

# Espoused vs. Enacted: Institutional Racial Cognizance and the Realities of Black Disabled Students

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## Abstract

Formed within the policies and laws of racist, antiBlack, and ableist systems, disability support services (DSS) offices remain the primary institutional intermediaries to access for Black disabled postsecondary students.<sup>3</sup> The historical development and functional primacy of DSS demand an examination of espoused institutional awareness and commitment to supporting Black disabled students; we characterize this aspect as “racial cognizance” and employ two complementary approaches to examine its prevalence. First, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of University of California DSS websites explores multimedia indicators of racial cognizance. Second, we engage with interview data from four Black disabled women discussing the challenges they have encountered with DSS. We contextualize emergent themes from our CDA with these student narratives to discuss how DSS websites continue to employ color and race-evasive language, policies, and practices that privilege documentation and legal compliance over the access needs of Black students.

*Keywords: accessibility, race, blackness, disability student services*

## Introduction

Federal legislation requires postsecondary students to disclose a medical diagnosis supported by documentation to obtain individualized accommodations support from disability support services (Cawthon et al., 2014; Dorrance et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2017; Mireles, 2022). These policy and praxis logics—which are, by nature, contingent on deficit conceptualizations of disability, “color-evasive” (Annamma et al., 2017), and uphold medical expertise as the end all be all—do not address, dismantle, or oppose the ongoing structural inequities that shape Black disabled students’ experiences in higher education (Annamma et al., 2013; Boone & King Berry, 2007; Feagin & Bennefield, 2014; Karpicz, 2020; Mireles, 2022; Nolan, 2022). Black disabled students must navigate through academic and social environments grounded in whiteness<sup>4</sup> while facing further

disablement through a compounded legacy of exclusion, exploitation, healthcare disenfranchisement, and dehumanization (Adebayo et al., 2020; Artiles, 2011; Baynton, 2017; Feagin & Bennefield, 2014; Schweik, 2009; Yssel et al., 2016). Despite their espoused role as facilitators of access (Dolmage, 2017; Evans et al., 2017), DSS offices functionally gatekeep access, maintaining a culture of compliance dictated by policies enmeshed in antiBlack and ableist structures that legitimize certain lived experiences of disability within the institution while further delegitimizing and disenfranchising others (Dolmage, 2017; Dorrance et al., 2023; Mireles, 2022). DSS offices have developed within the confines of compounding oppressive systems, and it is imperative that we examine the intersectional awareness of these offices as a salient component of culture to better assess their functional commitment to supporting Black disabled students.

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<sup>3</sup> We intentionally employ varied lexicality to align with the language used in analyzed documents, cited sources, and participant narratives (disability alongside dis/ability, antiblackness instead of anti-blackness, person-first and identity-first language, variations in capitalization, etc). We leverage this lexical disruption as a form of liberatory violence (Leonardo & Porter, 2010) that honors disability, race, and Blackness as experiential aggregates that manifest a multitude of presentations, identifications, and lexicalities.

<sup>4</sup> While APA mandates the capitalization of all racial/ethnic groups (American Psychological Association, 2019), the construction of whiteness as a racial categorization exists only as the result of intentional and repeated exclusion and oppression (Harris, 1993); to equate whiteness alongside other racial/ethnic groups dismisses the perpetually adaptive, exclusionary, and exploitative reality of white supremacy. As such we use lowercase ‘white’ and ‘whiteness’ throughout our writing (Daniszewski, 2020; Laws, 2020).

Public universities exist, by social contract, to serve the public, though who is included in that public has nominally (if not practically) evolved (Douglas, 2007). The public effectively served by public institutions includes Black disabled individuals. An estimated 22.7% of Black adults in the US had disabilities prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Courtney-Long et al., 2017), which has increased both physical and psychological chronic disablement across the globe (Santomauro et al., 2021) while disproportionately impacting Black communities (Badalov et al., 2022; Bassolas et al., 2021, Cokley et al., 2022). Cognizance of the multifaceted, systemic dehumanization and disenfranchisement of Black disabled individuals demands the interrogation of public university support of Black disabled students. We chose to strategically examine the DSS office websites of the nine undergraduate-serving University of California (UC) institutions in Fall of 2021: Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, San Diego, San Francisco, and Santa Barbara. California has the fifth largest Black population (2.8 million) and ranks as the second most diverse state (Pew Research Center, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Of the 67% of Black Californians between the ages of 25-64 who have attended higher education, 47% do not earn a degree, despite the UC system leading in Black student completion rates; four-year graduation rates are approximately 20 percentage points lower for Black UC students than their white peers (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021). A multitude of compounding systemic factors contribute to the ongoing oppression of Black students, and recognition is a cardinal, subminimum requirement for rectification. Institutional websites serve as the primary information gateways for students (Brown et al., 2016; Grim et al., 2021; Kim, 2020; Meyer & Jones, 2011), and this interrogation will contribute to the limited post-secondary racialized disablement literature (Mireles, 2022) by examining how DSS websites at University of California institutions acknowledge and address systemic inequities.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2022), about one third (37%) of individuals with disabilities inform their college about their disability. In 2022, the Office of the President of the UC system revealed the UC system is *underserving* students with disabilities on their campuses—something we had long suspected, but did not have the data for. While the NCES (2018) reports 19.1% of

