

**The Rhetorics of Identity Within Higher Education: Exploring How Disability Identity
Shapes Learning at the University Level**

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It is often said that college is the time for ‘figuring out who you are’. The university campus is understood not only as a location of meaning-making in terms of academic knowledge and career development but also as a site for making meaning of oneself. Thus, higher education is a fundamental space for identity construction and negotiation. Identity and the ways in which we engage with it matters in higher education because who we are informs the ways in which we learn, and the knowledge we gain while in college pushes us to evolve our senses of self. The people we are at our college graduation ceremonies are vastly different from the people we were at freshman orientation, reflecting the formative role that college plays in the development of identity during those in-between years of late teenage-hood and early young adulthood, oftentimes shaping our later adult years, as well. If we conceptualize higher education as an institution that goes beyond educational pursuits and includes self-discovery, it becomes clear that an understanding of identity in relation to higher education spaces is critical in pursuits of reimagining higher education for the better.

I acknowledge that there is likely already an understanding of identity within the context of higher education that has been established through such conversations about the rates of recruitment, retention, acceptance, enrollment, and graduation. However, our identities are not merely a variable for empirical research, and they also are far more nuanced than a categorical variable. In fact, scholars have demonstrated that empirical studies oftentimes misrepresent the lived experiences that construct our identities by generalizing or assuming inaccurate conclusions. Donaldo Macedo is one such scholar who demonstrates that studies aren’t always as factual as they might seem: “What empirical studies often neglect to point out is how easily statistics can be manipulated to take away the human faces of the subjects of study through a process that not only dehumanizes but also distorts and falsifies the reality” (Macedo, 2000).

Instead, I'm raising the need for more discussions that center the construction and negotiation of identity that takes place within the purview of higher education. Such discussions about identity construction and negotiation that are specific to higher education is important because learning does not happen irrespective of our identities and our identities are not wholly constructed or negotiated prior to beginning college. Central to learning is building interpersonal relationships, and we build relationships with each other based on our identities and the ways we interact and engage with others and their identities. In other words, who we are plays an ever-present role in the happenings of higher education, so why aren't we investing in recognizing the ways in which our understandings of identity and identity construction and negotiation are instrumental to learning?

Understanding Identity

There are numerous definitions for identity and boiling it down to a singular definition is nearly impossible. However, for the purposes of this paper, I'd like to approach identity from a framework of storytelling, which Shakespeare presented as, "The concept of identity as narrative, which focuses on the stories we tell about ourselves and our lives, and constructs accounts which encompass plot, causality and conflict" (Shakespeare, 1996). Thus, identity is constant blending of our various experiences that tell the world who we are. It is not a label or a box we check off on a form; it is our worldview and the ways in which we go about our lives. While we might claim the same identity with another person, the experiences that led to claiming such an identity may differ greatly. Others may assume the identities we hold based on their own identities or understanding of identity and they may be right or wrong. Sometimes, the identities we hold are a form of resistance and other times they are not.

No matter what the origin stories might be for the identities we carry with us, identity is constantly at play in higher education. To consider the ways in which identity is then constructed and negotiated on university campuses, we can look to the rhetorics of different identities and

how those rhetorics are at play in higher education. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the rhetorics of disability identity and how that works to shape student learning.

Disability as Identity Within Higher Education

Like many things, disability has many meanings and many approaches that lead to those various definitions. One approach to defining disability is the medical model, as Shakespeare refers to it. With this approach, disability is “the outcome of impairment” and “disabled people are defined as that group of people whose bodies do not work; or look different or act differently; or who cannot do productive work...this approach assumes a certain standard from which disabled people deviate” (Shakespeare, 1996). This is the approach that is most common in higher education spaces and is most prominent in rhetorics of disability when it comes to student learning. Under this medical model of disability, there is a “focus on the need for adjustment, mourning, and coming to terms with loss,” all of which are relevant themes in the ways in which disability and higher education are presently perceived (Shakespeare, 1996). Meanwhile, another approach to disability is the social model:

which focuses on the disability as a relationship between people with impairment and a discriminatory society: disability is defined as the outcome of disabling barriers imposed by environmental or policy interventions. It suggests a strategy of barrier removal, or education to remove prejudice, with the goal of inclusion. Disabled people, in this approach, do not want anything extra, but wish to be treated the same as non-disabled people. (Shakespeare, 1996)

