Virginia AHEAD Conference 2022

**Academic Ableism and its Alternatives: A Town Hall Discussion**

I am going to break this presentation up into three parts, based on examining disability in higher education before COVID, during COVID, and after COVID.

So, first, I am going to lay out some of the ways disability has been historically constructed at our colleges and universities. How has ableism come to inflect what we do as teachers? The metaphor I commonly use for this approach is the “steep steps,” and we will look briefly at some examples of these steep steps as architectural realities at our schools, but also as built into the culture and the curriculum.

The second part of the talk will look at retrofitting: the ways we work around inaccessible features of the social, educational, physical, and digital environment to provide access. In this part of the workshop, we are going to explore how to identify retrofits, but also how to build them. This is the “during COVID” part of the talk, and we want to examine some of the ways we have – actually quite quickly – “pivoted” or adapted to an emergency teaching scenario. In some ways we have advanced access in this pivot, and in other ways we have not. In some ways, we have been thinking of accessibility and disability rights as part of the picture for diversity, equity and inclusion – in other ways we have not.

Finally, we will explore Universal Design, looking at how we might plan, from the beginning, to make our teaching as accessible as possible, so that we don’t have to make temporary or unsatisfactory modifications later. Hopefully, this is the hopeful “after COVID” part of the talk, where we think about what we do want to change permanently about higher education, now that we have been offered a chance to reevaluate our priorities.

**One, steep steps.**

Your campus is lousy with stairs, I bet you. So is my own campus, the University of Waterloo. On our campuses, we build specific associations with the steps and staircases on campus, having traveled up them many times, or having avoided them. Students and faculty alike recognize that these steps have something to say. The **steep steps** metaphor puts forward the idea that access to postsecondary education is a movement upwards—only the truly ‘fit’ survive this climb. Higher ed. is the place for the very *able*. Not only have people with disabilities been traditionally seen as objects of study in higher education, rather than as teachers or students; not only has disability been a rhetorically-produced stigma which could be applied to other marginalized groups to keep them out of postsecondary education, but the college is seen as performing the societal and cultural function of pulling some people slowly up the stairs, and it arranges others at the bottom of this steep incline. I want you to think about how this “steep steps” mentality has shaped your own education. Who and what helped you up the stairs? Where were they steepest, most difficult, for you? What pushed you back? Where did you start on the stairs, based on your own privilege or lack of privilege?

Of course, the reality is that disability is always present—there is no perfect body or mind. There is no normal body or mind. As teachers, staff members, and administrators, we might recognize and celebrate the diversity of the students we teach. But we must also recognize our roles within institutions, disciplines, and perhaps even personal pedagogical agendas, in which we may seek to avoid and disavow the very idea of disability—to give it no place. This avoidance and disavowal brings with it its own spatial metaphors—I use the steep steps to express this negative force. Higher education sorts the population by a medicalized and legalistic definition of “ability” as effectively now as it ever has. Colleges continue to function to keep certain groups of individuals out of the work force and away from status positions, and away from knowledge and dialogue and power, even as they provide pathways for others. Thirteen percent of U.S. citizens 25 and older with a disability have a bachelor’s degree or higher. This compares with 31 percent for those with no disability (Census). While, recently, more students with disabilities are enrolling than in previous eras in the United States, “nearly two thirds are unable to complete their degrees within six years” (Smith, n.p.). Just 41 percent of students with learning disabilities complete their postsecondary education (Cortiella and Horowitz; Walpole and Chaskes). Disabled students are likely to have up to 60 percent more student debt by the time they graduate. These statistics are skewed because they only account for the students who receive accommodations. In the United States, some studies show that two-thirds of disabled college students “don’t receive accommodations simply because their colleges don’t know about their disabilities” (Grasgreen, n.p.). Those who do seek accommodations are likely to do so only in their third or fourth year of school. We have a generation of students who are much more likely to experience higher education as disabling, and much less likely to seek help (NCHA 2018). In the United States, while 94 percent of learning-disabled high school students get assistance, only 17 percent of college students with learning disabilities do (Krupnick, n.p.). We have a crisis of help-seeking around disability. We are losing thousands of students every day.

Because of a lack of access to laboratory courses, research has also indicated that only 4.3% of postsecondary students with disabilities in the United States chose natural sciences as their fields of study (McDaniel et al., 1994). This is upsetting, but it also tells us that removing barriers to access could help increase the number of students with disabilities who enroll in these programs of study, and also improve their numbers in science-related careers (Moon et al., 2012). So, we have a crisis of help-seeking around disability. We have a pipeline in which disabled students are avoiding STEM. This pandemic should make it clear to us how badly we need disabled people informing our scientific decision-making.