the pre-pandemic undergraduate student population is disabled, only 7% of the total UC student population received accommodations (University of California, 2022), which suggests there are Black disabled students who are not getting institutional support. In addition to the CDA conducted by first author, Anna Acha, we draw a subset of interview data from another research study conducted by second author, Danielle Mireles, which examined the experiences of ten racialized undergraduate students who identified, had been labeled, or had the lived experience of disability at four-year colleges and universities in California. Of the ten students, two identified as Black (Tiffany and Kennedy) and two as AfroLatina (Marisol and Andrea). We center their counternarratives in the analysis to contextualize and further expand upon our findings from the discourse analysis. We consider the following two questions:

1. In what ways do DSS offices display their racial cognizance to (potential registrants) students?
2. What are Black students' experiences registering for Disability Student Services and disability accommodations?

### **The Invisibilization of whiteness in Disability Student Services**

The construct of disability has been enduringly employed as an acceptable tool of dehumanization for Black bodyminds<sup>5</sup> alongside other marginalized populations over time (Artiles, 2011; Evans et al., 2017). In the 1800s and 1900s, the sociocultural association of “physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws, deficits, and deviations” (Baynton, 2017, p. 28), laid the foundation for the concurrent legislative authorization of Jim Crow and Ugly Laws (Baynton, 2017, p. 28; Schweik, 2009). Schweik (2009) explains that Ugly Laws “functioned to sort people on the streets and into institutions by race as well as disability” and that these “two kinds of segregation were not so much comparable as inseparable” (p. 185). These laws sought to restrict the visibility of disabled, Black, and Black disabled bodyminds from public spaces (Schweik, 2009).

This association and subsequent devaluation contribute to ableist rhetoric within Black protests for humanization. Historically, disability supports were often denied to Black disabled individuals as their dis-

<sup>5</sup> Schalk (2018) defines bodyminds as the convergence of multiple intersectional experiences, recognizing multiple sites of oppression and collective resistance across physical and cognitive domains. She argues that “because (dis)ability has been used by dominant social discourse to reference, define, and regulate other social systems,” an intersectional analysis of disability representations is crucial for understanding their implications for race, gender, class, and sexuality (pp. 40-41).

abilities were considered inherent to Blackness (Pickens, 2019). As sociocultural value, legal agency, and wealth (read: whiteness) were associated with access to education, education access was limited (Evans et al., 2017). For example, though opportunities were made available to the d/Deaf and blind children of the white elite in the early 1800s, and later Black d/Deaf and blind students, educational opportunities for Black and disabled people were widely restricted and segregated throughout most of the 1800s and early-to-mid 1900s (Evans et al., 2017; Madaus, 2011; McCaskill et al., 2020).

Capitalist labor demands were the primary drivers of postsecondary disability access in the 20th century, which prioritized the reintegration of veterans into the workforce after World War I (Chamusco, 2017). Though the Vocational Rehabilitation Act helped to provide education access to disabled WWI veterans in 1918, Black veterans' disabilities were considered "endemic to the colored race prior to enlistment... readily detectable by the trained medical professional or racial anthropologist" (Lawrie, 2016, p. 88), discrediting claims and limiting access to education (Pickens, 2019). Though the Civil Rights Act (CRA) mandated nondiscrimination protections for a multitude of identities in 1964, a venture to incorporate disability as a protected class in 1972 was unsuccessful as Black activist leaders and CRA policy actors feared compromising the effectiveness and ideology of the nondiscrimination protections (Davis, 2016). These actions perpetuated the artificial dissociation from disability in the context of humanizing Blackness (Artiles, 2011; Baynton, 2017), and influenced the development of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act (Davis, 2016). Therein, Section 504 provides federal nondiscrimination protections for individuals with disabilities (Chamusco, 2017) but lacks the racial cognizance of the CRA. Similarly, the ADA in 1990 was drafted by adopting Black civil rights tactics for disability, primarily by white policymakers (Davis, 2016).

Most recently amended in 2008, the ADA mandates reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities in multiple spheres, including higher education (ADA, 1990). Education for All Handicapped Children Act designated funding specifically for K-12 students with disabilities in 1975 (Chamusco, 2017; Madaus, 2011). Renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, reauthorized in 2004, and amended in 2015, IDEA details funding, familial rights, and school responsibilities, including the provisions of free needs assessments, least-restrictive placement, and accessible education (IDEA, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). These mandates, while lauded for increasing high school persistence

and college enrollment, are most effective for white students who are less likely to be placed into segregated special education classrooms or funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma, 2017; Boone & King-Berry, 2007; Tefera & Fischman, 2020).

