# The Struggle You Can't See

## Experiences of Neurodivergent and Invisibly Disabled Students in Higher Education

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# 1. The Higher Education Landscape

Higher education and academic settings are particularly fraught with complexities for students with all types of disabilities. The history of disabled students' participation in higher education is shorter than many-able bodied people would expect, and it has required great effort to bring it to the point where it currently stands. Neither, for that matter, can it be claimed that higher education is a welcoming and supportive environment for students with disabilities at the present moment, much less that they have the same opportunities to succeed in colleges and universities as other students do. It is critical to begin this discussion by acknowledging first that, through the great efforts of many activists, success in higher education is more achievable for students with disabilities than it has been in the past, and second that it is still not as achievable as it needs to be. Those of us who work in higher education must be willing to recognize that we still have much to learn and much work to do before we can serve students with disabilities equitably in our institutions, and that begins with looking candidly at where the problems have been and still are in the higher education landscape.

## Disability in Higher Education History

In the introduction to *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*, Dolmage (2017) argues that higher education has in many ways defined itself in opposition to disability: that 'higher education' presents itself as an elite place to demonstrate ability, both mental and physical, while the institutions of confinement, labor, and remediation that were seen as appropriate for disabled people in past centuries were understood to represent a kind of opposing 'lower education' (p. 3). Elsewhere in

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the same work, Dolmage also connects higher education's exclusion of disabled people with another disturbing aspect of academic history in the U.S.: the embrace and propagation of eugenics by North American scholars, particularly in the first decades of the twentieth century (pp. 11–20, 49–53). The pseudoscience of supposedly pursuing human perfection by eliminating 'undesirable' traits and promoting 'positive' ones (inevitably associated with whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, ability, and other privileged and dominant identities, while 'undesirable' encompassed all alternatives) played a significant part in establishing the modes of study, norms, and principles of much of the modern academy:

> Not only did eugenics actually reshape the North American population through things like immigration restriction, not only did it reshape families through its campaigns for 'better breeding,' not only did it reshape bodies through medical intervention, but it reshaped how North Americans thought about bodies and minds.
>
> Academia is implicated very deeply in this history. Academia was the place from which eugenic 'science' gained its funding and legitimization so that eugenicists 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 the future teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals on campus. (Dolmage, 2018, p. 13)

As Dolmage also describes, many university buildings to this day stand literally on the bones of those who were subject to inhumane experimentation and other abuses toward eugenicist ends (pp. 49–50). Academia as the laboratory of eugenics resulted in numerous real and horrifyingly violent consequences for people with disabilities, alongside members of other marginalized communities. Indeed, eugenicist ideas of disabled people's deficiencies were also used to implicate minoritized racial and ethnic identities, by claiming these groups to be inherently associated with physical and mental impairments in order to support dispossession and discrimination (pp. 14–16). This was true of North American people of color, particularly African Americans and indigenous communities, and of immigrants of color, as Dolmage (2018) also discusses in more detail in *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability*. Well into the twentieth century, claims like these were a part of accepted scholarly discourse, while disability was seen as fundamentally incompatible with the academy, and disabled students as having no place in postsecondary education. In the United States, in particular, this dreadful legacy of higher education has yet to be truly confronted, as evidenced by how seldom discussed and little known it remains to this day.

It was only through a great deal of courageous work and activism that this perceived incompatibility began to shift, and that the possibility of the disabled college student—let alone the disabled scholar—began to be constructed. Although there were other catalysts as well, four main factors may have contributed most to this transition in the United States context:

1. Advocacy for d/Deaf education;
2. College attendance by disabled veterans prompted by the G.I. Bill;
3. The Independent Living Movement; and
4. Several key pieces of U.S. legislation regarding the rights of disabled people.

## d/Deaf Education and Higher Education

In the United States, Deaf communities have represented one of the oldest forces advocating for rights for a disabled community, even if that advocacy has been complicated and troubled in a number of ways. A relatively cohesive and independent Deaf culture has existed since at least the 19th century, and specifically d/Deaf educational institutions have played a major role in helping this community-building to occur—a role that has resulted in serious and detrimental pushback against these same institutions.

The long-time bastion of d/Deaf higher education in the United States is Gallaudet University, previously Gallaudet College and the National Deaf-Mute College. The institution was established in 1817 as the American Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons, co-founded by hearing American minister Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Deaf French teacher Laurent Clerc, to disseminate French progressive methods in d/Deaf education in North America (Edwards, 2001, pp. 60–61). Clerc was profoundly deaf and communicated entirely through sign, which was also the preferred style of education in the French institutions in which he had been taught, and as a result the American Asylum also followed these methods. Teachers were expected to be fluent in Deaf community-originating naturalistic sign patterns as well as more formal sign language, which Edwards (2001) points out was not only quite revolutionary at the time, but has been for much of subsequent history (pp. 61–62). Deaf education flourished under this approach, and Gallaudet went on to be president of the Columbia Institution for the Deaf, Dumb, and Blind, which in 1864 was authorized to award the first college degrees to d/Deaf students (Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 17).

