Using Crip Theory to Create Campus Cultures that Foster Students' Disability Disclosure (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Ableism often prevents college students from disclosing their disabilities. This practice brief, co-authored by a non-disabled faculty member and a disabled disability services professional, explores implications of crip theory to create campus cultures that foster self-disclosure of disabilities. Using tenets of crip theory–compulsory able-bodiedness, cripistemology, and disability as a fluid identity–we explore three practice issues: (a) wrestling with the murkiness in disability services professionals' decisions about who is disabled and meets accommodation eligibility requirements; (b) interrogating ableist practices of disability services offices that prevent disclosure (a reflection not on disability services but on the insidious nature of ableism); and (c) creating cultures in the classroom and co-curriculum that value disabled students' insights rather than perceive them as tragic burdens. For each issue, we explore practical implications of crip theory to encourage disclosure and allow disabled students to bring more of their authentic selves to their college experience.

Keywords: disability, disclosure, crip theory

Rethinking disability disclosure on campus is critical as institutions of higher education experience growth in the number of disabled students (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Campus cultures must foster disability disclosure in ways that provide a welcoming environment for disabled minds and bodies. Much of this work starts with disability services professionals. Disclosure to disability services professionals and other educators is necessary for students who require the use of accommodations to fully access programs and services (Madaus, 2011). However, as Knight (2017) stated: "when we disclose our disabilities, when we publicly acknowledge the particularities of our bodies, we make ourselves vulnerable to backlash" (p. 61). Mingus (2017) described the "forced intimacy" of disclosure: "People are allowed to ask me intrusive questions about my body, make me 'prove' my disability or expect me to share with them every aspect of my accessibility needs" (para. 3). Indeed, there is much at stake for students when they disclose their disability, and for multiple reasons connected to ableism and intersecting systems of oppression, students often do not disclose their disabilities (Kerschbaum, Eisenman, & Jones, 2017; Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). Fearing embarrassment, stigma, or negative reactions by authority figures (Miller, 2015; Samuels, 2017) and having internalized messages that disability should be overcome (Harbour et al., 2017), many disabled students hide their disability, if they are able to do so. Also, some students do not perceive their disability as part of their identity, often a result of ableism (Abes & Wallace, 2018). For all of these reasons, many students engage in passing, maintaining their more comfortable status in the non-disabled/disabled binary (Alshammari, 2017; Blockmans, 2015). Rather than feeling that disclosure is intrusive and not welcomed, necessary, or valued, students should feel comfortable bringing their whole self to college, including their disability.

Depiction of the Research Problem

Disability services professionals and other educators are not supporting effective disclosure if disabled students are met with burdensome processes that elicit feelings of interrogation and misguided judgment in order to receive accommodations. Regardless of whether or not a student views their disability as a part of their identity or has a clear sense of their disability, creating a streamlined process that meets students

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at their current understanding of their disability and welcomes them into an open conversation of access planning is critical. Students will resist disclosure if disability services providers and other educators engage with students using ableist narratives (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019). These narratives cause students to feel that their disability is terrifying, tragic, and will transform their life in negative ways (Holmes, 2010). In this brief, we explore how campuses can reframe their understanding of disability and disclosure to support disabled students.

This practice brief is a collaboration between Dan, a physically disabled practitioner in a disability services office, and Elisa, a non-disabled faculty member who studies college student identity using critical theories. Together, we urge that crip theory be considered to address the vexing issues surrounding disability disclosure. Although still infrequently applied, there is increased interest in using crip theory to conduct research on disability in higher education (Abes, 2019; Friedensen & Kimball, 2017; Miller, 2015). As a poststructural theory, however, concerns exist about crip theory's utility for addressing the practical, lived experiences of disabled people (Bone, 2017). We understand that concern and also believe that crip theory can be used in a liberatory manner. Using tenets of crip theory, we explore what crip theory exposes about creating campus communities that foster disabled students' self-disclosure to disability services offices, in classrooms, and with peers.

Specifically, we explore three practice issues connected to disclosure and accommodations: (1) wrestling with the murkiness in disability services' determination of who is disabled and needs accommodation; (2) interrogating the ableist practices of disability services offices that prevent disclosure of disability; and (3) creating cultures in the classroom and co-curriculum that value disabled students' insights rather than perceive them as tragic burdens. For each issue, we explore the practical implications of crip theory for disability services professionals. To do so, we review in the next section key concepts of crip theory. Following that review, we then explore the implications of a cripped analysis of these issues for practice.

