

Ableism in Higher Education

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Welcome and Introductions

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What This Session Is

- **Learning Objective 1:** Define ableism as a form of oppression in society and explore how our cultural understandings of disability have been created.
- **Learning Objective 2:** Understand both individual and systemic ways that our society and institutions of higher education continue to replicate ableism.
- **Learning Objective 3:** Explore how ableism manifests in a pervasive lack of accessibility in physical, social, and digital spaces.
- **Learning Objective 4:** Identify campus resources, including spaces, that may offer needed support for students and faculty navigating these challenges and help contribute to their success and persistence at our institutions

What This Session Is Not

- **This session is not a “how to” on accessing accommodations.**
- **This session is not about how to comply to ADA standards.**
- **This session is not about helping or saving people with disabilities.**
- *We all have institution-specific resources for specific questions about access to accommodations and compliance issues: at SUNY Brockport, this includes Student Accessibility Services, Human Resources, The Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, and the Committee on Accessibility.*

Reflections on Disability

- **How do you define disability? What does disability mean to you?**
- **What is ableism?**

Foundational Definitions

Disability:

- **Americans with Disabilities Act (ada.gov)**
 - “A person with a disability is someone who:
 - has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities,
 - has a history or record of such an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission), or
 - is perceived by others as having such an impairment (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn).”
- **Social Model (APA)**
 - results “from a mismatch between the disabled person and the environment (both physical and social). It is this environment that creates the handicaps and barriers, not the disability”



Foundational Definitions II

Accessibility

- the level of inclusivity of any environment—physical, learning, social, etc. (Williamson, 2015)

Ableism

- *Dictionary Definition*: “Discrimination in favor of able-bodied people” (Oxford English Dictionary)
- *Scholarly Definition*: “The implicit belief that disability makes one less deserving of respect, a good education, membership in the community, equal treatment, equality before the law, opportunities to live independently and have self-fulfilling lives.” (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2014)



Foundational Definitions III

able·ism

/ˈābəˌlɪzəm/ noun

A system of assigning value to people's bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.

This systemic oppression leads to people and society determining people's value based on their culture, age, language, appearance, religion, birth or living place, "health/wellness", and/or their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, "excel" and "behave."

You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

working definition by @TalilaLewis, updated January 2022, developed in community with disabled Black/negatively racialized folks, including @NotThreeFifths Read more: bit.ly/ableism2022



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The Importance of History

- **“Examining the history of disability also gives insight into the origins of current attitudes toward disability.** Attitudes do not arise in a vacuum- they emerge from the customs, laws, and practices of the past. Examining their foundations helps us perceive the long-lasting influence of culture and beliefs about disability on the present.” (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012, p. 53)

History of Ableism

- Long history of oppression, similar to other minority groups. (Davis, 2010)
- Institutionalization was very common until the early 1970s. (Taylor, 2009)
- Eugenics movement and sterilization of people with disabilities as an intentional and sanctioned tool of population control. (U of Washington)

Medical Model of Disability

- Situates disability as a problem or lack in the body of the individual.
- Individuals are labeled and placed into categories for convenience and/or to fix what is wrong with them.
- This model drives many of our current social structures, such as education, healthcare, employment, and access to accommodations.
(Shakespeare, 2010)