This legislation also does not cover undergraduate and graduate education (Cawthon et al., 2014). Though there have been postsecondary additions to IDEA, those mandates focus on vocational and pre-college programs, rather than undergraduate and graduate institutions (IDEA, 2004; Madaus et al., 2014), effectively ending active institutional support as Section 504 and the ADA become the primary legal influences in higher education (Cawthon et al., 2009). In essence, these two pieces of legislation require postsecondary institutions make "reasonable accommodations" (Cawthon et al., 2009, p. 457) for students who can meet the prerequisite standards to prove their disablement through documentation that demonstrates that their disability "creates a 'substantial limitation' to [a] 'major life activity'" (Evans et al., 2017, pp. 102–103; see also Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Simon, 2011). The linguistic requirement of reasonable accommodations then promotes a culture of compliance in higher education (Shallish, 2015), and avoiding litigation takes precedence over cultivating a norm of intersectional student support (Cawthon & Leppo, 2013). We assert that this is the primary characterization of compliance culture in higher education: the language used in disability rights law functionally prioritizes avoiding potential student lawsuits over students.

### **Compliance as Institutional Violence**

Colleges and universities approach structural support for students in ways that are single-identity focused (Duran & Jones, 2020; Mitchell & Means, 2014) and "cater toward the majority within minoritized communities" (Duran & Jones, 2020, p. 282). This approach is in large part due to the ways in which higher education compliance is guided by federal legislation, which has privileged whiteness. As Piepzna-Samarsinha (2019) explains, "spaces where a white-dominated, single-issue, civil rights approach that depends on the ability to use lawsuits to achieve disability liberation leaves many of us behind" (p. 40). This "us" includes poor, working-class, queer, trans, and Black, Native, and/or People of Color who do not have the same access to resources to (a) always get the medical documentation required by DSS (Dorrance et al., 2023; Mireles, 2022) or (b) have the ability to challenge these powerful institutions when they fail to provide access to accommodations (Karpicz, 2020).

Documentation obtained from free IDEA assessments may be the only option for Black low-income students, as the alternative requires navigating the financially inaccessible and systemically racist medical-industrial complex (Adebayo et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2017; Feagin & Bennefield, 2014); however, these systems are not always accepted by students' institutions (Evans et al., 2017). While the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) recommends institutions include self-report (AHEAD, 2012), this practice is not ubiquitous, and students with insufficient documentation may not qualify for services (Banks, 2014; Dorrance et al., 2023; Kafer, 2013; Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Mireles, 2022). Banerjee et al. (2021) analyzed the DSS websites of 299 postsecondary institutions across four institutional Carnegie classifications (doctoral, master's, baccalaureate, and associate) and found that while 89% mentioned disability documentation, only 30% explicitly referenced "self-report" or "interactive process" (p. 36). Other analyses of DSS websites bring attention to a range of issues without intentionally engaging race: discrepancies between the accessibility of DSS information and actual utility across public community colleges (Jackson & Jones, 2014), marginalization of disability content within broader diversity frameworks on university websites (Gabel et al., 2016), discrepancies between awareness and utilization of disability services, often exacerbated by administrative and communicative barriers (Kim, 2020), and the representation of autism on community college websites, wherein 29.8% omit autism-specific content entirely and discussions are often framed in deficit-oriented terms (Nachman & Brown, 2020). A deliberate examination of race that challenges embedded whiteness has yet to be conducted, despite the reality that access to disability documentation for accommodations—arguably, the major contention in DSS discourse (Banerjee & Lalor, 2021)—is fundamentally racialized.

This issue of racialization extends broadly into the literature where "[w]hite scholars often research about and with a mostly [w]hite disabled student population" which invisibilizes whiteness and (re)produces color-evasive discourses about disability and higher education (Stapleton & James, 2020, p. 216). It is important to note that much of the research focuses on students needing to develop 'self-advocacy skills' without consideration as to why Black students may not seek care from their institutions or feel comfortable identifying as disabled (Acha & Mireles, 2021). Lakshmi-Samarasinha (2019) explains that "people's fear of accessing care didn't come from nowhere" but "came out of generations and centuries where

need[ing] care meant being locked up, losing your human and civil rights, and being subject to abuse" (p. 39). For many racialized and minoritized communities, care has been leveraged in carceral ways such as imprisonment and institutionalization (Bailey and Mobley, 2019; Ervelles and Minear, 2010; Piepza-Samarsinha, 2019; Puar, 2017).

The foundation of DSS is ingrained with anti-Black carceral logics that normalize control, surveillance, and punishment as necessary regulations masquerading as compliance, fairness, equity, or care (Annamma, 2016a; Weaver & Lerman, 2010). DSS relies on this narrative to perpetuate a compliance culture that systemically prioritizes minimizing institutional legal risk over providing optimal support for students. Higher education compliance culture "eclipse[s] an understanding of disability history, social collectives, culture and emerging disciplines that transcend biomedical interpretation" (Shallish, 2015, para. 6). Between widespread campus actors, unfamiliarity with influential federal policy, and the single-identity (read: white) conceptualization of disability in influential federal policy, the space for engaging disability beyond a single-issue lens is limited, which ultimately impacts Black disabled students as well as other racialized and minoritized students such as undocumented, queer and trans, and students of Color (Mireles, 2022; Acha & Mireles, 2024; Dorrance et al., 2023; Karpicz, 2020).