Finding Practice-Based Solutions Using Crip Theory

Crip theory challenges the dominant social messages that define who and what are normal (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006; Sandahl, 2003). A central idea of crip theory is compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006).

Maintained by ableism, which is the privileging of able bodies and able minds that renders others less worthy (Linton, 1998), compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness push people toward an unattainable "normal." Those who do not fit these norms are determined disabled and therefore less worthy (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). Crip theory critiques these messages and the disabled/non-disabled binary that deems disability abnormal (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). To "crip" is to expose compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness in all contexts (McRuer, 2006).

Crip theory describes disability as fluid, variable, and changing with contexts rather than a rigid category (Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). It explores the tension between "claiming crip" as an identity and perpetuating oppressive narratives associated with categorizing disability. Claiming crip is "a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities" (Kafer, 2013, p. 13). But claiming crip also feeds into ableist messages that value the categories of disabled and non-disabled. Adding to the tension, crip theory destabilizes disability, but does not "dematerialize disability identity" (McRuer, 2006, p. 35). That is, crip theory contests disability identity because it is fluid and defined through ableist messages and also recognizes that identity politics are necessary to survive (Schalk, 2013). Crip theory exposes how compulsory able-bodiedness and mindedness are the root of these tensions.

Crip theory also speaks to the nature of knowledge. Johnson and McRuer (2014) described "cripistemology" as knowledge production from the perspectives of disabled people. Cripistemology embraces the multiple ways that minds produce and understand knowledge. Cripistemology embraces crip time. Crip time challenges the normalized and disabling pace of life (Kafer, 2013; Samuels, 2017). It is not an extension of time for disabled people, but rather "a challenge to normative expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds" (Kafer, 2013, p. 27). Cripistemology, along with compulsory able-bodiedness/mindedness and disability fluidity, inform issues connected to disability disclosure.

Implications and Portability for Higher Education Practice: Three Practice Issues

Guided by crip theory, we discuss three practice issues that speak to challenges associated with disability disclosure. Crip theory does not provide specific strategies for dismantling dominant narratives.

It does, however, reveal the mindset shift necessary to create this cultural change.

Practice Issue One: Wrestling with the Murkiness in Disability Services Professionals' Determination of Who is Disabled and Needs Accommodation

In order for disability service professionals to work with students to develop accommodation plans, it is necessary to determine disability status, a process that depends on disability disclosure. The process of reviewing student eligibility for accommodations is grounded in disability-related laws, in particular Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Section 504 stated that an individual with a disability is someone "who (i) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such person's major life activities, (ii) has a record of such an impairment, or (iii) is regarded as having such an impairment" (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973,§ 706(7)(B)). Additionally, Titles II and III of the ADA ensure disabled students non-discrimination and equal access to educational programs (Gil, 2007).

Understanding the guidance disability laws provide and applying them to individuals on a case-by-case basis poses challenges. To determine if accommodations are necessary, there are situations where disability services professionals need to further explore the impact of the students' disability in order to understand how the disability "substantially limits" a "major life activity" (Section 504). This process takes into consideration the student, documentation, and the professional judgement of the disability services professional (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2012). When individual barriers are not readily apparent, the impact of the disability and relevant accommodations are not easily understood (Magnus & Tøssebro, 2014). Understanding the impact of the disability is particularly challenging when it presents in a fluid way. For instance, the impact of the disability for students with mental health or chronic medical conditions may fluctuate due to various levels of disability-related flares and/or whether or not ongoing medical management is occurring. When the disability impact on the student is constantly changing, indefinite accommodation plans are necessary. When a student discloses their disability, they may not come to disability services knowing their access needs and may be seeking to engage in a dialogue where professionals validate their experience and work collaboratively in access planning.

Instances where formal disability documentation is lacking, out of date, or does not tell the complete story, self-report of students' disability is critical. For some students, access to healthcare and disability documentation may not have been previously attainable. In these situations, professional judgment is key in determining accommodation eligibility along with the self-report. Disability services professionals can either provide a level playing field for a student who encounters disability-related barriers or give a student an unfair advantage. Wrestling with these decisions can be challenging when trying to support students through equal access while maintaining the integrity of the institution's legal responsibility for providing access.

