

Foreword

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“It’s better to ask forgiveness than permission.”

-Grace Hopper

As a new student affairs professional, I remember chatting with my supervisor about a new program idea. My supervisor cringed, then shrugged and said, “It’s a new and interesting idea. Go for it; it’s better to ask forgiveness than permission in this case.” We shared a few laughs as I knew exactly what that meant. An idea like this meant long meetings, endless emails, and answering several questions that would take more time than just trying the program. This Western adage was coined by Grace Hopper, a White woman, computer scientist, U.S. Navy Admiral, and a woman who lived with her disabilities of depression and alcoholism (Uhl & Marx, 2020). She got her PhD in 1934 and achieved most of her success during a time when women role models in leadership were few and far between (Uhl & Marx, 2020). Some have speculated on the meaning behind her comment. Still, I wonder if it was about pushing women not to wait for men to validate their existence, their desire for an education, or their professional ambitions. Perhaps it was meant to say, “Just do it.”

Regardless of her intentions or context, I can identify several times and spaces when the “Just do it” mentality has supported the liberation of marginalized communities. As we quickly approach the 35th anniversary of the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), I am reminded, past and present, of all of the ways permission was not asked for in the fight for fundamental human rights for disabled folks, such as the 1977 San Francisco 504 sit-ins and the Black Panthers providing daily hot meals (Lebrecht & Newnham, 2020), the Deaf President Now Movement of 1988 where Deaf leadership was demanded (Christiansen & Barnartt, 1995), the 1990 “Capitol Crawl” in which individuals put their bodies on the line with the youngest protesters being eight years old (Little, 2024), the current #CripTheVote movement that pushes for disability topics to be at the forefront of political discourse (Hui, 2020); and the countless families that have fought for their children during Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings for them to have access to an equitable education.

In the cases above, not asking for permission made necessary change possible. However, what led me to co-write *Not Another All White Study: Challenging Color-Evasiveness Ideology in Disability Scholarship* in the Fall 2020 issue of the *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* was the shadow or negative aspects of this adage on people with disabilities. We have turned this saying into a practice in higher education that excuses us from trying, leaves marginalized folks out of the conversation, and makes us feel better about ourselves when we are questioned about why we made certain decisions. These thoughts came to me during a summer disability scholars’ retreat where I had the opportunity to engage with higher education scholars who were invested in guiding the direction of future disability scholarship.

Each day, I left the conversation wondering where the Scholars of Color were in disability higher education. I was one of only a few People of Color at the retreat. During breakout dialogues and late-night chats, the uninterrogated issue of Whiteness in higher education disability scholarship continued to surface for me and, might I add, without permission. It was allowed to sit in our space. Some folks talked around it, and others acknowledged its continuous problematic presence, but nonetheless, it was talked about as if there was nothing we could do about it except apologize, say we would do better, and move on. I left that retreat wanting to disrupt the culture of its “better to ask for forgiveness than permission” approach when it came to how we supported people with disabilities on our campuses (i.e., students, staff, faculty, and administrators), and specifically question the overuse of this idea in our disability scholarship. *Not Another All White Study* was a rallying cry for me. It was my moment to draw a line in the sand to say, “enough is enough,” and to name what had become the norm. I could no longer tolerate the erasure or the lack of consideration of the impact of unnamed White-only disability scholarship, epistemologies, and ideologies on disabled folks of color. This piece was meant to point out that simply adding “only White participants” as a limitation was asking for forgiveness instead of doing the work, embracing patience, and building the relationships required to diversify studies racially. All

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White-centered research and scholarship that is not named as such goes under the radar and paints broad strokes of what people with disabilities are experiencing, ultimately misrepresenting and misinforming student affairs practitioners (Stapleton & James, 2020).

This special issue is a sign that the rallying cry has been acknowledged, validated, and continued by racially diverse scholars with their own lived experiences with disabilities. As readers engage with the special issue, I hope they continue to grapple with a few ideas. First, what it means to start disability scholarship and conversations with Black and Brown communities at the center. Scholars within this issue are holding a magnifying glass over the status quo: ways that higher education is navigating technology, supporting students, and checking boxes when working with Black and Brown disabled communities. Second, we must question what we have identified as equitable practice and how it might be masking White patriarchal-centered ways of being. The second wave of the Disability Right Movement is upon us. It demands that we move beyond just accommodations and understand the importance of cross-movement solidarity, which requires we embrace intersectionality, interdependence, and collective access (Berne, 2015; Ramirez-Stapleton & Torres, 2020).

Lastly, these scholars begin to show us ways to hold Whiteness accountable, to question it, not underestimate its impact, and require it to be transparent in disability scholarship and our practice with students with disabilities. The scholarship in this issue and future dialogues about this work can foster a culture of shared responsibility between scholars, practitioners, and higher education in general (Stapleton & James, 2020). No one person is fully responsible for how we got here, and no one person will help us evolve it. As we move forward, let us continue to ask ourselves, “Is it better or easier to ask permission than forgiveness, and on whom does that burden fall?”

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Dr. Lissa Ramirez-Stapleton is an associate professor at California State University Fullerton in the Department of Educational Leadership and Program Coordinator of the Masters of Science in Higher Education program. Her research focuses on Deaf students’ educational equity and access, identity development, and Deaf educational history with a particular interest in the intersections of race, gender, and disability. Her current research focuses on the historical connections, relationships, and experiences of Deaf student and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. She is also the Executive Director for The Black Deaf Project, a 501c (3) educational Black Deaf and hearing collaborative nonprofit.