And when students confront the metaphorical “steep steps” of higher education, the message that they get is that it is not OK to ask for help. But as you know, especially as we hope to continue to open our colleges up to a more diverse group of future students, we need students to ask for help.

Whatever the numbers, and whatever the statistics tell us about how dire prospects might be for disabled students, the statistics only speak for the very small number of disabled students who successfully navigate the complicated accommodation process to seek help. The simple extrapolation tells us that 100s of thousands of postsecondary students need accommodations but never seek them.

Looking at these steep steps, as well, in a world in which COVID has changed how we think about buzzwords like community is jarring. Further, in a world in which the prevalence of overt and systemic racism needs to be foregrounded in all that we do, we must understand that these steep steps disproportionately impact students of color. I know that many colleges and universities have been working hard to address racism on campus, and I know that this has been a widespread issue at schools across North America. There have been specific incidents, but there are also systemic issues. For example, we know that “African American males are disproportionately placed into categories of special education that are associated with extremely poor outcomes” at the K-12 level (Losen and Gillespie). Yet education researcher Joy Banks has shown that “African American students with disabilities experience difficulty accessing disability support services and appropriate accommodations” at colleges and universities (28). So how can it be that for the same group of students, a disability diagnosis at the K-12 level can be hastily applied, and will speed them into the school-to-prison pipeline, and at the postsecondary level is so much more difficult to get, and then there are such large barriers to getting help?

Further, in interpreting the extra time and space and “hoops” and “barriers” that black and hispanic students may need to navigate, and thus that teachers need to anticipate and build into their course and curriculum design, William Sedlacek suggests that these students have to develop specific skills and expend considerable energy coping with racism, looking for allies and forming their own community, and protecting their identities (202). It might be argued that these are tasks that might require strategic silence or reticence, cunning, code-switching, self-care, and a wide range of abstract and contextually varying skills. These skills do not always sync with traditional pedagogy and assessment. At the same time, students in “majority” groups can concentrate on interpreting and categorizing information in ways that sync with test-taking, reasoning, and other more straightforward academic arenas (Sedlacek, 202). The result is that multiple studies have shown that minority students, specifically African American and Hispanic students, exert more effort and are more engaged than white peers, but get lower grades (access Greene et al., for instance, on two-year college students and this acknowledged “effort-outcome gap”). How could we apply this to students who are also English Language Learners, for example? Teachers absolutely have to understand that these differences change the social and the educational geography on campus. These are steep steps that we need to better understand and address. We need to look at campus differently.

We also know that when an individual is subject to what is called “stereotype threat,” they deal with a fear of providing evidence that a negative group stereotype is true. This fear, has associated anxiety, and it creates a “cognitive load that affects working memory, ability to focus, confidence, self-esteem, and effort” (McClain). This then has been proven to impede performance. This phenomenon has been documented across racial/ethnic and gender groups (see McClain). It has had a serious impact on college campuses, where stereotypes about who can and cannot succeed actually come to materially structure who can and cannot succeed. There is no research on this impact for disabled students, but I believe it has to adhere for disabled students as well, and have an intersectional impact on black disabled students, for example. How we talk about disability and accommodations has a material impact on how disabled students can perform.

I think this all goes for our faculty and graduate student colleagues doubly – we don’t even try to imagine the ableism experienced by faculty, instructors, staff, or graduate students. The result is a culture of silence and passing. The result is the attrition of disabled teachers and researchers. The steep steps are in place for students, but they are firmly in place, and extremely steep, for us as teachers as well.

Disability service providers can be the leaders in thinking through intersectional equity issues because we are experts in the barriers that students face.

I would like us to have a look at this handout of “institutional barriers,” created by students at the University of Iowa. This shows an iceberg and, at the top of the iceberg, we see the words “student disability services located in dorm basement.” This is the visible part of the iceberg, above the water. Below the water, we see dozens of other unseen factors, from “mental health stigma” to “courses seldom inclusively designed” to “exclusion from diversity programs and initiatives” to “minimal administrative advocacy.” This calls to mind the idea that, as Disabled In Higher Ed, has stated, higher ed is often not “better” ed, but is “higher barrier” education. I want you to think about this now, and maybe we can add some more barriers into this mix. How can this advanced understanding of the barriers to student learning also help us take a leadership role in thinking about equity, diversity, and inclusion?