By requiring disabled students to endure invisible labor to provide ‘official documentation’ and request accommodations from instructors is precisely an example of disabled students being treated differently as non-disabled students, who do not have to undertake this extra process required in their pursuit of higher education. This social approach also recognizes the interplay of individual, society, and hierarchical structures in the construction of a disability identity. It rejects the essentialist, biological definition of disability and rejects the notion that identity is a

static, characteristic descriptor. Instead, it creates space for understanding self-identity as “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography.’ Identity therefore connects the social and the personal and involves the individual putting themselves in a collective context” (Giddens as qtd. in Shakespeare, 1996). Higher education would benefit from a shift to viewing students’ identities as their biographies because presently, it does not allow disabled students this idea of self-identity. Higher education disability centers only validate a medical approach to disability, wholly disregarding the reality that a student knows themselves best – not a medical authority figure. By gatekeeping the identification of students as disabled based on an external source, higher education also adds to the stigma and de-legitimacy of self-diagnosis, perpetuating the undertone of condescending paternalism that pervades student learning in higher education.

The rhetoric of disability in higher education is further understood when considering Baynton, who articulated that “Although normality ostensibly denoted the average, the usual, and the ordinary, in actual usage it functioned as an ideal and excluded only those defined as *below average*...Abnormal signified the *subnormal*” (original emphasis, Baynton, 2013). Considering the way in which accommodations or pedagogical frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning are often perceived as decreasing rigor or ‘dumbing down’ the content, it’s clear that disability is perceived within higher education as an abnormality that is inherently lesser than. The idea that disability is simply a matter of difference was not possible. Instead, higher education seemingly follows the idea that “differences in capacity, if present, would be justification for...inequality,” which in the case of higher education is exhibited in the inaccessibility to inclusive pedagogies and the mistreatment of disabled students (Baynton, 2013).

Oftentimes, I find that disabled students’ needs are dismissed by individuals with power due to the reason that such needs might not always be met outside of college. Even if students are not disabled, they may be familiar with college professors justifying their rigid and strict rules

by saying that 'this is how the workplace will be like.' However, what is not often discussed is that this is not an attitude exclusive to schooling. According to Baynton, "The belief that an immigrant with a disability was unfit to work was justification for exclusion; but the belief that an immigrant was *likely to encounter discrimination* because of a disability was equally justification for exclusion" (Baynton, 2013, 29). In other words, just as the disabled immigrant was denied entry to the United States on the basis that they may be discriminated against, disabled students might face challenges to their request for accommodations on the basis that the workplace may also present such challenges.

Locating the Rhetorics of Identity in Higher Education

Something that has always puzzled me about the ways in which college students are perceived in comparison to how K-12 students are perceived is that college students are 'adults' and K-12 students are 'children.' To many people, the students who are in college classrooms are different from the students in K-12 classrooms, the difference being that college students don't need the same guidance or 'hand-holding' that K-12 students need, since those students are still considered to be 'young.' The part I never understood is how do students suddenly become 'adults' at their college orientation after graduating from high school only four months earlier as 'children'? And why do we promote an existence of such a transformation between the end of K-12 education and the beginning of higher education? Why do we expect our college students to already know how to be an adult at Day One when many of them won't have fully developed brains for a few years after they graduate from college?