### Theoretical Frameworks

We use disability critical race theory (DisCrit) and theorizations of antiBlackness to meaningfully engage not only how race and disability intersect, but center Blackness to consider the racial cognizance of DSS websites. Negotiating the deficit-centric, often race-evasive ideology of special education discourse in K-12 education, and the invisibilization of disability in critical race theory discourse in legal and educational spaces, DisCrit expands on the legacy of critical "intellectual ancestors such as James Baldwin, W. E. B. DuBois, Yuri Kochiyama, and Bayard Rustin," existing in the scholarly nexus of disability studies and critical race studies (Annamma et al., 2016a, p. 1; see also Stapleton & James, 2020). Centering the intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) experiences of disabled students of Color, DisCrit conceptualizes the interconnected social construction of race and ability, examining "the processes in which students are simultaneously raced and dis/abled" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 5) by acknowledging the insidious and cyclical nature of oppressive systems. The first tenet of DisCrit asserts the cyclical and invisibilized nature

of race and dis/ability reinforces conventional “notions of normalcy” (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11). We consider the role DSS websites play, specifically the racial cognizance of these pages, in positioning certain lived experiences, such as “medically acceptable, doctor approved” as legitimate while delegitimizing and further marginalizing others (Kafer, 2013, p. 12). The second tenet of DisCrit calls into focus the multidimensional identities of our students and rejects essentialist definitions of identity. We highlight documentation practices in our paper because “we recognize that equity for queer, trans, and Black people also has been overwhelmingly about access to adequate medical care” including the right to deny care (Bailey and Mobley, 2019, p. 11). Last, we focus on the fourth tenet of DisCrit, which centers the stories of racialized and disabled people, by highlighting the counternarratives of four Black undergraduate students who identified, had been labeled, and had a lived experience of disability to contextualize the findings in our discourse analysis.

To clarify and support our engagement of DisCrit, we consciously align our work with the theorization of antiBlackness. Contemplating the works of Hartman, Tillet, and Wilderson, scholar Dumas (2016) asserts that “antiBlackness marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard” (p. 13). From its conception, Blackness has existed in opposition to humanness without a concrete historical pivot that delineated the subhumanity of Black enslavement to the recognition of Black humanity, or the intentional deconstruction of antiBlack systems of oppressive violence (Dumas, 2016). However, antiBlackness itself is not so concerned with remedying racial inequalities via recommendations for practitioners operating within confines of Black ahumanity; it seeks a more profound conceptualization of Blackness, subhumanity, and normative targeted violence. The explicit intent of our work, however, is action-focused: We examine Black dehumanization in disability services to create a foundation that allows us to identify avenues of support for Black disabled college students. We use the term “anti-antiBlackness” to position the systemic subhumanity of Blackness as a required starting ground of student support.

### **Methods**

As a Black, multidis/abled, queer, ciswoman and a multidis/abled, queer nonbinary Chicanx, we actively and recurrently leverage our marginalized and privileged positionality as a critical reflexive tool that informs our navigation of the literature and our

qualitative inquiry to consider how racial cognizance is engaged (or not engaged by) disability student services (Alridge, 2003; Marecek, 2003, Stapleton & James, 2020). Our paper draws from two studies based in California: the first, a discourse analysis on DSS websites across the UCs, which was conducted by Anna Acha in 2021; and, second, a qualitative study by Danielle Mireles about the experiences of racialized undergraduate students who identified, had been labeled, or had the lived experience of disability at five campuses in California from 2019-2020.

