to create the opposite. Ableism allows for harmful stereotypes and assumptions about people with disabilities to perpetuate within society, making it unsafe for people with disabilities to interact with society.

Academic Ableism

In higher education, *Academic Ableism*, conceptualized by academic Jay Dolmage, describes the construction of ableism, which validates non-disabled and able-minded students (Dolmage, 2017). To operationalize the definitions of academic ableism for my research, I define academic ableism as *the valuing of non-disabled students, staff, faculty, and community members over individuals with disabilities coupled with exclusionary or less-than-equal treatment of people with disabilities in academic settings.* In my definition, an academic setting includes all spaces within a higher education institution, both within the classroom and social spaces, including the cafeteria, athletics, and extracurriculars.

Academic ableism stigmatizes disability as a deviation from the societal norm of able-bodiedness. To begin to understand academic ableism, the deconstruction of rhetoric (the knowledge and discourse spread through policy, practice, and teaching) implemented by higher education institutions is necessary. Dolmage defines rhetoric as “the circulation of discourse through the body” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 8) and emphasizes that rhetoric is critical to developing academic ableism in space.

Accessibility

There are various modes of accessibility, including physical accessibility, educational accessibility, web accessibility, and other types of accessibility. The U.S. Center for Disease Control (2020, sec. 4) defines accessibility as “when the needs of people with disabilities are specifically considered, and products, services, and facilities are built or modified so that they can be used by people of all abilities." Accommodations are adjustments made to physical or social environments to allow broader accessibility for people with disabilities.

Biopower

Michel Foucault, the world-renowned sociologist, coined the term biopower to describe “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of human species become the object of political strategy” (Foucault, 1979, p. 1). Statistical knowledge and techniques of population control allowed for the new conception of “normal” to spread. The norm accomplished the expansion of power by enabling mechanisms to discipline by transforming harmful restraints into positive controls for humans (Foucault, 1979). The mechanisms by which it functions through normalization and discipline are fundamental to biopower. Normalization emerges as a technology that makes the body more calculated and produces a docile and efficient body in terms of the population (Foucault, 1979).

Within the discourse of critical disability studies, there is another definition of normalization posed by Nirje and Wolfensberger in 1969 and 1972, respectively. Normalization, according to Nirje and Wolfensberger, is the practice of allowing people with disabilities to live life as close to the “normal” as possible, including following routines viewed as “standard” (Nirje, 1969; Wolfensberger, 1972). This principle of normalization intends to standardize people with disabilities under the façade of creating “equal” conditions. Rather than moving forward with this definition, I base my understanding of normalization around Foucault's definition, which emphasizes normalization as a mechanism of control of bodies and something inherently negative.

Critical Disability Theory/Studies

Critical disability studies/theory encompasses an interdisciplinary approach to disability by analysis of disability as a cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon rather than isolated and medicalized to the individual (Hall, 2020). Worth distinguishing, critical disability studies/theory is a methodology that:

> Involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments and the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations (Schalk, 2017, para. 1).

Critical disability studies describes both the social and political constructions of disability, utilizing the lived experiences and "attempts to transform the circumstances under which oppressed subjects live through critical, intersectional analysis" (Hall, 2020, para. 6). Critical disability studies is a profound dichotomy from the mainstream disabilities studies that emphasizes diagnosis and treatment of individual conditions rather than broader societal structures.

Disability

Disability as a definition is nuanced, meaning that one definition does not necessarily apply to every member of the disability community. For this research, I draw on the definition of "disability" from the Center for Disease Control (2020, para. 1) as "any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions).” There are four categories of disability: behavioral/emotional, sensory impaired disabled, developmental, and physical disabilities. People with disabilities can have more than one type of disability or may feel they do not want to categorize themselves into one of the four categories. It is essential to make a distinction-- as under this definition, there may be several conditions that could be considered disabilities but do not drastically affect one’s day-to-day life. For example, I wear glasses and corrective lenses to help me see with my near-sightedness and astigmatism. By the state of Minnesota, I am not considered visually impaired or blind, nor do I consider myself to be visually impaired or blind. Therefore, I do not consider *my* use of glasses or contact lenses to be a disability. Defining disability is difficult because it is situational. Disability is fluid as lives change through age and conditions.

Lived Experience

The lived experience of individuals with disabilities in higher education is the heart of this research. Without this element, the work would be obscure. Lived experience refers to knowledge based on individuals' perspectives, identities, and history beyond their educational and professional backgrounds (Ramirez et al., 2022). My hope for this research is by understanding the lived experience of individuals with disabilities in the context of the case study of a higher education institution, I a) understand the process of renegotiation of self and space in the face of implicit and explicit academic ableism, and b) understand how space and inclusion can be reimaged in higher education by restructuring system of power and spatial processes.

The Production of Space

In his 1974 book, *La Production de l'espace* (*The Production of Space*), French sociologist and intellectual Henri Lefebvre, argues that space is neither an object nor a container. Instead, space is produced, socially constructed, and ruled by human relations (Lefebvre, 1974). Lefebvre argues the hegemonic or leading classes lead the social production of urban space in society to reproduce and maintain dominance. This is insightful as it shows how dominant perspectives of institutional powers shaped day-to-day lives. There is an opportunity to shift the trajectories and mechanisms of power to understand the constructions of space.

The definition above offers a grounding in understanding some language, rhetoric, and ideas in disability discourse. Before the literature review, I note my positionality within my research. Understanding how my identity influences my research approach and analysis of my results is important.

Positionality

Connecting with the notions of power/spheres of power on campus, I find it critical to mention how my identity holds power and what systems of power my identity tends to uphold in the sphere of research. This research prioritizes experiences through person-centered data collection, making it more important to acknowledge my positionality. My positionality may influence the types of conversations I have with my interviewees, and my positionality also relates to my understanding of my interviewees' experiences. I am currently an able-bodied white woman. However, I am a younger sister to my brother, who has a rare genetic condition and is a member of the disability community. Growing up with him, I found myself wanting to understand the world through his experiences and struggling to reconcile with how the world treats him because of his disability. I have kept this close to me all through my growing up, which has led me to this work, which I hope has an impact outside the scope of this paper. My position as an advocate to the disability community may be the most relevant in my conversations with interviewees on their experiences navigating disability at Macalester College. Although there is value in having someone who is not as directly embedded within a community share their observations, experiences, and interactions within it, it is also essential to make clear that it can be problematic when outsiders go into communities and then afterward share the stories in a manner that is manipulating the space that is not there, creating a dominant perspective. Academic research can also end up being very exploitative, and it is essential to acknowledge this, mainly because research based on first-person perspectives relies on individuals sharing highly personal and sometimes traumatic stories. Although I am not a member of the disability community, I hope this research can help uplift the voices of members of the disability community at Macalester and their experiences -- contributing to a fundamental shift in the viewing and acknowledgment of disability on our campus, creating a new narrative of accessibility for future disabled students, staff, and faculty.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

According to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, higher education "shall be made equally accessible to all, based on capacity, by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education" (ICESCR, 1996, Article 13.2.c). Furthermore, the right to higher education does not allow any discrimination. There is a disconnect between policy and practice in higher education. In practice, there are still several forms of discrimination or barriers impeding equal access for people with disabilities in higher education. Barriers come in several forms, including physical infrastructure and social settings, creating experiences where discrimination leads to uncomfortable or unsafe environments.

The following section reviews the literature, which offers an overview of preexisting discussions about accessibility and lived experience with disability in higher education. Given the interdisciplinary nature of disability and accessibility, the literature works to rectify multiple discourses, including geography, the medical field, education, sociology, and political theory. The material in this literature review broadly focuses on understanding how spatial practice and power dynamics play pivotal roles in reproducing academic ableism in higher education. This helps to understand a few key pieces. First, the history of legislation at the federal level in the United States and how legislation left policies for accessibility in higher education. Second, the lived experiences, including supports and barriers for people with disabilities in higher education. Third, the critical disability studies discourse surrounding Lefebvre and Foucault. Addressing these three key areas provides an opportunity to understand how these processes of academic ableism shape higher education and further address how to shape an accessible future.

The History of Higher Education for People with Disabilities Pre-Legislation

Legislation in the United States transformed higher education into a more accessible space; however, the history of higher education for individuals with disabilities is a history of eugenics, isolation, exclusion, and discrimination. Disability in higher education was something not accepted or allowed throughout history. It is crucial to take a step back and understand the development of the academic tradition in higher education and the establishment of ableist rhetoric and practice in higher education.

The first establishment of higher education for people with disabilities came in 1864 when President Abraham Lincoln signed into law a division of college at the Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb. Twenty-five students, including two women, were in attendance just two years after its establishment (Madaus, 2011). By 1894, public feedback about the name shifted the school name to Gallaudet College. When created in 1864, Gallaudet was one of the first higher education institutions to recognize and allow disability and remains the only liberal arts university in the world for the Deaf.

In the early 1900s, higher education became the epicenter of medical research that, in turn, facilitated harmful, ableist rhetoric. Eugenics became one of the critical areas following Darwin's survival of the fittest conjecture (Dolmage, 2017). Eugenics, or "the 'science' of controlling who lives, who procreates, who thrives, and who dies, based on flawed ideas about our genetic makeup" (Dolmage, 2017, p. 11), drove North American national health and immigration policy. As institutions supported eugenics research, higher education became more selective. Policy drove the selection process, sorting bodies into geographical areas, classes, and regimes of discipline. Especially at larger land grant schools, which got money from both state and federal governments for research, offered classes based on eugenicist philosophy. Classes, in turn, spread eugenics-based knowledge that shapes young minds to believe that able-bodied, white bodies were "right" -- spreading harmful, racist, ableist rhetoric. The eugenics movement reshaped how North Americans thought about bodies and minds. Dolmage says:

> Academia was the place from which eugenics "science" gained its funding and legitimization so that eugenics could undertake massive projects in both "positive" and "negative" eugenics. But the university was also itself a laboratory for "positive" eugenics, a place where the "right" combinations of genes could be brought together ("the better families") and where eugenic ideals and values could be conveyed to future teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals on campus. (Dolmage, 2017, p. 13)

Inextricably connected are other schools of thought that permeated higher education, including racist, anti-Indigenous, and classist research and politics. The result of the eugenics movement was the institutionalization of millions of North Americans in asylums, "idiot schools," and other institutions where people faced abuse, neglect, and were forcibly sterilized (Dolmage, 2017). Institutionalization disproportionately affected women, Indigenous, African Americans, Eastern European, and lower-income children. At this time and to this day, none of these harmful ideologies exist within a vacuum. They all tend to reverberate off each other, causing harm to those who are not the middle-class, white, able-bodied, educated "norm."

Although eugenics, as it was known, has ceased to exist, its legacy still lives on within higher education and shapes how these institutions exist.

Perception towards individuals with disabilities in higher education shifted following the First World War and even more so after the Second World War because disabled veterans returned from war. Following the First World War, Congress enacted the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (VRA) of 1918, establishing the Federal Board for Vocational Education. The VRA of 1918 introduced vocational rehabilitation training to honorably discharged veterans with disabilities. However, the supply did not mean demand, and of the 675,000 veterans who applied, less than half completed training, and 345,000 were denied benefits completely (Madaus et al., 2009). These training sessions were held at local colleges and offered some support for disabled veterans returning home from war.

Following the Second World War, the Disabled Veterans Act of 1943 and the subsequent GI Bill of Rights offered more support for disabled veterans. The Disabled Veterans Act of 1943 established vocational rehabilitation programs for returning veterans (Maudaus et al., 2009). The GI Bill, a more comprehensive Bill, allowed veterans to attend specific institutions and take courses for up to four years, with the government paying up to $500 per school per year (Madaus et al., 2009). The GI had a significant impact, with veterans making up 50% of the total college population in 1946 (Strom, 1950). Several institutions developed programs specifically for veterans with disabilities, such as the University of Illinois, City College of New York, and the University of Minnesota. Most of these programs were near Veterans Hospitals or local Veterans Administration (VA) (Maudaus et al., 2009). In response to the all-too-common argument that veterans with disabilities simply “could not do the work” in higher education following the war, the American Council on Education released a report titled “The Disabled College Veteran of World War II,” which interviewed over two thousand veterans from almost forty institutions across the nation. The report noted that colleges were “not prepared” (Madaus et al., 2009, p. 12) to meet the needs of veterans with disabilities. The report noted several procedures for the campus, namely the identification of the needs of students and increased awareness by staff and faculty. The report closed with these observations:

> We cannot argue that such personalized attention is out of the question now with such huge student bodies on the campus. The experience of several institutions have shown that, with the proper organization and the support of the administration and faculty, any institution, however large, can offer the individual disabled student the necessary help and assistance that he requires. One thing is certain, physical disability is not, and should not be, an insurmountable handicap to the successful achievement of the benefits of a college career. There may be as important aspects of the college and university educational and personnel programs, but there is no more important phase than that which is concerned with the disabled student veteran. (Strom, 1950, p. 47)

This report was one of the first in American higher education to express a need for accessibility specifically for students (or, in this case, veterans) with disabilities. Following the Vietnam War, more veterans entered higher education, and support from the federal government increased as recognition for support for these individuals increased. Towards the end of the Vietnam War, there was an increased need for legislation for veterans returning home from war with physical and cognitive conditions, leading to the first in a series of foundational legislation for people with disabilities.

