

Accommodation With Ambiguous Disclosure: A Critical, Crip, Queer Approach

by

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

“You forgot that we had class? It’s April; how could you forget that?”

These words are taken from a conversation that I had with an instructor in the spring of 2019— the second semester of my undergraduate experience. I recall fumbling to explain the undiagnosed chronic amnesia that I face every day, while also trying to reassure her that I was not completely incompetent. Further, I was struggling to explain the chronic exhaustion I was facing, as the stress of the college semester was taking a toll on my blood sugar. In that moment, I was expected to, as professionally as possible, explain how it was possible for me to forget about a class I had attended for 14 weeks. I share this anecdote because, in that moment, I experienced deep pain, shame, and isolation. This is important because, despite the pain I experienced during that interaction, I believe the instructor and I were both fighting to understand and navigate a conversation neither of us was ever prepared for. That conversation was not unique, nor was it an isolated failure. It was one small instance of a much larger pattern — one that disabled students navigate across classrooms, offices, and institutions every semester, and one that instructors, however well-intentioned, are rarely equipped to recognize or interrupt. In higher education, the accommodations process for disabled students is tedious, time-consuming, and emotionally taxing. In the academy, disabled students must disclose their disability to the institution and provide documentation to request accommodations. From there, students must negotiate reasonable accommodations at the institutional level. Following this, students often have to negotiate accommodations individually with each instructor (Rocco & Collins, 2017). As Rocco and Collins note, these negotiations are precarious and repetitive and highly influenced by an imbalanced power dynamic in which the student must repetitively divulge intimate information to negotiate accommodation in a process they call ‘forced

disclosure'. The negotiation of accommodation between student and instructor was the focus of this study. In this study, I piloted a simulation-based training and visual model that aims to shift instructor response scripts from a deficit-focused navigation to an accommodation-focused navigation. This research sought to queer the accommodations process through a training that provided instructors with the tools needed to navigate the ambiguity involved in accommodation negotiations. To queer, as a verb, is to deconstruct what has been rendered normative — to refuse the demand that bodies, minds, and experiences resolve into legible, documentable categories before they are granted care. The accommodations process, as currently structured, is deeply normative: it demands that disabled students produce disclosure, documentation, and repeated validation of need before accommodation can be granted, and it positions the instructor as the arbiter of whether that need is legitimate. Queering this process means disrupting those demands. It means shifting the instructor's role away from gatekeeping and toward accommodation, and training instructors to accommodate, even when the disclosure is incomplete, the diagnosis is unnamed, or the request is ambiguous.

This intervention is both timely and necessary. The number of students navigating the accommodations process is growing, but the training designed to support it has not kept pace with the theoretical commitments that would make it meaningful. Studies show that since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the number of disabled students in higher education has steadily grown (Gould et al., 2019). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, during the 2019-2020 school year, 21% of undergraduates and 11% of graduate students had disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.)_. Because these statistics are drawn from students who have disclosed and documented their disability to their university, there is evidence that the frequency with which students must negotiate their

accommodations with instructors individually is also increasing. However, as Allison Kafer noted in her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, many sensitivity trainings regarding disability on college campuses align with the medical model of disability and focus solely on mimicking the corporeality of some disabilities via tying blindfolds to sighted participants or providing wheelchairs to non-wheelchair users. This simulation-based training attempted to answer the call to implement a training that captured the political/relational experience of disability, which, as Kafer points out, is highly political and informed by the “discriminatory attitudes, and ideological systems that attribute normalcy and deviance to particular minds and bodies” (Kafer, 2013).

This work was grounded in critical disability studies, crip theory, and queer theories, and intersects with critical interpretive organizational communication as it challenged the existing narratives that in-depth disclosure and documentation/validation of need were required for all accommodation negotiations. In recognition of research showing that instructors struggle to understand the lived experiences of their disabled students, this work queered the accommodations negotiation process by training instructors to accommodate amid ambiguity. As a result, instructors became less focused on validating need and more focused on creating accommodation.

The remainder of this thesis proceeds in the next four chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the literature grounding this study, tracing the history of ableism and disclosure in higher education, the politics of disability language, and the turn from compliance to care in accessible pedagogy. Chapter 3 details the methods of this study, including the design of the simulation-based training, the data collection and analysis procedures, and my positionality as a disabled researcher conducting research rooted in my own lived experience. Chapter 4 presents the findings,

organized around the three research questions guiding this study: how instructors understand and respond to disability disclosures, how a simulation-based training shifts instructors' awareness of their communicative role, and the narratives instructors construct about empathy, responsibility, and power. Chapter 5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of these findings, the limitations of this study, and directions for future research.

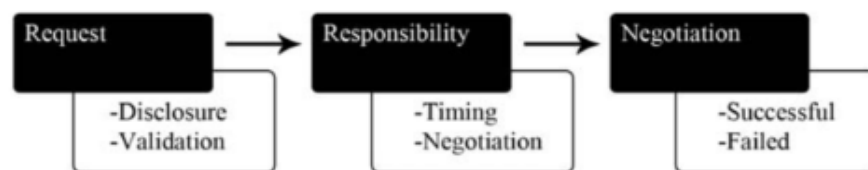
Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Ableism and Disclosure in Higher Education:

Crip time and the accommodations process

Disabled students often struggle to meet the temporal expectations of a college semester, as crip time often differs from non-crip time (Kafer, 2013). This may manifest as additional time needed to complete assignments, walking to classes, using elevators instead of stairs, or completing degrees. Despite this, disabled students' differing temporal and energetic abilities are often chalked up to being an "individual failure of motivation and of time management" (Miller, 2020). Accommodations are available to help remedy time misalignments; however, the accommodations process is itself a temporal and energetic drain. Further, the process of obtaining accommodations is thought to be intentionally slow and difficult to deter students from seeking them out (Price, 2017). This work is grounded in an initial model (see Figure 1) that tracks the accommodations process set forth by Rocco and Collins (2017).

Figure 1: Rocco & Collins' (2017) Accommodations Process



According to the model, to obtain accommodations, the ADA requires that students must disclose their disability to their institution and provide supporting documentation in what Rocco and Collins call 'forced disclosure'. This is evident in the two black-and-white boxes on the left. After sufficient proof is provided, responsibility is placed on the institution and the instructor to

begin negotiations in the center boxes. However, this negotiation happens according to the instructor's and the institution's time and availability, not the students'. This process of negotiation involves the repeated act of disclosing not just the diagnosis, but detailed descriptions of symptoms and experiences, and how they interfere with the student's ability to complete the course curriculum.

Forced disclosure and its limits

The word forced does a lot of work in this expression. Rocco and Collins are pointing out that to gain equity, disabled students are required by law to disclose much more than their able-bodied counterparts. Further, they document the power imbalance at play between faculty members which students must disclose to and the students themselves. However, when all instances of initial disclosure are dubbed as 'forced', it places disclosure on a binary that can be rather unhelpful, given the wide array of experiences within disabled reality. The term 'forced disclosure' does not allow for disabilities that are visually apparent due to the presence of mobility aids, durable medical equipment, or visibly disabled bodies. The word 'forced' casts an odd stigma on the disclosure inherent in conversations that require some form of description to clarify how the accommodation will manifest. Further, the word forced does not allow space for disclosures in which the student feels empowered by their disclosure. Rocco and Collins may be overlooking these aspects due to their focus on the power dynamic at play within accommodation negotiation. Rocco and Collins don't acknowledge it in their analysis of their model, but their centering of the institution is very insightful, as this centering of the instructor and subsequent de-centering of the student is embedded in the writing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the very act responsible for accommodations as we know them.

Further, Rocco and Collins are specifically focusing on the interactions between faculty and student when discussing 'forced disclosure', while this study focuses on student and instructor, however, the idea of forced or coerced disclosure both has the ability to expand and

limit the understandings of the power dynamic at play within accommodation negotiation between instructor and student.

The ADA as a negative right

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed with the intent to prevent discrimination against people with disabilities in all spheres of public life (*Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, as Amended*, n.d.). The ADA determined that a disabled person is “a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (*What Is the Definition of Disability Under the ADA?* | *ADA National Network*, n.d.) Further, the ADA requires accommodations for students with disabilities, provided they don’t alter the course’s core curriculum. The extent to which an accommodation alters the course, thus being ‘unreasonable’, is typically determined by the course instructor in what Rocco and Collins (2017) call ‘accommodation negotiation’ conversations between the instructor and student. Rocco and Collins note that this positioning of the instructor creates an inherent power imbalance between the instructor and the student, as the instructor is given the full authority to determine whether an accommodation request is unreasonable.

The ADA is often misunderstood as having granted disabled people access to education and other public and private spheres. In practice, it did something narrower: it abolished exclusion and discrimination based on disability status. The difference between outlawing discrimination and granting access is essential to understanding the true status of access, or the lack thereof, within the academy.

Civil rights protections in the USA are known as ‘negative rights’ (Centre for Constitutional Studies, 2019). Positive rights require government action to *provide* something to a group of people. Negative rights prohibit public and private entities from infringing upon the

rights of a group of people. Thus, the rights and access that disabled folk deserve can only be enforced after discrimination has already taken place, a complaint has been made, and the court sides with the disabled person rather than the institution. Even then, the student's rights are not restored. Rather, the very wealthy institution that violated their rights is punished financially and threatened with the loss of government funding.

The adversarial approach to maintaining the rights of disabled folk is a difficult labyrinth in terms of logistics, as complaints made to the US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division are usually not seen for at least three months. Following this long wait, the Department of Justice responds with their decision to further investigate, mediate, eliminate, or elevate the complaint to a lawsuit (*Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, as Amended*, n.d.). Further, adversarial action often proves to be a pipe dream. An analysis of the 2024 Office for Civil Rights report shows record-low resolution rates for disability-discrimination claims in education, from K-12 through postsecondary levels. Although disability-related complaints account for nearly 40% of all complaints received, none had been resolved as of 2025 (Oettinger, 2025).

