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WRTG 3020

Investigative Essay

**Physical Disabilities on College Campuses: Experiences, Accommodations, Discrimination,
Regulations**

“The handicapped live among us. They have the same hopes, the same fears, and the same ambitions as the rest of us... in their quest to achieve the benefits of our society they ask no more than equality of opportunity” – Senator Williams (Gerse 1)

The world we live in today is continuously being shaped and transformed through the organization of space, place and the different power dynamics that present themselves within society. These aspects of life significantly impact the ways in which we experience the world around us and how we can exist as individuals. This is paramount to consider when analyzing the different challenges faced by disabled bodies on a day-to-day basis. Space and place within society have often been constructed to advantage the lives of able-bodied individuals. For a large majority of us who are able bodied, it can be hard to imagine the multifaceted and complex experiences of these disabled people and how it deeply affects their livelihoods, attitudes, and emotions. It is critical to give voice to disabled individuals and hear about their intersectional life experiences and how this directly affects them. The term disability should not be frowned upon, pitied, or stigmatized but rather we should aim to celebrate our differences and learn how to embrace them.

College is a time in a young adult’s life where they typically move away from home, live on their own, begin to know themselves as they truly are, and grow into their adulthood.

Oftentimes, people with disabilities do not experience this same rite of passage. This paper will look at first-hand accounts of disability, in conjunction with an overview of the organizations, laws, and articles that govern them on campuses nationwide.

Jake is a sophomore at the University of Colorado Boulder studying Journalism with an interest in sports. When Jake was five years old, he was diagnosed with Duchenne's Muscular Dystrophy¹, a progressive, degenerative muscular disorder. I am a caregiver for him and have held this position for the year and a half. For seven days a week, combining to roughly fifty hours of work, I assist him with day-to-day functions that most able-bodied people can do. Jake is confined to a motorized wheelchair, which severely impairs how he navigates his daily life. I interviewed him to receive insight on his experience as a college student with a profound physical disorder. We began this by talking about the specific accommodations that he receives through the university. He gets a specialized dorm room that is ADA compliant². Jake mentioned that while some buildings and rooms are technically compliant, there are some cases where he does not have adequate room to maneuver his chair (Melchiode 1). This poses great difficulty because he is limited in where he can move around. He did note that his dorm room is slightly small, but he doesn't feel that he is confined to a small area with little movement. The University also gave his caregivers access to his dorm so they can care for him while protecting his and his dorm mate's safety. He has no roommate as well, for added privacy. Due to Jake's disability, it is

¹ Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD) is a degenerative disease that causes the muscle to waste over time. Primarily affecting males, symptoms include muscle and skeletal, and cardiovascular damage and loss. It is genetic. Symptoms begin between the ages of two and eleven. Intellectual impairments are common with this condition (NIH GARD).

² For a building to be ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant there needs to be accessible modes of entrances, accessible public living areas, doors that can be opened alternatively, an entrance that is covered, appliances that can be reached (lights, thermostats, electrical outlets), and access to kitchens and bathrooms that are also compliant (ADAtile).

common for patients to have intellectual difficulty as well. He says that he struggles with ADHD and concentration issues. To accommodate for this, CU provides extra time on exams.

The Muscular Dystrophy Association has a School Accommodation Recommendation fact sheet for places of education to comply to if possible. They recommend daily exercise (no weightlifting or muscular work), an additional set of textbooks so they do not have to carry books around school and home, elevators, a specialized schedule, preferred seating in class, a plan in case of emergencies, and special considerations for any field trips or events (MDA 2). I was not aware of these recommendations until Jake pointed them out to me. I wanted to hear about how he thinks CU does with complying to this. He said that he does have some physical barriers on campus. Not all buildings on campus are accessible and he has a hard time when he needs to go somewhere off campus. He had a lab at the East Campus this semester, but he struggles because not all the buses are accessible. He missed his first lab and was late multiple times due to this. He wishes that the University had more easily accessible buildings and he would like to be able to take any bus he wants without having to wait for an accessible one.

Regarding discrimination, stigma, and prejudice, Jake notes that he has never felt that a professor or peer has “been mean to [him]” (Melchiode 2). His professors have offered to visit the ADA seating after class to talk to Jake to see if he has any questions because ADA seating is typically in the back of a room. Jake is a brother at the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity at CU, pledging in the Spring of 2022. Over the summer, brothers and alumni raised money and resources to build a ramp into the fraternity house so Jake could hang out with his brothers. It is ADA compliant and safe. Jake says about his brothers, “They treat me like there are no physical differences between us. I am just another FIJI brother, and it makes me feel really happy to be included like that (Melchiode 2)”. While this was heartwarming, Jake did mention that he hasn’t

felt that doctors' offices are that considerate of disabilities like his. He struggles with access to the building, lack of elevators, inability to get onto an exam table or scale, and transportation issues which causes him to need to go to Denver for appointments often. While medical discrimination will be discussed further along, it was interesting to hear about Jake's personal experience with it.