By the turn of the 20th century, however, these successes had met with a backlash. As Edwards (2001) suggests, Deaf people's possession of the shared language of sign, which education in sign helped to propagate, enabled the development of collective Deaf identity and independent community—which was discomforting and concerning to educational activists of the day, who were steeped in ableist views of any disability as an inherently dehumanizing deficit, and not a suitable basis for community and pride (pp. 74–75). The source of critics' dismay seems to have been entirely that Deaf people embraced one another and Deafness, rather than rejecting their difference with shame and striving to be as much like hearing people as possible (Edwards, 2001, p. 74). The destructive consequence of this reaction was the promotion and eventual adoption of what was known as the oralist method of deaf education (as opposed to the manualist method of using hand signs). Rather than allowing deaf education to be led by and conducted in Deaf people's own language, oralism insisted that d/Deaf students should be taught to learn and behave as much as possible as though they were hearing, and that attaining spoken language should be their primary goal. This approach focused singularly on integrating d/Deaf people into hearing society, which, as Edwards (2001) suggests, was intended to also serve the goal of defusing the perceived threat of Deaf community-building. Not only was this seen as a rhetorical threat to able-bodied supremacy, but as a physical threat to the eugenicist elimination of the perceived deficit of deafness: Deaf people in community would be more likely to marry and procreate with one another, which it was feared would produce more Deaf people (Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 17). Furthermore, as Fleischer and Zames (2011) also note, oralism simply was not a cognitively appropriate learning method for d/Deaf children, as it involved insisting that they communicate from a young age only in ways that were uncomfortable and unnatural for all and impossible for many; once proponents were able to successfully achieve their widespread adoption, oralist methods significantly impaired generations of d/Deaf students' language acquisition, cognitive development, and educational efficacy (pp. 15–16). Not only did this shift in d/Deaf education strive to break up Deaf community, it was also to the detriment of d/Deaf education and therefore also to their social participation and economic success, making it a form of systemic oppression that persisted into the latter half of the 20th century.

As a number of authors have pointed out, however, neither should the relative cohesion and strength of historical Deaf communities be misconstrued as lost utopian perfection. Deaf communities in particular have been prone to divisions and internal oppressions, in part as a defensively conservative response to oppression from without. Racial segregation and discrimination, particularly anti-Blackness, have been as much a part of the history of d/Deaf education in the United States as that of hearing education, and the greatest successes of d/Deaf education in the 19th century were in reality largely the successes of *white* d/Deaf education. African American students were instead consistently relegated to inferior resources and facilities, and so segregated from white Deaf students that their sign dialects developed significantly differently, to the point that they lacked the advantage of a shared language (Burch & Sutherland, 2006, p. 141; Nielsen, 2012, pp. 136–137). Extremely conservative gender roles also developed in Deaf communities, often as a defense of Deaf men's remaining social power in response to hearing and oralist oppression, which severely limited Deaf women's participation in Deaf culture and in society in general (Burch, 2001; Burch & Sutherland, 2006). As beneficial as Gallaudet University and higher education were to parts of Deaf society, those with access to them tended to be elite members of the community, entrenching classist divisions in the community as well and keeping the greatest benefits from working-class d/Deaf people (Burch & Sutherland, 2006). It is worth noting, also, that the pressure to integrate with hearing society and reject disability identity exemplified by the oralist movement also appears to have taken a lasting toll, in the form of Deaf communities' historical resistance to early coalition-building with other disabled activists. For example, Nielsen (2012) points to Deaf leaders' refusal to ally with disabled activist organizations against employment discrimination in the 1930s, out of willingness to accept discrimination in employment against disabled people as long as Deaf people were not considered 'disabled people,' as well as fear of marginalization within a broader community by hearing disabled people (p. 136).

Over time, though, Deaf communities' embrace of disability identity and pride has increased, and some of these attitudinal shifts have also been associated with Deaf education in general, and Gallaudet University in particular. For example, Nielsen (2012) also points to the 1988 student protest campaign at Gallaudet—which, as Shapiro (2004) notes, should also be recognized as definitively an *alumni* protest campaign (pp. 75–76)—titled the Deaf President Now (DPN) campaign. This protest led to the institution of the first Deaf president of the university, and was one example of the movement toward positive disability pride in the U.S. in the 1980s. As problematic as some of the stratification with regard to d/Deaf education has been, the fact that such a noteworthy campaign for representation in leadership was centered around a higher education institution should point to how important a role postsecondary learning has played in the life of Deaf communities.

## Disabled Veterans and Higher Education

The U.S. Soldier Rehabilitation Act of 1918 and Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1920, passed after the end of World War I, attempted to secure some educational support and services for disabled veterans of the war, although the focus was almost exclusively on job preparation (Bryan, 2010, p. 217). The capacity of the programs created was also poorly matched to demand, and the impact was mixed as a result (Madaus et al., 2009; Madaus, 2011). The legislation that had a much more substantial and lasting impact on American higher education, however, was the G.I. Bill of Rights, or the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, which financially supported honorably discharged servicepeople in pursuing higher education. As in the wake of World War II, many of those meeting this description had been disabled in combat to some degree; this led to an unprecedented influx of disabled students into U.S. colleges and universities—for which the vast majority of these institutions were neither equipped nor enthused (Pelka, 2011, p. 94).

Programs began to be developed at a number of institutions, including the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of Illinois, the City College of New York, the University of Minnesota, and others, most often in conjunction with nearby veterans' hospitals or associations (Madaus et al., 2009; Madaus, 2011). The majority of these programs, however, were still significantly lacking by 1950, when the American Council on Education (ACE) commissioned a report on veterans with disabilities attending postsecondary institutions, which concluded that 'colleges and universities were not prepared to meet the needs of veterans with disabilities, and pointed to examples from veterans who did not receive services, even at institutions that stated that such services were provided' (Madaus et al., 2009). To read these paraphrased words from as early as 1950 should be sobering, as they identify a theme that has been common throughout the history of all students with disabilities in higher education, up to and including the present day.