The state of justice and access for disabled folk in education is difficult terrain in which students must prove that their corporealities are real, that their complaints are credible, and that their required accommodations are 'reasonable' (*Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, as Amended*, n.d.). Beyond the lack of resolution in the courts, one can safely assume that the failure to enforce the ADA within the academy is due to the fact that many disabled folk cannot afford the temporal and energetic cost of advocating against their institutions. After all, the three-month wait time for a complaint to even begin the review process takes up most of a college semester.

Ableism, History, and the Untrained Instructor

Jay Dolmage (2017) theorizes in his book *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* that "disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education" (p. 10). He cites this as evident both in unseen elitist symbolic structures, such as inherently ableist syllabi, and in visual symbols, such as grand, arching staircases, which dictate access to physical spaces on campuses. Despite this, disabled scholars have still fought to claim space within and beyond the academy, even predating the ADA. To say that disabled academics did not exist in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s would be incorrect. In 1962, Ed Roberts, a man with Polio, was denied admission to the University of California, Berkeley based on his disability, and fought to have that decision overturned. In his essay, *Why I Burned My Book*, Paul Longmore, a renowned disabilities scholar, recounts many of these experiences, from being withheld access to government programs such as Medicaid as a result of being enrolled in a university to being directly told that no one would hire him as a teacher due to his use of a wheelchair (Longmore, 2003).

The fight for rights and access has been slow and difficult and is far from over, as disabled scholars still report, as recently as 2020, that ableism is alive and well within the academy. In *Reporting from the Margins: Disabled Academics' Reflection on Higher Education*, Olsen and colleagues (2020) interviewed disabled academics, with one interviewee reporting that she was told to stop talking, and then asked a litany of questions focusing on her physical impairment during a meeting with her institution's disability office. Further, dropout rates for students with invisible disabilities such as mental illness remain staggeringly high, as the National Alliance on Mental Illness reports that 47% of students with schizophrenia drop out, while people with bipolar disorder drop out at a rate of 70% (Baldwin, 2018). Dolmage (2017)

reports that currently, “the ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness” (p. 11).

Alongside the power imbalances inherent in the structure of the ADA and the historically ableist culture in the accommodations process, there is the issue that instructors lack consistent training on how to accommodate students or even navigate accommodation negotiations. As Carrol-Miranda (2017) found in her study of five students with disabilities, accommodation letters issued by disability offices are frequently ineffective on their own. Students must often confer individually with each instructor, explaining not only their accommodations but also how to implement them and, often, *why* they are needed.

Taken together, these factors create environments in which students must navigate ableism, validate their need, cooperate with surveillance, and operate within a system that centers an untrained and inexperienced actor who can deny accommodation requests. Oftentimes, this accommodation request denial or acceptance may in fact hinge on additional disclosure.

Naming and Framing: The Politics of Disability Language

Stigma and the disabled bodymind

To understand the power of language surrounding disability studies and crip theory, we must first understand the stigma that they respond to. Stigma plays no small part in the treatment of disabled people. The able-bodied experience is temporary, as many individuals experience disability in older age (CDC, 2025). Most people have a subconscious, rather than a conscious understanding of this, which creates some aversion to disabled bodyminds (Wendell, 1996).

Along with this, the expectations of bodies as only being useful or desirable so long as they are able, productive, and perfect is pervasive (Kafer, 2013). Thus, “To the nondisabled, people with

disabilities and people with dangerous or incurable illnesses symbolize, among other things, imperfection” (Wendell, 1996, p. 60). Further, the disabled bodymind is often stripped of humanity in the media, while some aspects of media go so far as to label wheelchair users as “drooling” and “mishappen” (Kafer, 2013), while other media tropes display the idea of the ‘super cripp’, the disabled person who overcomes and transcends disability, outperforming everyone in the room and providing inspiration porn for able-bodied audiences (Longmore, 2003). In this large stirring pot of stigma, the language used to describe disabled people becomes a focal point of critical disability scholarship, as non-disabled populations rely heavily on language to envision futurities (or lack thereof) for disabled people.

Person-first language is a practice that shifts how we discuss people and disabilities. This movement began in the 1970s (Best et al., 2022) with the intention of avoiding defining someone entirely by their disability, as disability carries (or carried) heavy stigma. When using person-first language to refer to someone with a disability, the structure of the sentence is 'person + disability' rather than 'disability + person' (e.g., "person with diabetes" as opposed to "diabetic person"). However, disabled activists have pushed against person-first language in recent years, advocating for identity-first language (e.g., "disabled person" rather than "person with a disability"). The push for identity-first language comes from critical disability studies, which treats disability not as a condition to be softened linguistically but as a meaningful part of who a person is — an identity to be claimed. As Best and colleagues (2022) note, identity-first language is "grounded in the diversity model" and "recognizes that disability is part of the person and is not a derogatory term" (p. 127).

Critical Disability Studies is a field of study that has arisen from movements for the rights and inclusion of disabled people, dating back to the 1950s (Temple, 2025), and began to

emerge as a critical field in the 1980s (Garland-Thomson, 2013). Disability studies are often referred to as *Critical Disability Studies*. The word 'critical' is used to differentiate disability studies, which seek to achieve social transformation and accommodation for disabled people, from the study of disability as a medical phenomenon requiring intervention (Garland-Thomson, 2013).

This work recognizes the humanity of disabled people by demonstrating a shift in thought rather than in sentence structure and thus will use identity-first language. This should not be mistaken as an assertion that all disabled folk feel comfortable with identity-first language. Rather, I use identity-first language because it aligns with the social model of disability, and I find it preferable as a disabled practitioner.

Critical disability studies: Social, interdisciplinary, participatory

Disability studies have fought long and hard to define its borders since its first publications in the 80's. However, for the purpose of this work, it is important to note that critical disability studies are social, interdisciplinary, and participatory (Ferguson, 2012). As was previously mentioned, disability studies recognized that the definitions and limitations of disabled identity gain meaning and exclusion from societal structures surrounding it, both in liminal and physical settings (Jones, 1996; Kafer, 2013). These socially maintained barriers can take many forms, such as inaccessible building design, inaccessible curricula in the classroom, or social norms that are difficult or impossible to achieve for disabled people. The social model rejects the medical model, which views disability purely as a medical phenomenon that needs to be treated or cured. However, many scholars have pointed out that both the social model and the medical model leave out key aspects of the disabled experience. The social model excludes the lived realities of disability, such as chronic pain and the need for medication, that social

accommodation cannot adjust for. For example, no restructuring of society can make a Type 1 diabetic not need insulin, for example. However, the medical model disregards disability as an identity that is created and exaggerated by structures that exclude certain bodies and brains. It is for these reasons that Allison Kafer (2013) proposed the political/relational model, which recognizes disability as a lived physical reality that is also highly politicized and defined by the oppressions and exclusions that come as a result of the ableist context that the disabled body-mind is situated in.

Further, disability studies are interdisciplinary, as it challenges ableist ontologies as they exist in all sectors— “Disability studies demands that the study of disability be as broad as culture itself. We must draw upon the tools and traditions of all our ways of knowing about the world” (Ferguson, 2012). In this work, Critical Disability Studies met the study of critical interpretive organizational communication, in the claim that ableism is a form of violence which is “woven through organizational processes and dynamics” (Lockwood-Harris, 2019, p. 44). This work recognized that the obsession with documentation and validation of need, conjoined with the lack of training given to instructors to navigate these disclosures, creates cyclical and traumatic narratives within academia, defined by instructor confusion resulting in student exhaustion and withdrawal as an example of organizational narratives which privilege the interest of the institution over the interest of the student (Mumby, 1987).

Finally, disability studies are participatory, meaning that critical disability studies benefit from the participation and contributions of scholars who possess a disability standpoint (Ferguson, 2012). I have physical and mental disabilities, and my viewpoint comes from being both a disabled student and a disabled instructor and researcher.

Crip Theory, Queer Theory, and the Work of Queering

Crip theory, in tandem with critical disability studies, posits that intersecting identities and surrounding socio-cultural norms also inform the meanings assigned to the disabled bodymind, and depict what accommodations will be granted. Crip theory states that disability is an identity that intersects with other identities such as race, gender, class, and queerness. Further, crip theory draws on queer theory, recognizing that the process of disclosing disability has much in common with ‘coming out’ as queer. However, this work recognizes that similarly to coming out as queer, disclosing one’s disability status is not always an empowering experience. In the context of forced or coerced disclosure in the pursuit of equity, queer and crip scholars write that “activist traditions of disclosure might interact with the systems of oppression they are seeking to challenge” (Reeders, 2019).

Further, in *My Body My Closet*, Ellen Samuels discusses the similarities and tensions which crop up between ‘passing’ and ‘not passing’ as disabled or queer, which then influence disclosure or ‘coming out’ decisions. In both contexts there are times at which ‘passing’ as the ‘non’-- in this case, non-disabled/not-queer provides a level of safety. However as Samuels notes, especially in the context of needing accommodations, passing as non-disabled can be dangerous, as the body which does not announce itself to be disabled visually is readily interrogated in public spaces by strangers. For example, Samuel writes about a man named Jones who used a guide dog who eventually had to start using a white cane which he did not actually need in order to more convincingly disclose his blindness. This was due to the overwhelming amount of harassment he experienced concerning his use of a guide dog, as he passed as sighted otherwise. While Samuels notes that disability-- much like queerness can be

an identity which is disclosed with pride, it is also true that queerness, like disability, is an identity which one can have 'outed', suppressed, or coerced from them in exchange for safety from neo-liberalist structures like the academy or the workplace.