These such expectations of college students are evident in a variety of sites where rhetorics about college students are demonstrated. In a 2017 essay on *Inside Higher Ed*, titled "Please Don't Call Me a 'Teacher,'" Alexander H. Bolyanatz writes: "I am ill-equipped to consistently provide skilled interventions when students have difficulties with attention, comprehension, and reading deficiencies. And aren't these the sorts of things that are in the wheelhouse of K-12 teachers?" (Bolyanatz, 2017). Bolyanatz naively assumes that he will not

have to encounter students who have difficulties with attention, comprehension, and reading deficiencies, as though these are difficulties people only experience up until high school graduation. To Bolyanatz, his college students are not former K-12 students with diverse learning needs and goals, but “newly-minted adults” that only need him as “an easily accessible classroom source of anthropological concepts and findings,” as though college isn’t about learning, messing up, and trying again, but about content consumption (Bolyanatz, 2017). Meanwhile, on Quora, a website where people can ask questions and get answers from anyone, one responder to the question, “Why don't college professors need teaching credentials but high school teachers do?” wrote that it’s because:

Primarily because college professors are teaching adults who...should be capable of functioning on their own by that point in their lives. They shouldn't need the hand-holding, reminders, and structure that many high school students need, especially in the first 2-3 years of high school. College students should already have the study skills, the initiative, and be responsible enough to do their work on their own. If not, they shouldn't be in college and they may need to go do something else for a while and get in some real life experiences to grow up a bit before tackling college. (Cloke, 2018)

The rhetoric of this response is strongly dismissive and disrespectful of a large population of college students. By describing college students as adults who “*should* [emphasis added] be capable of functioning on their own,” the writer leaves no room for college students to try new things or make mistakes (Cloke, 2018). Further, it also isolates current college students who may be struggling due to a variety of reasons, making it seem as though their struggles are their own faults, rather than the reality that higher education structures don’t typically make it easy to navigate college life, like filling out FAFSA forms or knowing how, where, and who to ask for help.

This rhetoric is also something I’ve experienced myself, in conversation with a friend. During a text exchange in November 2020, we debated about how college students should be

treated. To my friend, it seemed as though the legal age of adulthood overrides the fact that brain development continues through several years after college graduation. After I explained that “i think ‘treating [us] as adults’ is a way that adults like to look down on young adults/college students,” she responded, “so then everyone should be treated like an adult?” (Nomura & Harriss, 2020). When I responded her question by writing “no,” she wrote back: “so we should all be treated as children?” and later added: “it’s wacky because now we are adults and we aren’t used to it but that doesn’t mean we aren’t adults” (Nomura & Harriss, 2020). The interesting point in this exchange is that there didn’t seem to be an identity for college students to inhabit that was neither child nor adult. Young adulthood is wholly forgotten about as its own stage of life and college students thus bear the brunt of being treated as adults simply because they are no longer children in high school.

These examples are of a pervasive rhetoric about the college student, which has insidiously informed the ways in which higher education is structured and presented. This rhetoric assumes college students should be ‘fully prepared’ for the challenges of attending university. It’s a rhetoric that supposes that college students who ‘aren’t ready’ for the intense rigor of higher education just shouldn’t attend. This rhetoric of the college student contradicts the messages that I started this paper with, which is that college is a time for self-discovery, of personal growth and exploration. Instead, college students are defined by a rhetoric that dictates ‘college students are adults’ and therefore should know how to deal with all of the associated challenges.

This rhetoric minimizes the identities that college students are allowed to hold and is dependent on an ableist construction of the college student. Not only is the concept of adulthood seeped with ableist notions (“should be capable of functioning on their own by that point in their lives”), the characterization of the college student also leaves no room for the experiences of disabled students. It seems as though being a college student is equated to being an adult which is equated to being a non-disabled person. Such a limited perception of

the college student clearly poses many challenges for the student who is not non-disabled. With higher education presenting a strong resistance to change and a firm belief in doing things as they've always been done, "difference is either fetishised, as medical tragedy, or ignored. Assimilation is the name of the game" for students entering college (Shakespeare, 1996).

The Disabled Student's Dilemma

In the Fall 2019 term, I took a course titled "Issues in Gender and Sexuality Studies: Framing Mental Illness in American Culture." I was ironically in a yearlong depressive episode at the time and couldn't do a lot of the readings. I didn't even actually write a "proper" final paper; I could barely go to another class of mine due to anxiety and panic attacks. However, being in this class and engaging in the class discussions, even if it was mostly through listening, greatly shaped my understanding of mental illness's place in American culture. Having taken this class added meaning to my pursuit of enrolling with DePaul's Center for Students with Disabilities and was the seed to my current interest in Critical Disability Studies. My education informed my understanding of disability as an aspect of identity and helped to formulate my own identity as a disabled student. Yet, the knowledge I learned from this class combined with further research and learning I on the topic since then, also made me realize that the rhetoric of disability as it is understood in American culture is very much at play in higher education, as well.