The default information-seeking behavior of young adults in the digital age is asking the internet (Given et al., 2023). Institutional websites are the first and primary information interaction hub about their school and potential resources for the majority of students, particularly for first-time first-year students, first generation college students, and low-income students (Brown et al., 2016; Grim et al., 2021; Hodge et al., 2020). Broadly speaking, discourse analysis is a qualitative approach to language analysis that focuses on social context, commonly used by social scientists to deconstruct spoken/written matters of cultural significance (Miles, 2012). Critical discourse analysis (CDA), more specifically, deconstructs “social structures and discursive strategies that play a role in the (re)production of power...[d]iscourse (the words and language we use) shapes our role and engagement with power within a social structure” (Miles, 2012, p. 450). This CDA uses Pauwels’ (2012) approach to consolidate a range of anthropological and sociological perspectives into a series of steps that deconstruct and synthesize websites as data repositories that illuminate the “expressions of norms and values, expectations, roles, [and] goals” that impact human and organizational behavior (p. 247). The six steps include (a) capturing initial sensory and emotional responses to assess the website’s design impact; (b) documenting and categorizing visible elements and notable absences that reflect the site’s cultural functions; (c) analyzing textual, visual, and auditory content to decode cultural meanings; (d) examining the layout and navigation to understand user guidance and cultural messaging; (e) identifying diverse perspectives and assessing their alignment with cultural goals; and (f) operationalizing cultural concepts to decode broader narratives. This structured progression facilitates a strategic in-depth analysis of cultural expressions in institutional websites (Pauwels, 2012), and contextualizing this work with DisCrit enables us to recognize and interrogate the indicated compounding realities of racist and ableist systems (racial cognizance) within our data unit of choice: DSS websites.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Following Pauwels' (2012) model with a Dis-Crit frame, I (Anna Acha) interrogated the language, organization, and visual presentation of California postsecondary DSS websites in the UC system. Data were collected from nine UC institutions in October 2021, through ethnographic observational notetaking techniques associated with in-personal sociological fieldwork in a virtual space (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Emerson et al., 2011; Hart, 2017; Pauwels, 2012). First, a preliminary overview was performed of each DSS website to capture cursory researcher responses to the look, feel, and language of what was seen (e.g., How easy are these websites to locate? How easy are they to navigate? How do I react to what I perceive? Do I, as a Black disabled student, feel welcome?). Second, salient emergent topics were collected and organized (e.g., What language is repeated? What ideas are featured most prominently? What is missing?). In addition to looking for themes in the language, this investigation included strategic keyword searches through two browsers (Google Chrome and Safari) to account for potential platform-related errors (loading issues, case sensitivity, optical character recognition errors). The keyword database was developed from our literature review, incorporating terms that functionally relate to DisCrit and indicating some degree of racialized reflection on the part of the DSS office (seen in Tables 1 and 2). As we examined the text, other salient terms and phrases were incorporated as they presented themselves.

In line with Pauwels' (2012) multimodal website analysis framework, first author, Anna Acha delved into the field notes as data with an intra-modal, cross-modal, and negative analysis (e.g., What specific linguistic, typographic, auditory, and visual signifiers do we see that relate to racial cognizance? How do they connect? What is missing, and why?), and deconstructed the voice and intended audiences of the websites (e.g., What point of view is favored in these websites? Who are they constructed for? How does race manifest?). The website observation fieldnotes and discourse keyword synthesis were treated as datasets (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Acha conducted inductive, open coding of the field notes, treating each bullet entry as a piece of data using Google Docs and Dedoose (Emerson et al., 2011). After creating the initial list of codes from the first passes of close reading, both authors focused on coding, code memos, and integrative memos to streamline our findings deductively by engaging DisCrit and reflexive praxis to make meaningful connections between data points (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Emerson et al., 2011; Pauwels, 2012). This resulted in two charts (Tables 1 and

2), which cataloged explicit and implicit markers of racial cognizance, and two emergent themes: the phenotypic vs. the explicit, and documentation as default.

We also analyze interview data from a larger study that examined the experiences of 10 racialized undergraduate students who identified as disabled or had a lived experience of disability in California. We focus on the counternarratives of these four students (Marisol, Tiffany, Andrea, and Kennedy) as they relate to our research questions and findings from the website analysis. Counternarratives, a methodological approach in critical race theory, allowed us to both "privileg[e] voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within the research" (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 12) and engage in "an act of methodological resistance" (Locke et al., 2022, p. 155). Counternarratives also allowed us to meaningfully center the epistemologies of Black and AfroLatina students as a much-needed disruption of "essentialized [w]hite understandings of disability" that have emerged from decades of color-evasive higher education disability research (Stapleton & James, 2020, p. 218). Building on the work of Annamma and colleagues (2017), Stapleton and James (2020) define color-evasiveness as "a racist ideology rooted in white supremacy to avoid accountability, acknowledgement, and identifying historical or continuous, race-based discrimination while instantaneously allowing race neutral justification, laws, policies, and beliefs to persist as normal" (p. 216). By centering their counternarratives, we aim to highlight the ways disability accommodations, policies, and practices are not race-neutral, and to reposition Black and AfroLatina students who identify, have been labeled, and have the lived experience of disability as "knowledge creators" (Stapleton & James, 2020, p. 218).

### Findings

Tables 1 and 2 display the frequency of salient utterances in the mission statement samples (as labeled or implied by website markers including "about us," "our mission,") on both explicit and potential markers of racial cognizance related to antiBlack institutional barriers. These tables aggregate similar key search terms in ways that do not compromise their context in the dataset. For example, the terms "white," "whiteness," and "white supremacy" are distinct but interrelated concepts that were included as potential indicators of racial cognizance; however, none were used in meaningful ways, so they are thematically consolidated in the aggregate. Pauwels' (2012) multimodal model revealed a variety of useful information about generalized accessibility in the