Legislation Towards Accessibility in Higher Education

In the United States, the critical pieces of legislation for people with disabilities and their right to equal education are Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973), the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). U.S. Congress passed Section 504 and IDEA twenty years before the monumental passage of the ADA. First, we begin with Section 504, one of the earliest federal legislative Acts passed to support accessibility to education for individuals with disabilities.

Beginning to Create Accessibility, Section 504

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Action of 1973 (34 C.F.R. Part 104) is a federal civil rights statute that "assures individuals will not be discriminated against based on their disability. All school districts that receive federal funding are responsible for the implementation of this law" (*Section 504*, n.d., sec. 1). This is important for students that may have a "hidden disability" and allows for the scope of who qualifies as individuals with disabilities to expand. The passage of Section 504 was the first time that the United States legally recognized discrimination against people with disabilities, and schools that receive federal funding could legally be liable if they were ableist against people with disabilities. However, many aspects of American life did not receive federal funding and, therefore, did not face consequences when discriminating against people with disabilities.

Bringing Accessibility to Public Education: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

The IDEA (formerly called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) requires public schools to make free appropriate public education available to all eligible children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their individual needs (ADA.gov, n.d). Further, the IDEA required public school systems to provide a program with special education and related services outlined for the individualized needs of each student, called an Individualized Education Program (or IEP). IDEA requires annual reviews of the IEP to ensure the information is up to date and accurate to each student's needs. The passage of the IDEA allowed for students from kindergarten through twelfth grade equal access to public education, with individualized learning programs to help them succeed in an environment that is traditionally not accessible outside of the non-disabled, neurotypical student.

Monumental Answers for Individuals with Disabilities; the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

In the United States during the 1980s, leaders and members of the disability and civil rights movements, members of the U.S. Congress, and those in federal government civil rights agencies concluded the need for comprehensive civil rights legislation to support people with disabilities. In February of 1986, the National Council on Disability or NCD (then known as the "National Council on the Handicapped"), an independent federal agency created to make recommendations to the President and Congress on behalf of people with disabilities, released a report titled *Toward Independence: An Assessment of Federal Laws and Programs Affecting Persons with Disabilities- With Legislative Recommendations*. This report laid the foundation for the ADA, calling for a comprehensive law to provide full opportunities and empowerment for people with disabilities in the United States (Kemp & Bush, 2023).

In April of 1988, Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut and Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa introduced legislation that would become the blueprint for the ADA. United States Representatives Tony Coelho of California and Silvio Conte of Massachusetts introduced H.R. 4498, the House version of the ADA (Kemp & Bush, 2023). In a joint session between the House and Senate, several Congressional members testified about discrimination based on disability. During this time, the disability community worked together to gather support for broad anti-discrimination protections, including a national campaign called the “discrimination diaries". The discrimination diaries documented daily instances of discrimination and inaccessibility. Introduced in May of 1989, the joint efforts of both the disability community and the Joint Congress were a catalyst for the ADA.

The introduction to the 101st Congress offered a further springboard for the disability community to mobilize and work to pass the Act. After debate and tireless work from members of the disability community and activists, Congress passed the ADA in July of 1990. A monumental day for the disability community, the passage of the ADA specifically targeted six areas:

1. Title I- Employment
2. Title II Public Services: State and Local Government
3. Title III: Public Accommodations and Services Operated by Private Entities
4. Title IV: Telecommunications
5. Title V: Miscellaneous Provisions

6. Title VI: Transportation

The passage of the ADA has had a substantial effect and influence on higher education in the United States. The legislation reshaped the educational landscape by reinforcing principles of inclusivity and access for students with disabilities. It allows students with disabilities to have equal access to educational opportunities and be provided with reasonable accommodations to support their success.

The ADA unequivocally prohibits discrimination against students with disabilities within higher education, emphasizing the need for equitable treatment throughout their education journey (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 794). Further, a fundamental provision of this legislation is the requirement for higher education to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities tailored to meet an individual's needs and help them ensure they can fully engage in educational opportunities. Standard accommodations include extended examination time, accessible course materials, and sign language interpreters (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 794).

Lastly, another critical element of both the ADA and Section 504 is the establishment of grievance procedures, which enables students with disabilities to file complaints in cases of discrimination and accessibility concerns. Students file grievances through the administration or a separate entity, such as a Title IX office on a higher education campus (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 794). With the establishment of such procedures, the opportunity for students, staff, and faculty with disabilities to express their concerns and safety dangers became more streamlined in practice, though not necessarily in execution.

Regulation in the Rise of the Internet: Section 508

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (29 U.S.C. 794d) became necessary as the United States entered the Internet age. Initially passed in 1998, Section 508 requires federal departments and agencies to ensure accessibility of their "electronic and information technology" to people with disabilities unless doing so would cause a heavy burden (CAST, n.d., sec. 3). Since 1998, Section 508 has been updated to address Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), developed by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The WCAG guides web application accessibility by making the functionality operable, understandable, perceivable, and robust.

With the rise of other online educational materials, such as sites like Canvas, Moodle, and EdX, and other universities shifting their material to online, the need for legislation to address web accessibility in higher education is significant. Over the last decade, several universities have been pressured by disability rights activists, institutional regulation systems, or even the Justice Department to ensure the campuses are more accessible for all students. For example, in 2013, Louisiana Tech University agreed with the Department of Justice regarding accessibility of its technology and instructional materials (United States Department of Justice, 2013). The university unveiled several accessibility initiatives to create a more accessible campus. This is just one example, but several universities are in similar positions, with a discrepancy between accessible materials online for students with disabilities and materials in person. Even with legislation, accessibility for students with disabilities is an ongoing issue, with barriers causing more difficulties in navigating campus compared to peers.

Next, the literature review will unpack some current models of disability in everyday discourse or some of the perspectives used in academia and the broader world on addressing and assessing disability.

Societal Perspective of Disability, the Models of Disability

One of the key debates within disability studies discourse is the perception of disability in the public eye, whether it is a condition in need of a cure or a reflection of societal structures. Conceptualizing this leads to two different models for approaching research in disability studies.

Medical Model

The earliest model developed to examine disability is the medical model. The medical model views disability as a health condition or impairment that needs diagnosis and treatment (Dolmage, 2017; Irmie, 1992; Kitchin, 1997). This model looks at disability as needing a cure for someone whose body is different from the “norm” as sick. The medical model ties closely to ideas of Foucault’s Biopower, conceptualizing disability as a health issue or impairment necessitating diagnosis and treatment, positioning individuals with disabilities as subjects to be managed within medical discourse and institutions. This model, entrenched in notions of normalcy and deviation, not only pathologizes difference but also reinforces the authority of medical professionals as arbiters of health and normalcy (Tremain, 2005). Further, framing disability as a personal deficiency, the medical model places the burden of adjustment and adaptation squarely on the individual, thus perpetuating a disciplinary mechanism that disciplines and controls marginalized bodies. The Medical Model ties closely to Foucault's theory on Biopower, which I discuss below to parallel the ongoing legacy of the medicalization of disability in higher education.

Foucault's Biopower and Normativity as Barriers to Accessible Higher Education

Michel Foucault, the world-renowned sociologist, emphasizes throughout his work that the body is a deeply politicized space (Anders, 2013) and the field of biopolitics, therefore, is the understanding of modern politics through the rhetoric of the body. Biopower refers to the procedures and relationships that manipulate the biological features of humans into political strategies for governing populations (Foucault, 1981). In the context of disability, mechanisms from the reproduction of biopower include imposing norms or normalization, as Foucault calls it. Normalization is a practice that reinforces a "standard" of the human body, enforced by conduct such as social control and disciplinary power (Foucault, 1981). Disciplinary power emerged in the 19th century in the military, hospitals, schools, factories, and asylums or institutions for individuals with disabilities (Foucault, 1981). To maintain a "norm" in society, any deviation from the norm is liable to discipline.

Foucault first cites the concept of the "normalizing society" in his book *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1976). In this book, Foucault argues that normalization is the central strategy of biopower's management of life (Foucault, 1976). At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the power of the normal began to meld with powers of law and tradition, imposing new limits and coercion through the introduction of standardized education (Foucault, 1979). Discipline evolved into an 'anatomy' of power, a technology of power assumed by society to achieve specific goals, apparatuses used as modes of function, authorities to reaffirm and reorganize established power structures, and states that ensure discipline reigns over society (Foucault, 1979). To enforce normativity within an institution like higher education, it is necessary to have disciplinary mechanisms in place.

In the context of disability studies, biopower and the subject are “indispensable” in the understanding of disability (Tremain, 2005). The production of disability is less a “property of bodies… [then] a product of cultural rules about what should be or do " (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p.6). Therefore, the general lack of accountability towards accessibility, in turn, invalidates disability and disabled bodies. The Western regime, a nexus of knowledge/power, values human ways while fearing others, perpetuating hierarchies of exclusion via the recirculation of the norm (Karmiris, 2017). The regimes of knowledge reproduce throughout institutions, including higher education.

With historical roots in eugenics and exclusionary practices, higher education is a key institution that enforces processes of biopower. Structures in higher education reinforce ability through prioritization of conformity to predetermined standards. Standards include elements of neoliberalism, which upholds power by maximizing the efficient and productive body (Foucault, 1976). In higher education, neoliberalism informs the treatment of people with disabilities that reinforces social controls and discourse to ascribe people with disabilities as “non-productive” members of academia (Tremain, 2005). As a result, people with disabilities are viewed as being less valuable to society compared to nondisabled people.

In higher education, the mechanisms that intend to create normalization are most prevalent through the production of knowledge and power, or the rhetoric, shaped to remain prejudiced against people with disabilities. For example, one of the most significant ways that students with disabilities experience empowerment in higher education is through a lack of control or opportunities in decision-making (Beauchamp-Pryor, 2010). Through the creation of a façade to promote inclusion rather than practicing inclusion, higher education is reproducing rhetoric that reinforces hegemonic practices by promoting the integration of students with disabilities into the dominant institutional culture without proper support (Rooney, 2019). Further social barriers, including a lack of encouragement, repeated cycles of disempowerment by family or resource systems at the institution, or fear of the impending negotiation of identity, create moments for students with disabilities where they are not accepted because of their disability (Abes & Wallace, 2012; Amakid & Brownfield, 2019; Francis et al., 2019). The lack of opportunity for decision-making for students with disabilities within higher education constructs university rhetoric of equality as an aspiration rather than tangible because the discourse is not based on the lived experience of students with disabilities and how these shape both identity and academic progression (Rooney, 2019; Tremain, 2005). Unfortunately, the construction of discourse intending to normalize students with disabilities, leaving them without the support they need, has a profound effect. Students with disabilities face a higher dropout rate at four-year institutions compared with their non-disabled peers (Frances et al., 2019).

In higher education, the positioning of students with disabilities as different or a deviation from the standard is reflected in the ways universities identify via the minimization of students with disabilities' needs and a lack of support within the system. Ambiguity in navigating disability services and how they are accessed creates a barrier to and challenges inclusive practices (Rooney, 2019). These barriers reflect that to access the services. Students must go out of their way and over-advocate for their needs, something a student from the general population may not have to do. This reinforces stigma and normative discourses, a structural issue in the navigation of disability. One example of this is the construction of accommodations in higher education. Students with disabilities noted that they avoided asking for accommodations from professors for fear of offending a professor, drawing attention to themselves, or getting singled out by students without disabilities (Easterbrook et al., 2015; Grimes et al., 2020; Shpigelman et al., 2021). There are several reasons why universities tend to be reluctant to give students accommodations. For example, the main concern among university staff was that providing accommodations for students with disabilities could create a dependence on accommodations and limit chances for success in the workplace because workplaces tend to be less accommodating compared to higher education (Collins et al., 2019). Although this may be founded, it does not create an environment where students have the tools they need to succeed.

