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Making (Virtual) Space for Disability Equity in Academia

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Cover Page Footnote

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Making (Virtual) Space for Disability Equity in Academia

Overview, Strategy, and Target Audience

Although academia is widely noted as a bastion of intersectional ableist privilege (Brown & Leigh, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Kafer, 2013; Mackey, 2018), the COVID-19 pandemic offered up a brief—and partial—reprieve. Resistance to providing remote access to public settings waned and an infrastructure of digital connections was built seemingly instantaneously (Jenkins, 2020). Many disabled academics and students and academics and students with chronic health conditions gained opportunities to more fully participate when meetings, conferences, classes, and events were switched to hybrid or virtual settings (Parsloe & Smith, 2022; Trager, 2022; Wu et al., 2022). Despite these accessibility gains, the pandemic simultaneously magnified healthcare, economic, and racial disparities – with marginalized people bearing the consequences most deeply (Crenshaw, 1991; Moore Jr. et al., 2018; Yusuf, 2022). In late 2021, when academic institutions mandated a “return to normal,” many of us pushed back. We asked our colleagues and administrators to explicitly recognize that the previous “normal” was neither equitable nor desirable for many (Annamma et al., 2013; Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022). With compassion and urgency, author and activist Sonya Renee Taylor (2020) voiced on Instagram it clearly in a statement (made during the emergent days of the pandemic):

We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate, and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.

The “COVID years” demonstrated that performing the essential functions of faculty positions - teaching, mentoring, advising, conferencing, networking, work meetings, research and even lab work - can be accomplished remotely (Kahn et al., 2022; Sonbuchner et al.; Tosun, 2021). Nonetheless, in 2023, many virtual options have been replaced by on-site-only options, and those who felt an increased connection in 2020-2021, feel abandoned and dismissed. Many in the disability community continue to be affected by the *ongoing* pandemic, a point often overlooked by institutions and professional organizations (Krebs, 2022). For some disabled academics, the oft-celebrated “return to normal” feels more like perpetual trauma as it continues to result in diminished opportunities for participation across a myriad of venues, unnecessarily stymying career trajectories (Mitchneck & Smith, 2021).

Our strategy, then, is to advocate for remote participation *options* to be available *by default* across institutional settings. Recognizing that remote options are not a best fit for all campus community members (Olsen, 2022), we believe an equitable and pandemic-informed academic workplace requires well-resourced and intentionally welcoming hybrid (virtual + on-site) participation options.

In order to inform our advocacy for hybrid participation options, in the fall of 2022, we placed an open call for faculty, staff, and graduate students on our campus to join our *Making Space for Disability Equity* work group. We met four times over the 2023 spring semester. While our group was passionate about accessibility, we knew we had much to learn, so we began by researching evidence-based best practices for supporting hybrid and remote work. After evaluating the resources available on our campus, we assembled a test model for convening an inclusive hybrid meeting space, then identified additional community needed to making hybrid work our “new normal.”

During our semester-long study, we learned that remote or hybrid access is not automatically congruent with accessibility. Meeting hosts must be intentional in their practice – in the design of the space, in their preparation, and in their practice (Price, 2009; Price 2021). Because hosting and facilitating hybrid meetings can be challenging, our group wanted to develop recommendations, informed by evidence-based best practices and our own investigation, to support our campus colleagues in curating fully accessible, well-resourced, and intentionally welcoming hybrid participation options for their own units. The recommendations are in a checklist format, with the caveat that each item on the list likely represents substantial time and effort. We organized the recommendations somewhat sequentially to reflect what facilitators need to consider before a meeting, during a meeting, and after a meeting; each can be applied to other types of hybrid work – including courses, workshops, and events.

Rationale

Across the United States, there has been an increase in faculty, staff, and students reporting disabilities (Khanmalek, 2022; Schneiderwind & Johnson, 2020; Swenor, 2022), and Long COVID will likely add to those numbers (HHS, 2021; Yong, 2022). Disability is often overlooked in diversity efforts. In response, the federal government recently addressed the omission of disabled voices via Executive Order (EO) 14035: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility (DEIA) in the Federal Workforce. This order marks a shift in the federal approach to disabled workers; while previously included in disability-specific efforts, disability has been missing from federal diversity efforts (Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion)– and, frankly, at our institution. This change is important because diversity makes us smarter (Page, 2012; Rock & Grant, 2016; Smith, 2009). Diverse perspectives increase creative problem-solving capacities, and people who identify as members of disability communities have unique and valuable perspectives and skills (Bernard, 2021).