One of the most successful and widely recognized programs of the day was that of the University of Illinois, and even this example, as a case study, illustrates many of the problems that were inherent in these early approaches. The University of Illinois program, under the directorship of Timothy Nugent, began at an ad hoc campus in Galesburg, Illinois, which was converted from a newly-built hospital that was found not to be needed after the end of the war (Pelka, 2011, p. 95). The program faced skepticism, discrimination, and hostility from the university and from the surrounding community, and within a few years the university sought to close down the entire Galesburg campus, citing budgetary reasons. With support from multiple veterans' organizations, the students and program leaders demonstrated in the state capital and on the main campus in Champaign, and eventually university administration allowed the program to move to the main campus as an 'experiment,' which was underfunded and poorly supported (Pelka, 2011, pp. 96–97). As part of his programs for wheelchair-using students, Nugent instituted wheelchair athletics and training in independent living activities, and procured a set of lift-equipped buses for student transportation, despite so much resistance from administrators that leveraging organizations of students' families to put pressure on the university was often the only path to success (Pelka, 2011). Both Nugent and later students in the program also worked to improve the accessibility of buildings on campus and in the surrounding town. The program provided tremendous opportunities for many students who would have few other options at the time.

Even so, multiple former students in Pelka (2011) describe their experiences with Nugent's program in complicated terms, recounting its value to them but also how much its director insisted that students in the program participate entirely unsupported, without aid from medical assistants, help from others on campus, or even the use of power wheelchairs (pp. 105, 109, 111–112). Nugent's corresponding narratives express obvious pride in these same insistences, suggesting that they fostered independence in students, and it is true to a degree that his high expectations of disabled people and recognition of their capacity for independence would have been remarkable among common attitudes at the time. Still, as activist Mary Lou Breslin—who experienced Nugent's tenure—puts it, this does not account for 'the whole concept of the level playing field, of how attendants made people physically independent [...]. Only people who were physically able to play basketball, do wheelchair tricks, or be a cheerleader were accepted' (Pelka, 2011, p. 109). While the program's strictures may have provided those who were able to meet them with pride in their accomplishment, they also left behind far more of those no less capable but simply with different physical needs.

Pelka (2011) describes Nugent's requirements of students as 'a bridge between the paternalism of the vocational rehabilitation movement of the 1940s and '50s and the modern era of disability rights' (p. 95): his work helped to prepare some leaders for a future of greater liberation, but was in many ways steeped in past destructive attitudes about disability. His approach is emblematic of what is called the 'whole man' rehabilitation philosophy to which Pelka alludes, based on the work of Dr. Henry Kessler and Dr. Howard Rusk with wounded servicepeople after World Wars I and II, focusing on rehabilitation and independence in every area of life rather than treating the injury alone (Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 172). While this movement was in many ways positive for modern understandings of rehabilitation and disability, its primary focus was on independence achieved by the actions of the disabled person, rather than changes to increase accessibility in social services and institutions, which set a burdensome precedent for the ways that disability is addressed even to this day. It is also worth noting that, while in cases like the University of Illinois the need to support disabled veterans led to program advancements that could also serve disabled civilians like Breslin, communities of disabled veterans were also much more invested in their identity as veterans than in solidarity with other disabled people. Veterans' organizations went so far as lobbying for separate and special laws stipulating different supports and treatments for disabled veterans and disabled civilians, rejecting (as with Deaf communities) any coalition-building with other seekers for disability justice (Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 171). While it is important to acknowledge that the need to support disabled veterans opened the door for other disabled students, it is also important to note that the door was certainly not opened all the way for all students equally, and also that some who had entered were invested in pushing it shut again behind them.

Furthermore, while programs and services continued to develop for veterans after the Korean and Vietnam Wars, many campuses continued to be completely inaccessible and not to accept disabled students at all. Support for veteran benefits was also significantly cut by the Reagan administration in the 1980s, substantially impacting the access to services that were available by the end of the Persian Gulf War (Madaus et al., 2009).

## The Independent Living Movement and Higher Education

In addition to being a severe restriction of disabled people's rights in itself, one of the greatest barriers to disabled organizing and activism prior to the mid-twentieth century was the common confinement of people with disabilities in medical institutions. In the 1950s and 1960s in the U.S., however, medical procedures and technology began to reach a point where people with many kinds of disabilities were able to have more physical mobility, and more avenues opened to other types of independence (Scotch, 1988, p. 164). These decades saw a few test cases of what Fleischer and Zames (2011) refer to as 'deinstitutionalization,' where people with severe mobility impairments began to receive support first to create more positive spaces for themselves within medical institutions, and then to move out of them altogether and into the mainstream of society (pp. 33–34). These efforts proceeded alongside increasing pushes for legislation to support disabled people in pursuing education, work, and independence as well, such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