The medicalization of higher education, or rather a student with disability's responsibility to solely navigate the system, reinforces processes of normalization. One example is universities creating doctors, special educators, and therapists that are grounded in the knowledge that disability is explicitly something that should be cured or rehabilitated, or on the other hand, tokenized or minimized to normalize (Dolmage, 2017). By taking on these perspectives, the distinction between seeing disability as fixable versus desirable or understanding “subjectivity as diversifying a stagnating cultural knowledge base of differential embodiment” (Mitchell, 2017). Long-standing ableist discourses in education not only perpetuate narrow views of disability but also restrict our capacity to appreciate the full spectrum of human experiences and perspectives.

Disclosure of disability is also another area of higher education practice that has the potential to perpetuate normalization. Disclosure of disability is the practice of the individual communicating their disability to someone, whether for acquiring accommodations or with a trusted member of the community. However, the act of disclosure is not a merely neutral transaction; it is an interaction where individuals with disabilities must give a piece of confidential information about themselves to receive the things they need (Matthews, 2009). The disclosure decision is an act of survival and a balancing act because people with disabilities may need support. However, they also do not want to be viewed as unable to help themselves (Matthews, 2009). This leads several students, staff, and faculty to try to lead lives of passing as non-disabled for fear of stigma (Selznick, 2015). Thus, the act of disclosure becomes a site of negotiation and resistance, where individuals with disabilities must navigate between the margins of visibility and invisibility, autonomy, and vulnerability within systems of power and control.

In higher education, surveillance practices targeting individuals with disabilities intersect with processes of normalization, reflecting broader societal attitudes and structures that shape notions of ability and inclusion. Disability surveillance in higher education is a practice of biopower, shaping social control that excludes people with disabilities to prevent academic 'risk' (Saltes, 2013). Surveillance aims to mitigate the abnormal and deviant body, a body that, in this context, is disabled (Foucault, 2003). Foucault states, '[d]isability may well be something that upsets the natural order, but disability is not monstrosity because it has a place in civil or canon law. The disabled person may not conform to nature, but the law somehow provides for him' (64). Surveillance aims to both penalize and push people with disabilities to conform to "nature." In higher education, surveillance is operated through grading techniques, testing strategies, and surveillance technologies, assessing performance and reinforcing societal norms of intelligence and capability (Nieminen, 2023). These mechanisms can inadvertently marginalize students with disabilities who do not conform to traditional academic standards or need accommodations to succeed.

Both mechanisms enforce what Almog (2018) called "compulsory able-bodiedness." As able-bodiedness is constructed as the norm, disability is an exception to preserve it in the binary system where the norm is defined (Almog, 2018). The system is medicalized, interpreting that disability as curable and a desire for people with disabilities to want to be expected and able-bodied (Almog, 2018; Tremain, 2005). An institution that prioritizes and emphasizes "normal" and non-disabled students continues to oppress students with disabilities in the process (Almog, 2018). Students with disabilities first feel they must try to abide by the institutional norms or the norms in place for non-disabled students. When they are unable or do not want to comply with these standards, they are ostracized and face isolation from their peers and the learning environment they deserve (Almog, 2018).

In the late twentieth century, the realm of critical disability studies promoted the idea of normalization as something that people with disability should interpret as a sign of progress. Wolf Wolfensberger coined the "normalization principle," which aimed to integrate people with disabilities into the broader community by transforming appearances to make them more socially accepted (Wolfensberger, 1983; Yates, 2005). The normalization principle, later named social role valorization, stresses the *normativity* of normalization. However, this means that social role valorization still maintains that the knowledge-power regime is inherently negatively promoting normalization by showing people ought to learn normal (or valued) behaviors to have regular (valued) lives (Drinkwater, 2015). Although the framework implies inclusivity, it reproduces another "strain" of normalization.

There are two distinct pathways forward to resistance mechanisms of normalization against people with disabilities in higher education. The first is emphasizing the narration from people with disabilities to question the discourses of normalcy. To do this is to resist the institutional and system formation of a “normal” (Annamma, 2014; Connor, 2009; Karmiris, 2017). Secondly, reconsidering educational policy and practice to accept the myriad of human bodies and identities is critical to unpacking discourses of normalization in higher education (Karmiris, 2017). By engaging with discourses that aim to normalize and reproduce Western practices of knowledge that intend to “Other,” it is possible to resist biopower mechanisms and call for an acceptance of disability. This can only happen through acceptance of stories and embodying a range of lived experiences.

Social Model

With the medical model as the dominant discourse in society, members of the disability community and academics alike argued that this model did not encompass all discourse about disability. After decades of the medical model as the dominant narrative in education, social welfare systems, and the public and private sectors, a new model was needed to understand how disability functions in society. In 1983, disabled academic Mike Oliver coined the *social model of disability*. The social model shifts the focus away from the individual's impairment and toward the societal barriers and boundaries that create a disability (Oliver, 1983). Oliver explains:

> Firstly, it is an attempt to switch the focus away from the functional limitations of individuals with an impairment on to the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures. Secondly, it refuses to see specific problems in isolation from the totality of disabling environments: hence the problem of unemployment does not just entail intervention in the social organization of work and the operation of the labor market but also in areas such as transport, education and culture. Thirdly, endorsement of

> the social model does not mean that individually based interventions in the lives of disabled people, whether they be medically, rehabilitative, educational or employment based, are of no use or always counter-productive. (Oliver, 1983, p. 4)

The social model represents a change in how society thinks about disability. By acknowledging disability as not an inherent flaw within an individual but rather a consequence of societal attitudes and policies, the social model challenges traditional perspectives on disabilities. The social model emphasizes that systems, rather than individuals, are what discriminate against people with disabilities. Further, systems shape space, which raises able-bodied narratives and constructions in space. By doing so, the social model opened conversations within interdisciplinary fields on creating inclusive and accessible environments by dismantling systemic barriers to ensure the full participation and empowerment of people with disabilities. The social model intricately links socio-spatial insights presented by Lefebvre, which detail how space is social and created as a product of the discourse and perspectives within space.

Socio-Spatial Theories from Lefebvre

In their physical form, higher education campuses encourage community formation and, thus, social capital formation (Temple, 2009). However, the formation of community and social capital is complex when barriers in the physical form of higher education campuses create environments for people with disabilities that are inaccessible. This is one critical piece, but drawing on Lefebvre's Production of Space can offer insight into how people with disabilities' sensory, physical, and spatial experiences inform the lived experience within higher education.

First, Lefebvre claims space is a social product (Lefevre, 1974). He presents a triad of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces that interact with each other to inform a lived experience.

Perceived space, or spatial practice, is the daily common space (Lefebvre, 1974). Conceived space, or the representation of space, is dominant in society, constructed by professionals and technocrats (Merrifield, 2002), and is a “mixture of understanding and ideology” (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 41). The last mode of space is the lived space or spaces of representation. Lived space is a mix of physical space and the meaning we attribute to these spaces. Lived space is necessary for a space to be social (Lefebvre, 1974). The three concepts of space are not isolated but always working or at odds with each other.

As Lefebvre argues, society constructs space, aligning more closely with the social model of disability. The triad recognizes how the social frameworks and discourses of society inform how the built environment is constructed to discriminate against people with disabilities. In critical disability studies, Lefebvre circulates within the discourse through discussions about social differences within the disability community (Kinkaid, 2020; O’Brien, 2020). Lefebvre argues that the body is the critical site for producing space and how a body is subjected to the built environment. The understanding of how the spatial triads and dimensions intersect with the experiences of individuals with disabilities gives a unique insight into how the world is space by the social conditions we live in and how individuals with disabilities navigate a space that, according to Lefebvre is constructed by the social (O’Brien, 2020). This aligns similarly to the social model of disability, which argues that disability and how space is constructed are influenced by the social environment. However, Lefevre also emphasizes the individual’s role in producing space as a social product rather than the collective, which aligns less with the social model and more with typical Marxist ideologies (O’Brien, 2020).

Lefebvre’s theories are used within disability geography, most commonly in Deaf Geographies. For example, the use of American Sign Language (ASL) produces[s] a linguistic, communicative, space through harnessing the body's movements" (O'Brien, 2021, p. 649). This is different from a gesture, and ASL tends to reconfigure the space, like other forms of communication. Many institutions do not have accessible ways for members of the deaf community to navigate spaces, like narrow hallways where two people cannot walk side by side to talk (O'Brien, 2020). The day-to-day space, or the perceived space, is inaccessible, making thriving in the environment and safety difficult. Planning and design of the institutions are also inaccessible, with a lack of windows (visual cues) for deaf academics and a lack of communication (O'Brien, 2020). In the conceived space, the layouts of rooms are planned, and users are expected to adhere to them, even if they are not accessible or ideal (O'Brien, 2020). In the lived space, members of the deaf community within the institution created their ways to navigate the space, such as a strategically placed mirror, moving their desks to face the door, or even ways to represent that they are members of the disability community, through signs or flags (O'Brien, 2020). Again, almost all of the studies that apply Lefebvre's theories to disability experiences in higher education center on the Deaf community, meaning there is a significant gap in the research here. Hopefully, I can begin to fill it.

In the Production of Space, Lefebvre discusses alienation towards minority populations within space. Space favors certain bodies while marginalizing others, thereby perpetuating masculine, heterosexual, and white-centric perspectives of space. Space that obscures the relationships between bodies and spatial environments leads to a portrayal of marginalized bodies as inherently lacking or non-normative (Kinkaid, 2020). These contradictions offer opportunities to critique dominant spatial norms and envision accessible futures with alternative spatial practices. Lastly, the political/relational model extends both medical and social models further, centering the role of lived experience and political gravity in the construction of disability.

Political/ Relational Model:

In 2013, author Alison Kafer offered a response to both medical and social models, adding another dialogue on disability. In her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Kafer introduces the *political/relational model of disability*. Kafer's model is in the middle of the spectrum between the medical and social models of disability. Under the political/relational model, "the problem of disability is solved not through medical intervention or surgical normalization but through social change and political transformation" (Kafer, 2013, p. 6). The political/relational model does not oppose medical intervention; instead, it recognizes that medical intervention can be helpful with chronic pain and other needs (Dolmage, 2017). The political/relational model emphasizes the political, relational, societal, and individual dynamics in shaping disability. Further, the model emphasizes how power structures and social interactions can shape an individual with disabilities' experiences in the world.

Developing Perspectives

Over time, disability models have continued to evolve to address the complex and dynamic nature of disability itself. While the traditional medical model of disability is still influential, increased scrutiny of this model has changed the framework of disability discourse and introduced new perspectives to critique the perception of disability. Scholars and activists have increasingly advocated for more holistic approaches that consider the broader social and cultural contexts that shape the experiences of individuals with disabilities. Newer models reflect a growing recognition that disability is not a static condition but a relatively dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various factors. As the field of disability studies continues to expand and evolve, shifting perspectives and ideologies are applied to not how disability happens but rather how societal perceptions of disability shape how people with disabilities are treated. Society is far from the days of open eugenics research within higher education institutions. However, there are ways to go before people with disabilities are treated in a manner equal to their non-disabled peers. Shifting perspectives within disability studies mirror the public's outlook towards disability, an outlook that is more accepting than previous discourses within history.

Defining Academic Ableism

The experience of institutional inequality towards individuals with disabilities is framed by academic ableism. Academic ableism connects intersectional identities, like race, gender, and socioeconomic situations, to how ableism is perpetuated in higher education settings. The elitism of higher education is defined by exclusion towards people of color, women, the working class, disabled people, and other marginalized groups (Jarman on Dolmage, 'Academic Ableism: Disability and High Education,' n.d.). It is essential to acknowledge how eugenics was part of the academy in the early to mid-1900s, and with this emerges a "scientific" lens through which researchers could exploit who deviated from the "norm" and use findings to enhance white, patriarchal, able-bodied/minded privilege and power. Even today, this legacy remains steadfast in the experiences of people with diverse needs and disabilities in higher education.