Finally, crip theory marries critical disability studies and queer theories by seeing disability as something that is fluid and ever-changing. A site of questioning, rather than a site of strict and rigid answers (Kafer, 2013). The need to merge critical disability and queer studies has been acknowledged for decades due to the shared experiences that disabled people and queer people have such as isolation, discrimination, harassment, assault, and— as this research focuses on- excessive pathologization which informed forced institution arrest, and denial of access to public space (Schweik, 2010), (Sherry, 2004). Further, as Nancy Ordover reveals in her book *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (2003), these eugenicist schools of thought found home in American academia through pro-eugenicist training materials such as the 'Pioneer Project,' which taught pre-medical students about the importance of good breeding and selective sterilization as late as the 1950's. Ordover furthers that the history of queer liberation and institutionalization is deeply entangled with the history of eugenics, as early attempts to create legal protections for queer people involved attempts at proving that queerness was genetic.

These ideologies were nurtured on the exact grounds on which this study was situated. Further, the marriage of ableist, anti-queer and anti-woman ideologies was still shaking the grounds when this study took place, as on the home campus of this study, all DEI initiatives were stripped away, the LGBTQ+ center was forcibly shut down, instructors were forced to remove their pronouns from their email signatures, and on a national level many woman-dominated degrees such as social work, nursing, therapy, and counseling were re-classified and left out of being 'professional degrees', limiting their eligibility for federal funding, and international students faced higher and higher levels of surveillance, visa revocation, and full on bans from the

country. It is in this context of rigid structure that this study turned toward queer theory's concept of 'queering' as a verb. Michael Warner wrote that "Queer gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual." Similarly, Whittington (2012) defines that in the academic sense, when queer is used as a stance, it is meant "as a kind of position against normative or dominant modes of thought" (p. 1). To queer then, means to actively take part in that positioning. Stephanie Youn (2020) specifies that to queer communication studies, we must focus on "ambiguity, contradiction, hybridity, fluidity, and sitting in uncertainty." (p. 3).

As normative structures become stronger and more exaggerated, queer theory informs the deconstruction of the accommodations process. As accommodations processes currently stand, accommodations are withheld until both instructor and institution have eliminated all traces of ambiguity or confusion regarding the students' corporeality and related need for accommodation. A queering of this approach asks what the accommodations process could look like if accommodation could be granted in the presence of ambiguity.

From Compliance to Care: Empathy and Access in Pedagogy

Ableism and the well-intentioned instructor

Throughout the creation of this work, I was advised to keep in mind the well-meaning instructor, as that may very well be most instructors. This work had the potential to leave the well-intended instructor feeling criticized or challenged. At the time of writing this, I was a graduate instructor teaching public speaking. I cared deeply about my students. Despite this, I had fumbled accommodations negotiations with students and created spaces in conversations where my students felt the need to divulge their exact diagnosis or explain their difficulty with the curriculum. Was this ableist? Yes. Did this define me as an educator? Hopefully not.

However, this work cannot and should not be tasked with managing the egos or self-doubts of

well-intentioned educators. The goal here is not to indict individual instructors but to name the structural conditions that make even well-intentioned educators into sites of ableist harm.

Ableism can be defined as “stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities” (Bogart & Dunn, 2019, p. 650). This work posited that the consistent use of power imbalances, intentional or not, that created unnecessary disclosures, while simultaneously failing to train the disclosers to either avoid or respond to these disclosures, is a form of ableism. Rocco and Collins (2017) point out that “students with disabilities disclose more personal information than students without disabilities to lay the groundwork for asking permission to do things that students without disabilities take for granted” (p. 332-333).

Trauma-Informed Practice and the Question of Necessary Disclosure

For this reason, I urge educators to turn their best intentions toward trauma-informed educational practices. As Liasidou points out, trauma and disability are often intertwined. While disability is not trauma, disability can create trauma. Trauma can also inform disability (Liasidou, 2021). As Price (2024) points out, the accommodations process itself can create trauma, as the validation stages can often involve in-depth descriptions of intimate symptoms and sometimes even demonstrations of physical impairments. Further, the act of disclosing personal information solely to have an accommodation negotiation fail can be traumatic. As Rocco and Collins (2017) note, while failed negotiation can sometimes lead to further attempts at advocacy, it can also lead to isolation, self-blame, total withdrawal, or complaints on an institutional or legal level. Trauma-informed practice works to prevent traumatizing or re-traumatizing students by critically examining and eliminating aspects of the curricula that may prompt disclosures of trauma (Carello, 2015). Not all disclosure is inherently traumatic. As has

been stated, some disclosure is involuntary or necessary, as it informs the way that accommodations are implemented. However, there is space to explore what disclosure is necessary and what is not. For example, initial disclosure is usually required for accommodations to be granted. However, there is room to roam between the disclosure required to grant accommodations and the disclosure required to help an instructor empathize with a student's corporeality enough to validate that student's need during accommodation negotiation. The current centering of untrained instructors seems to require both disclosures and more.

Taken together, the literature points to a set of interlocking problems: an accommodations process structured around repeated forced disclosure, a legal framework that protects against discrimination without guaranteeing access, a scholarly tradition that positions disability as the inverse of higher education, and a pedagogical culture in which well-intentioned instructors are left without training to navigate the very conversations the system asks them to hold. These problems do not sit at the level of individual instructor behavior. They are structural, and they are reproduced each semester in the negotiations that take place between disabled students and the instructors tasked with accommodating them.

This study sought to intervene in those negotiations through a simulation-based training grounded in critical disability studies, crip theory, and queer theory. Specifically, this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do instructors understand and respond to student disability disclosures in instructional settings?
2. In what ways does a simulation-based training impact instructors' awareness of their communicative role in disability accommodation processes?

3. What narratives do graduate instructors construct about empathy, responsibility, and power in the context of accommodation negotiations?

The following chapter details the methods used to address these questions, including the design of the simulation-based training, the data collection and analysis procedures, and my positionality as a disabled researcher conducting research rooted in my own lived experience.

Chapter 3 - Methods

This qualitative study was grounded in the critical interpretive traditions of organizational communication and informed by critical disability and queer theories. Specifically, this training centered on Kafer's political/relational model of disability, as it did not merely seek to mimic the corporeality of disability among its participants; rather, it sought to emulate the politicized nature of disability by giving participants the experience of navigating accommodations from the student's perspective. Further, this training was informed by queer theory as it encouraged participants to embrace ambiguity within accommodation negotiations— where traditional academic structure calls for rigid documentation and repeated validation of need. Data were sourced from written responses generated during the training and from follow-up interviews conducted several weeks after training. All data were coded and then analyzed for common themes. This research was highly participatory, as it drew on my lived experiences as a disabled student and instructor and involved real-time disclosure to participants by me.

This work sought to accomplish the following three goals:

1. Create awareness of disability as it is experienced politically/relationally amongst first year instructors
2. Establish clearer understandings of instructor's communicative role in the accommodations process
3. Encourage instructors to approach accommodations negotiations in a way that accepts varying levels of ambiguity, centering student need above instructor validation.

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval, this study drew on two phases of data collection. Together, the resulting datasets offer complementary perspectives on how the training shaped instructors' understanding of accommodation negotiations and their subsequent classroom practices.

Simulation-based training

The first phase of data collection took place during the simulation-based training itself, which I piloted at the beginning of the semester with a cohort of first-year graduate teaching assistants in a media and communication program at a large Midwestern land-grant institution. Nine participants took part in the training, and three forms of written data were collected: (1) email responses to Student A's initial accommodation request, (2) reflexive free writing completed after each phase of the training, and (3) journal reflections on the overall training experience. Together, these written artifacts captured participants' immediate responses to the scenarios and their evolving thinking as they moved through the simulation.

The training opened with a brief lecture on disability, the stigma surrounding disability, and the history of access to higher education for disabled students in the United States, followed by an introduction to Rocco and Collins' (2017) model of the accommodations process.

Participants then entered a simulation grounded entirely in my lived experiences as a disabled student and instructor, though they did not initially know the scenarios were drawn from my life. The simulation began with an accommodation request from a student referred to as Student A. After writing email responses to Student A, participants engaged in a reflexive free-write recording what they were thinking and feeling as they composed their responses.

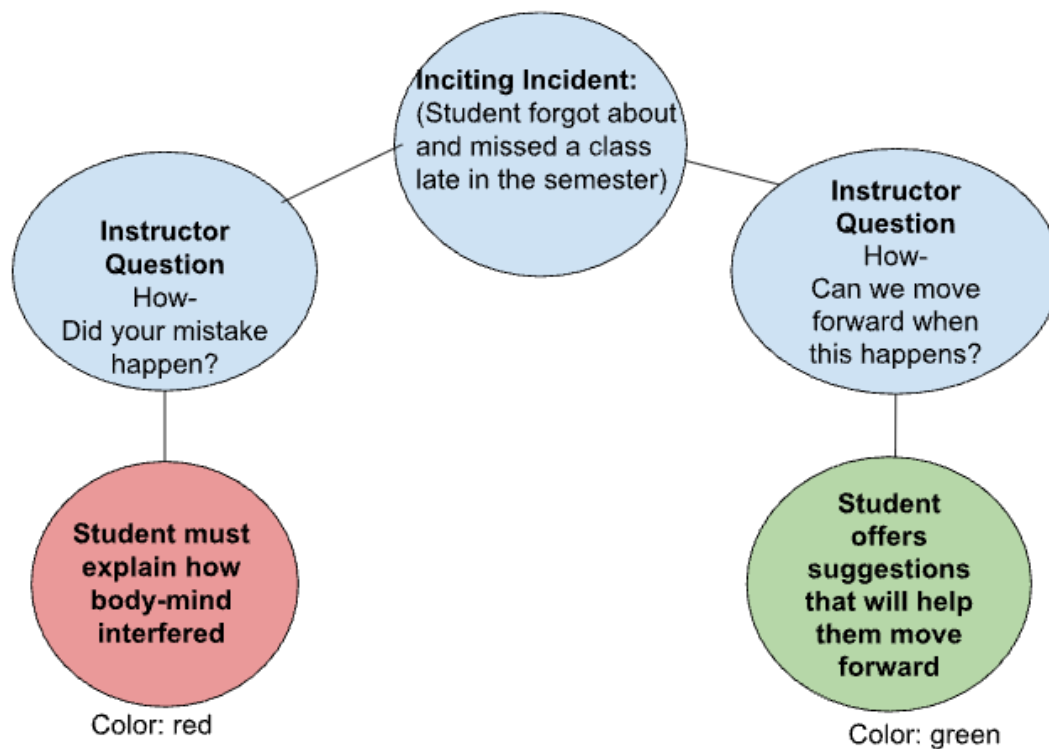
The simulation then shifted perspective. Participants were given Student A's point of view, a description of the physical and mental corporealities that shaped the original email, and

asked to respond to an instructor's email written by another participant. Pseudonyms were used to prevent participants from identifying the author of the email they received. After writing their response as Student A, participants completed a second reflexive free write about the experience of receiving the instructor's email and responding from Student A's perspective.