**Table 1***Mission Statement Utterances - Explicit Markers of Racial Cognizance*

INSTITUTION	TERMS*						
	Race Racism Racist	Students of color SOC S.O.C.	People of Color POC P.O.C.	Black	black	White Whiteness White supremacy	Intersection Intersectional Intersectionality
<b>UC Berkeley</b> Disability Access & Compliance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Davis</b> Student Disability Center	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Irvine</b> Disability Services Center	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>UCLA</b> Center for Accessible Education	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Merced</b> Student Accessibility Services	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Riverside</b> Student Disability Resource Center	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>UC San Diego</b> Office for Students with Disabilities	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Santa Barbara</b> Disabled Student Program	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Santa Cruz</b> Disability Resource Center	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Note.* \* Terms have been aggregated in this table when applicable (e.g., if they cover similar/related concepts without compromising the presentation of the data)

**Table 2***Mission Statement Utterances - Potential Markers of Racial Cognizance Related to AntiBlack Institutional Barriers*

INSTITUTION	TERMS*			
	Compliant Compliance	Documented Documentation	Systemic	Justice
<b>UC Berkeley</b> Disability Access & Compliance	1**	0	0	0
<b>UC Davis</b> Student Disability Center	0	1	0	0
<b>UC Irvine</b> Disability Services Center	0	0	0	0
<b>UCLA</b> Center for Accessible Education	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Merced</b> Student Accessibility Services	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Riverside</b> Student Disability Resource Center	0	4	0	0
<b>UC San Diego</b> Office for Students with Disabilities	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Santa Barbara</b> Disabled Student Program	0	0	0	0
<b>UC Santa Cruz</b> Disability Resource Center	0	0	0***	0

*Note.* \*Terms have been aggregated in this table when applicable (e.g., if they cover similar/related concepts without compromising the presentation of the data) \*\*Compliance occurred three times but was omitted twice as the institution was stating their name within their statement. \*\*\*Systemic was used once with regard to systemic medical conditions (i.e., conditions affecting the entire body) rather than mentions of systemic barriers, antiblackness, or racism; for this reason, the utterance was excluded as a potential marker of racial cognizance.

data, but the engagement of DisCrit highlighted two salient, emergent themes: first, UC DSS websites display a preponderance of documentation information/requirements with little to no information supporting students without documentation (documentation as default) which aligns with current research on DSS CDAs (Banerjee et al., 2021); and second, most UC DSS websites leverage Black and non-Black POC images without explicit, intentional, and ongoing incorporation of their realities into policy and practice (the phenotypic vs. the explicit). Documentation, specifically as a barrier, was also mentioned by four participants who talked about DSS registration requirements, with two participants specifically discussing their experiences navigating barriers to obtaining documentation.

**Documentation as Default**

Three out of nine institutions included potential markers of racial cognizance related to antiBlack institutional barriers (Berkeley, Davis, and Riverside), which included the terms compliant/compliance and documented/documentation. Potential is included alongside Table 2 keyword markers because the context could signify the acknowledgment of ongoing antiBlack access barriers or the continued reaffirmation of those barriers. For Riverside, the latter was true, rather than a commitment to support students facing documentation barriers. While this appears to be true for Davis' mission as well, its homepage explicitly outlines the process for "make a request for services without documentation," (UC Davis Student Disability Center, n.d., para. 2). Similarly, Berkeley's use of the compliant/compliance utterance in the context of the mission alone did not reflect racial cognizance in their mission, but other explicit racial cognizance

markers were found throughout our exploration and analysis of its website.

Common throughout all the websites was the necessity of medical documentation, listed alongside documentation requirements and examples. These requirements list medical provider credentials, and several explicitly exclude online diagnostic services and provide recency specifications. Beyond Davis' one-sentence homepage mention, there are no indications that students without documentation have a shot at receiving accommodations support from these offices. When we consider how the UCs only accommodate 7% of disabled undergraduate and graduate students, it is clear that disabled students are underserved in this system.

Students' counternarratives also highlighted how documentation requirements and related policies and practices made it difficult for them to register and obtain support on campus for their disabilities. Marisol, a 34 year-old AfroLatina student with physical and mental disabilities from childhood cancer, had transferred to a four-year public university where she had registered with DSS and was studying to become an attorney. Marisol recounted how it was difficult to get basic information about registering for DSS online at her four-year college even though she had received support previously from her two-year college.

Um, I went online and tried to get information, I even called and the lady was like "There's a process for this" and I said "Okay, I understand that but I'm just curious what's your process in this." "Well, you need to come and make an appointment." So, despite that frustration over the phone, I couldn't even get the basic information.

Marisol explained how the whole process felt like a "cat and mouse game" and how, when she did go in-person, the staff told her, "The information is right there on the wall."

Tiffany shared a similar experience to Marisol. She was 27 years old at the time of the study and planned to go into neuroscience because of her own experience being diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury after a car accident when she was 19. Tiffany, like Marisol, had also been registered for support at community college, but had trouble registering at her four-year institution.

[M]y counselor...told me that I should go back to my doctor and have them rewrite my disability verification...and say that things are moderately or severely impacted...I-I don't understand why I would say that like if that's not true like, you

know?...and then like it's just a hassle if I go back to the doctor. First of all, it's going to be hectic to get an appointment and, then when I get that appointment, I have to pay for the form, you know?