As Dolmage asserts and other authors support (Francis et al., 2019; Goodley et al., 2014; Mitchell et al., 2017; Tremain, 2005), higher education campuses are viewed under the political ideology of neoliberalism, which idealizes institutions to be run like businesses (Dolmage, 2017). Neoliberalism then provides an ecosystem that allows ableism to flourish (Goodley et al., 2014). Neoliberalism in higher education helps to ensure that the student body is productive and efficient (Goodlely et al., 2014). In higher education, disabled people are methodically excluded from the planning, architecture, and design decisions for built space (Dolmage, 2017).

Just like Foucault argues, neoliberalism establishes a process that emphasizes the productive and efficient body while also disciplining the disabled body, further creating policy and practice to normalize the body when this is not the case (Dolmage, 2017; Foucault. 1981). This is the case not just in the United States but also in other countries. In higher education, the physical design of campuses still focuses on the individual or medical model, where students are accountable for accessing facilities on campus and responsible for seeking out their accommodation (Fleet & Kondrashov, 2019). While students should hold some accountability, and many students prefer to have accountability in decision-making, institutions need to implement programs and create infrastructure that can level the playing field, making it easier for students to seek support (Abes & Wallace, 2018).

Like Lefebvre, Dolmage considers how the discursive and the physical space combine to exclude people with disabilities in higher education. As space is a social construct created to serve all citizens (Lefebvre, 1974), academic ableism draws the belief that specific bodies and minds do not have a right to the university (Dolmage, 2017). Through a Lefebvian perspective, Dolmage argues, “the connected feeling is that the spaces and architectures of the university have been and should continue to be designed to filter out certain bodies and minds” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 44). Dolmage’s insight into Lefebvre addresses the connection between the social aspects of space as profoundly intertwined with the physical, both facilitating moments of academic ableism.

Responses to Dolmage's framework have been positive. Although more work is needed outside of purely academic writing, a framework contextualizing disability and ableism within the academy gives strategies to think through how not to remain complicit in academic ableism (Wieland, 2021). A criticism towards Dolmage is the lack of direct quotes from disabled students, staff, and faculty to emphasize the work that needs to be done (Iqbal, 2023; Wieland, 2021). Another critical piece is the lack of commentary on educational leadership and the roles leadership plays in shaping policy and institutional culture (Iqbal, 2023). Even Dolmage admits in his writing that there are several issues he fails to address (Dolmage, 2017). However, his work breaks the surface in understanding the complexity of ableism within academia, creating opportunities for dialogue and recognition of a deep-seated issue.

Disability in Higher Education

Modern Era

Today, many students in higher education identify as disabled. According to a 2020 report by the National Center for Educational Statistics, almost 20% of undergraduate students in the United States reported having a disability (NCES, 2020). In this report, the most common types of disabilities were learning disabilities (13%), physical disabilities (5%), and mental health conditions (4%) (NCES, 2020). This means that within higher education, several students identify as disabled and further enforces that regardless of whether the disability is considered "invisible" or not, people with disabilities can thrive within higher academia, regardless of their experiences. Furthermore, individuals with disabilities may have different experiences than their non-disabled peers because of their disability.

In many higher education institutions, a network of support tends to exist. Support usually comes from the administration and a center for Disability Resources. However, these resource centers may exist as a “one size fits all” experience, where accommodations or opportunities may be less individualized based on need. Further, many of these centers have large caseloads. In some situations at larger institutions, the caseload could be between 1:125 and 250 (Dolmage, 2017). With overworked offices, the support needed for students with disabilities is not sufficient and combined with inaccessible infrastructure and harmful rhetoric, higher education can become a ground where academic ableism is perpetuated, not allowing students with disabilities to have the meaningful and equal experience they have a right to.

Identity Negotiation as a Key Barrier for Academics with Disabilities

Further, a lack of representation exists for staff and faculty with disabilities in higher education. The data shows a deficient number of tenure track professors with disabilities nationally: about 3.6 percent, based on a 2004 U.S. Department of Education study (Brown & Leigh, 2018). The low number suggests there may be barriers to access for academics with disabilities. One of the critical barriers identified by Brown and Leigh in their book, *Ableism in Academia: Where are the Disabled and Ill Academics?*, is identity negotiation. All academics work to navigate academic work and identity together, but academics with disabilities may have a more significant struggle. The neoliberal academic tradition prides itself on striving for perfection, productivity, and efficiency. Balancing academic burnout (which is portrayed as rigor) and self-care is always tricky in higher academia. However, this struggle can be even more massive for an academic with disabilities (Brown & Leigh, 2018).

Further, academics with disabilities may not be taken as seriously as their peers, meaning they may struggle to negotiate and renegotiate their identity, driving them out of the academy (Brown & Leigh, 2018). Lastly, there may not be support for disabled academics. For the most part, there is no resource center for staff and faculty with disabilities, unlike students. This means that no spaces and resources are allocated explicitly for them, and they must go through Employment Services or Human Resources for resources and accommodations, making support all the more difficult. Representation matters, and there will be few academics with disabilities. There is a significant gap in representation, which leads to very few role models and empathetic support for students with disabilities in higher education.

Accessible Futures in the Literature

The future of higher education for people with disabilities is yet to be determined, but hopefully, with investment in education and the experiences of people with disabilities on higher education campuses, infrastructure can be reinvented, and social environments can change. Shifts over the last century in higher education for people with disabilities show there is a capacity to change, and with a push by students, staff, faculty, and advocates alike, creating a more accessible environment for all is possible. One of the critical areas of change is the process of disability disclosure, or the personal decision of who should know, what to disclose, and when to inform about a disability (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). In academia, this has to happen at several different times, from the initial admission or acceptance to the institution to the day-to-day need for classroom teacher acknowledgment. This process aims to legitimize disability by having to be singled out, not allowing an individual to choose what they would like to share and when.

Furthermore, this process can be more complicated for staff and faculty, who must go through human resources or administration to advocate for their needs. Disclosure could essentialize students, staff, or faculty into the "____ with disabilities" rather than just an individual in the community, like their non-disabled peers (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). These subtle nuances seep into ableist discourses on people with disabilities and can operate in everyday interactions, which can reduce the impact on the quality of educational achievements. Although there is no clear answer, one shift for this could be facilitating resources within higher education where there is support for individuals of the disability community, and people are allowed to share what they feel comfortable with, not what they are obligated to share to receive resources to make education accessible. This is one step to creating a more inclusive, accessible higher education experience for people with disabilities.

Chapter Three: Methods and Results

Methods

To discuss the methods used for my research, I need to dive into the history of disability geography to inform how to approach research within a traditionally marginalized community. In critical disability geography, various perspectives exist on optimal and ethical research methodologies. Pioneer of the field, Reginald Golledge, in his work titled *Geography and the Disabled: A Survey with Reference to Vision Impaired and blind Population,* attested that common narratives categorize disability as a function of impairment. Golledge, who was blind and a member of the disability community himself, emphasized that the geography of and for disabled people should have studies conducted by researchers on behalf of people with disabilities (Kitchin, 1997). This dynamic enforces an all too normalized stereotype about members of the disability community, that they are people meant to be observed, further enforced by previously mentioned thoughts on eugenics. He called out the field of geography for lacking in the geography of the disabled and called for the discipline to examine:

> How its expertise can be used to help understand and solve the many problems these special populations encounter in normal commerce with physical and built environments … [and the ways] geographers can invoke their skills and knowledge to deal with sets of problems faced by these special populations. … [As such a] geographical study of the disabled could represent a new systematic area of geographic concentration. (Kitchin, 1997, p. 5)

Golledge's notion of disability geography is built around the idea that to be disabled is to be impaired and, therefore, places the responsibility on the individual to navigate the space.

As the field continued to develop, Golledge was criticized for his view. One of the most prominent oppositions, written by Rob Irmie, argued that any studies that do not recognize the socio-spatial processes underlying disability fail to understand how societal values, attitudes, and structures affect people with disability; it is not the individual's fault, but rather society's fault (Kitchin, 1997; Irmie, 1991). He argues that Golledge reduces problems faced by people with disabilities as technical problems with similar solutions, depoliticizing the problems when they are inherently political (Kitchin, 1997). He asserts a move towards geography with and by disabled people, where the researcher is less of the expert and more of the facilitator for the work (Kitchin, 1997). This allows the research to be more inclusive and genuinely reflective of the people and groups the research aims to address.

The rationale for conducting a case study on a single higher education institution lies in its ability to provide an in-depth analysis of specific phenomena and experiences. I can investigate unique characteristics, policies, practices, and dynamics by focusing the case study on one specific institution. Additionally, a single institution case can serve as a broad basis for comparison with similar institutions, allowing for valuable benchmarks and identifying areas of differentiation.

Grounding my research in both theory and best practice, I hope that this work will allow for the opportunity for geography work framed by members of the disability community. That being said, as much as I am the one behind the computer screen, writing this thesis and facilitating the interviews, ultimately, this research is focused on allowing for the opportunity for members of the disability community at Macalester to have their voices heard, facilitated by my honors thesis work. Rather than speaking for members of the disability community, my research and research methods aim to allow for voices to be placed at the forefront, and my thesis is a vehicle for this opportunity. Before moving on to the rationale behind my methods, it is important to reiterate the questions I am trying to answer in this work.

My research questions are as follows:

- How do the built environment of campuses, social dynamics and interactions, and institutional power intersect to reinforce or challenge academic ableism in higher education?
- How does this empower or disempower students with disabilities?
- What strategies can dismantle academic ableism and foster inclusivity in higher education, shaping a more accessible future for all students?

Now, I will discuss the journey through my methods and data collection before moving on to data analysis methods and results.

Section A: Contextualizing the Research Journey

I began working on this research in the summer of 2022 when I collected literature and began to narrow my topic. By the end of the summer of 2022, I planned to look at accessibility in higher education in the Twin Cities. This was still an enormous scope, and by the spring of 2023, when the honors process began, I had worked to refine my research topic further. The decision came down to logistics and long-term goals-- my goal is for this body of work to catalyze and shift the fabric of thinking about disability in higher education. With that goal came the realization that Macalester College would be the best place to conduct this research because of my position as a student within the community. Once the topic scope was refined for Macalester, the research for this thesis took place over a year. I have had Institutional Review Board approval from the institution throughout this process. Throughout this process, I have ensured that all interview subjects' identities are kept confidential to protect privacy, allowing people to share their experiences, opinions, and perspectives more openly.

Section B: Phase One of Data Collection

To identify who to interview, for the first phase, I used word of mouth and connections from my previous research as a springboard for who to talk to. For this phase, the logistical communication occurred over email, where I also shared my research disclosure form with them before our interview. To select advocates for the Macalester disability community, I asked my interviewees who identified as disabled who they felt advocated best for them at the institution; based on their answers, I reached out to these individuals. Utilizing this process, word of mouth, to expand my interview pool has helped me to find more cohesive results and find a broader participant pool.

For the first data collection phase, I conducted formal interviews with six individuals, three identified as members of the disability community and three identified by members of the disability community as institutional advocates to the community. Each interview ranges from approximately thirty minutes to an hour. The interviews were semi-structured; I had a set of prepared questions that varied based on the positionality of the interviewee, organized around the main themes I am looking at, current experiences with ableism at Macalester, supports and barriers, and accessible futures. For these interviews, I had primary guiding questions that structured the interview. However, I also asked follow-up questions depending on the interviewee’s responses, allowing the interviews to take on a natural rhythm.

Section C: Adaptations to Data Collection

During the first round of in-person interviews, several participants noted that they knew of people who would want to talk about their experiences but not necessarily sit down with me. This makes sense, given the concerns about the stigmatization of my topic and how qualities of disability can be individualistic and nuanced. After concluding the first data collection phase, I knew there were still narratives to address, so I shifted the data collection methods. Given the guidance from the first round of interviews, I created an anonymous survey with many related questions asked in the first data collection phase. By allowing the survey participants to remain completely anonymous, those who may be more nervous about sharing personal information or want to be able to choose how they share their experiences have greater flexibility in how they answer. I sent the survey through a newsletter to the Macalester College community, including students, staff, and faculty. It was first sent out on December 4th, 2023, with subsequent times on December 6th and 13th.

For the survey, I asked closed and open-ended questions, usually having an open-ended question as a follow-up or extension of the closed-ended question. This allowed participants to choose if they wanted to elaborate on their experience. The survey's general themes were grouped around current experiences (both with physical and social infrastructure), experiences with discrimination, and imagined futures of accessibility. Like the interview, these were guiding questions, and participants were allowed to elaborate or add at the end of the survey if there were things the participants wanted to add. For the survey portion, I received eighteen responses.