This also signals the transition point in this talk, moving away from talking about disability and access before COVID, to what has happened since COVID. Steep steps have been a huge part of back-to-campus planning around Covid-19 as well: all of a sudden, administrators have to look at their buildings entirely differently, in 6-foot increments that don’t easily fit in crowded stairwells and don’t fit at all in elevators. And the steps of going back to school have forever changed: who will have a choice about teaching or learning in person on-campus? Who will get to choose to work and learn from home? What social and student-centered spaces will replace physical ones like these steps, and who will be included? How has teaching changed right now just by moving the steep steps online, with the same demands of student time and productivity, but without the overhead costs of buildings and classrooms? What regimes of individualization, self-responsibilization, and personal wellness are being put in place? What new regimes of control and surveillance have been built or are being built?

For instance, we now know that more and more students will take online courses for credit in the coming semesters and years (Donovan et al., 2019; Ostrowski, Lock, Hill, da Rosa dos Santos, Altowairiki & Johnson, 2017). Some disabilities like print disabilities are foregrounded in our approach to making online learning accessible. But it makes sense that, for instance, there will be a prevalence of students with mental-health-related disabilities in post-secondary online courses and programs. Despite this, there is very limited research examining factors affecting learning for this population (McManus, Dryer & Henning, 2017). Since COVID, so many of the community supports that used to be in place on campus are gone or are not being accessed by students. During COVID, we see a different relationship between disability and teaching, one in which I hope we can better understand the disabling impact of education. As more of our teaching moves online, some forms of disability will also become less visible, and more difficult for us to understand and support.

In my work, I put forward the metaphor of the **retrofit** as a way to explore the reactions and responses we have to steep steps in higher education. I think this idea of retrofitting is especially important to us to understand right now, as we make changes to our teaching, but mostly see these as temporary. To retrofit is to add a component or accessory to something that has been already manufactured or built. This **retrofit** does not necessarily *make* the product function, does not necessarily fix a faulty product, but it acts as a sort of correction—it adds a modernized part in place of, or in addition to, an older part. Often, the retrofit allows a product to measure up to new regulations. Automobiles or factories are consistently retrofitted with new parts so that they can pass new emissions guidelines. Retrofits may be seen as mechanical, or as a matter of maintenance; thus they aren’t seen as creative. Retro-fitting is also often forced or mandated. Another entailment of the retrofit is that it is a stop-gap measure—this leads to the entailment that a retrofit can, in fact should, be given low priority. Thus, as a building is retro-fitted to accommodate disability, as per the ‘specs’ of Disability law, ramps are added onto the side of a building, or around back, instead of at the main entrance. The law calls for *reasonable accommodation*. Common reason then seems to dictate that disability is supplemental to society, that it is an after-thought or an imposition.

Students have a right to retrofitted accommodations in our classes. But I am here today to say that’s not enough. In the history of disability in higher education, a rights-based approach has often meant that disabled students are invited in the door, they are counted and added to diversity statistics, but then the culture of the college makes no changes, no lasting adjustments to account for their presence, participation, and thriving.

One way to think about this might be to look at a Tweet posted by a student named Sarah-Marie Da Silva from the University of Hull. She posted the picture on Twitter, showing how she is forced to take in her Zoology lectures. When she arrives at the lecture, there is only one place for her to sit, in the doorway at the back of the room. That doorway has a push-button entrance and an automatic door, allowing her to get into the room. But when she gets in, there is nowhere to go. This is what so many of the physical but also curricular and cultural layouts within higher education actually look like: disabled students may be there, may be able to get into the room, but their access is so clearly an afterthought, their participation is already minimized. No wonder we are losing so many disabled students.

We are all becoming much more aware of retro-fitting in the Covid-19 era. Our restaurants and businesses have plexiglass walls built, tables and chairs are now a measured distance apart. There are new laws and regulations designed to both make spaces safer, but also to allow them to remain open. Perhaps rightly so, these retrofits have been criticized. Some are wise and well-thought-out, others seem simply performative. On college campuses, retrofits can include ramps that are placed around the back of a building, or buildings in which the only elevator is also a freight elevator. On the syllabus and within the curriculum, we similarly create access, but only in minimal ways, and often in ways that can actually further stigmatize students.