One significant result of this direction, in the 1970s, was the establishment of independent living centers: communities for disabled people to reside in, with resources and services available to reduce barriers, where the emphasis was placed on empowering disabled people toward autonomy and personal fulfillment (Winter, 2003). The history of these centers is also closely tied to higher education, since the first Center for Independent Living (CIL) was established in 1972 as an outgrowth of student activism at the University of California at Berkeley. The CIL was founded and run by disabled Berkeley students and graduates, led by Ed Roberts, a polio survivor with severe respiratory and mobility impairments, and also a dedicated student activist. Roberts fought a legal battle to be allowed to attend Berkeley with the use of a wheelchair and portable respirator, and his success attracted the attention and eventual attendance of more students with significant disabilities (Fleischer & Zames, 2011; Pelka, 2011). Appropriate housing for Roberts, able to accommodate his needs and his eight-hundred-pound iron lung, was not available on the university campus proper, so Roberts and the others with similar needs who came to attend the university were housed in a ward of Cowell Hospital, at the edge of campus (Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 38). Roberts also quickly became deeply involved in social justice activism at the university, a context that surely helped him to see his own struggle and those of his peers as a civil rights issue and a case of societal discrimination, rather than an interior deficit to be overcome (Pelka, 2011, p. 197). The community they formed at Cowell Hospital served as the base of a group calling itself the 'Rolling Quads,' which continued to push for greater access at the university and beyond, leading to the 1970 opening of the government-funded Physically Disabled Students' Program (PDSP) at Berkeley (Pelka, 2011). This program became a source of support services and resources for disabled people in the surrounding community as well as students, hiring disabled counselors and providing a wide range of services up to and including wheelchair repair (Shapiro, 1994, p. 51). When it was clear that there was a need for a similar support structure for alumni and community members, Roberts and other PDSP students founded the CIL to meet it (Pelka, 2011, pp. 197–198). The CIL offered disabled people a wide variety of services and supports, many through peer support networks and community, and it became the center of some of the boldest disability social justice activism throughout the 1970s (Fleischer & Zames, 2011; Pelka, 2011). This was especially true when political backlash, citing the costs of supporting people with disabilities, threatened many of the gains the PDSP, CIL, and other organizations had made (Shapiro, 1994, pp. 70–73). In time, other independent living centers were also established across the country, leading not only to practical benefits for those with access to them, but an increased sense of empowerment and pride as well (Winters, 2003).

While the CIL and a number of other independent living centers that arose may have done so initially within universities, in large part their inception was more in spite of higher education administration than because of it—as could be said of much of the student activism of the 1960s and 1970s. Roberts had to overcome UC Berkeley's resistance to admitting him in the first place for other students to realize they could achieve the same, and it was the students themselves who had the perseverance to attend in spite of the difficulties, and the courage and advocacy skills to make changes. It certainly was not the university, which offered them so few resources in the process that they had to reside in a hospital ward instead of a dormitory. This has remained an unfortunately persistent reality within higher education: institutions tend to balk at changing discriminatory systems and policies until pressured, sometimes aggressively, by especially strong advocates.

The case of the CIL is particularly impressive because of how much was accomplished, and, as Bryan (2006) notes, because of how much of it was led by students with particularly severe physical limitations and restrictions (pp. 43–44). It is important to note, however, that the story of the Berkeley CIL—and of others like it—is not a simple tale of individualistic triumph. For one thing, much of what enabled the development of the PDSP and the CIL, and similar independent living centers, was in fact government funding, largely through 1978 subsidies to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Bryan, 2006, p. 45; Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 46). Support at the level of national social services was critical to the establishment of independent living centers. It was also, unfortunately, insufficient to provide universal access to independent living centers, or to other resources for disabled people.

As Nielsen (2012) notes, in a large number of cases the movement to deinstitutionalization has, instead, effectively been a movement to the abandonment of people with disabilities due to lack of support, lack of services, and becoming unhoused, particularly in cases of psychiatric disabilities (p. 164). Historically, independent living centers have also not served all people with disabilities equally. African American activist Donald Galloway, for example, has recounted Roberts' and the CIL's centering of people with physical and mobility disabilities over those with other types of disability (Pelka, 2011, p. 220). More importantly, he also notes the lack of diversity in the CIL's leadership, and that they were reluctant to boost marginalized voices within the community, or attend to the intersections of where multiply marginalized community members, such as Black disabled people, are disproportionately impacted by disability (Pelka, 2011, pp. 220–221).

## Legislation: The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, Section 504, and the Americans with Disabilities Act

At the same time that disabled veterans were claiming access to higher education, meanwhile, parents of children with disabilities were organizing into advocacy groups for their children's right to education. Later referred to as the 'parents' movement,' this work began in the 1930s, and only burgeoned through the 1940s and 1950s with support from disabled veterans seeking additional services for their families; it was also eventually emboldened by *Brown v. Board of Education* and other efforts toward racial civil rights in education (Pelka, 2011, p. 131). Throughout the 1960s, parent and family activists fought legal battles against continuing discrimination toward disabled people, in education but also in other critical areas, including abuse in care institutions for children with cognitive disabilities, cerebral palsy, and similar conditions. The successes and networks built by these efforts eventually supported direct lobbying in Washington, D.C., providing grassroots backing to enable the passage of major legislation (Pelka, 2011, p. 141). The most significant accomplishment at this point in the movement's life was the 1975 passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, reestablished in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA (Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 184).

The core of IDEA is the requirement that all eligible children and young people, including those with disabilities, must have access to 'a free, appropriate public education,' which includes special education and services meeting state standards, directed by an individualized education plan (IEP) developed by experts and parents, and provided publicly with no additional charge to families of disabled children (Bryan, 2006, p. 61). Another critical component of IDEA has been the concept of the 'least restrictive environment,' by which the act proposed to end the separation and isolation of disabled students, and integrate them into educational environments with their nondisabled peers (Pelka, 2011, p. 144). Helpfully, activists were able to argue for this measure by comparing the issue to that of racial school segregation (Fleischer & Zames, 2011, p. 185). This significant legislative achievement had major implications for primary and secondary education in the U.S., although as Fleischer and Zames (2011) describe, enforcement would prove to be a more complicated matter.