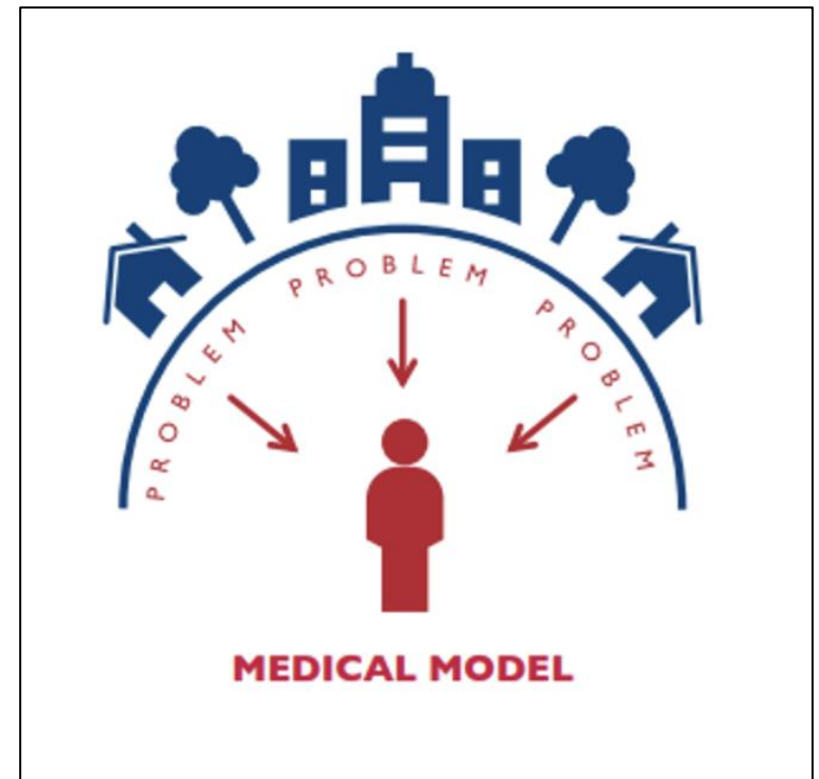


Image from: <https://www.edulinks.org/resources/usaid-education-disability-measurement-toolkit>

Social Model of Disability

- Originated from Disability Rights Movements
 - Defines disability as difference from a constructed norm
 - The remedy for disability-related problems is understood to be a change in society and environment, not in individuals.
- (Shakespeare, 2010)

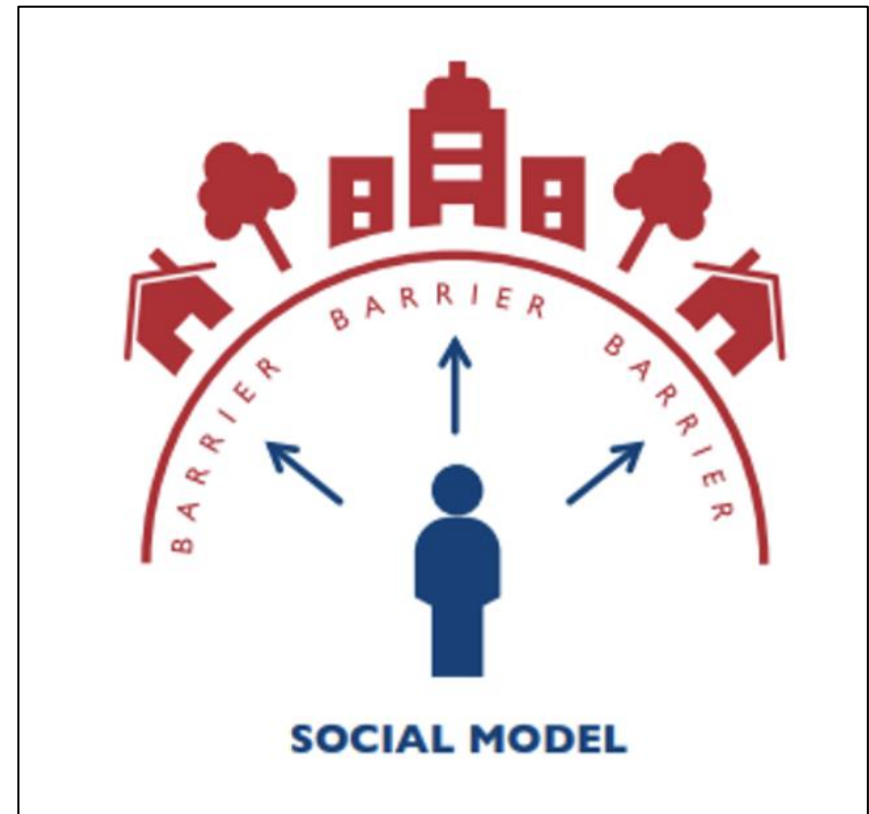


Image from: <https://www.edulinks.org/resources/usaied-education-disability-measurement-toolkit>

Social Model Perspectives

- *Normal* is a social construction that marginalizes people.
- Most of us will have a disability at some point in our lives.
- When it appears that a limitation is located in an individual person, ask if changing the environment would enable equal access.

Complex Experiences of Disability

- Disability is experienced intersectionally—you can't extricate disability identity from racial, gender, sexual, class, or religious etc. identities
- There are many differences in the experience of being disabled—type of disability, imperceptible and perceptible disabilities, relation to disability, age of acquisition of disability etc.
- While attitudes toward disability are socially constructed, it is important to note that the physical, psychological, and other challenges faced by people with disabilities are very real. (Siebers, 2008)

Ableism and Disability in Higher Education

- Studying people with disabilities as objects while simultaneously excluding them from full and meaningful participation (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022; Brown et al., 2021; Dolmage, 2017).
- Significant barriers persist including lack of knowledge among faculty and staff about how to best support these students (Sniatecki et al., 2015; Dowrick et al., 2005; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005) and attitudinal barriers related to stigma and ableism (Cook et al., 2009; Dowrick et al., 2005; Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022; Sniatecki et al., 2015)