The retrofit is a sort of cure, but half-hearted, and so it *begins* by negating disability and *ends up* only partially succeeding, thus leaving many people with disabilities in difficult positions. Too often, we *react* to diversity instead of planning for it. We acknowledge that our students come from different places, and that they are headed in different directions, yet this does little to alter the vectors of our own pedagogy. Most often, the only time disability is spoken or written about in class is in the final line of the syllabus, when students are referred to the Office of Disability Services should they desire assistance. The message to students is that disability is a supplementary concern—and then that it is not the teachers’concern, not really a part of the course; it’s at the back door of the syllabus.

Many times, retrofits are rhetorically and concretely constructed in ways that actually enhance and *rationalize* exclusion. To begin with there are such a limited range of accommodations offered. More than three quarters of the accommodations offered are the same exact accommodation: extended time on tests and exams (NEADS).

If, like me, you don’t offer tests or exams, and never in a timed way – well, then good. But if you keep working with disability services and they keep offering this accommodation, then you are short-fusing the process. This ramp leads students nowhere. We need a much broader repertoire of accommodations. In classrooms where we rarely give tests and we rarely lecture, we must work to expand the range of accommodations that can be offered to students. Many other teachers argue for innovative teaching methods that move beyond lecturing, testing and rote learning. But continuing to work with this narrow range of accommodations, while at the same time advocating for a broader range of literacies and modalities, that’s really problematic. The accommodations stay stuck in a Fordist educational regime, where rigidity and uniformity – and above all else – timing reigns supreme. That brings us closer to what we might call malicious compliance, where following the letter of the accommodation law will hurt the student in an innovative classroom. Or it is like a defeat device, where we can make our classroom look like it is up to specifications, but only because we are fooling the system.

We need to allow for an environment in which students can claim difference without fear of discrimination. This environment *must* include disability—currently, it rarely does. Further, disability cannot be seen just as something one person diagnoses in another. Disability must be seen as socially negotiated; people with disabilities must be seen as the moderators, the agents of this negotiation. What are some ways we do this, already? What are some ways that in higher education we have taken “accommodations” that were made over time, and turned them into mainstream pedagogical techniques? How could we do more of this?

We know that we need to offer accommodations. But we should consider every temporary, one-time accommodation as **an argument for a permanent change**. What are some ways we do this, already? What are some ways that in higher education we have taken “accommodations” that were made over time, and turned them into mainstream pedagogical techniques? How could we do more of this?

For example, as we were forced to pivot online, we learned how to caption video maybe, or how to provide transcripts, or how to share these things so that students could access them any time. Well, in a pre-2020 study of engineering students with disabilities at the University of Illinois, results from 303 responses from 49 different courses showed that students with disabilities have always, well before the pandemic, been asking for recorded lectures as videos, transcripts for these videos and for lectures, as well as course textbook and instructor notes/slides that they could engage with offline (Amos et. Al.) These are all things we began to offer quite broadly during COVID. Let’s keep doing this, even when we move back into the physical classroom! That’s just a small place to start. But it is a place to start. What has changed about teaching on your campus since the pandemic that instructors could keep doing in order to increase accessibility?

We have had an opportunity, over the last 25 months, to redesign higher education in ways we never have before. Yet nobody was talking about accessibility as part of this process. We spent much more time investing in surveillant test-proctoring software than we spent developing alternatives to outdated teaching models that rely on testing.

Disability Services offices were rarely even consulted in the rollout of online classes, with no new parameters for accommodations in the new environment.

There is some irony that the ableist demands for physical attendance and participation that teachers used to cling to so tightly were so easily left behind, and then all of a sudden have reappeared again as though we aren’t still living in a pandemic. Asking to have a grade converted to CR rather than a numerical grade, asking for an extended deadline, getting extra time on a research grant or a tenure deadline, back in 2020 all of a sudden anyone who wanted these things could have them. Disabled people can hardly count the number of times they were denied these things and stigmatized for even asking about them.

My challenge to you is to think again about the barriers students might be facing right now and also to explore how they get accommodated. Let’s think about the barriers disabled students face, but also that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds face, or undocumented students, that African American students face, or that English language-learners face, or Hispanic students? What are the work-arounds. How have we built accessibility into our COVID pivot to online learning? How will we need to retrofit our teaching in ways that remove barriers when we finally do return to campus for good (knowing that many of us already have)?

**Three, Universal Design.**

Now, I want us to transition to thinking about what accessible teaching might look like, some day, after COVID.