Following the simulation, I disclosed to participants that Student A was me and recounted my original experience of the scenario. I then introduced the conversation tree model (see Figure 2), a visual tool designed to help instructors focus on accommodation rather than deficit-based explanation during negotiation conversations. I walked participants through how the instructor in the original scenario erred and why that error was easy to make, drawing on the fact that my disabilities are largely invisible to underscore how quickly ableist assumptions can form in the absence of visible evidence.

The final phase of the training addressed disclosures that students make of their own volition, without pressure. Drawing again on my experiences as an instructor, I discussed the potential power of mutual disclosure and offered a brief set of practices for signaling solidarity with disabled students, including using vocalized self-empathy for instructors who do not share a disability identity with their students.

Figure 2: Participant conversation tree model



Following this, the training provided key language participants with the language they could use in future accommodation negotiations. The written email responses and reflections were collected, transcribed, and analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019). Participants were contacted for semi-structured interviews several weeks later. Five participants responded. These interviews were also recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed.

Semi-structured interviews

The second phase of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted six weeks after the initial training. Of the nine participants who attended the training, five agreed to be interviewed. Semi-structured interviews allow for conversational flow and the emergence of follow-up questions, and Berg and Lune (2012) note that they are particularly effective in

helping researchers understand the social world and how lived experiences are expressed through participants' own words.

Participants from the training were invited to be interviewed six weeks after the training concluded. This temporal gap was intentional: it allowed participants to reflect not only on the training itself but also on how it may have shifted their classroom practices and their thinking about accommodation negotiations with real students. Five participants responded and completed interviews.

Interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Audio files were transcribed verbatim, and I checked for accuracy, producing a total of 54 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participant anonymity.

Analysis

All data were transcribed and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) to identify themes in response to the study's three research questions:

1. How do instructors understand and respond to student disability disclosures in instructional settings?
2. In what ways does a simulation-based training impact instructors' awareness of their communicative role in disability accommodation processes?
3. What narratives do graduate instructors construct about empathy, responsibility, and power in the context of accommodation negotiations?

Reflexive thematic analysis was a strong fit for this study for two reasons. First, it treats the researcher as an analytic instrument rather than an objective observer, which aligns with the critical interpretive and participatory commitments of this work. Second, it is well-suited to

smaller datasets in which depth of engagement with the data matters more than breadth (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. In Phase 1, I familiarized myself with the data through transcription and repeated readings of the full corpus, making initial notes on patterns and points of interest. In Phase 2, I generated initial codes inductively, staying close to participants' own language where possible. In Phase 3, I searched for themes by collating codes into larger analytic categories and gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Phase 4 involved reviewing themes against both the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole, with several candidate themes collapsing into others or being split apart as the analysis developed. In Phase 5, I refined and named the themes, developing theme names intended to do analytic work (e.g., "Irrespons(ability)") rather than simply describe content. Phase 6 was the production of the analytic narrative presented in Chapter 4.

Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2019) framing, his process was recursive rather than strictly linear. I moved back and forth between phases as the analysis developed, returning to earlier data as later themes came into focus. Reflexive thematic analysis treats the researcher's subjectivity as an analytic resource rather than a source of contamination to be controlled (Braun & Clarke, 2019), a commitment that aligned with the participatory traditions of critical disability studies and with my own positionality as a disabled researcher analyzing data generated from a training grounded in my lived experience.

The accommodation decisions in this study were narrowed down to options such as whether the participants would allow Student A the opportunity to do work in a different format and still earn the same amount of points, and gather the same amount of information- this should not be conflated with the ultimate standard for creating equity. Ultimately, further trainings

would teach participants to eliminate barriers that were inherent in the scenario such as needing to be present in class to access information. This falls in line with Universal Design for Learning as presented by Myer, Rose and Gordon, (2014). However, for the time constraints present in this study, giving smaller accommodation decisions for the participants to choose from and for me to measure provided more space to analyze the data influencing those decisions which was gathered from written reflections and follow up interviews.

Establishing trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this study was pursued through three of Tracy's (2010) "Eight Big-Tent Criteria" for qualitative quality: credibility, sincerity, and resonance. *Credibility* was supported through my sustained engagement with the data across multiple coding cycles and through the triangulation of training artifacts with follow-up interview data. *Sincerity* was pursued through transparent reflexive practice, described in the following section. *Resonance* was supported by grounding the analysis in detailed participant quotations and by returning to the theoretical commitments of critical disability studies, crip theory, and queer theory at each stage of interpretation.

Reflexivity

I approached this study first as a trans, disabled learner, second as a trans, disabled researcher, and third as a disabled instructor. The order in which these are listed indicates their influence in this project, with the strongest being my experiences as a disabled learner and the weakest being my experiences as an instructor. The scenario that I used for the training was incredibly foundational in creating me as a critical disability scholar, as it gave me the subjective experience to bring to this research. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2019) work on the strengths

of subjectivity in research, my experiences navigating accommodation negotiations gave me an eye for analyzing these negotiations, which I documented in the data.

However, that is not to say that my subjectivity and emotional investment in the data did not complicate my positioning as an analytical tool. Student A's narrative was one that I naturally felt protective of, making it difficult for me at times to see past the defensiveness of my own story. The difficulty with insider perspective is described well by Berger (2015): "In addition to the aforementioned benefits, an insider's position and familiarity carry the risks of blurring boundaries; imposing one's own values, beliefs, and perceptions by a researcher; and projection of biases" (p. 224). Along with this, the participants in this study were my peers, thus heightening the defensiveness and shock I initially felt toward some of these responses.

To further complicate matters, the study was situated in a highly tense context regarding diversity training of any kind, as DEI had been slashed completely, meaning my training needed to have the word 'diversity' removed before it could clear IRB review. Further, universities around the country were experiencing budget cuts, the LGBTQ+ center on the host campus was forced to shut down, my university demanded that we take pronouns out of our email signatures, and just six days before my training took place, Charlie Kirk was shot and killed on a college campus in Utah. Within 24 hours, a transgender person was blamed in connection with his death. I did not feel safe walking or driving home from my campus for weeks leading up to, during, or after data collection or analysis, as protesters lined the streets I used to drive on in mourning and celebration of Charlie Kirk. Further, Trump's crackdown on immigration led to an uptick in VISA revocations for international students. Many of my peers and participants in the study, whom I respected very much, were also undoubtedly feeling the weight of these pressures closing in. It was in this hotbed of tension, empathy, and fear that I was trying to serve as an

analytical tool. If there was ever a time for me to feel defensive of my and my peers' right to exist within the academy, it was now, and those tensions were present as I interpreted this data.

First and foremost, I tried to practice humility as a methodological tool, keeping in mind my own fallibility as an instructor. In order to do this, I reminded myself often that this project was born out of an interaction in which I, despite my years of experience as a disabled learner, accidentally prompted unnecessary disclosure from a student during my first semester teaching. Despite my years of bitter declarations that I would never replicate my trauma, I did within a matter of weeks as a new instructor- prompting the question: "If I just did it, how can I expect anyone else to avoid it?"

Second, reflexivity as methodology was necessary. I was incredibly honest with myself and those advising me on this project about what I was experiencing and how that may be informing my analysis. This fell in line with Finlay's (2002) description of using introspection and self-reflection "as research tools to enable researchers to become aware of the emotional investment they have in the research concerned" (p. 216). Further, drawing on Braun and Clarke (2002), I learned to interpret feelings of defensiveness, anger, or frustration as invitations to reread the data. This habit came about early on in data processing, as I struggled to code one particular email response to Student A as anything other than 'condescending'. I read it multiple times and became more confident in this verdict. I imagined Student A, 19-year-old me receiving that response, and felt my blood boil. Finally, I brought the response to a committee member who asked me, "Okay, why is it condescending? What else could it be?"

Thus, my heightened emotional responses became invitations to dive deeper. To analyze it further, I ask myself: "Did the participant really say that? If they did, what was that in response to? Am I really seeing the whole picture right now?" If further investigation did not yield a more

nuanced response, I sought second opinions, circling back to Finlay (2002) again, as they highlight that multiple subjective interpretations are preferable to shying away from subjectivity for fear of subjectivity itself.

Third, I maintained participant identity until the last editing stages of this project as an empathetic tool. Until I was completely done with the analysis, I kept all of the participants' original names (being careful not to let anyone not approved by the IRB see my work). I chose to keep participants' original names because this helped me maintain the humanity and identity of my peers in a way that pseudonyms would not have. By keeping my participants' original identities until the final draft, I had the constant reminder not only of who I was writing about, but also of our shared context. This, along with reminders from my committee, helped me engage in critical empathy of the systems that influenced the responses that participants produced in this data set, rather than criticizing the participants themselves.