Disabled Students

- Prevalence of students with disabilities (SWD) has increased significantly over time
 - Approximately 21% of undergraduate students in the United States identified as a student with a disability during the 2019-2020 academic year (NCES, 2023)
 - Mirrors prevalence in the general population in the United States, in which one in four adults has a disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023)



Disabled Faculty

- Only four percent of faculty identify as disabled (Burke, 2021)
- Highly likely that disability among academic faculty is underreported (Burke, 2021)
 - Stigma and ableism may deter faculty with disabilities from disclosing
 - Experiences with ableism negatively impact both career development and both physical and mental health (Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022).
- As Brown and Leigh (2018) describe, “Academics with health conditions are concerned that they are not taken seriously or seen as academics in their own right, and that their achievements and publications are considered through the lens of their disability status” (p. 987-988).

Person-First Language (PFL)

- Person-first language puts the person before the disability.
- Person-first language stresses that a person with a disability is more like a person without disabilities than different.
- Examples of PFL:
 - “People with disabilities,” instead of “The disabled.”
 - “Person with schizophrenia,” instead of “Schizophrenic person.”

Identity-First Language (IFL)

- For some people “disability” and “disabled” are indicators of culture and identity.
- IFL sees disability as an identity, much like gender, race, or sexuality.
- Examples of IFL
 - “Autistic person” instead of “person with autism.”
 - “Deaf person” instead of “person with deafness.”
 - “Disabled person” instead of “person with a disability.”

General Practice

- **Address people as THEY want to be addressed**
 - You cannot decide what language is appropriate for another person's identity
 - If you are unsure how to refer to someone, ask them how they identify
 - Practice mirroring language
 - If you aren't sure, start with PFL.
 - Note: This concepts applies for other identities that people occupy.

Avoid Historically Marginalizing Terms

- Handicap/ped
- Crippled
- Wheelchair bound/confined
- The “R word”
- The “M word”

Avoid Ableist Slurs

- “Fall on deaf ears” or “turn a deaf ear to”
- “Crazy”
- “Dumb”
- “Lame”
- “That's so OCD”
- <https://www.verywellmind.com/types-of-ableist-language-and-what-to-say-instead-5201561>

*****You will make mistakes. Reflect on what you really meant to say and revise.**



Reflection on Language

What others have you heard/used?

What kinds of assumptions does ableist language reinforce?

What are some good alternatives?

Please add these to the chat



Ableist Teaching Practices that May Be Reinforced in HE Settings

- Inaccessible readings/course materials
 - Not sharing Powerpoints/other materials
- Not explaining visuals
- Not using captions
- Inflexible attendance policies
- Rigid due dates/deadlines
- Not giving students the benefit of the doubt
- Identifying the essential skills for a major/career
- Course scheduling

Student Quotes

- I went to go and try to do the ... stuff, they were basically, “Nope. You need to be able to write it. You need to be able to spell it.” That dictated what I could and could not do for jobs
- I feel like it's hard to relate to my professors because there's so many people in our classes, especially the ones I have in the lecture halls. I can't necessarily talk to them because there's some lecture halls that I can't get all the way down to the bottom in. Even if I could get all the way down to the bottom, by the time I got there, they wouldn't be in the room anymore because you have to go through all around the building to get back there. I feel as far as my professors, they know me by name because I'm the only person in the chair. If I didn't have that, they wouldn't know me.
- I was told that if I missed more than three classes, I was going to drop a full letter grade. That was even after I gave my disability statement, the letter from the disabilities office. I was saying, please, be more accommodating. I even had the professor at one point say ADHD isn't a real disability.

Inclusive/Anti-Ableist Practices

- Avoid language, activities, comments that assume anything about people's ages, bodies, or ability status.
- Academic accommodations are a legal requirement; however, you are not entitled to details about the student's disability/medical status/symptoms
- Recognize that many adults have unrecognized/undiagnosed disabilities that significantly impact their academic engagement (and make appropriate referral when these are shared)
- Implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices in your teaching

Inclusive/Anti-Ableist Practices II

- Consider accessibility when planning events: SUNY Brockport Accessible Events checklist
 - Provide interpreters and microphones for large/open events, large print options for handouts, etc.
- If you need help or suggestions for how to make your virtual or physical environment more accessible contact those with expertise (IT, disability services, library, etc.)



Reflection and Action

- What are some barriers for PWD in your classroom or working environment that you may not have recognized before this presentation?
- What are some other examples of how disability/higher education professionals can implement anti-ableist practices in their work?

Questions?



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