While "the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires K-12 schools to provide appropriate educational services to students ages 3 to 21 with disabilities," including identifying the need for and providing relevant services that seek to ensure equity in education, colleges are not held to the same standard (Mintz, 2020). Instead, they're "only required to make reasonable accommodations to those students who provide documentation of learning disabilities and who request learning or testing accommodations" (Mintz, 2020). DePaul is not special in its procedure of requiring disabled students to "enroll" with the Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD), which included a form to be completed by the student, a form to be

completed by a doctor or therapist to list any official diagnoses, and a meeting with a staff member of the CSD.

In the same term I took the class on mental illness, I began the process to be registered with the CSD. Beginning the CSD enrollment process after I went through the intake process with DePaul's University Counseling Services (UCS) was ultimately crucial because part of the enrollment process is to have a doctor provide documentation or "proof" of a disability. By meeting with UCS, I was provided referrals to outside counseling providers, where I found a therapist who I later asked for help in completing the CSD enrollment form.

As an out-of-state student with an insurance plan that is not recognized in the state of Illinois, I effectively do not have insurance-covered health care. To make things even more difficult, DePaul University does not offer its students any type of student insurance package, unlike many schools across the country. Thus, all my sessions with my therapist have been paid for by out-of-pocket payments. DePaul also fails to provide its students a campus health clinic with an onsite physician or nurse. Instead, the Office of Health Promotion and Wellness exists to provide a variety of student-lead programming events on topics about health promotion and wellness. Therefore, for students to even begin the CSD enrollment process, there are significant barriers to access the health care necessary to provide the documentation of a disability.

This process was so complicated and time-consuming that it wasn't until January that I finally met with a CSD staff person. In this meeting, I had to elaborate on my disabilities and the academic challenges I faced because of them. Quite honestly, I don't remember this meeting very much, except for the fact that it was emotionally and mentally draining. I was being told to discuss in intimate detail with a stranger all the ways in which I struggled under the ableist systems of higher education, without knowing how to articulate that it was the ableism that's the problem and not my disability. I did not have the awareness to be able to "blame exclusionary social processes; rather than explaining one's situation in terms of personal failure, one can

justify one's identity on the basis of discrimination and prejudice" (Shakespeare, 1996). In fact, I believe that having to enroll with the CSD and facing barriers in the process insidiously implied that self-blame of personal failure is valid because the entire procedure of enrolling is proving to figures of authority otherwise. It was a constant performance of resisting the self-image of myself that has been "dominated by the non-disabled world's reaction to" me (Morris as qtd. in Shakespeare, 1996).

Ultimately, most of the accommodations I received for my disability were still at the discretion of the instructor, only after I sent them an email explaining my enrollment with the CSD and the kinds of accommodation I'd like to have. Other accommodations like early registration were a nice plus, but not super helpful to me. The "fee-for-service" that is available to CSD-registered students is Learning Specialist Clinician Services, which was a type of academic coaching, assisting with the executive functioning side of being a student. Of all the resources that were offered to me, this was the only one that was helpful, and it cost hundreds of dollars for weekly meetings in a single term.

This Fall of 2021, I enrolled in a graduate certificate program at DePaul University, and I soon learned through an email that my CSD enrollment as an undergraduate did not carry over to my status as a graduate student. I was informed by CSD staff that I would have to go through the enrollment process all over again, despite already having done this. Remembering the emotional labor that I had to invest into this process as an undergraduate and considering the benefits of being enrolled with CSD, I concluded that registering again would be more work than it's worth. I settled on hoping that my graduate instructors would be understanding teachers with a course design that resisted ableist notions of teaching and learning.