Finally, my stance as a disabled researcher was imperative to this study because my disclosure affected not only my experience as a researcher and analyst but also the outcomes of the training. The fact that my disabilities are invisible, and thus were only claimable once I chose to disclose them, had a major impact on the study itself. I used my disclosure as a rhetorical tool that influenced both the results of the study and my emotional investment in it. My disclosure of disability served as what Kerschbaum (2014) described as a counternarrative. I used my story not only to challenge the pre-existing narratives about disability that may have been present in the participants, but also those that were present when I lived the experience myself. Further, my disclosure also reclaimed my identity as a disabled scholar in this work, placing my disability as a vital aspect to the success of my work rather than a hindrance to my overall success. This personal and professional reframing was important to recognize because it also reframed how I approached my analysis. By turning my disability disclosure into a rhetorical tool, I simultaneously reclaimed control of my narrative and then felt the crash

of losing control of my narrative and identity when the data revealed responses that elicited a negative response. This was something I needed to be very aware of and reflexive about, as the disclosure was intimate yet also the centerpiece of this work.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study, organized by the three research questions that guided the analysis. Each research question is addressed through a set of themes developed from the written responses and reflections collected during the training and the follow-up interviews conducted six weeks later. Together, these themes describe how instructors understood and responded to student disability disclosures, how the simulation-based training shifted their awareness of their communicative role in the accommodations process, and the narratives they constructed about empathy, responsibility, and power in accommodation negotiations. Throughout the chapter, participant quotations are presented at length to preserve the texture of instructors' thinking and to allow the data to do its own interpretive work.

Research Question #1: How do instructors understand and respond to student disability disclosures in instructional settings?

Analysis of the written responses collected during training and the interview data revealed the following themes: (1) Accommodation requests and emotional awareness, and (3) Not disabled. Not a doctor. Not an advocate.

Accommodation requests and emotional awareness

The first theme, *Accommodation Requests and Emotional Awareness*, names a pattern visible across participants' written responses and interviews: instructors who recognized disability disclosures as emotionally charged encounters, for both student and instructor, moved more readily toward accommodation. This theme captures the relationship between an instructor's awareness of their own emotional response and their orientation toward the student making the request.

As a reminder, Student A was eligible for flexible attendance and deadlines. Participants varied in whether they extended the full accommodation Student A requested. Those who did share a consistent pattern in their written reflections: positive feeling toward the disclosure. Maria writes, "I felt passionate and happy at the same time. Passionate because I was ready to help Student A with their needs, without making them feel bad."

Maria's reflection does two things at once. First, it reveals an awareness that disability disclosure and accommodation requests can create negative experiences for the student — Maria is preemptively trying to avoid making Student A feel bad. That awareness points to a deeper recognition of factors such as power dynamics, which will be explored in later themes. Second, and perhaps more striking, Maria is articulating her own emotional state with precision: passionate, happy, and oriented toward care. Her awareness of the emotional gravity of Student A's situation appears to be grounded in her awareness of her own emotional response. The two forms of awareness, self-directed and other-directed, are not separate practices in Maria's reflection; they are mutually constitutive.

Another participant, Celeste, noted in her interview that when she was disclosed to, she felt shocked and honored when a student disclosed to her, "you see me as someone that you can share that kind of information, which is an honor." This response has some space to unpack, as the participant seemed to grapple with the intimacy of disclosing disability. This points to the fact that again, instructors are aware that disability disclosure is inherently intimate. Celeste's acknowledgment that disability disclosure is an honor and a sign of trust also affirms what researchers such as Dolmage (2017) and Miller (2020) point out, which is that academia is inherently exclusionary toward disabled bodies and brains.

These responses are very hopeful, but they also hold a very compelling pattern. Participants who recognized accommodations requests and disclosures as vulnerable, stressful, and potentially emotionally damaging encounters were more likely to attempt to meet with Student A face-to-face. This pattern reveals that in the moment, participants who felt the gravity and emotional vulnerability of the disclosure or accommodation request also knew the power dynamic in which they existed (something which will be further explored in research questions #2 and #3) and turned to immediately create opportunities to connect. Not only did these participants provide opportunities for Student A to gain the points that they missed— they quickly moved to arrange a meeting with Student A during office hours or via zoom. There is a clear path in this data set that begins with emotional awareness and then moves to connecting with the student.

Not disabled. Not a doctor. Not an advocate.

The second theme, *Not Disabled. Not a Doctor. Not an Advocate.*, names three intersecting forms of confusion that moved instructors toward non-accommodation. Instructors in this study reported feeling unqualified to respond to student disability disclosures on three grounds: medical (not understanding the diagnosis), personal (not having lived experience with disability), and institutional (not knowing what accommodations their university recognized or offered). This theme captures how each form of confusion produced patterns of withdrawal from the accommodation process rather than engagement with it.

Amongst those who were counted as not accommodating were instructors who accommodated Student A with partial points, and instructors who refused Student A the chance to have any points. Partial points are counted as a form of non-accommodation in these findings due to the specific nature of this situation. While most accommodation situations do not exist on

a strict binary between accommodation or non-accommodation. This scenario is one where Student A is requesting to do the same amount of work in a modified manner. Thus, a deduction in points or a refusal of access to information points to a distinct inequity. Student A has accommodations for flexible attendance and flexible deadlines– granted to them because their disability sometimes prevents them from accessing the physical domain of the classroom in the way that their non-disabled peers do. Instructors who offered partial points offered them in exchange for conferencing one on one during office hours– a modified version of the activity Student A’s peers completed during the class period that Student A missed. If Student A is completing the same amount of work, but in a modified way, then the point deduction serves as punishment for Student A’s inability to access the classroom. This is classified as non-accommodation in these findings and subsequent discussion because this point deduction is evidence that despite Student A’s accommodation letter issued by the university, Student A is not receiving the same opportunities for success in the classroom that their non-disabled peers are.

This theme captures three sources of confusion which causes broad misunderstandings of disability– and therefore accommodations– that influence instructors toward non-accommodation. This theme highlights that current resources and training on handling student negotiation are likely to become part of this swirl of confusion and heightened emotion. This data set shows that misunderstandings of disability are rampant in instructors and it is directly affecting how we/they respond to student disclosure. Within this theme we can see that three different (mis)understandings of the word ‘disability’ develop in a way that instructors are acutely and anxiously aware of: medically, personally/not disabled, and institutionally.

First, in medical terms, participants who reacted negatively to student disclosure said they did not understand the corporealities and, by extension, the needs of their student. One participant, Alondra, brought up a medical example during her interview in which she was informed about a condition she had never heard of before: “I remember being like, I am not educated enough to know what to do for this.” Alondra described the student’s symptoms, then shrugged as she said it. This sentence does several things. First, it indicates that, as an instructor, Alondra felt overwhelmed by the disclosure due to a lack of knowledge about the condition being disclosed. Thus, she states that she is not educated enough- she is not a doctor- to do anything about this- to accommodate. We can see here that a medical (mis)understanding of disability has overwhelmed the instructor. In reaction, she acknowledges that she does not know what to do and turns to the worst-case scenario- non-accommodation.

Second, not disabled/personally, participants shared that they do not understand the corporealities- and by extension the needs of their student. During her interview, Carey shared her experience of receiving a disclosure from a previous university’s disability office on the second day of class which informed her that one of her students was partially blind and hard of hearing. She reported feeling horrified and, more importantly, unqualified to accommodate this student, as her university provided her no instruction in how to do so, and she had no personal experience with blind or deaf people. What she recounts about her next class period after the disclosure is noteworthy: “and then it did kind of, like, make me a little bit more nervous the next class period because I was thinking about: Is this working?” Carey notes that for the entire class period, she nervously wondered if the student could see and hear her. She has no real frame of reference to know because she herself does not have experience being blind or hard of hearing,

let alone accommodating someone who is. In the absence of guidance on best practices, Carey is shooting in the dark about the efficiency of the accommodations she is attempting to provide.

Finally, *not an advocate* — the institutional form of confusion — names a pattern in which participants lacked basic knowledge about what their institution's accommodations office recognized as a disability and what accommodations it could offer. In stories where the student who disclosed did not yet have accommodations, participants questioned whether the disclosed disability would even qualify. They lacked knowledge of the very system they were trained to direct students toward. Returning to Alondra's earlier story: the student she had been describing did not have accommodations on file, and when Alondra attempted to refer the student to the accommodations office, she told them, "I was like, I don't really know what kind of accommodation would best help you." While Alondra's uncertainty began with a lack of understanding of the student's condition, her lack of knowledge about available accommodations is worth examining on its own terms. Because Alondra did not know what accommodations existed, she could not meaningfully connect the student with resources, which overrides the already limited training most universities provide, training that typically advises instructors simply to refer students with concerns to the accommodations office.

Another participant, Ese, shows an intersection of all three misunderstandings, as she struggled to describe the disability that was disclosed, struggled to define whether or not the disability disclosed counted as a disability that could be accommodated, and shares that she was doubtful of the student's ability to function in the classroom at all:

I don't really know if that's, that's in line with disability, like disability. But then I have, is it abnormal headaches or something. I was thinking maybe....the students wouldn't be

able to maybe... what accumulate whatever thing I'm going to say in class as a result of the person's problem.

Prior to the training, Ese experienced a myriad of misunderstandings surrounding disability and accommodation. Ese's response to Student A's request for accommodation read as follows:

Hello Student, Thank you for reaching out to me. However, as a student it is mandatory for you to attend all classes regardless of your concern, it is somehow cool to miss one class but it shouldn't be consistent in the other classes. Also, I will be help you by providing the necessary information and send them to you in email to be able to catch up with the class as it contains salient information about the final project. Do well not to miss any upcoming classes. Thank you. Best, Ms. Ese

Ese was not disabled, not a doctor, and not an advocate; in the absence of any of the three, Student A's request became a lecture on attendance rather than a negotiation about access. In this theme, we see that the word "disability" reveals a cavern of misunderstanding on multiple levels between the instructor and the student. It is important to note that in this cavern of unknown created between discloser and disclosee by a lack of training, the only person that can bridge the gap is the student. In instances where the gap is not closed, instructors experience high discomfort and at times turn that discomfort outwards— expecting that the student be unable to succeed in their class based on their disability alone and taking no action to accommodate.