It is evident that disabled individuals have constantly faced more difficulties through their lifetimes as they learn how to navigate a world that has oftentimes left them out of the picture, their voices being silenced. A prime example of this is the way various spaces have been set up with the intention of keeping disabled individuals "in their place" (Kitchin, 1998). Moreover, our society and culture have been constructed to the disadvantage of disabled bodies, frequently making them feel ostracized and excluded. This negatively affects the quality of life of disabled people and serves as social texts that communicate to disabled individuals that they are in fact the ones "out of place" (Kitchin, 1998). Ultimately, this causes many people in the disabled community to be rejected and marginalized within society. They fall victim to being the 'other' in a world of 'us' and 'them'. This is further exemplified through the personal experiences of disabled individuals. A NPR interview with disabled professor, Lisa Iezzoni, highlights a recent study which found that some doctors don't want patients with disabilities (NPR, 2022). In fact it was reported that "in a series of anonymous interviews with 22 U.S. doctors, some admitted to refusing care to people with disabilities, making the excuse that they weren't taking on new patients" (NPR, 2022). This shows how disabled bodies are unable to even exist comfortably in spaces and places within society.

The concept of ableist geographies furthers these points of prejudice and discrimination against disabled bodies. The capitalist, money hungry, and powerful world that surrounds us has

always been built to favor and advance the needs of able-bodied people. We can further our understanding of this concept through its definition as explained by Vera Chouinard——“ableist geographies refer to lived environments which incorporate and perpetuate physical and social barriers to the participation of disabled persons in everyday life” (Chouinard, 1997). This idea of ableist geographies is seen in all kinds of city planning and urban development, just like on certain college campuses across the country. This in turn, further isolates disabled people and makes typical tasks and daily activities more difficult for them, contributing to their inequality in society.

In 1973, the Rehabilitation Act was established to forbid discrimination based on handicaps. People protected under this law must show a “substantial” limitation to at least one major life activity, be qualified, pose no threat to themselves, and make the disability well known with documentation in a quick manner (Rothstein 4). Integration of these regulations into schools and higher education took many years and revisions. The effectiveness of these laws will be evaluated in different ways as there are many differing opinions regarding this. It is crucial to pressure states and various institutions in promoting different regulations that improve the lives disabled bodies can realize. Therefore, such acts like the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the ADA are paramount in building a more inclusive society and future for disabled individuals. However, in an open access conference report at the University of Louisville, Steven Gerse notes that court interpretations argue the effectiveness of section 504 of the act stating that federal financial assistance programs do not integrate people with disabilities (Gerse 2). There should be a system put in place to ensure these regulations are being effectively carried out and are meeting the standards that they set.

What is the most equal, sufficient way for disability funding to be dispersed? Some argue that there is adequate funding, inadequate funding, and even over funding. In schools as of 2014, thirty six percent of funding goes towards specific learning disabilities, followed by speech and language impairments. The lowest funded section is orthopedic/mobility disabilities. These disorders can be one of the most detrimental aspects of a child's education. Access to classrooms and equal opportunities are drastically impaired (McCann 3). Some argue that disabilities are over-diagnosed, and accommodations are given out too frequently and excessively. However, statistics show that many programs in education are certainly underfunded to the extent of many schools providing inadequate care or turning students away when they have disabilities. This disparity needs to be addressed with more federal funding for schools so that students with disabilities have fair and equal access to education in the same way that an able-bodied student would have.

Disabilities have a multitude of effects on a person's life, especially when it comes to education and independence. This paper showed the different ways that a student at the University of Colorado, Boulder struggles and thrives with his disability. Certain structural disparities give rise to the issues that disabled students experience. Discrimination, stigma, prejudice all goes to further make disabled individuals more secluded in society. The multifaceted ways in which space in society has been organized often keep disabled individuals marginalized, making them feel denigrated. Being disabled is by no fault of their own, yet it is harder for them to simply exist in the world. Medical injustice, bullying, violence, demeaning behavior, and other inequalities threaten the wellbeing of the disabled, and further challenge their pursuit of accomplishments. For these reasons, it is important that proper measures are made to account for the disabled, especially in terms of access to accommodations. There needs to be an

increased call to action for better regulations, accommodations and modifications to laws and policies so disabled bodies can exist comfortably in society.

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