Marisol echoed this frustration. She had to go to medical professionals three times before her documentation was deemed legitimate by DSS standards.

I felt like I was just put in like in this loopholes like, "You gotta be this to do that, you gotta do that to do this" and I'm like, "Are you kidding me? What more do I need?" I mean, the stamp thing [on the documentation] was [a] certified stamp—the whole nine yards. So, I came back and got more documentation and then the next advisor tells me "Well, this has to be...like we have to show...that [your disability] is chronic."

For Marisol, the pursuit of necessary support became a labyrinthine process, burdened with procedural gatekeeping that discourages and exhausts students seeking help. The narrative that students must prove their disability before receiving any support not only undermines their agency but also perpetuates a form of institutional ableism and racism; it norms carceral logics as objectivity where the perceived deservingness (Williams, 2021) of a student, in the eyes of doctors and DSS works, controls their access. This systemic rigidity exemplifies a dissonance between the DSS offices' purported objectives and their operational ethos.

### *The Phenotypic vs. The Explicit*

No institutional mission statements contained explicit markers of racial cognizance. While scattered markers exist in these websites (for example, in the biographies of two staff members, pertaining to their own race and personal ideological standpoints), they were usually vague, difficult to find, and lacking DSS office accountability. These isolated mentions generally allude to the value of intersectional identities and diversity (usually without concretely naming race) rather than adequately addressing that white-centric history and ongoing systemic antiBlackness are rooted in their own policy and practice, which inevitably impacts their accessibility to Black and nonBlack students of Color.

Despite an overwhelming absence (read: omission) of explicit racial cognizance, DSS websites do not shy away from prominently displaying images of phenotypically Black and non-Black POC. The sources of these images are often not provided, but they could potentially be stock images, images of current UC stu-

dents, and images of former UC students. These images evoke idealistic, diverse, welcoming campus environments, despite the offices maintaining policies that effectively bar Black students from receiving support. While some campuses provide images of their staff, others do not; some offices with more phenotypically staff of Color sometimes had greater racial cognizance, but this was not a consistent indicator of ideological commitment or even racial acknowledgment.

These images of a welcoming campus climate did not align with students' counternarratives of their experiences. Both Andrea and Kennedy were not registered for support because of previous experiences with antiBlackness and ableism in their K-12 education, including being bullied by their teachers when they were experiencing difficulty in their classes. Kennedy was the youngest at 19 years old and attended a private Christian college. Kennedy, who was labeled with a disability and placed into her school's resource room from second to seventh grade, advocated to be removed so that she could have the opportunity to attend a four-year college. Kennedy planned to go into a teacher education program after finishing her degree in English. She recounted an experience she had with a white teacher in elementary school that continued to haunt her years later and influenced her decision to not share her disability with other people.

She was kind of like helping me with the with a math problem and I remember her getting super close to me and being like, "You're going to be nothing but crap"...those were some of the hardest words that you could even hear...it even makes me emotional to this day 'cause it's like, for me, I want to be a teacher and hearing that from somebody that you're supposed to look up to and this they're supposed to be a protector and someone to teach you how to be better...that's where I shut down...I don't want anyone to know that I have a learning disability...

These types of traumatizing experiences are not uncommon for students who navigate antiBlackness and racist ableist microaggressions from educators in PK-12 and higher education but are often not discussed in disability higher education research (Dávila, 2015; Love et al., 2021; Mireles, 2022).

At the time of the study, Andrea was 29 years old and identified as Guatemalan/Black or African American. She had been diagnosed with general anxiety, depression, and adjustment disorder after seeking out support at her university (a public four-year college) where she was also a transfer student. Similar to Tiffany's and Marisol's experiences, Andrea did not find

the DSS office at her campus welcoming, which led to her not registering for support. Not having this documentation available meant that pathways to meet her access needs were foreclosed and unavailable to her. She recounted an interaction she had with a professor where she did not share her disability because she knew it did not matter without institutional backing.

I didn't share my diagnosis because it's become so commonplace for people to say, like, "Oh, I'm depressed" or "[I] have anxiety" that teachers and other professionals are so wanting to just, like, dismiss it. They're just like, everybody has that like, get over it.... So without having the proper paperwork to say, like, "Oh, I'm in the disability office," it just didn't feel like it was a battle that I wanted to, like, try—even attempt to fight.

In examining the narratives of Andrea and Kennedy, a profound disconnect emerges between the institutional portrayal of diversity on DSS websites and the actual encounters these students have with systemic barriers within these services. The institutions in question utilize phenotypic representations of diversity that, while visually suggesting an inclusive environment, starkly contrast with the experiential realities reported by Black disabled students. This dichotomy between espoused inclusivity and enacted exclusivity reflects a broader trend of performative allyship within the academy that does not substantively engage with the structural inequities facing these students.