For the second phase of data collection, the survey features a rationale about who can be involved in the survey responses:

- identify as a member of the disability community

- a student, employee, or alums of Macalester College

- at least 18 years old

- consent to participate in this study

I have limited personal information about the individuals in this data collection format, only their disability (they had a choice within the survey to elaborate) and their experiences. I also had to amend my IRB to allow for a difference in data collection, and all of the information was collected confidentially and remains anonymous.

Data Analysis Processes

It was challenging to decide exactly how to code the results, especially since the results were lived experiences of individuals with disabilities in higher education. Through an iterative process of rereading and understanding the data, the results were meticulously coded and organized into two categories. The first category is based on the built or visible environment. In this category, the analysis of results was based on supports or barriers that empower or disempower students with disabilities in higher education. This could include anything in the visible environment, whether an elevator that does not seem to work or a building overall. The second category is the relational or regulatory space. This space is not necessarily visually seen but has more to do with the relationship between individuals with disabilities and the institutional community, moments of empowerment and disempowerment that are reproduced in a structural sense. The key distinction is differentiating between visible moments that perpetuate academic ableism and more implicit ones. While both types are equally significant and dangerous, the visible instances manifest at an observable pace and can be explicitly addressed through legislation and policy. In contrast, implicit moments are less overt and cannot be fully remedied through regulation alone.

Limitations of Data Collection

My research has several limitations because of the nature of case study research. There is both selection and sampling bias within my work. Firstly, participants felt motivated to participate and self-selected to come to the college. Furthermore, I was specifically interested in the lived experiences of people with disabilities in higher education. This is one way to look at the case study institution, but it is not a comprehensive view. I focus on lived experience rather than policy or application of policy to understand how discursive rhetoric about disability reproduces within the institution. Secondly, sample bias is prevalent in my research via the voluntary nature of surveys and interviews. This may skew the results towards individuals with stronger opinions or more negative/positive experiences with accessibility at the institution. Limited perspectives may arise due to the underrepresentation of certain groups, such as students with a wide range of special needs or disabilities.

Furthermore, the inability to explore each experience and response in depth because of anonymity may mean that there is more to a story or several different dynamics at play. However, even with self-reporting, the stories of individuals with disabilities in higher education are important to create widespread, systematic change. Lastly, I am currently a non-disabled researcher. Therefore, I do not have experienced disability and am part of an outgroup throughout this research. As we transition into the results, the comprehensive methodology employed in this research lays the groundwork for illuminating insights into the complex dynamics of accessibility and ableism within higher education. The following chapter will present findings derived from the data, shedding light on the realities of disability experiences and challenges in navigating higher education institutions. Through careful examination of results, there is a deeper understanding of the barriers to accessibility and the opportunities to advocate for meaningful change within the academic landscape.

Chapter Four: Results

These results intend to focus on the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education by placing the voices of individuals with disabilities at the forefront. The analysis, or the section following the results, considers how we can use Lefebvre and Foucault's insights to reshape higher education and inform shifts to a more accessible higher education.

To begin, the results of the experiences are non-exhaustive. The experiences represent the experiences of individuals with disabilities within space in higher education. From these experiences, there is an understanding of the bigger picture of how academic ableism is represented in the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities in higher education. From there, this can inform how to make higher education accessible to all. Also critical for these results is the understanding that I am relying on people's self-reporting, meaning that I am relying on personal experience, testimony, and feelings of experiences.

In the context of this specific case study, it is worth mentioning the change in staff in the summer of 2023 and a rebranding of Disability Services as Disability Resources in January 2024, which inadvertently shifted the culture around disability in the case study institution. An ethos change was created by establishing innovative programs and beginning an ongoing dialogue between the Disability Resources Office and the greater community. The space is dynamic and has been institutionally in the process of changing since the staff turnover. All to say is that some of my participants have been at the institution for four years, some for only one semester. This could mean the experiences they are speaking about may not happen today. Again, my work is less about specific individuals or events than the greater themes and institutional relationships.

The results are broken into three sections: the first, breaking down the aggregate information from the surveys; the second, looking at the visible or built environment; and the third, looking at the relational and regulatory spaces. Furthermore, these frames of spaces will be broken up between positive and negative relationships or interactions. For the visible or built environment, the results are broken down into spaces that empower or disempower individuals with disabilities in higher education. The relational and regulatory spaces are the social practices, relationships, and policies that empower and disempower individuals with disabilities in higher education. Looking at these two distinct categories of space allows one to unpack the different processes that create inequities and academic ableism in higher education. Below is a visual representation of how I analyzed my results:

	Disempowering	Empowering
Visual/Built Environment		
Relational/Regulatory Environment		

Experiences in the Numbers

The survey participants were asked to rank their impressions of the institution in terms of accessibility on a scale of one to five. For example, They were asked, “On a scale of one to five, one being not negative at all and five being very negative, how negatively do you believe your disability has affected your experience at the institution?” Zero participants said one, three participants said two, five participants said three and four, and four participants said five (See Figure 1).

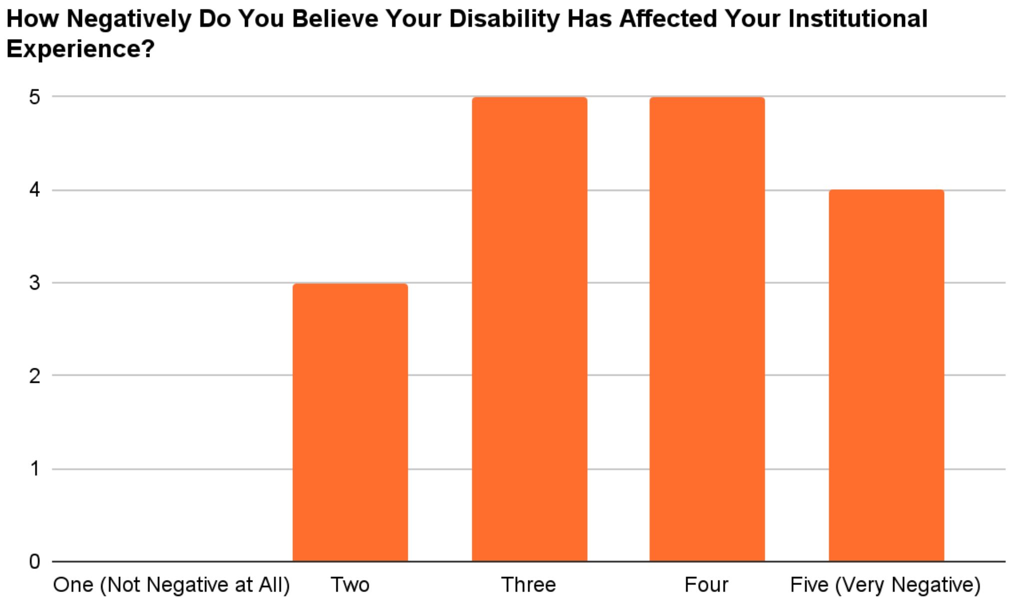

Figure 1: Results of Survey Question One

However, when asked, “On a scale of one to five, 1 being not positive at all and five being very positive, how positively do you believe your disability has affected your experience at the institution?” One person said one, four people said two, six people both three and four, and zero said five. So, although there are a number of individuals with disabilities who noted negative experiences on campus based on their individual experiences and their disability, there are also a number of positive situations that come from it (See Figure 2).

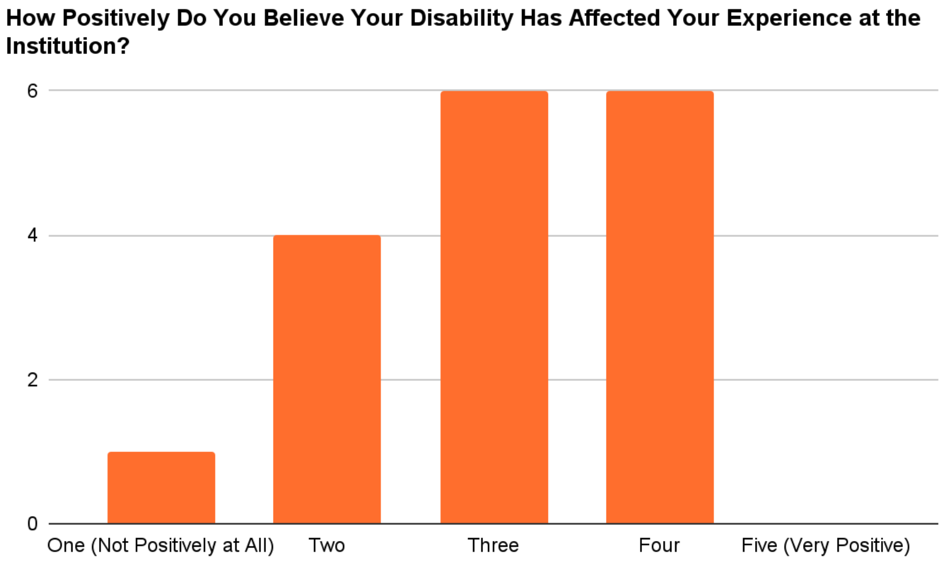

Figure 2: Survey Results from Question Two

However, a majority of the individuals with disabilities (64.7%) responded “Yes” when asked, “Have there been times when you feel like you have been excluded on campus (in both physical and social settings) because of your disability?” Following, participants were asked, “Have you ever experienced discrimination due to your disability or specific need?” to which 62.5% of participants answered “Yes,” meaning they felt like they had experienced discrimination based on their ability during their time in higher education. This may be a phenomenon that is experienced more socially, as the majority of the respondents (13 out of 17) gave a three or higher in terms of how physically accessible the campus is. So, these numbers give us insight into areas where higher education may be accessible or inaccessible but cannot tell the full extent of the story or the full experience, as the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities in higher education can.

Visible/Built Environment

Disempowering

The environment's design influences the experiences of people with disabilities on higher education campuses. Being unable to traverse the built environment in an accessible way can make attending classes and feeling like one is part of the community all the more difficult. For example, an inaccessible classroom can make navigating schoolwork difficult, and inaccessible dorms can make living on campus difficult. One of the key areas in which campus can be inaccessible is entrances to buildings and inefficient communication about ADA-compliant entrances. As one student said,

> "[I have experienced] broken elevators [and] broken door buttons. Unclear and confusing ADA entrances make me walk all the way around the building. On-campus housing is challenging at best and completely inaccessible at worst (I am in a building with no elevators at all, and I have fallen downstairs before). In general, while this campus claims accessibility, universal designs, and openness to all, you can tell that the priority of administration and staff/faculty are to abled-bodied people first and disabled people are always a second thought."

Being unable to access different parts of campus can make both the actual day-to-day tasks needing to be done by a student, like attending class, going to the library, and getting meals, much more difficult, but it also can limit social interactions on campus. As one student put it:

> "Many of the buildings are older, with only single elevators for those who need them. Some of the buildings and entrances are inaccessible, either atop stairs or requiring manual operation. For dorms, the laundry rooms across the Macalester College campus are inaccessible to wheelchair users those who cannot use the stairs, Bathrooms in many dorms are inaccessible, and social possibilities-- even when those in question do not live

> there-- are cut down, as these people cannot access the buildings, visit their friends, may not be able to easily access the bathrooms, etc. "

Another student mentioned that although the physical environment plays a role, it also affects students' attitudes: "Abled people will often block off elevators, sometimes being hostile when I need to push past to get to the elevator. I am often forced off paths (that I need with my cane) by people unwilling to make space."

Another area in which this is an issue is within the classroom. For example, a number of majors have a field or lab component to their study, where students are supposed to go out in the field to collect information for the class. This can be inaccessible for someone with physical disabilities. Depending on the student's needs, they may have to drastically modify their lab or not participate, isolating themselves further from their peers. One student explained their experience, saying, "Many labs involve going out into the "field" and gathering data. Often, these environments are inaccessible, and the response is overall "tough luck"." Many other students also identified with this experience, especially the feelings of shame and anger they felt with having to miss critical class components because of the lack of accommodations. One student explained this: "Last year I was unable to do most of my ecology labs. I completely missed out on these learning opportunities and my professor's solution was for me to process the data that my lab partners found. It felt completely awful. Like me, having those experiences was not important, and people with disabilities were completely disregarded."

