

Disability Dialogues: Confronting *MARKED* Ideologies in Higher Education

Naming the Elephant in the Room;
the mark of stigma that
blames, shames and brands
marginalized students.



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Session Grounding & Overview

Warren/Yates, 2026

**Theoretical grounding:
Disability Studies,
DisCrit theory Ableism,
Feminist & Equity
theory**

**Interactive Journey:
How MARKED
ideologies influence
campus policies,
procedures, and
practices**

**Explore Our Spaces:
where are our own
institutions situated in
relation to the MARKED
ideologies**



Community Dialogue Norms

- Foster a safe space
- Make space for all
- Take care of yourself
- **ORID**
 - **O**bjective: What stood out?
 - **R**eflective: How did you feel about that?
 - **I**nterpretive: What did that mean to you?
what is your reflection telling you?
 - **D**ecisional: What can you do about it?



Take a picture
of this slide



Grounding Higher Education

Warren/Yates, 2026

Social Contract (Johnson & Reed, 2012)

- Citizens surrender personal will/freedoms to benefit the General Will (society).
- Some gave up more than others
- Designed by 18th century Master Identity
- Students surrender personal will



Manors of Knowledge (Baldwin, 2021)

- Lords/Owners (institution) determine the general will.
- Students as tenants of the Manor
- Industrial Complex: Mass produced - speed and sameness vs defect



Meritocracy

Ableism

Racism

Kyriarchy

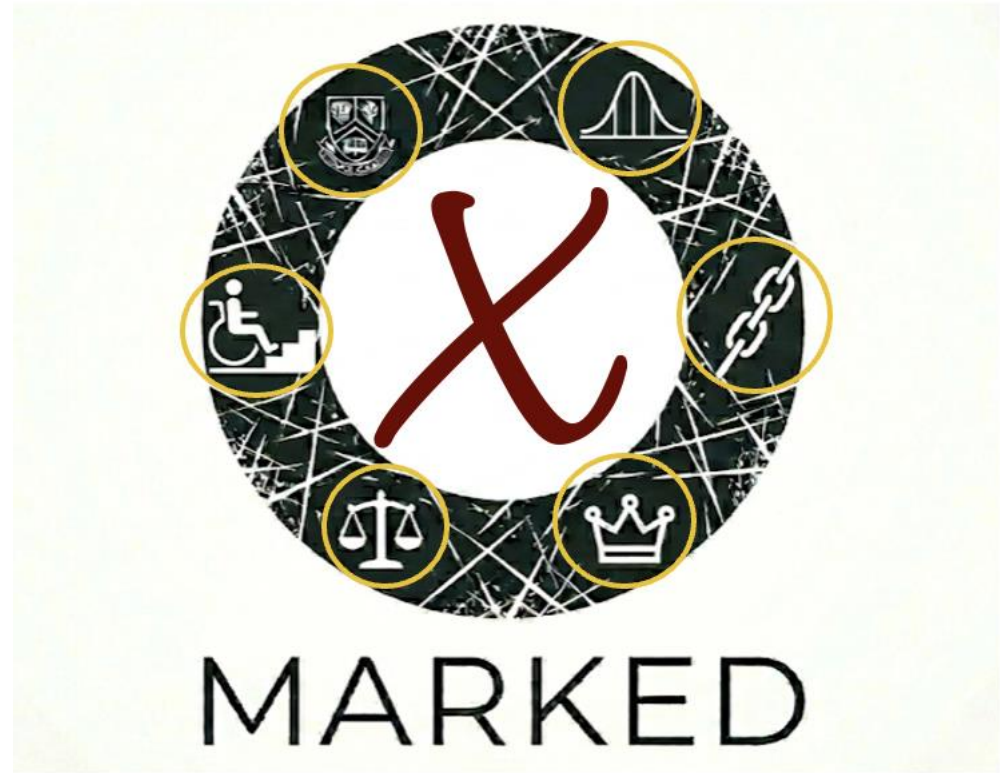
Equality

Disablism



MARKED

Ideologies

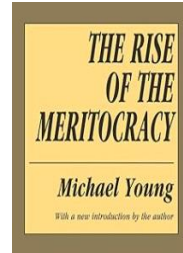


Mark: Meritocracy

Warren/Yates, 2026

Meritocracy: People achieve success by individual ability and effort. Best and brightest rise to the top through hard work and talent.

Historical Context: Sociologist Michael Young's satirical warning. The meaning co-opted & Higher Ed embraced the satire.