All of this is an experience I've had to undergo because I have a disability that does not conveniently align with the way higher education is done. While my abled peers do not have to spend energy on the processes of CSD enrollment, I must toil through the process, only to get very little substantial support. Yet, due to the indirect ways in which my disability affects my

learning, my challenges are not immediately understood as struggling under ableism and are instead perceived as a lack of preparedness for college or acting childish and irresponsibly. My college experience was in part defined by hearing, wincing, and resisting the ideas or feelings that I am “incapable of learning anything – that [I am] sick, lazy, and unproductive” in order to not “become convinced of [my] own unfitness” (Freire as qtd. in Shakespeare, 1996). The burden is placed on me to conform to higher education’s ableism, instead of higher education to adapt to the needs of disabled students and make inclusivity the new standard.

Why We Need to Engage Rhetorics of Identity in Higher Education

Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity (DEI) has become such a commonplace term across education that many could argue the meanings of all three words have become diluted in favor of the liberal models of inclusion that DEI positions and offices oftentimes perform. Such models of inclusion include the creation of diversity trainings, disability centers, and multiculturalism class requirements that exist specifically without a critical review of all the other classes across disciplines that already exist. At the root of the problems that DEI initiatives try to resolve is that there are so many identities present within higher education, facing a wide array of inequities, with very little resources that only actually serves the hegemonic population of universities. The pitfalls of such DEI liberal models of inclusion are that they fail to address these root problems and instead pursue solutions that exempt them from instituting transformative changes. This then ends with a surface-level conclusion to institutional and structural issues in higher education, purporting the existence of any problem while students continue to face difficulties in their learning, faculty continue to experience burnout, and staff continue to be undervalued.

Engaging in a discussion about the rhetorics of identity, situated within higher education, is thus a necessary piece to removing structural barriers within universities because we must understand how and why these barriers exist and persist in the first place. By conceptualizing identity as narratives, it follows that “Stories need communities to be heard, but communities themselves are also built through story tellings. Stories gather people around them: they have to

attract audiences, and these audiences may then start to build a common perception, a common language, a commonality” (Plummer as qtd. in Shakespeare, 1996). Higher education as a field must begin to truly pay attention to the stories within that have been fighting for such attention. University institutions must be intentional in fostering communities that listen to disabled students’ stories and then go beyond that to cultivate a shared understanding for a need of inclusive and accessible education. And this work is more than building awareness because “celebrating and identifying in difference can be risky...The work of Helen Liggett (1988) shows the risks of reinforcing the categorisation of disabled people as a separate group” (Shakespeare, 1996). We do not want to tokenize disabled students or over-celebrate disabled people by hosting disability awareness month events or promoting inspirational and motivational speakers with disabilities. Rather, the work is in actually removing the structural barriers currently in place so that disabled students can truly pursue their education with the same ease of access and with the same treatment by others as non-disabled students already do.

As Shakespeare writes, “We may need to develop a nuanced attitude which incorporates ambivalence,” towards who students are, how they behave, and how to best evaluate their learning (Shakespeare, 1996). This nuanced attitude would be informed by the notion that “categories – race, gender, sexuality – are considered events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects” because these categories are what make up who students are, how they behave, and what methods of evaluation are most appropriate (Puar, 58). Incorporating an assemblages approach to student identities, going beyond an intersectional approach to identity, “foreground[s] no constants but rather ‘variation to variation’ and hence the event-ness of identity” (Puar, 58). Such event-ness of identity would expand higher education’s understanding of the ways in which disability impacts students and their lives, acknowledging that it is only part of students’ identities, which “are multicausal, multidirectional, liminal; traces aren’t always self-evident” (Puar, 59). When identity and disability are understood as elements of life that aren’t easily documented or clearly

diagnosed, higher education opens the possibilities for students to deepen their learning and enjoy their learning even more. If disabled students would no longer have to endure invisible labor or access fatigue by enrolling in their disability centers or requesting accommodations from instructors, the landscape of higher education and approach to teaching and learning would be drastically different from what it is today.

With a more thorough and mindful awareness of identity and the rhetoric we use to describe it in higher education spaces, we can create room for more intentional pedagogies and higher education leadership that honors all identities of students, staff, and faculty in ways that lead to lasting and transformative changes.

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