This speaks to a broader theme distinguishing policy versus practice, namely the treatment of students with disabilities by their peers when moments like this (inability to do an activity because of other needs) occur. One student explained their experience with class trips and said, “The whole group will usually take stairs/other inaccessible routes without consideration for my needs, forcing me to either use a route that causes me pain/injury, or other myself by taking a separate route alone.” Another student explained how in a campus building, there is only one accessible chair per classroom, so:

> “In classes in Carnegie where I use the table, if I have to do group work the expectation is that I go move to a desk group to accommodate my other classmates. So I do it because I don't want to cause a problem, but typically I will feel uncomfortable the entire time.”

Another piece that alienates students with disabilities from their peers is how accessibility on campus comes with separation. On several higher education campuses, the ADA-compliant and accessible entrance is on the opposite side of the building from the intended entrance. As one student notes, “You can tell that disabled people have always been treated as a second thought (like how in the majority of the buildings, you have to go through a separate ADA entrance on the other side of the building).” Inherent in these connections of real-life experience with the environment is also the social component-- how the built environment affects the lived experience of people with disabilities in higher education. Furthermore, although improvement plans for institutions are implemented, the progress that is needed to create tangible change in the moment for students with disabilities is not happening in meaningful ways.

Empowering

Throughout my research, I was also curious to consider how areas of the built environment are working for people with disabilities, or better put, what visible spaces on campus are supportive of people with disabilities. However, I asked about that in my work, and the feedback was extremely limited. Overall, the general trend was newer buildings on campus considered accessibility, namely buildings that were built post-ADA and in the early/mid-2000s. That being said, there was not much of a mention of specifics within said buildings to offer insight, more than newer buildings on campus were designed with elevators, wider doorway entrances, and other elements that make the campus more accessible for all students.

Relational/Regulatory Space

Accessibility Dynamics and Relational Challenges

The manner in which individuals with disabilities engage with the higher education system, particularly their interactions with various levels of authority, can significantly shape their daily navigation within that system. Both the relational and regulatory “environment” can have a direct impact on the treatment of people with disabilities and move within the physical or visible space in higher education. One key piece of this is the implementation of accommodations, or “an alteration of environment, curriculum format, or equipment that allows an individual with a disability to gain access to content and/or complete assigned tasks" (University of Washington, 2022). The process to receive accommodations can be lengthy, including a meeting with a member of Disability Resources and then, in most cases, some type of “proof” that there is a need for an accommodation. One student said:

> The system and institution I am in that gives me such accommodations still upholds a norm that is hostile to disabled people such as myself. To gain accommodations, I often have to perform or prove the extent to which my disability causes me pain and hardship.

Students feel they have to act out or emphasize how their disability affects them to give reason to gain accommodations. This can create a unique power imbalance, where, ultimately, the institution has control over whether a student with disabilities has the resources to succeed. Moreover, the institution is given the power to decide if a disability is seen as valid. This student continued:

> If I am not able to still maintain this proof without it being "too much" (i.e..., "ugly," dislikeable, etc.) to the observer, I may be treated negatively [by Disability Resources, professors, and peers] for it. I must prove [to Disability Resources, professors, and peers] my disability and experience in a way that is palatable to the observer (including those who I seek aid from). In addition, I sometimes must provide official proof, which can be hard to obtain, financially draining, emotionally stressful, and time consuming, among others…. For many I know, to be disabled in an institution is to be constantly weighing the costs/risks/benefits of showing disability and the extent to which it impacts them [as the individual] versus trying to prove their worth as a person, student, worker, partner, etc.

Another area that can be difficult to navigate as someone with a disability in higher education is the ways in which different departments or centers interact with each other and who holds power in different areas. Sometimes, the different departments cannot communicate with each other, rendering it difficult for the student who has needs. One student explained:

> In my first semester, I started having problems (mostly related to anxiety and sensory overload) and went through all the official channels - tried Hamre Center counseling, registered with Disability Services, etc. - and found that no one was equipped to help.

> (Fun fact when I tried to explain my difficulties with verbal communication to someone from Disability Services I was told that I "sounded fine.") The accommodations that I needed were not codified so I had to take matters into my own hands and negotiate with professors one on one to figure out alternatives to public speaking assignments.

When these official channels either do not have the correct support needed in place or in this specific example, deny the student's needs, students with disabilities feel they must negotiate the environment on their own. This student expressed that when resources within the institution did not have the specifically unique accommodation or resource already incorporated into their practices, the student was left feeling alone and like they had to navigate their needs on their own, and needing to self-advocate in a way that was almost like reinventing the wheel. Another student spoke about the difficulty of negotiating accommodations, “I find that disability services and professors are hesitant to be accommodating to attendance accommodations, which are important for me as someone that struggles with major fatigue due to Ehlers-Danlos.”

Difficulty in acquiring accommodations was a common theme for students with disabilities, both how they helped but also how difficult it was to maintain, shift, or get more as needs changed. One student also said:

> I have accommodations, and they have helped, although the process to get them was painful and confusing. While meeting with the Disability Services advisor (who no longer works here), my disabilities and worries were frequently ignored and minimized. Accommodations were simple to get for things like extended test time and absences, but they had very little idea what to do with the issues I had that weren't just the 'standard' accommodations (like dietary needs and housing).

Multiple students described their experiences acquiring accommodations as exhausting and difficult. This was a theme in both the survey responses and interviews. Ultimately, the issue sometimes also comes down to proof that one's disability is valid, proof that the disability exists, and proof that accommodations are needed for a disability. This can lead to a lengthy process, or as a different student notes, "Accommodations are a negotiation. I don't know if people know that."

Students with disabilities have to grapple with navigating the system and advocating for their needs on their own, which is difficult to do when the system and policies in place don't allow for easy navigation of accommodations. The gist of this, as one student put it, "Disability resources only are able to help you if you are able to articulate and advocate for what you need. I've walked other students through the process of letting them know what the resource center offers in terms of technology support because they never got told about those options in the meetings they've had with staff."

Despite some of the pitfalls of the accommodation systems for students with disabilities, the system is still needed and important for students to excel within the system. One student said, "Disability Services has been vital for getting the accommodations I need to graduate. If not for them, I think I might have dropped out." As another student said, "I felt very heard and aided by disability services which helped my experience at [the institution]. They provided me with ample accommodations that I needed and made me feel ok asking for help." Although there are experiences in which the structure in which accommodations are not truly accessible for students with disabilities, there are instances in which students do have satisfactory conditions with navigating accommodations. The experiences of each student navigating this process is different and completely individualized.

Further, higher education institutions tend to be at the precipice of social justice movements, usually in an environment where students work together to learn and critically grow as global citizens. As both a movement for social justice and self-preservation, students interact with and disrupt institutional powers to shift the outlook of disability and can also translate to the day-to-day social environment for students with disabilities. Although an institution may preach a message of accessibility and inclusion, that may not be the practices put forth in the day-to-day lives of individuals with disabilities at the institution. One key area is accepting people with disabilities within the higher education community. As one student explained, surface-level acceptance of people with disabilities is prevalent, but acceptance as a concept is much deeper than daily interactions:

> ...people are generally well-educated about social justice issues, and I've never had a bad reaction when disclosing my autism to a professor or peer. On a deeper level, I've encountered some really upsetting rhetoric around autism from other people in my classes, a librarian I went to for help with my capstone, and even a [college]-affiliated social media page. It's pretty exhausting to have to make the choice between educating people or being quiet and saving my energy all the time.

Further, as one student expressed, acceptance may actually differ for someone who is neurodiverse versus someone who is physically disabled or has a cognitive disability. They explained:

> I think the neurodiverse community gets a lot of acceptance because of how prominent we are on campus, however most other disabilities are not seen in the same light because they are a minority or they are invisible or they are overly visible and people don't like to

> be uncomfortable and for some reason seeing people with different abilities makes able-bodied people uncomfortable.

Students with disabilities also face moments in which they are singled out because of their disability. This can be a humiliating, angering, and uncomfortable situation for someone to experience, even if the situation is technically “accommodating.” The situation itself might be compliant with the policy, yet the student feels singled out because of their disability. One student explained:

> Once in class I had a professor who didn't let students use their computers in class and argued with me when I told her that I have computer use as a disability accommodation. She made me sit in a separate desk in the corner and I felt very excluded and singled out. I dropped that class.

Other students with disabilities expressed that they have been denied access to meetings, have not been allowed to make up tests, and have had points taken off for “autistic traits.” A student explained,

> [I’ve had] points off on presentations for autistic traits (eye contact, fidgeting, etc.). [I’ve also been told] I'd likely not survive as a doctor due to disability (I changed paths, still not ok), [also the] general infantilization and assumption of incompetence.

There have been a number of incidents noted by students when advocating for their needs where they have either been denied their accommodations or even called out by their professors in front of their peers, isolating the students with disabilities.

Accessible Futures

So, then, what can be done to create higher education institutions that are accessible to all? The first piece is to push for buildings to have accessible features, like elevators, openings, and other options. Further, as one student said, “Accessibility makes things better for everyone, not just disabled people!” Considering all students' needs in creating accessible physical and social infrastructure would be a key first step in creating broader accessibility on campus.

Many students spoke to the broader structural shifts that need to happen, shifts that can be applied to one campus but also need to be applied to the entire structure of the United States higher education system to see real shifts. One student said:

> A future that is accessible needs a hard structural change within our campus AND the entire structure of higher education as a whole. [Because] higher ed was built for wealthy able-bodied white men, it actively perpetuates violence against everyone not within that identity, in how it operates and treats the people within.

Another student expresses a similar sentiment, addressing how predominantly white institutions tend to forget about students who are marginalized, like disabled students:

> Without continuing to recruit students who are marginalized AND build a support network that actually supports the students ([because] you can recruit all you want for diversity and people falling through the cracks [because] there's no structural support - like first-gen, experiences of QTBIPOC students, disabled peeps, etc.

This also raises the question of representation and the fight for representation of individuals with disabilities. How can representation happen when individuals with disabilities feel like the system is fighting against them? One student said:

> I think disability status as an identifier is less well represented than gender or race because it isn't always obvious. Out of sight, out of mind, you know? Most disabled people are conflict-avoidant people pleasers too, so we try not to make a fuss about being represented because it doesn't feel worth causing tension. Ultimately though, it would be nice to not be an afterthought when new courses and spaces are designed.

Another student also echoed this point, speaking to the broader issues of justice and the need for sweeping change:

> Accessing accommodation is a fight. Disability advocacy is not seen as important [at the institution], even in circles claiming to care greatly about diversity and social justice. Universal accommodation, general restructuring of the academic institution, hiring of disabled people (especially visually disabled people!) in all departments but in disability services especially, etc. would help. I mostly just want people to actually care about us.

Many students spoke of how disability is a part of life and a part that may very well affect us all at some point. This makes the need for accessibility all the more important, something that should be “the norm, not the exception.” One student continued, “Disability is a norm in many people's lives, and the more we treat it as another aspect of life and the more we treat accommodation as the norm, the better I believe things will become.”

One student spoke to the conditions of higher education, particularly at institutions that preach and practice social justice on a wider while another student elaborated on the culture of higher education and what needs to shift to create a more accessible higher education:

> For a community whose proclaimed values focus heavily on social justice and diversity, disabled people are very often left out of discussions and actions taken. Many social justice actions planned by students are not accessible and the acknowledgement of that is often met with hostility.

Being met with hostility for expressing an accessibility need speaks to a larger cultural issue, something that needs to be addressed from the ground up with education. A number of students expressed how engaging with members of the non-disabled community on campuses could offer the opportunity to educate. As one student put it, “I think the institution needs to engage with the able-bodied community and educate them about what it means to be a good citizen and community member to those of us who are not able-bodied.” So then, what else can be done? Here are two quotes from two students that frame what needs to change in higher education to create accessible environments, “There needs to be more conscious inclusion efforts when creating events and spaces + keeping the conversation going. No more being an afterthought.” Another student said they hope there will be a campus where “my presence is welcomed and celebrated instead of merely tolerated. One where we are listened to. One where we do not have to fight tooth and nail for our basic needs. One where people (abled people in particular!) do the work to combat ableism and not use us as mere props to be discarded.”