In its initial form, IDEA was focused on primary and secondary education, and had far fewer implications for the postsecondary level. This changed, however, with additional legislation only a few years later. In 1977, also thanks to the grassroots organizing of disabled activists, Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act was signed into law. This section protects disabled people nationally from disability-based discrimination in organizations receiving federal funding—although the logistics of enforcement in private industry proved more elusive than in federal agencies (Bryan, 2010, p. 234). Furthermore, Section E specifically requires both public and private higher education institutions to consider qualified applicants regardless of ability status, and to provide necessary accommodations and support for students with disabilities (Madaus, 2011, p. 9). In close succession, Section 504 was followed in 1978 by amendments to IDEA, then the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, part of which addressed higher education for disabled students, in the context of requiring schools to aid them in the transition to adulthood (Madaus, 2011, p. 9). Together, these two additions to the existing legislation made a significant stride toward guaranteeing access to higher education for disabled students.

Unfortunately, in the years afterward, enforcement of Section 504 proved elusive, including in higher education. Only after more protesting, direct action, and pressure on government officials—including a sit-in demonstration in Washington, D.C. supported by LGBT and Chicano activists, as well as the Black Panthers—were enforcement regulations enacted, threatening the funding of organizations found to discriminate on the basis of disability (Nielsen, 2012, pp. 168–169). Postsecondary institutions responded to the requirements of Section 504 in particular with initial trepidation and hostility, fearing, as Madaus (2011) puts it, 'closure because of costs related to compliance' (p. 9). Even so, the requirements were now law, and as Scott (1988) points out, their construction of disability as a legally protected category and a basis of discrimination, like race, also had possibly equally significant effects on disability rights and organizing moving forward (p. 167). Scott also notes that another highly significant element of these definitions of disability enshrined in law is that, rather than having been set by government officials and medical experts as in past instances, these were crafted and in some cases written by advocates from the disability rights movement itself (p. 168). From multiple perspectives, these legislative achievements were vindications of the principle of 'nothing about us without us' that has been a key component of disability activism.

As much as Section 504 and the amendments to IDEA helped push forward disability rights in higher education, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), along with its other expansions of disability rights, also played a significant role in increasing what was possible for disabled postsecondary students (Madaus, 2011, p. 10). The road to ADA's passage was a long, complex, and arduous one, requiring tremendous contributions from all of those who advocated for it, and has been documented in a number of disability rights histories already. In short, disability rights advocates had built significant political skills and coalitions with other civil rights movements around the passage of Section 504, which set them up for success in further endeavors (Bryan, 2006, pp. 64–66). Seasoned disability rights advocates built relationships in Washington that allowed them to participate in the drafting, supporting, and lobbying that were necessary for the bill to be passed. As Davis (2015) alludes to, much of ADA's success seems to have come from clever use of the unique nature of disability as an identity: it can belong to anyone, anywhere, at any time, and therefore even among Washington elites, unexpected allies tended to pop up in unexpected places (p. 8). Much of Pelka's (2011) lengthy recounting of ADA process follows the same pattern, again and again: disability rights advocates secured support from one political insider after another, each with some personal connection to disability. Advocates leveraged this advantage carefully to pass—with surprisingly bipartisan support—a relatively powerful piece of legislation acknowledging the history of discrimination against disability, and establishing broad protections against it in the future.

Of the five titles of ADA, Title II, 'Public Services,' pertains most directly to public higher education, and Title III, 'Public Accommodations and Services Operated by Private Entities' to private higher education. The responsibilities indicated by these sections led to further growth in accommodations, services, and programs for disabled students from 1990 onward. Disability services increasingly emerged as a professional area within higher education, leading to the establishment of the professional organization Association on Higher Education and Disability; professionals in this area placed increasing value on students' self-determination and the principles of Universal Design, which were borrowed from their origins in architecture (Madaus, 2011, p. 10).

By no means have all of the developments since ADA was passed represented forward progress, however. As Winter (2003) notes, as with Section 504, compliance with ADA has often been lacking and enforcement has proven a perpetual challenge, and many of the terms and definitions in ADA (e.g. 'reasonable accommodation') have been subject to considerable dispute, confusion, and interpretation. Furthermore, Madaus (2011) acknowledges that there has been a significant legal backlash to ADA's push for services for disabled students since the late 1990s and early 2000s, including a number of court cases whose outcomes have generally favored more restrictive, conservative interpretations of ADA's requirements (p. 11). As Madaus's writing demonstrates, in 2011 significant concerns and issues persisted in the field of serving students with disabilities, most of which are still quite familiar to higher education professionals over a decade later, such as:

- Continuing legislative adjustments, such as the 2009 Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA);
- New entering populations particularly of neurodivergent students, those with learning disabilities, and those with psychiatric conditions;

- Continued developments in serving disabled veteran students; and
- Changes in available assistive technology (Madaus, 2011, pp. 11–13).

Neither are these the only issues still facing neurodivergent and disabled students in higher education.

## Persistent Barriers for Disabled Students in Higher Education

There are a number of factors in higher education, perhaps even intrinsic to higher education in its current form, which work against access and equity for students with disabilities. While these likely extend well beyond the factors described below, these are some of the most relevant specifically for students who are neurodivergent and invisibly disabled, in the particular ways to be discussed in this book.