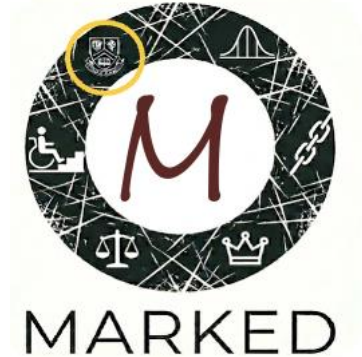


Message: Success and failure are due to effort alone; deserved. Merit is fair so struggle is due to personal deficit. (Wooldridge, 2023)

The Brand: Unprepared, Insufficient, Unfit

The Problem: Asking for support is seen as a lack of merit & meritocracy is used to justify ableist practices and exclude people with disabilities from the STEM workforce (NASEM, 2024)

- Weaponized merit; Rigor + standardized speed = intelligence
- Accommodations are viewed as a *lack of merit*



Mark: Ableism

Warren/Yates, 2026

Ableism: A system that assigns value to bodies and minds based on socially constructed ideas of productivity and normalcy, rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. Systemic oppression leads to determining value and worth based on language, appearance, religion and/or ability to excel and behave
(Lewis, 2022)

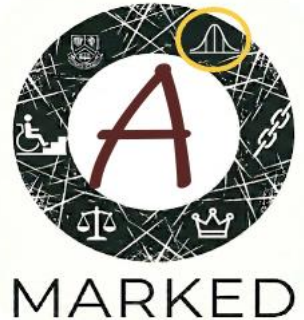
Historical context: Plato's Republic, The American Dream, the Industrial Machine & 'In-valid' ... Higher Ed & the factory model

Message: Value is defined by proximity to an established norm.

The Brand: Brokenness. Deviance from a norm, must be "fixed"

Current manifestation:

- Students as units of production
- Intelligence measured by speed - mistaking fast for smart
- "valid" humans must fit the system or are deemed INvalid



Mark: Racism

Racism: A system of advantage [and oppression,] based on race (Tatum, 1997).

“In the American context, the invention of ‘the Africanist’ was necessary to define ‘whiteness’ as the standard of freedom, intelligence and order.” (Morrison, 2017)

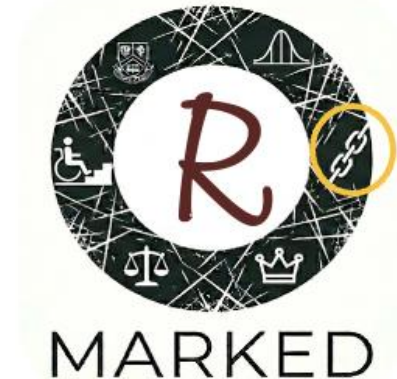
Historically – Western institutions used race to determine who was fully human (entitled to education) and who was sub-human (subjected to labor)

The Message: You are not like ‘us’ - you are stranger

The Brand: Pigment penalty – Global anti-blackness

Pervasive assumption: Inferiority, Irrationality, Lazy, Violent

- Institution invents reason to keep ‘Outsider’ outside.
- Demand assimilation: performative white-washed masking
- Creates a survivor mentality & MARKED multiplier



Mark: Kyriarchy

Warren/Yates, 2026

Kyriarchy: A complex pyramidal system of dominance and submission (Fiorenza, 1992)

Historical: Kyrios – Greek, “to lord over.” University as Manors of Knowledge (Baldwin, 2021)
faculty/admin as Master, students as tenants or guests; institution as Master Identity.

Message: Know your place in the hierarchy – your belonging is a privilege, not a right

The Brand: Inconvenience to the Master’s order

Higher Ed through Kyriarchy’s Lens

- Social Contract to protect the institutional default
- Key Masters holds keys to access, belonging and completion
- “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984)
- Master’s tools: bureaucracy, rigid compliance, gatekeeping enforce the locks.
- “You’re a guest here, be grateful.”

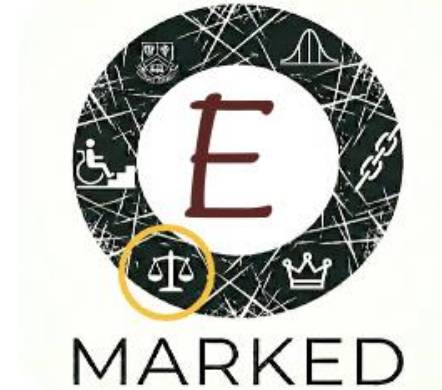
*** Meritocracy is often just kyriarchy in disguise***



Mark: Equality

Equality: *Rigid adherence to Letter of the Law* – the exact same resources to all

- **Historical Context:** To be “fair” to the collective Individuals surrender their particular will (unique interests, needs or personal status) to the General Will (republic).
- **The message:** Assimilation with the master identity - treat everyone the same, extra needs are a burden on the collective. Forces students to compete for resources
- **The Brand:** The ‘extra’ student violates the shared contract
- **Current Manifestation:**
 - The Colorblind or disability-blind pedagogy
 - The same exam with the same time for every student
 - Weaponizes standardization and accommodations
 - One-size-fits-None door: Public access designed for master identity



Mark: Disablism

Disablism *is the action in relation to Ableism's ideology*. It is how the social contract locks out undesirables through environmental design.