At our institution, we are also seeing an increase in numbers. Staff and faculty reporting disabilities and chronic conditions increased from 16.5% in 2017 to 19.4% in 2021 (Berg & Besse, 2021). Based on national data from the CDC (2023) these numbers likely will continue to increase. In our 2021 Campus Climate Survey, this population reported lower rates of job satisfaction. Disabled faculty and faculty with chronic health conditions were also less likely to report being treated with respect by colleagues in their department/unit (67.6%) as well as by their department chair/head/director (75.8%) (Berg & Besse, 2021). This survey is one of the primary reasons our group wanted to address accessibility at campus meetings and events.

Analysis of Effectiveness

The *Making Space for Disability Equity* work group created a checklist of evidence-based best practices for our campus community to follow. We acknowledge that this information is not revolutionary; many organizations, particularly those committed to social justice, have provided critical social analyses, frameworks, and guidelines (Mingus, 2011; Sins Invalid, 2019). Our campus now has more accessibility-focused technology readily available because of the pandemic, which is why we believe now is the perfect time to implement campus-wide accessibility guidelines.

We recommend reviewing the list below and identifying resources available within your organization. On our campus, the IT department supports all classroom and conference room technology, and the Center for Accessibility and Disability Resources assists with accommodations and universal design. Meaningful cultural shifts require participation across the board. Institutional readiness to address disability equity includes not only knowledge and awareness of inequities but also effective resource allocation including an accommodations line

item in the central institutional budget, and funding for staff who are charged with proactively addressing accessibility and responding to specific identified needs as they arise.

This list, while not exhaustive, is a start and will need to be revised as we learn more through application. Our focus has been on non-teaching workplace settings because we saw those as being the most unattended contexts. We hope that by sharing this list others will develop similar guidelines for their campus and organizations.

Before the Meeting

Select a Date and General Considerations

- ☐ When possible, avoid scheduling meetings that fall on any religious holidays and celebrations.
- ☐ Be conscious of eating during meetings / during holidays such as Ramadan.
- ☐ If serving food, consider dietary needs. Make sure to label and use separate utensils, placing them in an accessible area.
- ☐ If serving food, is there space for religious prayer or private space?
- ☐ Consider fragrance-free policies.
- ☐ Have masks available for use.
- ☐ If there is a cost for the event, consider offering scholarships to attend.

Evaluate Pre-Meeting Communication

- ☐ When sending out an email invitation to a meeting, ensure the appropriate link is provided to join.
- ☐ If applicable, print materials prior for those that wish to follow along.
- ☐ Ensure marketing for the event is accessible; use alt text on images and closed captioning on videos.
- ☐ Include an accommodation statement on publicity materials.
- ☐ Provide contact information for participants, in case they have difficulties or have questions prior.
- ☐ Establish expectations of meeting / training.
- ☐ Ensure the print of your meeting materials are large enough and in an easily readable color/ font.
- ☐ Make sure to have signage for the event location if in a large building.

Evaluate Physical Space

- ☐ Ensure the room is equipped with appropriate technology. Double check electrical outlets. Is there a large screen with integrated speakers and microphone system in the room you are using? The work group recommends an Owl Device for greater visual representation of those on-site to those online.
- ☐ Double check space for visibility and acoustics.
- ☐ Ensure the space has technology which is equipped with microphones and presenters wear them – repeat questions from the audience. This benefits all participants.

- ☐ Ensure that seating is accessible. For example, is the space wheelchair accessible? Double check to make sure there is an elevator, automatic doors, and accessible bathrooms are nearby.
- ☐ Ensure there is space for service animals.
- ☐ Consider hosting in a space that has gender neutral bathrooms around and lactation rooms nearby.

Evaluate Virtual Space

- ☐ Disable the waiting room for those that may get disconnected; this will make it easier for them to rejoin.
- ☐ Enable live captions and make transcripts available after.
- ☐ Record the meeting.
- ☐ For large events, consider muting participants upon arrival to reduce background noise.
- ☐ Pay attention to camera view and angles; if attending remotely, consider blurring background.

During the Meeting

- ☐ Start a few minutes early to allow time to address technical issues.
- ☐ Refrain from making comments privileging one mode of participation.
- ☐ Consider introductions with visual descriptions and pronouns.
- ☐ Identify yourself when speaking.
- ☐ Repeat or paraphrase what participants say, if the microphones are subpar.
- ☐ Repeat what is in the chat to ensure everyone can follow the conversation.
- ☐ If there are links in the chat during discussion, consider that those in the physical space will not be able to access those, so send out prior if possible or after.
- ☐ Speak up when you feel an accessibility issue may be an issue.
- ☐ Consider attention spans and fatigue issues with those attending and consider policies of camera on/ off.

After the Meeting

- ☐ Provide a recording and transcripts.
- ☐ Consider a follow-up survey to evaluate accessibility.

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