We know that there are accommodations that can really help students in the classroom *and* in their future careers, including help with note-taking and record-keeping, and technological solutions around communication and memory. And I also want to suggest that if we planned for more disabled students in our classrooms, we could really change the shape of higher education. This is an innocuous but a revolutionary question: what if we allocated all of the energy we spend on adapting to an old, Fordist educational regime into building a new one, one in which disabled students don’t always need to ask for accommodations but instead their needs are expected?

Like in the fairy tales of the Three Little Pigs or Goldilocks and the Three Bears, “universal design” becomes our third image or metaphor – instead of stairs that only some people can climb, and the message that sends, the center of the space and its central message is about accessibility for all bodies. That should matter at an institution of higher learning.

To do this I also have a third spatial metaphor to share, and that is the architectural concept of Universal Design.

As Ronald Mace wrote, “universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.” The UD movement was first an architectural movement that worked against the exclusion of people with disabilities, and argued that instead of temporarily accommodating difference, physical structures should be designed with a wide range of citizens in mind, planning for the active involvement of all. To do so, disability and diversity needed to be central and not marginal in the design process.

As Mace and his team discovered, “many of the environmental changes needed to accommodate people with disabilities actually benefited everyone. Recognition that many such features could be commonly provided and thus less expensive, unlabeled, attractive, and even marketable, laid the foundation for the universal design movement.”

Of course, changing physical structures was always also seen as a way to challenge ideological ones. Universal Design for Learning was then a philosophy of teaching adapted from these architectural roots—advocating the use of multiple and flexible strategies, to address the needs of all students. Universal Design for Learning calls for the redesign of ideological, social, cultural, as well as pedagogical practices. We are asked to develop teaching strategies that plan for students’ multiple literacies, their valuable bodily and cultural differences, and the variety of discourse communities they are a part of, and that they will be asked to enter. UDL asks for:

* Multiple means of representation, to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge,
* Multiple means of expression, to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know,
* Multiple means of engagement, to tap into learners' interests, offer appropriate challenges, and increase motivation.

The belief was that a critical re-inscription and re-mapping of social and educational space was necessary—that disability is in part socially and environmentally constructed. Another push behind this movement was the idea that ignoring the centrality of disability perpetuates an injustice against more than just a small group of people—it disallows the possibility of recognizing the complexity of everyone’s needs and abilities and stunts the natural growth of diversity in the spaces in which we teach (and in each body within these spaces).

I want to point out that Universal Design, as a list, and as applied solely to the physical environment, as in this example, looks a lot like a set of specifications. Indeed, UD is often interpreted in this way, and then can become just another administrative tool. But institutions like Ohio State University and the University of Washington have used these criteria to design pedagogy. They too provide lists, suggesting that teachers encourage collaboration and cooperative learning; that they fluctuate teaching methods and diversify media; that they allow students to show their knowledge in a variety of ways. UD, registered as action, is a way to move. In some ways, it is also a world-view. Universal Design is not a tailoring of the environment to marginal groups; it is a patterning of engagement and effort. The push towards ‘the Universal’ is a push towards seeing space as multiple and in-process. The emphasis on ‘design’ allows us to recognize that we are all involved in the continued production of space (and that students should be agents in this negotiation).

Imagine if we conceptualized all structures – even large institutions like colleges– from the beginning, for the broadest possible spectrum of users, and that thought of users as moving across embodiments throughout the course of their lives? Steve Jacobs, writing about the “Electronic Curb-Cut Effect”, suggests that many of the things we now take for granted, technologies that improve everyone’s quality of life, were originally designed for people with disabilities. If disability hadn’t broadened our conception of access to technology, made it more Universal, we wouldn’t have the typewriter, the stereo recorder, the transistor radio, the flat-bed scanner, the p.d.a, the pager, watch alarms, e-mail (Jacobs). Most notably, without accommodations for disabled people, your smart phone wouldn’t do any of the things that make it smart. Universal Design has already changed our world.

Importantly, I think that Universal Design allows us to understand disability from a justice and cultural perspective, rather than a legal and medical one. This asks us to foreground intersectionality (Sins Invalid). This means we understand that disablement disproportionately impacts people of color – it means we never forget that. It also means we listen to disabled students, and allow them to shape their own education. It means that the goal is not a better postsecondary education for disabled people. It means the goal is truly a better college for everyone.

Concurrently, we are already using Universal Design—if not as an intentional method, then as an effect of the critical thinking we do about ability and access. For instance, specific practices in the classroom, like collaborative work, peer review, a focus on the learning process rather than just its products, the move towards multimodal and digitally mediated forms of student engagement, these things can all be seen as having roots as retrofits. But now they have changed my philosophy of teaching and my design. What do we already do that fits this concept of Universal Design? What are some ways that in higher education we have taken “accommodations” that were made over time, and turned them into mainstream pedagogical techniques? How could we do more of this?