Accessibility for individuals with disabilities in higher education is something that is unfortunately given to students with disabilities through their own self-advocating and work, not something easily granted by the system. By looking at both the visible/ built environment and the relational and/or regulatory environment of higher education, we can better understand how higher education empowers and disempowers students with disabilities. Looking at this from the perspective of students with disabilities and their lived experiences offers deeper insight into "what's going on?" in higher education. The results can give us direction on how to create a more accessible higher education. Transitioning from these findings to a discussion, we delve deeper into the theoretical frameworks that can illuminate how different modes of space can reproduce academic ableism. By applying these lenses, we can aim to dissect the intricacies of power and space that shape the experiences of individuals with disabilities in higher education.

Chapter Five: Analysis of Results and Moving Forwards

In the previous chapter, the results highlight how academic ableism continues to reproduce in higher education through the perspectives of lived experiences. Academic ableism becomes prevalent through the physical design of higher education campuses and the knowledge, rhetorical, and social relationships that create a campus community. The results point toward changing higher education institutions' physical and social infrastructures towards systems that empower students, staff, and faculty with disabilities. In this discussion, I utilize a critical disability studies lens through Foucault's Theory of Biopower and a socio-spatial lens via Lefebvre's Theory on the Production of Space to make amends between space, power, and agency to navigate accessibility within higher education.

Before diving deeper into my analysis, I want to take a moment to acknowledge a couple of key insights. First, how I analyze my results is not an exhaustive way to conceptualize academic ability in higher education. Rather, Foucault and Lefebvre offer commentary on how space, power, and agency converge to shape environments. Secondly, the results are based on the lived experiences of repeated cycles of disempowerment for students, staff, and faculty with disabilities in higher education. Individual experiences are based on an individual's feelings within the system but may also reflect broader experiences within higher education.

In the following subsections, I offer an opportunity for the literature to combine with my results to understand the intersections in which power, relationships, the physical environment, and agency combine to create moments of academic ableism. From there, I offer a combined understanding of critical disability studies through Foucault and socio-spatial lenses through Lefebvre to establish an understanding of accessible futures in higher education.

Critical Disability Studies

The surveys show that academic ableism within higher education is intimately linked to power, regulatory practices, and moments of agency. Produced through implicit and explicit power and regulation, the goal is to create a monolithic student form. The monolithic student form is able-bodied and minded and, therefore, able to be a more efficient contributing member of higher education (Dolmage, 2017). Understanding how higher education reproduces power that aims to regulate and normalize individuals with disabilities creates an opportunity to identify points to political, relational, and attitudinal intervention to advocate inclusive practices in higher education. The following section is broken into two points of analysis, first looking at how mechanisms in higher education reinforce the "normal" student and second, observing pathways to resist normalization mechanisms to create an accessible future.

Reinforcement of the "Norms" Within Higher Education

The norm within higher education is that students, staff, and faculty are nondisabled. This materializes in the lack of consideration for physical and social accessibility, regulating and disciplining students based on their disabilities (Hamraie, 2016). The lack of support can be viewed as a mechanism to disempower students with disabilities (Francis et al., 2019). In the results, one example of this was shown in only having a small selection of accommodations or not allowing for accommodations to be adjusted for the individual, which is a way to streamline the process. By only establishing a select set of accommodations or by only providing students with specific levels of support, there is an attempt to create students who conform to specific types of accommodations and needs. Then, by establishing norms within accommodations, the student's behavior and identity are regulated (Mitchell, 2017). Accommodations, because of privacy concerns, are a privatized and atomized experience. They are based on the individual appealing to Disability Resources for their needs. However, these services are gatekept from the individual who either needs to seek it out on their own or have to advocate for themselves continuously in the process. In private, individuals or institutions often minimize or reduce students' needs, thereby creating difficulties for students in advocating for themselves.

Minimization and isolation of students with disabilities needs within higher education is one mechanism that reinforces academic ableism. Furthermore, it perpetuates an implicit bias towards able-bodied students in higher education (Nieminen, 2023), making it more challenging for students with disabilities to thrive. Throughout the surveys, individuals with disabilities also articulated their experiences within higher education where their needs are disregarded, minimized, or singled out because of their disability. Peers, staff and faculty, and Disability Resource staff perpetuate these isolating acts. Students also report instances where authorities penalized them for exhibiting traits associated with their disability, marking occasions when they stood out from their peers. Such moments reinforce a standard in higher education, an ableist standard of conformity to inherently able-bodied norms. Furthermore, society views moments when a student does not 'comply' with able-bodied standards as deviations from these norms, which are considered abnormal and wrong (Nieminen, 2023). Instances like these make higher education a challenging environment for students with disabilities to navigate because they must simultaneously exert more effort to receive the same compassion and care as their peers while also facing discipline when they deviate from this norm due to their disability.

Resistance Towards an Accessible Future

In moments where students with disabilities have to navigate their needs through a system that both aims to reduce their needs and push them to conform to able-bodied standards, it is a moment of resistance to processes of normalization (Almog, 2018). For example, a number of students mentioned that accommodations felt like “a compromise,” and sometimes it felt easier to just go to individual professors to ask about their needs rather than confronting the institution as a whole. Through the confrontation of institutional power through the margins (by talking to individual instructors) and taking on labor that goes relatively unnoticed, these are moments of resistance to the broader structures of higher education, which aim to conform and regulate the disabled body. By resistance to conformity, actions of resilience and bravery for students with disabilities are resistance to academic ableism.

By way of structure, the educational system imposes forms of normality because of its stance as a modern regime of power. Therefore, resistance can come because, as Foucault says, “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1976, p. 95). Holding discussions about disability at the college is a mechanism to shift the knowledge and collective rhetoric about disability. For example, a number of students have mentioned that they felt that issues with disability are placed on the back burner and that other markers of identity are emphasized at the institution rather than disability. Although it is worth noting that there have been a number of conference opportunities for staff and faculty to learn about Universal Design (UD), there are not many opportunities for students outside of the disability community to learn about their peers. In the context of the case study, there is not a specific curriculum for staff and faculty to follow for how to incorporate UD and accessibility within their work. Staff and faculty have to actively seek out opportunities to learn about UD and accessibility on their own accord, with time and money. Creating opportunities for staff and faculty to learn about UD and inclusion supports all students, not just students with disabilities. By not, the institution is normalizing the views of the non-disabled students, staff, and faculty. By upholding processes that remove disability and accessibility from mainstream pedagogy upholds the ableist standards of higher education.

The politics of the body that Foucault discusses can be mitigated with the dissemination of knowledge, which recognizes that not one type of body or mind is the "useful" or "docile" kind of body (Foucault, 1979). Given that the structure of higher education is fixated on creating the "ideal" student, a student who conforms to a standard that aims to erase and mold students into complicated and efficient bodies, what can be done to create an accessible future in higher education? Tangibly, this would look like holding discussions about both pedagogy and realities of disability at the institution. Much as the ways in which ableism becomes part of the ableist language at an institution, intentional work to hold dialogue accountable to stakeholders throughout the institution to promote accessibility (Kikabhai, 2021). A shift in the stereotypical politics of body discourse held in higher education, a discourse that is based on the exclusion and isolation of individuals with disabilities, is necessary to create an accessible future.

By ensuring compliance with regulation rather than creating a holistic and comprehensive approach to accommodations, higher education creates instances that police what counts as a disability (Lester et al., 2013). A mechanism to resist the systems of normalization in higher education would be to emphasize the need for an accommodations process centered around lived experiences rather than purely based on regulatory practices. One example of this within the case study is shifting how students who cannot have an accessible lab or field experience can participate in the opportunity still fully at hand. Allowing the student to produce the appropriate accommodation or even for the class or institution to adjust the level of requirements within the class would be critical to creating a more accessible experience. Emphasizing a student's experience as the center of the accommodation experience in a system that works to reduce students with disabilities' needs is an important mechanism for mitigating the ableist and exclusionary effects in higher education.

A Foucauldian insight into critical disability studies provides an understanding of processes of academic ableism that may otherwise go unnoticed. Some of the main vehicles to perpetuate academic ableism stem from the attempt to standardize students in higher education that aligns with the able-bodied and able-minded norm. Reinforcement of these norms is done through insolation and minimization of the needs of individuals with disabilities in higher education, even by penalizing students when they advocate for their needs. By challenging the attempts to normalize higher education, individuals with disabilities have resilience by exercising their agency and advocating for their needs, pushing back against academic ableism. Next, transitioning to Lefebvre will help to understand the ways in which space is socially constructed and how different representations of space can explain the mechanisms by which academic ableism can continue to thrive.

Socio-spatial Insights

The built environment and how the built space informs the Production of Space are critical to understanding how academic ableism reproduces itself in higher education. The built environment is one piece, but the ways in which space is viewed as a social phenomenon by Lefebvre is a perspective that ties into power, relationships, and now space. Academic ableism, therefore, becomes a part of the conceived, lived, and perceived spaces in higher education, or as Lefebvre called this triad, the Production of Space. The Production of Space gives insight into how knowledge contributes to our understanding of space, the lived experiences within space, and the sensations that exist within space, which contribute to both how academic ableism is created and help pinpoint solutions to create accessible futures.

Conceived Space

With the dominant group of representation within higher education being able-bodied and non-disabled individuals, the conceived space and primary ideological markers in higher education bias toward able-bodied individuals (O'Brien, 2020). Therefore, according to Lefebvre's definition of the conceived space, or representations of space, the dominant groups disseminate the dominant narratives within the space (Lefebvre, 1991). In higher education, this conceived space is designed by institutions but also created by the people who move in and out of the space, creating this shared collective of knowledge about and within the space. Further, Lefebvre says that "Conceived space is tied to those relations of production [and reproduction] and to the 'order' which those relationships impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes..." (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). My results reflect that academic ableism is part of the conceived space of higher education or that academic ableism tends to be reproduced by those who create the knowledge within the space, both physically and socially. Academic ableism in the conceived space tends to come in a number of forms, from both implicit and explicit treatment of members of the disability community.

One key example of how the conceived space reproduces academic ableism is the expectation that students uphold their work and navigate a situation independently to reach competency. Inaccessible fieldwork is still required as a mandatory component of a grade in a class in a situation like this. Rather than finding ways to create accessible spaces within elements of the fieldwork, students remarked they were told to receive data from their peers or did not receive an adequate participation grade for the activity. Assignments that involve potentially leaving campus do not hold the same accessibility standards as assignments and activities within campus boundaries. Intent to make the activity accessible varies dramatically from the experience of the student with a disability, suggesting they should be excluded from their peers and on-the-ground class material. Upholding expectations of how people complete the tasks and disciplining them or placing them at a disadvantage when they cannot complete the activity for accessibility reasons. Although the physical spaces of campus may have changed, the conceived expectations of what people must do to reach competency still persist.

Perceived Space

According to Lefebvre, the perceived space or spatial practice is the physical space and how the physical space is experienced through senses and sensations (Lefebvre, 1991). Further, the experience within the perceived space is therefore mediated through the expectations of the conceived space into the lived space (Lefebvre, 1991). To simplify this specific situation, institutional expectations and power dynamics mediate experiences for students with disabilities, which informs the lived spaces of higher education. These elements are connected and inform how ableism can persist through physical and social spaces in higher education. Perceived space can take on two forms: either how the physical and social organization of space informs the daily routine and practices of individuals with disabilities or the inverse of how students resist the common practices within the institution. Another way to frame this is how students with disabilities disrupt the spatial practices or what is seen in the space just by existing.

Students with disabilities noted their experiences in their day-to-day routine that forced them to have to separate from their peers to accomplish the same task. For example, a number of buildings on campus have separate accessible entrances compared to the general entrance. Normally, the accessible entrances are on the backside of the buildings, which is the side of the buildings that most students commuting to class do not normally walk to. A student with a disability may need to use the accessible entrance and then have to go around to a different side of the building, separating themselves from their peers and creating a mechanism for social isolation by the built environment. The organization of the space isolates students with disabilities and can situate students with disabilities as feeling different from their peers (Abes & Wallace, 2012; Amakid & Brownfield, 2019). Separateness based on ability constructed a space that values ability over disability and creates broader instances of exclusivity and vulnerability for individuals with disabilities.