### Power Structures

The systems and structures of higher education are, in many ways, built to reinforce power imbalances and inequalities that exist more broadly in society at large, privileging the already privileged and marginalizing the already marginalized. For one thing, many of the ways in which colleges and universities function have remained much the same, sometimes uninterrogated, since past centuries, in which further education was explicitly intended only for elite, wealthy, white men. While this expectation may (usually) no longer be overt, it has left an imprint on the assumptions and requirements of higher education that has proven difficult to eradicate, and that now clashes bitterly with the current function of a college degree as a near-universal requirement for professional and economic success. The standard workload and deadline expectations of the average college class, for example, assume that students can, and should, make coursework the central priority of their lives, rather than facing working-class realities of juggling multiple responsibilities for survival. The typical reading and writing requirements for many disciplines assume that students have been raised and educated in environments of white academic English, with neurotypical levels of facility in processing, understanding, and reproducing language. The need to petition for financial and academic support as a special accommodation assumes that the norm is a student who is primarily supported by family, rather than needing to be a primary support for family. The typical classroom assumes that the 'normal student' can walk between narrow and sometimes stepped rows of seats, see distant chalkboards and projector screens, hear and instantly understand lecturing faculty, sit still, concentrate, avoid drowsiness, take notes on the fly, and tolerate prolonged social exposure, among other expectations. These assumptions are not made maliciously, and sometimes there are good reasons for them to be made. They are still, however, assumptions of characteristics that are not universal, and inequitably advantage some students, who have always had relative advantages, over others, who have always been at a relative disadvantage. Nor is this the only way that the typical business of higher education reinforces existing inequities, particularly in the present moment.

In *Academic Ableism,* Dolmage (2017) repeatedly refers to the metaphor of 'steep steps': the tendency for higher education institutions to place material, imposing architectural structures at key points of entry and access on campus, which also serve as metaphorical ascents that supposedly only the most capable can climb. These structures then also bar access to academia and the advancement it should offer, both physically and metaphorically, to those who don't fit its expectations—including the expectation of being able-bodied: 'The university pulls some people slowly up the stairs, and it arranges others at the bottom of this steep incline. The university also steps our society, reinforcing hierarchies and divisions' (p. 45). This claim builds on previous work, such as Charlton's (1998) foundational *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*, which describes the ways that (mainly primary and secondary) educational systems reproduce and reinscribe systems of power from the broader society. This includes funnelling students with disabilities into different and implicitly lesser pedagogical and professional paths:

> Special Education, like so many other reforms won by the popular struggle, has been transformed from a way to increase the probability that students with disabilities will get some kind of an education into a badge of inferiority and a rule-bound, bureaucratic process of separating and then warehousing millions of young people that the dominant culture has no need for. While this process is uneven, with a minority benefiting from true inclusionary practices, the overarching influences of race and class preclude any significant and meaningful equalization of educational opportunities. (p. 33)

Nor, as Charlton and others would argue, is this out of line with how education proceeds in general. Propping up systems of social power and privilege is part of the core function of education, including higher education, in the way it currently exists and as a legacy of its historical roots. Giroux (2011) identifies the influence on academia of what he calls the 'culture of positivism': the ideological tendency, held over particularly from 19th- and 20th-century scientific approaches to scholarship, to value only 'objective' truth and knowledge, and ignore the ways that even what seem to be 'objective' conclusions are colored by human perception, bias, and error. Adhering to this ideology makes it possible to claim that education even in history and social phenomena can, and should, proceed in the absence of context, nuance, politics, and social values, which in turn helps to reinforce existing power structures and exert social control over the educated even while obscuring the fact that it is doing so (pp. 36–39). Existing systems of power and marginalization are thus treated as self-evident matters of common sense, and go unchallenged.

One of the starkest examples and results of how power structures are reproduced in education is the prevalence of carceral attitudes in schools. Discipline, punishment, and policing have become increasingly and disturbingly standard elements of U.S. primary and secondary education over recent decades, and to the detriment of students' educational outcomes and actual safety, particularly for students who are already marginalized. In their introduction to a special issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* on carcerality and educational access, Huerta and Britton (2022) describe the negative impacts that contact with carceral systems in primary and secondary schooling have on students' later college success, and how overuse of discipline and policing in schools increases these impacts, disproportionately along lines of gender and race (p. 1312). In a later article in the same issue, Dizon et al. (2022) identify how carceral systems and structures are used to control and surveil students who are perceived as threats to the interests of the institution, economic and otherwise—which, in practice, are perceptions that are disproportionately likely to fall on Black students. Neither do explicit policing and criminalization need to be present in classrooms for educational institutions to perpetuate carceral attitudes, as Moro (2020) incisively articulates in his more colorfully titled blog post 'Against Cop Shit.' What he defines as 'any pedagogical technique or technology that presumes an adversarial relationship between students and teachers' also advances the view of educational environments as strictly hierarchical and to be tightly controlled by those in positions of authority, with punishment to be meted out for deviance from the norm. This is not an environment in which students who vary significantly from their peers in terms of behavior, cognition, social interaction, and support needs can expect to easily succeed.

Indeed, conformity of thought and behavior are key expectations in higher education in a number of ways, disadvantaging many of those with diverse needs that do not fit within the narrow acceptable range. Brown and Leigh (2020) point to how 'academic ecosystems seek to normalise and homogenise ways of working and being a scholar' (p. 5), and the pressures that increasingly corporatized higher education institutions experience to produce successful students en masse, making their individual differences a liability rather than a consideration (p. 3). Price (2011) argues that academia's valorization of a specific definition of 'rationality' makes it inherently hostile to different modes of thought and perception, including those of psychiatric and other disabilities affecting the mind (p. 8). Bolt and Penketh (2016) also collect a variety of scholarship highlighting the ways in which scholarship tends to avoid and dismiss the subject of disability altogether.

While higher education institutions have in recent years increasingly come to profess commitment to 'diversity, equity, and inclusion,' the vast majority simultaneously have not adequately reckoned with the rigid, normative, implicit expectations that academic structures, systems, facilities, and timelines impose on students (not to mention faculty), and tend to resist change to these whenever the possibility arises. Where this is true, the 'diversity' that an institution seeks can only be cosmetic in nature, only 'including' students from diverse backgrounds who are most able to perform the often grueling contortions of resembling those with privileged identities in how they think, speak, behave, and work, in order to be successful—and as long as this is the case, genuine equity will remain impossible.