For the last decade, I’ve been working on creating a long, long list of Universal Design ideas. I call this “Places To Start” because that’s how I want fellow teachers to approach them – as things to try, to experiment with, in their own teaching. In this way, Universal Design can begin for all of us, as early as now.

I want to challenge you to visit this site, and to pick a Universally-Designed teaching technique to try. In our discussion period, I hope we can hear some examples of accessible teaching that people already use. We have to share these ideas. We have to reward one another for accessible teaching.

I want to also offer, quickly, a few examples.

I think that during our forced pivot of teaching during this pandemic, we came to understand attendance and participation in radically new ways – we were forced to create more expansive ways for students to learn and to show what they had learned outside of the 50-80 minutes that they were in a room with us. Let’s never assess their involvement based only on being in the classroom, or based only in 50 minute chunks again. The ability to “attend” classes in flexible ways needs to become a right and not a concession in higher education. Asynchronous learning options are essential – we need to expand them whenever and wherever we can. That’s piece one: physical attendance.

Here’s another interesting example. My own Faculty of Arts at Waterloo was told by our Associate Dean to pull back on assignments in Spring of 2020 – assign less. This allowed me and many of my colleagues to teach more, to connect with students more, and to assess less. Why should we ever go back? That’s a second pillar: how can we adjust content and expectations of student labour? How can we make changes to the biggest stressors, systematically, rather than asking students to be resilient and adjust individually?

Educational practices that seem like they have simply always existed, such as letter grades, started hardly more than a century ago; they paralleled a system imposed on the American Meat Packers Association (Davidson). At first the meatpackers objected because, they argued, meat is too complex to be judged by letter grades. The factory assembly line provided inspiration for the standardized bubble test, which was adopted as a means of sorting students for admission to college. Such practices helped to make education seem efficient, measurable, and meritocratic, but they tended to screen out collaborative approaches to problem-solving. Somehow, we have held onto them for a long time, and held tight. This despite the fact that they have not always been around, and despite the fact the becoming a teacher, a lawyer, an entrepreneur, or a poet, is nothing like becoming a meat packer. Meat packers fought back, but we have not.

In Winter of 2020, despite their centrality to educational culture, we were asked to find alternatives to timed in-person tests and exams. Well, they were never a good way to assess student learning, and despite the lore that supports their continued use, there is no research that shows that students learn more, retain more information, study more effectively, or even properly reveal what they have learned when a test or exam is timed. No research. And at the same time, we are spending almost all of our accommodations budget and time on granting extended time on these ineffective instruments? It is absurd. Testing in higher education is a significant creator of barriers, in particular for people with learning disabilities and mental-health related disabilities. And it doesn’t make sense to think that these students will experience anything like these barriers in the environment outside of school, where high stakes testing-like experiences are extremely rare. Nobody walks into an Engineering firm and says: “put your pencils down, whatever bridge you have drawn up is the one we are building.” So why would we train engineers, or anyone else, to think under these constraints? There will be other barriers for our students when they reach the world of work. But nothing like the barrier imposed by a timed test. Likewise, the accommodations that these students will need in a professional capacity are unlikely to look anything like the accommodations they get in testing-heavy classrooms. And that is a huge problem, and a huge wasted opportunity.

We know that there are accommodations that can really help students in the classroom, including help with note-taking and record-keeping, and technological solutions around communication and memory. And I also want to suggest that if we planned for more disabled students in our classrooms, we could really change the shape of higher education. This is an innocuous but a revolutionary question: what if we allocated all of the energy we spend on adapting to an old educational regime based on timing and testing into building a new one, one in which disabled students don’t always need to ask for accommodations but instead their needs are expected? What if there were ways to empower disability service professionals to do this? We did it for one term, but let’s talk about seriously cutting back on timed assessments, forever.

Given an increase in awareness of systemic racism, we have been able, over the past two years, to challenge standardized tests like the SAT, GRE, and LSAT. How can we extend this – how can we work, for example, with equity offices and officers to combat the discriminatory effects of all timed tests and exams?

Thanks for your time today, and I hope we can talk more about how to continue to design an alternative future for higher education. I think we all agree that before COVID, our schools had too many unnecessary barriers in place for students. During COVID, we all viewed and experienced new barriers, or saw the old ones from new perspectives. Now we have a chance to build something different.