The physical design of the campus, specifically residential halls, reveals the distinct ways that the physical environment values able-bodied students and disempowers students with disabilities. In the case study school, only two dormitories are deemed fully accessible by the school. One is across the street from the main educational buildings, and one is on campus. The one across the street is accessible, with an en-suite shower, bathroom facilities, and laundry on the same floor. However, students must cross a busy urban street to reach the main campus. The second dorm is on campus, but students note they have to go outside and back into the dorm to reach the laundry room. The doors are sometimes not wide enough for wheelchairs, and the bathrooms are difficult to navigate. The social setup of the campus makes it difficult for students to navigate.

Further, students with disabilities have to decide between being guaranteed to live in an accessible dorm or if they would like to live with friends in a potentially inaccessible dorm. This isolates students with disabilities more, isolating them from their friends if they place their needs first or isolating them from their disability if they put their friends or even need a roommate because of their disability. What is seen in higher education is a system where students are unable to navigate their living space because of their disability and then are isolated from their peers because of their disability, both components being ableist at their core.

Lived Space

The lived space or representational space, according to Lefebvre, refers to the embodied experiences within the space (Lefebvre, 1991). The lived space focuses less on the dominant forces in power or the symbols at play but rather on the experiences of the individuals in the space daily. Another way to look at it is that lived space is the "space where social relations take place and where we actively experience it in everyday life" (Lefebvre, 1991). In general, the experiences of individuals with disabilities within the lived space are typically synonymous with isolation, exclusion, and difficulty navigating both the physical and social spaces within higher education. The lived space within higher education for individuals with disabilities is one where students must fight to make their lives easier and be resilient in the face of persistent academic ability. Although there are instances of institutional support, the student with disabilities is primarily responsible for navigating the living space on their own and advocating for their needs.

For example, students with disabilities feel that they are neglected in the space of higher education. This can come from something in the physical environment, be it an elevator not working, a broken accessibility button, or sidewalks slick with ice in the winter and not clear off.

This can also come from the social environment, like a lack of discussion at the institution surrounding disability, a hostile and ableist comment in a class, or a lack of belief when a student with disabilities asks for an accommodation or some other need. Instances like this create an experience for students with disabilities, an experience where there is a lack of care towards the needs of someone with disabilities, or just simply a lack of thought on behalf of the institution or the larger campus collective.

The lived experience of students with disabilities also offers an opportunity to bond with other students with disabilities. A number of students noted they found community among other disabled students, and in moments when the broader campus was not accepting of them, they found comfort in the disability community. This also shifts the lived space of the campus. Students with disabilities being able to find each other within the institution of higher education and bond over their lived experiences allow them to move forward together, potentially banding together to push for change at the institution toward a more accessible future. This also allows for moments of positivity and progress in these students' lives, which students noted was a welcome experience within the constant negotiation of needs and experiences in higher education.

Another experience noted by students was the disconnect between the disability community and the broader campus community at the institution. For example, there are instances where meetings and social events on campus do not have an ADA-friendly environment or accessible option for those who may need it. Furthermore, sometimes, students have inquired about these options and have been denied their requests. As students noted, this has made them feel excluded and not valued, not feeling like a member of the community. Further, this can also affect access to campus information that non-disabled students, staff, and faculty readily have. These moments create feelings where students with disabilities cannot feel attached to the space or their institution because of moments of academic ableism. They have navigated the space as a disabled individual and navigated the embodied experience of the institutional forces of academic ableism working against them.

Lefebvre's Theory on the Production of Space gives us the produced social space, which comprises the conceived, perceived, and lived space. This triad complements and works together to address how space is experienced socially. In higher education, there are both vividly physical and completely conceptual spaces-- think the buildings versus the rhetoric and discourse being written and discussed in classrooms. For the disability experience in higher education, the conceived space (or the institutional standard and norms) and the perceived (the construction of the space) influence the lived space. The lived space is one where students with disabilities are resilient in the face of academic ableism, which stems from the ways in which the conceived and perceived space influences the lived experiences. Quintessentially, to create an accessible future, one must understand how these three components of social space influence institutions and institutional power dynamics. To understand that, through the eyes of lived experiences of individuals with disabilities in higher education, is how we begin to dismantle the elements at play that create academic ableism in this environment.

Power and Space as Manifestations of Academic Ableism

The construction of space occurs through the voices and perspectives of the groups that hold dominant power. The understanding of how the reproduction of academic ableism occurs in higher education is informed by how Lefebvre views how power operates within spatial structures and how Foucault's understandings of biopower and normalization intend to regulate and construct the “normal” body (Lefebvre, 1991; Foucault, 1979). Therefore, ableist norms and practices are not only enforced through intentions to regulate and discipline the disabled body but also inscribed into the physical and social spaces of academia.

Foucault’s concepts of biopower and normalization offer an understanding of how power operates in higher education and how establishing norms is enforced to push individuals with disabilities to conform to the constraints of ability within higher education (Foucault, 1976; 1979). However, Foucault falls short on how power and space intersect to complicate, discipline, and reinforce power hierarchies.

The physical and spatial dimensions of academic ableism in higher education are where Lefebvre’s theory on the Production of Space can offer a framework to understand how power relations and ideologies shape the physical environment. He emphasizes the material and spatial aspects of social life. However, Lefebvre does not explicitly capture the mechanisms through which power operates, such as discourses, knowledge production, and disciplinary methods.

Together, Foucault and Lefebvre complicate and complement each other-- offering unique insights into how academic ableism is reproduced within higher education. Power, discourse, regulation, spatial practices, and social practices all contribute to how academic ableism manifests itself within higher education, and by understanding the discourses through which academic ableism continues to reproduce itself, there is an opportunity to advocate for and create an accessible future within higher education. In the following section, I will offer my concluding remarks on my research and offer, based on results and discussion, guiding principles to create an accessible future in higher education.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The examination of academic ableism within higher education through the lived experiences of people with disabilities in higher education reveals the mechanisms through which institutions and societal norms influence discourse outcomes towards people with disabilities. Utilizing Jay Dolmage's framework of academic ableism in conversation with Foucault's Biopower and Lefebvre's Production of Space sheds light on the logic of ableism that often goes unrecognized but circulates within institutions, influencing interactions and shaping experiences.

By reflecting on the findings of conversations with people with disabilities who must navigate higher education, it is evident that institutions are complicit in re-enforcing ableist ideologies and practices. Ableism is reinforced through policy, practice, and rhetoric that intends to normalize people with disabilities, subjecting them to disciplinary action when this becomes impossible. By placing Foucault and Lefebvre in conversation with one another, this research finds that students with disabilities are oppressed by and resist dominant knowledge and regimes of disability in spheres of power and space. Space is a critical dimension to understanding how power is reproduced and negotiated within higher education.

So, the question remains—what can be done to create an accessible future within higher education? The answer comes down to two mechanisms. The first is to center the voices of people with disabilities in decision-making in higher education. There is a distinct disconnect between policy and the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Complementing policy reforms with broader cultural shifts emphasizes people with disabilities being in the room making decisions about their needs in higher education. A prevalent example from my research would be the system of accommodation. Students noted that throughout the process of acquiring accommodations, there is a need to over-disclose needs or an ongoing fear that their needs will not be met with kindness and resources. This issue could cease if the connection between lived experience and policy were more prevalent. Now, students are held accountable for making the system of higher education work for them, rather than the system of higher education being held accountable for working for them (Fleet & Kondrashov, 2019). In a system that emphasizes lived experience, collaborative decision-making, accessibility awareness training (for staff), and individualized planning would be part of the disability resources experience.

The second, a much more significant strategy for creating an accessible future, is deconstructing the rhetoric in higher education that influences ableism. As ableism is a social phenomenon ascribed to space and institutions, the key mechanism for deconstructing ableism is the social. Here are suggestions of how this may be done:

A Foucauldian analysis of the situation at hand would conclude that the key to dismantling discourse is to deconstruct the categories of disability in higher education. Through the passage of the ADA, the disability community becomes constructed through legalistic processes. Assigning people into one category of “disabled” is a result of the way the categories are constructed between the “normal” (able-bodied) and abnormal (disabled) body. Disability Services offices in higher education are a way the legalization and medicalization of disability have continued to reproduce through assigning categories to disability. One tangible method to deconstruct categories is renaming Disability Resources to Educational Support, shifting the focus of the name from a center that only supports disability to a center that supports all students. Further, this equalizes the field, signaling that anyone who needs support can receive it, not just members of the disability community.

It is critical to address systems of academic ableism within higher education. Institutional means to create inclusivity and equity should lie at the heart of higher education. In a world where the goal of higher education should be to create opportunities for and educate students, ableist practices towards individuals with disabilities undermine the system that is meant to do good. By combining Dolmage's framework of academic ableism with Foucault's Biopower and Lefebvre's Production of Space, this work brings together the intersection of space and power. Together, this work helps to understand how the rhetoric of ableism informs space and how critical lived experience is in telling the dominant construction of space and resistance to ableism in higher education. The previous chapter shed light on the logic of ableism, which non-disabled people do not recognize, but certain things circulate within institutions. This research aims to shed light on academic ableism as a social phenomenon and call recognition to the mechanisms that allow academic ableism to reproduce by centering the experiences of individuals with disabilities in conversations about creating inclusive and accessible environments and challenging the ableist practices and attitudes at play. There is potential to develop a higher education that values all. There is no straightforward remedy to ableism; however, this research intends to challenge the bureaucratic routines of discourse that aim to normalize how space socializes and reproduces ableism in higher education. From the classroom to the cafeteria, the findings from this research have the potential for far-reaching implications, with the ultimate hope of reshaping higher education for people with disabilities. I hope my research serves as a reminder to continue engaging in dialogue, advocacy, and action to create more inclusive academic environments for individuals with disabilities.

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Appendix A

In-Person Interview Questions

General Background and Experience

1. Can you please tell me a bit about yourself and your academic journey to college?
2. In what ways, if any, do you identify as a person with a disability?
3. How has your disability or disabilities influenced your experience as a student?

Academic Environment and Accessibility

1. Can you describe any specific instances or challenges you've encountered related to academic accessibility on campus?
2. Have you interacted with Disability Services or any other support services related to your disability? If so, could you share your experiences?
3. How would you characterize the overall awareness and responsiveness of faculty and staff to students with disabilities?

Physical and Social Spaces

1. What are your thoughts on the physical accessibility of campus buildings and facilities for individuals with disabilities?
2. Have you encountered any barriers or difficulties related to social inclusion or social spaces on campus?
3. How do you perceive the campus culture in terms of inclusivity and understanding towards people with disabilities?

Academic Ableism

1. Can you provide examples of situations where you felt academic ableism was present in your experiences at the institution?

2. How do you think academic ableism impacts the academic and personal experiences of students with disabilities on campus?

Suggestions for Improvement

1. What changes or improvements would you like to see at the institution to enhance the experiences of students with disabilities?
2. How can the institution, including Disability Services and the College's administration, better support students with disabilities?
3. In your opinion, what steps can be taken to create a more inclusive and accessible campus environment?

Appendix B

Survey Questionnaire

Lived Experience with Disability at Macalester

1. In what ways do you identify as someone with disabilities?
2. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 not negative at all and five being very negative, how negatively do you believe your disability has affected your experience at the institution?
    a. Please elaborate
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not positive and five being very positive, how positively do you believe your disability has affected your experience at the institution?
    a. Please elaborate

Barriers and Challenges on Campus

1. Can you describe any specific instances or challenges you've encountered related to physical accessibility on campus?
2. Do support resources, like the Disability Resource Center or Academic Advising, help or hurt your ability to navigate campus?
        i. Support Resources help me navigate the campus
        ii. Support Resources both help and hurt me in navigating campus
        iii. Support resources do not help me navigate the campus
    b. Please elaborate
3. Have there been times when you feel like you have been excluded on campus (in either physical or social settings) because of your disability?
4. Explain these situations. What happened? What did it feel like?
5. Have you ever experienced discrimination due to your disability or specific needs?

    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. If you answered yes, please elaborate

6. In your experience, how well do you think people with disabilities are accepted within the campus community?
7. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not accessible at all and 5 being completely accessible, please note how physically accessible (buildings on campus) the institution is
    a. Please elaborate
8. Do you feel represented on campus?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Not sure/ Maybe
9. Please elaborate. Are there ways you would feel more represented on campus?

The Future of Accessibility

1. How can the institution better engage with students and employees with disabilities to create a more accessible campus?
2. What does an accessible future at this institution look like to you?
3. How can the physical infrastructure at the institution be improved to better meet your accessibility needs?
4. Is there anything else you would like to say about accessibility, disability, ableism, or your experience at Macalester?