Furthermore, another, particularly dismaying factor becomes evident in disabled students' narratives of their own experiences, as will become evident throughout this book: these expectations of conformity are, more often than not, shared by the students themselves, and their difficulties in meeting them are perceived as their own personal failings. Internalized ableism and its attendant negative self-perceptions, as Charlton (1998) puts it, 'prevent people with disabilities from knowing their real selves, their real needs, and their real capabilities and from recognizing the options they in fact have' (p. 27). So, too, do students who have been told there is something wrong with them enough times come to believe it, and that it is reasonable to expect them to conform to the expectations set for people very different from them, without adjustment, material support, or any but superficial accommodations.

## Capacity Challenges

At the individual level, however, while support for students with disabilities is, indeed, lacking in higher education, this is often not out of any lack of desire by staff and faculty to help. Rather, even those who want to provide sufficient services for neurodivergent and disabled students are frequently unable to do so. Improved diagnosis and increased access to higher education have led in recent decades to rapidly burgeoning populations of disabled students, especially those who are neurodivergent or have other cognitive, emotional, and behavioral differences (Madaus, 2011, pp. 11–12). While in many ways this is a positive development, and ideally institutions would embrace transformative change to meet the challenge of this new student diversity, in practice this transformation has mostly failed to materialize. This leaves disability services staff, as well as other staff and faculty who want to support neurodivergent and disabled students, to be overwhelmed with new needs while not receiving commensurate increases in resources, support, or staffing, and without substantial changes to university structures and policies that unfairly hinder these students and restrict what even the best-intentioned employees can do for them.

These issues have been exacerbated by the legislative rollback that Madaus (2011) notes has occurred since ADA's passage, where a number of court cases have effectively led to curtailment of its reach and impact. Among other things, this backlash and its results have played a role in preventing a systematic, accountable approach to implementing ADA in higher education. While some institutions have been more successful in embracing disability support in a holistic, collaborative way, no consistency has been supported or enforced, and many more institutions have been unsuccessful. On most campuses, knowledge of and support for disabilities is piecemeal and inconsistently available, limited to individual sympathetic staff and faculty members scattered across departments, meaning that the onus falls on disabled and neurodivergent students to disclose information about their needs and try to uncover support where it can be found (Kershbaum et al., 2017, pp. 1–2). As Charlton (1998) also notes, furthermore, there is a material cost for full access to inaccessible public spaces like colleges and universities for people with disabilities, and governing bodies have been as reluctant to fund those costs and facilitate structures of access in higher education as they seem to be in all other areas of public life in the U.S. (pp. 87–92). Higher education has in fact been perpetually underfunded in general in many states, and faculty and staff departments increasingly understaffed, undersupported, precariously employed, and stretched thin. Fewer economic and personal resources in general, of course, mean fewer that might be diverted to serving students with disabilities, or to any specific work toward equity.

A number of factors have contributed to this environment of relative scarcity in higher education. One significant cause, however, which also bears on other issues for students with disabilities, is the growing influence of neoliberalism in the political environment.

## Neoliberalism and Academic Capitalism

In the introduction to the blistering *Neoliberalism's War on Higher Education*, Giroux (2014) defines neoliberalism in excoriating terms: as an increasingly prevalent attitude of 'economic Darwinism,' eschewing values of public good and social responsibility in favor of individualistic gain. As Giroux describes it, neoliberalism views all success and failure as a matter of individual worth, meaning that it habitually ignores existing systemic, societal inequities that face marginalized communities. This means, in turn, that these inequities remain in place and go unchallenged, and continue to privilege the privileged and marginalize the marginalized, reinforcing existing disparities. The effects are only exacerbated by neoliberalism's 'expansion of a punishing state that increasingly criminalizes a range of social behaviors, wages war on the poor instead of poverty, militarizes local police forces, harasses poor minority youth, and spends more on prisons than on higher education' (Giroux, 2014, p. 22). It is a political ideology that, as Giroux ultimately condemns it, is implemented by plutocrats in order to uphold plutocracy, and is characterized by cruelty, lack of compassion, and apathy toward the ethical.

As a marginalized person with a commitment to social justice and a scholar of the humanities, who has closely observed the political developments of the United States in the past decades, I find I cannot disagree with Giroux's assessment, either of the nature of neoliberalism or of its increasing influence. Neither can I refute Giroux's identification of the impacts that this environment has on higher education. One of these has been a push, in part imposed from the state level upon higher education institutions, to target the curriculum increasingly toward career training, and away from critical thinking and engagement with moral issues (Giroux, 2014). For examples, one need only look to recent headlines describing attempted bans on critical engagement with racial inequality in education, or bills in Florida to eliminate DEI initiatives from higher education altogether. Another has been the rise of academic capitalism, defined by Slaughter and Leslie (1997) as the reorientation of scholarship and knowledge production toward a profit motive. Funding cuts and increasing suspicion toward educational institutions as a public good have plagued colleges and universities under the influence of neoliberalism, and have played a part in pushing them to pursue business-influenced models and sources of financial gain in order to sustain themselves. This is a shift that critics like Giroux feel fundamentally undermines their intended purpose, as well as placing more of the expected financial burden of higher education on students themselves. Furthermore, as Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) note, this shift demonstrably decreases the quality of services in higher education and makes knowledge itself a more privatized, corporate product, while also not actually generating much in the way of profit—at least not for academic institutions (pp. 330–332). Instead, it funnels the investments that are made into nonprofit higher education away to private corporate profits, for university trustees' private businesses and other new partners in the for-profit sector (Slaughter, 2014, pp. 24–25).