### **Interrupting Disability Services as Usual**

Rather than placing blame on disabled, and especially Black disabled, students for not self-advocating, we need to ask how DSS offices have (or have not) "created space for BIPOC people (and secondarily, Others) to identify as disabled, chronically ill, Deaf, or neurodivergent" (Piepzna-Samarsinha, 2022, p. 19). Focusing on documentation over facilitating pathways for Black students to access support can lead to further disenfranchisement. In line with the literature, students' counternarratives reveal recurring barriers to support and experiences with harm and violence that led to these students not feeling safe seeking support in college or encountering barriers which exacerbated racialized harm and violence. Beyond documentation by default, here we see documentation as a demand, mandated by compliance culture. Without intentional counteraction of medical racism, current DSS processes perpetuate race-evasiveness by omitting the reality of the medical industrial complex (Annamma et al., 2014).

Our study is limited to the institutions of one state; while diverse in its offerings, California's sociocultural context differs from both other postsecondary-dense states like Texas, North Carolina, and New York, and postsecondary-sparse states like Wyoming, Alaska, and Idaho (Statista, 2023). Our hope is to replicate this study in multiple areas and eventually develop a macroanalysis of racial cognizance in the US, so this study serves to help build our foundational understanding of DSS racial cognizance. Additionally, websites are not the end-all and be all of DSS. The minimum (racial cognizance) may manifest in ways beyond the visible and functionally accessible confines of DSS websites; after all, this is only one avenue of attack. These university DSS offices may be perfectly willing to circumvent documentation requirements or implement some form of critical pedagogy in their in-house training programs that allow for more nuanced support of Black disabled students during support meetings.

Interviews/in-person ethnographic research demands their own dedicated studies that build upon the work we intend to do here, and we lack the institutional credentials to go complete the registration process at each of these institutions' websites to gain practical insights. Our supplemental interview data begins to paint a picture of in-house practices and how they impact Black students, and none of our collected narratives illustrated more nuanced Black student support. If in-house practice exists that circumvents the racialized barriers instituted by documentation that is not mentioned in their online materials, it begs several questions: Why hide that information from students that could potentially benefit? Low-cognizance online platforms may inhibit the active engagement of Black disabled students. Why leave up information that leads students to believe they are disqualified from services, or, put another way, why not include information that could make services more accessible to everyone?

Offices may seek to avoid registering students who falsely leverage disability as a tool to get ahead; though, it appears in recent years those effectively misusing the label of disability are generally those white enough and rich enough to forge documentation (Price, 2021). There could also be funding concerns as more registered students would increase the workload of DSS staff members. However, quiet acts of acknowledgment do not disrupt systemic inequity; by perpetuating white hegemonic footholds in supposedly antiracist, anti-antiBlack, anti-ableist policies as normative, we avoid what violently threatens whitecisheteroableistpatriarchy. However, "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon...[w]ithout any period of transition, there is a total, complete, and absolute substitution...it cannot come as a result

of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding" (Fanon, 1965, pp. 33-35). Silence only serves oppressive violence, and we cannot continue to perceive violence as the sole property of whiteness. Violence can be a subversive tool of liberation for the systemically repressed, wherein all systemic threats (even those that appear functionally nonviolent) to white hegemony are conceptualized as humanizing violence (Applebaum, 2017; Fanon, 1965; Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Our restorative, antiracist, antiableist work must be unapologetic. It must be visible. Liberation is, by nature, loud.

### **Black Disabled Futurities on College Campuses**

Combating inequity first demands recognition of that inequity—DSS offices that do not recognize the historic and ongoing ableist antiBlackness that is embedded in the foundation of their policy and practice cannot adequately support Black disabled students. This is a minimum requirement, a baseline. To serve the public, we must serve Black disabled students; to serve Black disabled students, we must work toward collective liberation; to work toward liberation, we must understand compounding and insidious oppressive systems that impact current Black disabled realities in policy and practice. Before any transformative work can occur, we must know our baseline. We must know if we meet the minimum. Color-evasiveness does not serve our students (Stapleton & James, 2020). DSS websites are a salient part of the conversation regarding Black disability support in higher education, but they are far from the only piece. The counterstories of Marisol, Tiffany, Kennedy, and Andrea further support the notion that the facilitators of access have become the gatekeepers. Future work should expand the website analysis and interview collection to vary across location and institution types. For example, most disabled students and most students of Color in higher education attend community colleges (Ngo & Sundell, 2023). Exploration of UC system schools to California Community Colleges (CCC), California State University (CSU), and private California postsecondary institutions would offer valuable insights into the racial cognizance baseline of schools expecting high volumes of Black disabled students vs. institutions that prioritize white/abled-centric meritocratic admissions policies. There may also be variations in institutional response to Black disabled student needs in different locations. Exploring the higher education makeup of different states to create comparison groups would help create a more robust picture of the current state of racial cognizance in DSS. In the spirit of loud, visible, and unapologetic liberatory praxis,

it is crucial that DSS evaluate their policies and the practical approaches to support Black dis/abled students by actively combating systemic racial inequity.

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