For students who experience their disability in varied forms and times, it is important to consider if processes (a) proactively accommodate this variability; and (b) acknowledge the physical and emotional labor students use to meet the eligibility requirements to be regarded as disabled. Doing so moves from a compliance-based disability services framework to a student-centered disability services framework that recognizes students' individual stories. Recognizing the increased labor for disabled students is vital when developing procedures that meet the spirit of Section 504 and the ADA and effectively facilitate student access. This physical and emotional labor includes, for instance, having to go for doctor appointments, physically picking up documentation, visiting the disability services office, individual meetings with the disability services provider, and retelling stories. Students with a new and varied disability diagnosis who are uncertain of the impact of their diagnosis, unsure what they need from disability services professionals, and concerned about their changing needs should feel as equally welcomed into the process as do disabled students choosing to disclose with a well-established disability and defined disability-related needs. It is important that all students be met with reassurance and guidance based on a broad understanding and openness to the many ways that disability presents.

Cripping the determination of disability. Framing the work of disability services providers through a crip theory lens reshapes the mindset that is necessary to move toward a student-centered rather than compliance-centered disability services framework. Although it is important to comply with Section 504 and the ADA, these power-laden laws fairly rigidly define the meaning of disability. Crip theory invites professionals to flexibly interpret these laws to value individual experiences. A crip theory lens embraces the challenges faced by disability services providers by (a) portraying disability as fluid and defined through social expectations and therefore not something for which a label is necessarily appropriate; (b) recognizing that "claiming crip" does not always mean having a medical history documenting impair-

ment; and (c) acknowledging the political necessity of not abandoning the disability label. Recognizing disability as fluid and socially constructed supports the notion that the physical and emotional labor expended by students to meet legal guidelines contributes to the meaning of disability and needs to be considered when making eligibility decisions. Coming from a crip lens means that practitioners' starting point for making eligibility decisions is that disability is fluid rather than confined by legal requirements. New and changing disabilities are therefore met with the same openness as established and fixed disabilities. Once the law is viewed as the minimum of what can be done to serve disabled students and not the ceiling, engaging with a larger crip community becomes attainable. Partnerships with campus or local medical providers who understand disability services' openness to working with students in a fluid state of disability can support these students. Through these partnerships, medical providers can offer recommendations consistent with fluid disabilities. The use of temporary or provisional accommodations may also be effective while additional information is provided by the student. Recognizing the political realities of needing the crip label, a crip lens does not disregard legal requirements; it only changes assumptions about the meaning of disability.

Changing assumptions about the meaning of disability fosters an environment that encourages students' disclosure. When disability services professionals embrace disability as fluid, disabled students will likely feel less shame, stigma, and uncertainty around disclosure. Also, when professionals perceive students' physical and emotional labor associated with meeting legal requirements as part of the meaning of their disability, students will feel respected and understood, which also contributes to disclosure. Disability services professionals need to communicate this cripped mindset in, among other places, office websites, new student orientations, faculty trainings, and student meetings. Professionals also need to do their own continuous professional and personal development to shift their compliance assumptions into cripped student-centered assumptions.

Practice Issue Two: Interrogating the Ableist Practices of Disability Services Offices that Prevent Disability Disclosure

Disability services offices are intended to be the space on campus for disabled students to get connected and receive accommodations. The nature of their interactions with these offices contributes to their overall student experience, which ought to be comparable to that of non-disabled students. Students who self-disclose want a process that is not overly burdensome on their life as a college student. It is therefore necessary to analyze all disability services processes–from initial connection to ongoing access management–to determine which may be ableist.

The work of disability services historically has been grounded in a medical framework of disability (Devlin & Pothier, 2006), which risks being ableist. This framework leads to an individualized approach to address access needs, which may disregard other barriers, such as attitudinal barriers (Barragan & Nusbaum, 2017). For instance, students who had a positive interaction with disability services professionals may be faced with additional disclosures to faculty and staff with unknown attitudes toward disability, leaving students uncertain about disclosing. Additionally, a medical framework leads to the assumption that disability has been medically documented and that documentation can be readily provided. Historic practices do not account for students with financial barriers to disability documentation; students whose family cultural practices may have inhibited the choice to seek disability documentation due to stigma (DeFreitas, Crone, & DeLeon, 2018); or students who have a disability that is in flux, such as an undiagnosed disability that is impacting a student academically and medical professionals have yet to reach a diagnosis (Devlin & Pothier, 2006). Disclosure will be inhibited if policies for students are not welcoming to students who do not have documentation.