To answer research question #1: *How do instructors understand and respond to student disability disclosures in instructional settings?* Instructors have a heightened emotional response to student disclosure that is highly unpredictable— but very much impacts whether or not the student will be accommodated. There is an overwhelming amount of confusion and learned

helplessness amongst the instructors in this study in regards to how to respond to disability disclosure.

**Research Question #2: In What Ways Does a Simulation-Based Training
Impact Instructors' Awareness of Their Communicative Role in Disability
Accommodation Processes?**

An analysis of the data brought the following three themes: *Decenter the teacher*. Participants reported decentering themselves and taking on a more 'student-centric' approach to accommodations. *Teach me how to accommodate*. In their interviews, participants in this training communicated a need for additional training concerning accommodations. *Accommodators and instructors, not investigators*. After this training, instructors allowed greater ambiguity in students' communication during accommodation negotiations, finding that asking for detailed explanations felt invasive.

Decenter the Teacher.

The first theme under this research question, *Decenter the Teacher*, captures a shift participants reported after the training: a move away from placing their own judgments, schedules, and emotional responses at the center of accommodation decisions, and toward a more student-centered orientation. This theme traces how the training's layered design, which engaged instructors first as central actors in the accommodations process, then positioned them as Student A, and finally revealed my own disability, disrupted the self-centering habits that the existing culture of academia rewards.

In the post-training interviews, participants noted a strong shift in their approach to accommodation: a decentering of themselves. Ailbe, a first-semester graduate teaching assistant

who had already begun noticing the emotional dynamics of accommodation conversations in their own classroom, offered an observation that situates the importance of this shift well:

I can feel from several of my students when I have talked to them about some sort of accommodation that they need, whether it's related to disability or just life circumstances, I can feel the sense that they have to validate themselves. That they have to, like, prove that this is actually an accommodation that they need. And I think that's stemming from a very real presence of the inverse perspective of saying that teacher perception of accommodation or administrator perception of disability is determinative of what is valid and what deserves an accommodation.

Ailbe's awareness of their student's emotional labor displays an awareness of the power dynamic inherent in the accommodation negotiation process, which is a significant testament to the challenge that accommodation trainings face when attempting to take on a student-centric approach. Per the written structure of the ADA (1990), accommodations are often left to the discretion of the instructor who determines how reasonable an accommodation is based on its interference with course curriculum. As a result, accommodation negotiation has been theorized to become a process in which a student is tasked with 'proving' need. Ailbe's observation of this tension suggests that this power dynamic is palpable— even to an instructor who is in their first semester of teaching in higher academia. Ailbe only needed approximately 8 weeks as an instructor to make this observation. This suggests that not only is the culture present, but it is also prominent.

One participant, Alondra, who chose not to accommodate, wrote in her reflection during the training that she felt that Student A's reason for missing class and need for accommodations was "not a strong reason for going out of my way as a professor to adjust my schedule." Student

A wrote in their email that they missed class because they forgot that they had class. When situating Student A's absence in context, it's important to remember that Student A was under high physical and mental stress, which exacerbated their chronic amnesia, which led to them forgetting they had class. However, the simple explanation (e.g., "I forgot I had class.") alongside Student A's university-issued accommodations for flexible attendance were not a strong enough reason for missing class. The question becomes: what should the email have said? It is in this area that forced disclosure, or as Ailbe called it, "the need to validate need," appears. The instructor, in this case, Alondra, is not interpreting Student A's email as a valid request warranting an adjustment to her schedule. Now, Student A must either accept the answer given or figure out how to establish proof of need.

This judgment call comes from a mix of "annoyance and empathy" for Alondra. This annoyance is something that Student A is tasked with navigating. Instructor annoyance in these interactions can stem from a multitude of factors. In several cases, it is temporal. Alondra – along with all other participants in this study – is a graduate teaching assistant who is teaching two sections of a course to fund her graduate degree. They are undoubtedly limited in time and capacity. Frustration surrounding time constraints is a given. Alondra is not alone in this frustration, in fact, Ailbe mentions their own temporal constraint in their reflection, "How can I best assist this student without causing disruption to my schedule?" Ese expresses a frustration with the request for repetition of information that Student A missed- a task that takes time "I felt that it isn't appropriate to repeat information that I have discussed with the entire class again." In a culture that completely centers the instructors' judgment of what is a reasonable request, Student A is automatically tasked with not only justifying their need, but also staying in their instructors' good graces while doing so. On the other hand, Alondra is by no means a monster.

She notes that she also feels empathy, because “college can be stressful and humans aren’t perfect.”

Alondra’s empathy could be helpful if Student A is willing to disclose, and also very experienced at advocating for themselves. However, not all disabled students have positive or successful experiences with self-advocacy. Further, the possibility that a student discloses personal information in a bid for empathetic understanding from an instructor only to remain unaccommodated is ever present. While the role that instructor empathy plays in accommodation will be explored much further in research question three, the focus here is that an error was made because the instructor was focused on her emotions, regarding the request to alter her admittedly grueling schedule. When the instructor centers themselves— as the existing culture encourages— they can easily disregard requests for accommodation as unreasonable ‘strains’ on their schedule.

The simulation-based training disrupted this self-centering for several participants, encouraging them to take a more student-centric approach. When Alondra was asked what advice she would give to other instructors concerning navigating accommodations, she stated

I would say the first thing is it's not about you. It's about the student. So, like, whatever feeling you have, that's your feeling to have for yourself at a later time, it's in the moment, what is gonna be best for the student.

Alondra’s stance has clearly shifted, but there seem to be several reasons for it. Alondra states that she gave an answer that she “didn’t love.” She reflects that she felt that she knew too little about accommodations, was in a bad headspace, felt rushed to come up with an answer, and perhaps made a prejudiced call about Student A’s situation. Finally, she said that the training reminded her that “hey, you don’t always know the whole part of the situation.”

The training accomplished this in two ways. First, it allowed instructors to engage in their status as the most central points of the accommodations process and then placed them in the role of the student while simultaneously revealing the context that they did not originally know they were missing. Second, at each stage of this simulation, the participants were prompted to reflect on their thoughts and feelings, creating a space in which participants were aware of how their internal reactions guided their external actions.

Alondra is not alone in these feelings, as her fellow participant, Celeste, who also did not accommodate, reported in her written reflection during the training that she felt “Disappointed because I always remind them to send an email on issues that require absence in class.” Initially, her feelings echoed those of her peers: communication seems to have been missed or ignored. Frustration is present. However, Celeste’s interview uncovered something much deeper—

I have like way too much pain threshold that it has to be something really bad. I don't know what I consider really bad is definitely worse for someone else. And what is worse for someone else can be something I'm like, eh, I would actually just get through.

This initial reflection points out that perhaps, Celeste’s initial move to completely deny Student A any points was informed by a lack of empathy shown toward herself. If she was able to show up when she didn’t feel well, why couldn’t Student A? Celeste furthered that the training triggered a realization— she needed accommodations. She did not communicate this need for fear of disclosure. She states, “I don't communicate them out, but it would be nice to have somebody just understand even without communicating that.” She continued by stating, “where I'm from, it doesn't really matter if you have issues like this. You have to find a way.” Celeste shares that she does not accommodate herself and does not request accommodations; thus, pushing herself through pain and sickness instead. She states that this standard, which academia, her culture, and

she set for herself, influenced the standard she maintained for students prior to the training and informed the standard she employed when responding to Student A. The training shifted Celeste's approach to accommodation by giving her another standard, separate from herself, through my disclosure. Celeste stated in her interview that had I not disclosed that he was student A, she "would have held on to what I thought was right and appropriate." She explained that it was only after seeing a living, in-person example— a peer who needs accommodations that she understood. Upon seeing this example, she created a new standard, one divorced from herself:

I personally will be fine. But if I think about it like, you're my friend, you're my sister, you're my brother, how would I actually treat you? And how would I expect that you feel or how would I want you to feel? So that helps me more than trying to put myself in your shoes." "It made me understand that I'm not just an instructor. I should be able to like accommodate these people differently.

Celeste stated that her strict standards are cultural and rooted in familial dynamics. These are personal, lived experiences that become instinct. Further, the centering of instructor judgement is deeply ingrained in academic culture. It is a lived and learned experience. The disclosure from a peer was successful in disrupting these cultural and familial narratives due to its intimate nature. By mixing information, simulation, and intimacy, the training itself became a lived experience that introduced new, living, breathing narratives to challenge the status-quo in which the instructor is the most important communicator.

This was also evident for Carey, a participant who chose not to accommodate, shared that the training reminded her that her students have a wide range of corporealities in her classroom. Carey shared that after the training, she became more lenient with time-related requests and worked to be more normative about accommodation negotiation. She states that the point in the

training in which I disclosed that I was Student A shifted her understanding, “it made me think about like, my own classes and like, peers who might have been in a similar situation, but like, either felt like they couldn't reach out to anyone or like, didn't know to do that.” She goes on to share that this created an understanding of her own privilege living without disability, which has shifted the way that she approaches the classroom culture. She now tries to center the classroom culture to be inclusive to as many bodies and brains as she can— rather than bodies and brains that are exactly like hers.

This theme demonstrates that the simulation-based training disrupted instructor-centric approaches. Ironically, this training did this by intentionally engaging instructors in their status as being most central and asking them to reflect. As can be seen through revelations from participants like Celeste, Carey, and Alondra, these reflexive practices made participants aware of the impact that their emotions and past experiences brought to their decision-making. Further, this training built on these reflexive practices by revealing Student A’s context and the intimate nature of disclosure by providing a real-life, in-the-moment disclosure from me. Finally, the training gave conversational alternatives that moved the instructor out of the center-stage and prioritized the needs of the student.