- **Historical Context:** To enlightenment thinkers, the Collective Body was composed of 'able-bodied' citizens. Disablism through Ugly Laws preserved the Architecture of Exclusion (Lorde, 1984). Anyone not considered Standard was an afterthought
- **Message:** Disability is proof you don't belong in the Collective Body.
- **The Brand:** Societal Incompatibility and disruption to the workflow
- **Current Manifestation**
 - Afterthought design – disruption to systems and structures
 - Special favors – Accommodations as repairs for brokenness
 - Invisible policy *stairs* gatekeeping access and success
 - Blame game – failure to thrive is due to lack of ability



MARKED



Meritocracy

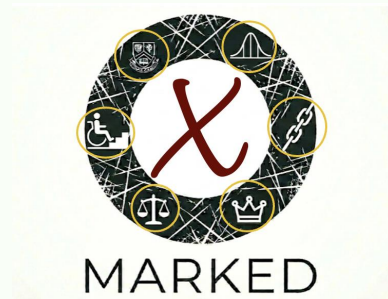
Ableism

Racism

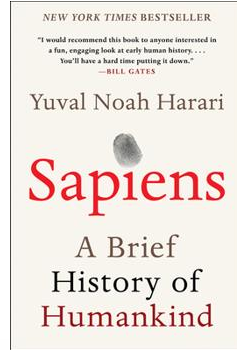
Kyriarchy

Equality

Disablism



Confronting Marked Ideologies



Organizational research:
Silo Syndrome Vs System Thinking
(Mhlongo, (2025)



Human beings progress because of ability to
cooperate in large groups based on our shared myths

*“The only way to forge a better future is through collective
struggle for collective ends.” (Harari, 2025)*

Higher Ed Designers and Builders

We are designers and builders within higher education.

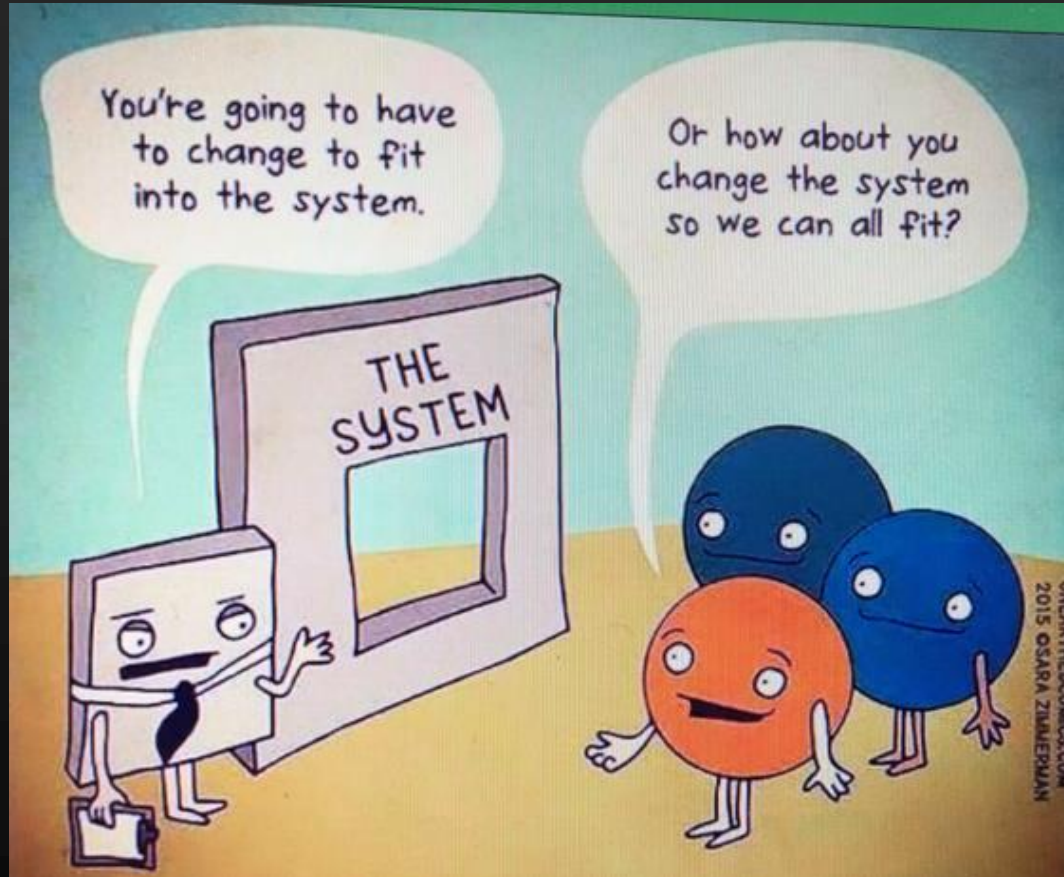
What phase of construction process is your institution in?



- Drafting (Conception)
- Demolition (Disruption)
- Maintenance (No Interruption)
- Expansion (Construction)
- Reverting Back (Regression)
- Rebuilding (Reconstruction)



About Fit



Going Forward

- Interested in connecting virtually?
- Homework: ORID in your institution?
- October check in?

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