

# Student Disclosure of Disability in Higher Education

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# Welcome and Introductions

## Facilitators:

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  - Healthcare Studies



# What is Disclosure?

- Introduce yourself to your neighbors.
- Discuss what disability disclosure means to you and the various examples of disclosure that you have experiences within any capacity.

# Our Understanding of Disclosure

- Formal
  - Disability Services, Employer, Medical
  - May require documentation
  - Legal process for obtaining access, accommodations, etc.
- Informal
  - Professor, Peers/Classmates, Friends/Family
  - Purpose may vary (understanding, identity, rapport, culture)

# Apparent vs. Non-Apparent Disabilities

- Apparent Disabilities (AD): those that can be seen or perceived by others through interpersonal interactions
  - Disclosure for those with apparent disabilities is sometimes not necessary, as people can see that they are disabled with physical and sensory disabilities.
- Non-Apparent Disabilities (NAD): those that cannot be readily discerned through interpersonal interactions
  - The privilege of non-disclosure allows people with non-apparent disabilities to decide when/if they will disclose
  - Students who have mental illnesses, learning disabilities, neurodivergence, and fatigue/pain often *pass for normal*

# Non-Apparent Disabilities

- Increasing numbers of students with NAD in higher education experience unique and subjective contexts that dictate the decision to disclose (Melian, 2022)
  - Decision to disclose is often determined by the nature of the barriers that they face (Melian, 2022; Kline, 2022)
  - Some students with NAD don't identify as disabled and do not seek accommodations
  - The stigma of disability and being perceived as "faking it" or asking for an "unfair advantage" prevents some students from disclosing at all (Dolmage, 2017)

# Literature Review

- Range of student feelings about interactions with university Disability Support Services (DSS).
  - Insufficient support, resulting in discouraging, repetitive, and bureaucratized experiences (Melian, 2022)
  - Very supportive, resulting in feeling safe disclosing (Kline, 2022)
  - Multiple calls for additional research to understand issues pertaining to students, staff, and faculty (Accardo et al., 2024; Dwyer et al., 2023)
- The nature and context of disclosure is not adequately represented or studied

# This Study

- Methodology:
  - Narrative Data Analysis
  - Semi-Structured Interviews
  - 11 self-selected students with NAD (depression, generalized anxiety disorder, learning disabilities, autism, chronic illness, fatigue, and pain)
  - Data collected 2019-2020, start of covid
- Research Question: How is disclosure interpreted and experienced by higher education students who identify as disabled?



# Disclosure

- How did our participants experience the formal and informal aspects of disclosure?
  - Positive and negative interactions
  - Disclosure to peers and faculty
  - Decision-making leading up to disclosure in informal settings

# Findings about SWDs with NAD I

- **Theme One: Emotional Labor of addressing barriers and advocacy**
  - Disclosure of academic needs in formal and informal ways
  - Disclosure of additional social and interpersonal challenges that they face.
  - *"I'll reach out to them myself and be like... you don't have the captions on. Would you mind just going in your settings and enabling that for me?" And then I just say, "It is in my accessibility plan, you can access it through the (redacted) student portal, it would be really helpful if you could do that," ... you know, if I email my professor 45 minutes before my exam and I'm like, "Did you remember to extend my Blackboard time?"*

# Findings about SWDs with NAD II

- **Theme Two: Accommodations as security-relieved anxiety**
  - Accommodations as security/insurance to alleviate anxiety
  - *"Most of the responses that I get from telling people about this new diagnosis and the accommodations have been really positive, and I am very grateful that I have never felt pressure to open all the way up to talk about the things that are very deep or have more trauma"*
  - *"To have an office that will advocate for me when it comes to disability related matters or just in general ... gives me a greater sense of security as a person with a disability on this campus. I feel like if I need to speak up whether it's heard or not I am not speaking up alone."*



# Findings about SWDs with NAD III

- **Theme Three: Gaining legitimacy through disclosure- being a human isn't enough**
  - Disclosure to gain legitimacy in HE/academic settings to be seen as worthy
  - *"It's not that I'm comfortable. It's part of who I am. It's part of what I have to do to succeed on this campus. To hide that is hiding who I am. I refuse to be ashamed of who I am. Not anymore. Too many people in my life have told me that I should hate me. I'm not going to anymore. I refuse."*

# Findings about SWDs with NAD III (cont'd)

- Theme Three: Gaining legitimacy through disclosure- being a human isn't enough
  - Disclosure to gain legitimacy in HE/academic settings to be seen as worthy
  - *"it's nice to have the form because even though it's a hassle that I have to do it every semester, it's nice because it's not coming up to a professor and saying, "Hi, so, I have this stuff and this is what I need." It's like somebody else is already preauthorized like, "She's legit. She knows what she's talking about. You need to help her because she doesn't have the same experience as some other people do.""*

# Case Study Discussion

- Discuss the case study that you are given with your small group.
- Be prepared to summarize your case study and share some of your thoughts and responses to the discussion questions.

# Implications for HE Professionals

- Why is it important to consider this in higher education?
- How does the systemic structure of higher education contribute to the perceived need for students to disclose personal information to their professors?
- How does the nature of one's disability (apparent vs. non-apparent) influence a students' decision to disclose and what to disclose? Why is this relevant to our work?

# Q/A

- What questions do you have for us?
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