Teach Me How to Accommodate

The second theme under this research question, *Teach Me How to Accommodate*, captures participants' near-unanimous call for more training on how to navigate accommodation conversations with disabled students. Across the post-training interviews, participants named the same systemic gap: they are tasked with referring students to institutional resources and making in-the-moment accommodation decisions without meaningful preparation to do either. This theme traces how that gap shapes instructor confidence, produces a reluctance to admit

uncertainty, and leaves instructors to rely on pre-existing misunderstandings of disability when formal training is absent.

An analysis of the post-training interviews suggests that more training on navigating accommodation is not only needed but also wanted. Celeste remarked,

There are quite a number of people, so I think trying to help them change their mindsets would work, because, I mean, not everybody might want to, like, have a training and then get their minds changed just with one training. It has to be, like, something over time.

Celeste is pointing out a systemic gap here. Celeste's journey was one of challenging the deeply held cultural beliefs that developed over time and through lived experience. When she notes that people would be reluctant to change their minds, it is important to listen, as she noted a reluctance to shift her own belief during the training: "If you did not explain that afterward, I still felt like I would have held on to what I thought was right and appropriate." Further, this comment must be situated within context: the training would not, and currently, does not exist beyond this research. Because this training was conducted as research, it was not mandatory, and all nine participants were volunteers. Further, this training took place during a class session, which is usually devoted to helping the participants navigate their first semester as instructors in the academy. All of this suggests that the participants were open to learning, shifting, or improving how they navigated their roles as instructors. Celeste's comment speaks to what this training has not yet attempted- changing the approaches of professionals who have taught for decades. Professionals who have created their approach to navigating accommodation in the complete absence of training, which is further observed by Alondra, who states that further training about accommodation would make her feel more supported as an instructor,

I think that there should be a stronger training in place for all staff and faculty to help them in the process. Because I feel like you're kind of left in the dark at times with how to navigate those conversations and how to help those students.

Alondra's description of being left in the dark, especially regarding how to navigate the conversation, is important. As has been demonstrated in earlier findings, instructors are not pre-set with the right responses and are often limited in time and capacity regarding their ability to make accommodation decisions. This response highlights that, along with this, there is a layer of confusion present. A layer of confusion in an environment in which there is considerable pressure to be knowledgeable. While it is true that factors like money, race, gender, nationality, and ability are all valuable determinants of success in academia, nothing trumps the surface-level pageantry of knowledge present in the academy. Instructors are supposed to know the most stuff. If they do not even know the basic protocol for accommodations, their credibility or competence could be called into question. Alondra shares that prior to the training, as she fumbled in the dark, she struggled with admitting that she did not know what to do, "I hate being one of those people that has to say, I don't know....want to always have the answer, especially if I'm a leader in the room." Alondra's reluctance to say "I don't know" has two implications that can be detrimental to the accommodations process. First, as was seen in Celeste's example, in the absence of training, instructors rely on their pre-existing (mis)understandings of disability and accommodation. Second, in the absence of knowledge lies a potential for the embarrassment of not knowing—giving disabled students another instructor emotion to navigate in order to obtain accommodation.

In response, these participants simply want further training so that they can more effectively accommodate students, and they want that training to be specific. Ailbe wanted more

instruction on formatting links and slide decks for accessibility, including color contrast, alt text, and screen reader compatibility. They acknowledged that while converting all their material to be accessible will most certainly take additional time and labor, “that's something that's, like, going to pay dividends for me in the future.” Carey wanted scripts listing local and on-campus resources to send students to when they asked for help or disclosed an issue. These requests point to the fact that in their first six weeks of teaching, brand new graduate teaching assistants are encountering circumstances in which their materials are not accessible, in which a student approaches them and discloses a mental health concern, and they do not know what to say or do to fix the problem or where to direct the student. This means that despite the department’s recent push to make Canvas materials more accessible, the myriad mental health resources available, and the accommodations office, there is a huge systemic gap: the university is counting on instructors to refer students to these services while simultaneously not training them to do so. By exploring this theme, we find that this training, while helpful, is only the tip of the iceberg. There are major systemic gaps in instructor training that cannot be addressed by a single, voluntary 50-minute training session. For the instructors in this study to be fully equipped, major gaps in training need to be addressed. Currently, they are being relied upon to operate in a system with which they are unfamiliar. Participants in this study clearly view their communicative role in the accommodations process as important; and, though they were selected from a pool of people who wanted to improve, all of the instructors wanted additional training to improve the way they interacted with and accommodated disabled students in their classrooms. Further this theme suggests that perhaps, the participants who chose non-accommodation would have chosen differently with more adequate training.

Accommodators and Instructors, Not Investigators

The third theme under this research question, *Accommodators and Instructors, Not Investigators*, captures a shift participants described after the training: a move away from treating accommodation negotiations as occasions for gathering documentation and proof of need, and toward comfort with providing accommodation in the presence of ambiguity. Participants reported feeling less inclined to press students for detailed explanations of their disability, and more attuned to the intimate and potentially invasive dimensions of accommodation conversations. This theme traces how the training repositioned instructors within the accommodations process: not as investigators tasked with validating disability, but as educators tasked with accommodating it.

While participants were eager for more training, the training that they completed in this study was effective in shifting their information gathering in the moment. After the training, instructors found that they were more comfortable with ambiguity and less concerned with documentation or ‘proof of need’ during accommodation negotiation conversations. In the email where Student A requests to use their accommodation for flexible attendance due to missing a class, they are ambiguous in why they missed the class, stating that they forgot that they had a class on that day and time. As found in previous themes in this question, this struck some participants as a deficient answer. However, ambiguity seemed to be something more acceptable because of this simulation-based training, demonstrating a turn away from collecting documented reasons for absences or missed deadlines and a turn toward accommodation. One participant, Ailbe, communicated that before the training, accommodation negotiations were prone to becoming disclosure requirements:

I might have asked for like some more clarity on that. But then realizing that I'm like, well, it's not like that could very well be perceived as me saying that, like, I don't believe in your symptoms unless you can tell me what disease you have.

After the training, however, Ailbe was more mindful of this dynamic in their approach to accommodation conversations, which further enriched the student-centric orientation described in the previous theme: "That's not something that I need. And that's definitely not something that would be beneficial for the student."

Other participants noted a different shift in connection to the intimacy of disability disclosure. Ese notes that the training revealed to her that "we all have things like disabilities that we wouldn't want to share." This comment is of note in connection to the point of view that participants were given about Student A. It was made clear that a factor in Student A's disability is trauma. There is a level of intimacy revealed to the instructors that they are keenly aware that they are not communicatively equipped or entitled to in their role as instructors. If Student A had shared something with Ese that they did not want to, there is a possibility that Ese, in an attempt to follow protocol, becomes an invasive investigator and documenter of disability.

As a result of this discomfort with being an investigator, participants reported being open to providing accommodations in the presence was present, shifting their focus toward the goal at hand. Alondra, who previously described Student A's request as an inadequate reason for accommodation, described a shift in focus after the training: "what can I do to get you back into the classroom or at least get you back into the work is definitely how I think my mindset is shifted." Instead of focusing on whether the student has reasonable need, Alondra is now focusing on what the next actionable step is. This transforms Alondra from being an investigator,

or a documenter of medical symptoms, and back to the role for which she is employed— an educator.

Further, this training deliberately provided an example in which a student did need accommodation, but did not provide a detailed explanation beyond their accommodation letter. For example, Celeste, who emphasized in her written reflection that her frustration stemmed from communication errors, adopted a more relaxed approach to communicating about accommodations:

I was more at ease, like, okay, you're fine. Are you good now? Is everything okay? You can actually take the time off. And it just made me communicate better. Like, now I'm more empathetic. I was able to understand what he was trying to say and the reasons for his thing. Even if, like, I don't completely know what he was going through.

Celeste's comfort with the unknown is evidence that instructors need training in ambiguity to accept it in accommodation negotiation. Otherwise, ambiguity becomes an obstacle that students must overcome through intimate disclosure. As it has been seen throughout previous findings, participants in this study often relied on their understanding of the legitimacy of a student's need for accommodation when making judgment calls about whether or not to accommodate, causing a fixation on detail and documentation. The turn toward comfort in the unknown, accommodation in ambiguity is a massive pedagogical turn.

To answer research question #2: *In what ways does a simulation-based training impact instructors' awareness of their communicative role in disability accommodation processes?*

Theme #1: Decenter The Teacher suggests that this simulation-based training encourages instructors to decenter themselves by first, centering them in intentional reflexive practices such as prompted reflection in which they engaged in their emotional and mental processes to gain a

clearer view of how those guided their response to requests for accommodation; and second, providing them the context and viewpoint of who should be central in the accommodations process— the student. As a result, instructors reported consciously working to decenter themselves and take a ‘student-centric’ approach to accommodation negotiation. There is some room to question, however, the move to de-center already over-worked laborers within the theme De-Center The Teacher especially as it joins Teach Me How To Accommodate. The participants who are voicing frustrations about schedules are first year graduate teaching assistants. While it is admirable and hopeful that they are willing to do more labor to accommodate it is important to remember that they are already overworked, which is itself a likely source of their frustration. A real strain which participants voice in this theme and throughout the entire data set is being under-equipped and overwhelmed when facing disclosure and accommodation negotiation. De-Center the teacher is not arguing to de-center that struggle, it is arguing that that struggle was not created by the student who is requesting access to the curricula. Theme #2, Teach Me How to Accommodate, showed that there are massive discrepancies between the expectations placed on instructors to accommodate and refer students to the appropriate resources at their institutions and the training they receive to do so. In this theme, we see that instructors want to know how best to handle these situations and are willing to put in additional effort to accommodate; however, they need ongoing training to make this happen. Finally, in theme #3, Accommodators and Instructors, Not Investigators, this simulation-based training created comfort in ambiguity regarding accommodation requests. Instructors felt less need to gather exact details regarding a student’s need for accommodation, unless of course it affected the form or nature of the accommodation itself. This suggests that instructors became more aware of the intimate nature of

disability disclosure after witnessing such disclosures. Further, they shifted their focus from information gathering and documentation to solutions and accommodations.