Flexibility in accommodation processes encourages disclosure because it lessens students' perception of the burden associated with disability. For instance, providing ways for students to engage remotely with disability services offices will reduce the number of in-person visits the student must make. Assuming the student can engage with disability services without remote/digital access is ableist. Once students have completed the connection process within disability services, it is important to recognize disability fluidity. Having avenues to disclose disability updates is validation that disability services professionals recognize that disability status and access needs change. Without this assumption of fluidity, student disclosure becomes not worth the effort and risk if their access needs are not accurately addressed.

Further, disability services professionals can lessen the ableist burden of students' having to disclose their disability multiple times. Processes that require multiple instances of disclosure, whether to multiple faculty members or in other university areas such as residence life, are strenuous on disabled students. When disabilities are not readily apparent, such as with chronic medical or psychological disabilities,

disclosure to multiple faculty members can be challenging due to the uncertainty of the faculty reaction and power differences (Seelman, 2017). Moreover, when students have other historically oppressed identities, the potential exists to be subjected to additional discrimination. When disability services professionals lessen students' disclosure burden to other university entities, the experience is more aligned with the non-disabled student experience. For example, active accommodation planning between disability services and faculty can better position the student for a seamless access plan without the burden of additional self-disclosures. This can also lead to faculty members understanding student access needs from the start of the semester, increasing overall student comfort in the classroom.

Cripping disability services practices. Crip theory reveals that disability services' ableist practices are not a reflection of the professionals, but instead, a result of the insidious nature of ableism (McRuer, 2006). Crip theory reveals the ableism inherent in the broad requirement that students prove their disability and the specific requirement that medical documentation be part of that proof. Crip theory teaches that compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, rooted in ableism, push people toward an impossible normal. With its rigorous expectations and pace, higher education is rooted in compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness (Dolmage, 2017). The need to prove disability is based on an assumption that college students are able-bodied and able-minded. This ableist assumption is so woven into the fabric of higher education that to deviate from it requires documented proof. More so, it requires proof to which not all students have access, sometimes a result of other intersecting systems of oppression, such as classism and racism.

Rather than proving one is not able-bodied and able-minded, what if instead, disability were considered part of the natural human condition and a valued form of diversity throughout the university and society? Perhaps then students' narratives describing their experience would suffice, along with a professional's judgment, to be eligible for accommodations using fluid and flexible interpretations of Section 504 and the ADA. Not only would this non-ableist mindset encourage disclosure, but would also encourage disclosure among students' whose other social identities, such as social class, race, and culture, prevented the acquisition of documentation. The medical approach rooted in compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness also leads to inflexible processes for variable disabilities that do not have fixed accommodations. Again, valuing student stories above medical documentation creates an environment where students can disclose the variability in their disability without fear of unwelcoming and doubting reactions.

Further, flexibility in how disability services offices engage with disabled students challenges compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, signaling disability as part of the typical student experience. When disability services offices' processes are consistent with the varying needs of disabled students, they convey the message that disability is normal, which again, encourages disclosure. Likewise, relieving disabled students of the burden of multiple disclosures - by placing the onus on the university rather than the students - signals that disabled students are the norm and their experiences should be comparable to non-disabled students. Collaborating with learning center staff, live-in housing professionals, and others who may also engage with students when disability identity is in flux, may increase the disability services reach and provide open communication back to the disability services office. Although cripping processes requires more work, this mindset shift resists compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, which is an area where disability services should provide leadership throughout the university - starting by looking inward.