As a result, the influence of neoliberalism on higher education has negative impacts for all students, but there are factors that are of significance for students with disabilities in particular. One of these is what Giroux (2014) refers to as the 'politics of disposability' (p. 12): a willingness to abandon the marginalized to the forces that oppress them, and to blame them for failing to succeed under these conditions. If, under academic capitalism, all students are considered consumers and revenue streams, then the material costs needed to make education accessible for disabled students offset their potential profits, and therefore make these students less desirable than others. No matter how the institution may claim to want to serve a diverse student body, as long as it is a priority for students to represent a financial return on investment, it will not be considered in the best interests of the institution to take on and retain students who require more than minimal support to succeed.

Another factor particularly affecting disabled students is how faculty are affected by the neoliberal university. Academic capitalism tends to lead toward expansion of managerial power and an increased proportion of nonacademic staff (Slaughter, 2014, p. 13), which leads in turn to erosion of faculty power in institutional governance, demoralizing them and often resulting in negative trends in their working conditions (Giroux, 2014). Particularly in universities, administration has increasingly found it more cost-effective to reduce tenure lines, and delegate an increasing amount of instruction to non-tenure-track faculty, adjunct faculty, graduate students, and other contingent or contracted employees. On the whole, these instructors are overworked, undercompensated, unbenefited, and precariously employed, making for an overall faculty that is much less willing and able to take academic risks or work beyond minimum requirements for instruction—as well as straining the remaining tenure-track faculty, as they scramble to cover duties that can only be completed by those in their role. It is quite reasonable that faculty in this position are less willing and able to support any of their students in meaningful ways, let alone their students with unique needs. Creating accessible course environments, fully supporting students with accommodations, being flexible with timelines, and other adjustments badly needed by disabled students are all critical tasks that nonetheless take work, and as most institutions have not made provisions for that work at a systemic level, it falls on the individual course faculty to decide whether or not to complete it. When already overextended, under-resourced, and in many cases completely without job security or benefits, it is less likely than ever that faculty will choose to undertake these extra tasks, even if their attitudes toward students with disabilities are more positive than average.

## Specific Stigma around Learning and Psychiatric Disabilities

Finally, and more specifically of concern for the types of disabilities under discussion here, students perceived as having learning disabilities or psychiatric conditions are in many ways particularly at risk of stigma in higher education, over students with other types of disabilities. As Oslund (2014) describes, a number of myths about students with invisible disabilities pervade higher education, such as that an anxiety disorder is no worse than the type of nervousness everyone experiences in academic situations and can be overcome with continued exposure, or that accommodations can represent unfair advantages, or that invisible disabilities are easily faked or overdiagnosed. Many of these myths, as Oslund also acknowledges, stem from simple lack of familiarity with the conditions in question. Similarly, faculty may also assume that rigor must be compromised for students with learning disabilities to succeed, imagining that 'learning disabilities' indicate that these students are less able to do academic work—rather than understanding that they only have more difficulty with the traditional mechanics of the work.

Experiencing challenges with certain modes of taking in information or demonstrating learning, however, does not make a student any less capable of actual learning.

Students with psychiatric disabilities, meanwhile, face an even more complex set of stigmatizing and disabling factors in college. In part this is simply because psychiatric disabilities tend to be heavily stigmatized in general: when discussing the 'hierarchy of disability,' Charlton (1998) notes that mental illness tends to be relegated to the bottom, with the mentally ill most subject to stigma, ostracization, and harm across cultures (p. 97). Furthermore, in the 2011 *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*, Price provides a powerful overview of the uneasy ways that mental disability chafes against the expectations of academia in particular, for mentally disabled students and faculty. These include scholarly valorization of 'rationality' and homogeneity of ways of thinking and reasoning (pp. 8–9), and the flawed but ubiquitous association of 'mental illness' with acts of school violence, which creates a perceived need to protect educational institutions from mentally ill students, rather than the other way around (pp. 142–144). Furthermore, academic and other forms of stress have recently been driving a growing crisis in the need for campus mental health care, for students with preexisting mental health conditions and those without, which available counseling resources have proven insufficient to meet (Abrams, 2022). Even students with mental health needs who are aware of those needs and able to reach out for help—which, as later chapters will show, already represent a minority—may not be able to access resources on campus to help them.

## Summary and Conclusions

Higher education has a long history of being a hostile landscape for people with disabilities in general. Over time, however, activists in a number of social movements have pushed to create spaces for disabled students in colleges and universities: Deaf students, disabled veterans, proponents of the independent living movement, and advocates for legislative reform have all contributed to this work, among others. Their efforts have helped make college success more attainable for disabled students, although in ways frequently complicated by issues of race, gender, class, and other factors, and not without lingering barriers that still plague students today. These include the implicit expectations, norms, hierarchies, and carceral attitudes embedded in higher education systems. They also include limitations in the human and financial resources available to support disabled students, which have been increasingly imposed by the growing influence of neoliberalism on public life in the U.S. Neoliberalism has also impacted higher education in other ways that are to the detriment of disabled students' success, such as causing 'less profitable' students with greater support needs to be considered less desirable, and placing increasing strain on faculty that makes it less possible for them to adequately support students with disabilities. All of these issues are only compounded for students with conditions classified as learning disabilities and psychiatric disabilities, who face additional stigma and challenges in higher education institutions because of stereotypes and misperceptions about what their conditions imply. Understanding all of these inherent factors and how they impact neurodivergent and disabled college students will be critical to contextualizing the experiences that students have recounted in the research literature.