Practice Issue 3: Creating Cultures in the Classroom and Co-Curriculum that Value Disabled Students' Insights Rather than Perceive them as Tragic Burden

Disability services professionals need to take the lead on creating campus cultures that value disabled students, and by doing so, ease the risks of disclosure in the classroom and co-curriculum. Disability training for faculty and other campus constituents, such as student affairs educators, is vital for properly educating the campus community about disability. These trainings, however, generally revolve around legal obligations (Zhang et al., 2010). The opportunity to shift perceptions of disability, disrupting dominant ableist narratives, is critical. Instilling a consistent message regarding disability as a positive form of diversity and a valued identity can begin to shift perceptions (Kimball et al., 2016). Engaging with faculty and staff in these positive environments -- rather than when negotiating accommodations -- to shift views of disability can lessen the burden disabled students face with self-disclosure.

Because disabled students are subordinated by their disability status, in addition to their student identity and for some, other marginalized social identities, disclosing their disability to faculty for accommodations is risky (e.g., Miller, 2015). As such, disabled

students "employ various and complex measures to manage the identities they reveal to their instructors" (Wood, 2017, p. 85). Disabled students need to assess potential reactions by the faculty regarding their disclosure. In addition to including a syllabus statement regarding university accommodation procedures, demonstrating openness to providing access in multiple ways can ease student concerns related to disclosure. It is also helpful to make faculty aware of a student's disability before the class begins so that faculty can invite the student to engage in dialogue regarding their accommodations. This dialogue demonstrates that faculty value the student in their learning environment. Offering opportunities for disabled students to discuss their access needs can validate a student whose needs may fluctuate and encourages disclosure.

Engagement on campus is beneficial to the academic success of college students (Brown & Broido, 2014). Disabled students should therefore have the same opportunity for these experiences. To show disabled students that their experience is valued on campus, proactive access planning for co-curricular events is necessary. Incorporating access statements and accommodation requests as standard components of co-curricular programming demonstrates that disabled students are welcomed. Likewise, educating programmers -- from student leaders to full-time campus event planners -- about universal design can change perceptions that access needs are not afterthoughts, but important to the quality of campus life. When disabled students perceive themselves as valued rather than burdens, they are more likely to self-disclose.

Cripping campus cultures. By revealing the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness shape the campus culture, crip theory makes apparent how students who do not meet ableist student norms are viewed as tragic burdens. This negative and pitying attitude often prevents faculty and staff from taking proactive steps to create accessible courses and campus programming. Cripping the campus culture and shifting attitudes depend on a cripistemology framework for perceiving disabled students. Cripistemology is knowledge production from the perspectives of disabled people (Johnson & McRuer, 2014). It embraces the multiple ways that bodies and minds produce and understand knowledge. Disabled people are therefore valued for the contributions they make to campus life *because* of their disabilities rather than *in spite of* their disabilities. Embracing a cripistemological perspective means that the culture is not about only proactively providing accommodations but also creating accessible environments shaped around disabled people's realities. For instance, offering courses and co-curricular opportunities from a crip time perspective means designing syllabi and programming that allow for flexibility in scheduling and deadlines, rest, and other atypical ideas. Faculty and staff who embrace a cripistemological perspective would be more inclined to create environments that encourage disclosure.

Conclusion

Table 1 summarizes our suggestions for cripped practice. We hope this crip theory analysis encourages professionals to consider the ways in which ableism contributes to students' decisions to disclose their disability. By looking inward and also educating and partnering across campus, disability services professionals can contribute to campus cultures that value disability as diversity. In doing so, disabled students can bring their authentic bodies and minds to their college experience. Indeed, when disclosure is facilitated in a manner that resists compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness it leads to a more liberatory notion of disclosure that embraces the fuller humanity of disabled students (Pearson & Boskovich, 2019).

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Table 1

Practices that Facilitate Disability Disclosure

Cripping the Determination of Disability	Embrace disability as fluid rather than defined only by legal requirements
	Recognize how the physical and mental labor associated with proving disability is in itself disabling
	Communicate the cripped mindset throughout campus (e.g., orientation, residence life)
Cripping Disability Services Practices	Rely on students' narratives and the professionals' judgment to determine disability rather than a medical history documenting impairment
	Provide flexible ways to engage with students, such as remote appointments, digital forms, and extended hours
	Put the burden on the university rather than the student for multiple disclosures to faculty and staff
Cripping Campus Cultures	Value contributions disabled students make to campuses because of rather than in spite of their disabilities
	Proactively design syllabi and programming that has flexible deadlines, paces, and expectations rather than relying only on accommodations
	Stop perceiving disabled students as tragic burdens needing pity