Together, these themes suggest that research-based training creates greater self-awareness among instructors, students, and the institution. Instructors first reflect inward to realize that they must de-center their experience and re-center the student in need of accommodation. In the process, this simulation-based training also creates awareness of the positioning of both disabled students and accommodators within the institution, which results in instructors seeking further training and desiring less documentation from their students to validate the need for accommodation.

Research Question #3: What narratives do graduate instructors construct about empathy, responsibility, and power in the context of accommodation negotiations?

Empathy, responsibility, and power intersect in highly contentious ways for both the instructor and the student in this study, which is why this research intentionally positioned participants in both the instructor and student roles. An analysis of written responses collected during the training, as well as follow-up interviews, uncovered the following themes:

Irresons(ability). The roles and responsibilities of instructor and student proved to be nebulous concepts, which changed from participant to participant, and in some participants took a noticeable shift after the perspective shift from instructor to Student A. Another theme that emerged was: *Understanding vs. Empathy– The shoe doesn't have to fit*. Understanding and empathy produced two very different outcomes in participants' decisions about whether to accommodate Student A. Finally, *Wait, I have the power?* Participants in this study completely disengaged from their position of power in their relationships with students and in the accommodations process.

Irrespons(ability)

The responsibilities inherent with the roles of instructor and student are incredibly important within the culture of academia, though they are highly unstable and can change from class to class. An analysis of these findings reveals that participants' pre-existing schemas and narratives regarding student and instructor responsibilities may be at the root of accommodation negotiation failure, as matters of accommodation negotiation were misread as lapses in responsibility. As a reminder, Student A missed a crucial class period in which they would have received important information concerning the final project for that course. Along with determining Student A's eligibility to earn points for the missed class period, the participants were also prompted to consider how– or if– they would relay this information to Student A as a result of their accommodation request. Thus, creating the potential for additional work for the instructors to accommodate Student A. In this emergence of additional labor, perception of roles and responsibilities was called upon in the absence of training, especially when an instructor or student was perceived to have erred.

For example, when Student A missed class, Ese reminds Student A that “as a student it is mandatory for you to attend all classes regardless of your concern,” For clarity, this is not written anywhere in the training materials that were provided to this participant. When Ese calls upon Student A's role as a student, she is using the pre-existing narratives regarding student responsibilities in higher academia, which she was taught far before the training. The phrase ‘regardless of your concern’ requires some attention. As part of the simulation, participants are informed that Student A has accommodations through the Student Access Center that allow flexible attendance. However, the word ‘concern’ is vague and points to some misunderstanding on Ese's part. A ‘concern’ could mean anything. Captured in Ese's language is a sense of

ambiguity. Ese does not seem to know what is going on. However, in the face of this ambiguity, the pre-existing schema she has been taught dictates that missing a class, or forgetting that one even had class points, indicates a lack of responsibility. This aligns with Dolmage's (2017) assessment that "-the ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness". If this is the schema that Ese was taught, it makes sense that, in the absence of training and in the presence of ambiguity, her narrative regarding Student A's request would be framed as a lapse in responsibility rather than as a need for accommodation.

However, it is not just Student A whose schemas she consults. In her reflection, Ese calls upon her own understanding of her role as an instructor and wrote, "as an Instructor regardless of the fact that my student's absence or misses class, it is on to me [sic] to guide and provide them with information." Despite how tough the academic schema seems to be toward Student A, Ese's schema is also incredibly firm for herself. While her response suggests that she perceives her student to have had a lapse in responsibility, she fulfills her responsibility as an educator, and decides to provide Student A the information needed for the final project: "I will be help you by providing the necessary information and send them to you on email to be able to catch up with the class as it contain salient information about the final project." Ese does not reference the student's accommodation in her reflection as a reason for her choice to accommodate. Thus, she will take on additional labor, but Student A will not have the opportunity to earn the points they missed due to being unable to physically access the space. Ese's pre-existing schemas regarding the roles of student and instructor were more influential in deciding her moves in the accommodation negotiation than the ADA or Student A's accommodations. It is important to note that Ese is relying on what she knows in the face of ambiguity, with a distinct lack of

training in accommodation negotiations. With that understanding, emails like the one which she wrote have a distinct, emotional impact. The recipient of Ese's email, Adeyemi, reflected that Ese's email caused feelings of "Shame...I felt it's okay to miss the class once in a while without telling to my professor."

Most participants did not state Student A's role as plainly as Ese. Instead, they focused on re-assigning responsibility. Alondra, a participant who described Student A's request for accommodation as an 'excuse,' encouraged Student A "to reach out to your classmates to get their notes on the information provided." Although Student A has accommodations for flexible attendance, Alondra plainly stated that she did not believe those applied to Student A's request. Rather, this absence is viewed as a lapse in responsibility- a violation of Student A's role as a student. Thus, Alondra does not find it to be her responsibility to repeat herself, pushing the responsibility for accommodation onto Student A's ability to crowdsource important, grade-defining information.

Adeyemi suggested the same action with similar phrasing, but wrote in her reflection that, regarding her role as an instructor, she was trying to ensure that the accommodation she provided to Student A was fair... to other students. When prompted to record what she was thinking about when she wrote her email response to Student A, she wrote, "How to be fair with other students as well while giving points." Here, we do not see responsibility directly mentioned, though it lies in the underbrush. Accommodations are systems designed to create equity for disabled students. In the absence of training surrounding accommodations, instructors correlate student error with laziness, disrespect, or a simple lack of desire to do coursework. This affirms the research set forth by Osborne (2018), who reported that many disabled students in higher academia feel as though they are constantly trying to prove that they are not lazy or faking

their disability while negotiating accommodation. This culminates in conversations where the disabled student is not perceived as disabled, rather, a student with a bad excuse trying to take advantage of the system. This framing situates instructors like Adeyemi with the responsibility of keeping things fair. So, responsibility flips, and she asks student A to reach out to fellow classmates.

Fiore represents a middle ground. While Fiore agreed to meet with Student A to fill them in, she assigned responsibility for future classes and mentioned the accommodations in a sentence that reminded Student A of the importance of attending class:

I understand that you might have [an] accommodation, but I want to reemphasize that it is important for you to attend class in order not to miss important assignments and announcements.

There is much to unpack here. First, the assumption that Student A is missing class because they do not find it important enough to attend is a significant interpretive leap, and one that lends itself to moral judgment. That leap becomes more legible, however, when we consider that Fiore, Ese, and Alondra may each carry an implicit understanding of the student role that includes the responsibility of ability.

Traits such as timeliness, attendance, and reliable memory are embedded in the student role. As Kafer (2013) points out in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, these traits are necessary to navigate the cornerstones of academia (e.g., due dates, class times, and degree timelines). We could simply say that remembering a class becomes a responsibility when forgetting one is treated as evidence of irresponsibility. But there is more at work here. To understand why instructors assume irresponsibility or fraudulence on the part of disabled students, we must recognize that traits like timeliness, attendance, and memory are not inherent to the brain, yet they are punished

as if they were. This is because the academy is structured around the prototypical student whose mind does not deviate from the expectations of time, memory, and perfection. Whose body can access not only physical structures, but also liminal and technological spaces without accommodation or adjustment. Any deviation from a deadline or attendance is automatically determined to be a failure of responsibility or a performance issue; thus, disabled bodies and minds inherit a permanent state of failure by means of existing within academic spaces.

This culture manifests itself in a whisper with Fiore. While Fiore did accommodate, Fiore finishes her email by telling Student A that they should, “reach out to your peers any time you miss class, but you missing class because you forgot is not a good reason to not show up.” This assignment of responsibility, and judgment of Student A’s ‘reason’ must be examined. First, this assignment of responsibility, when combined with the insinuation that Student A was not coming to class because they did not find it important, discourages further negotiation. The participant who received this email as Student A, Ailbe, was one of 2 participants who completely shut down and withdrew. They did not write a response, stating that they did not think that Fiore sounded empathetic or open to negotiation. Although Fiore probably felt empathetic and open to negotiation, the student perceived her differently. By framing Student A through rigid norms of what a student should be, assigning those roles and responsibilities moving forward, and framing Student A’s absences as lapses in responsibility, Fiore’s attempt at accommodation negotiation ended in silence. This withdrawal aligns with the research by Rocco and Collins (2017), who identified four outcomes of a failed accommodation negotiation. 1) Withdrawal, the student isolates and relies solely on themselves. 2) Passivity, the student ignores their needs and excuses the professor’s actions. 3) Advocacy, the student spends additional time

and effort in further negotiations. 4) Adversarial action, the student files a complaint with the university, or files an external complaint.

When applying Rocco and Collins' four outcomes, Ailbe fulfills the first outcome-withdrawal. Not only did they withdraw, they expressed deep frustration about the way that their instructor failed to fulfill her role. In fact, Ailbe wrote that they felt "defeated" and "frustrated that the instructor was minimizing my disability when making accommodations is both reasonable and required." Here we see that Ailbe is defeated by the denial of accommodation but frustrated by the instructor's failure to fulfill her responsibilities in her role as "instructor" and "accommodator." Ailbe furthered in their interview that Fiore's response "felt like someone saying, because I don't understand how this disability operates, this disability is not real." However, defeat won out, and the correspondence ended in silence. The fact that Ailbe did not respond further affirms the power dynamic noted by Rocco and Collins (2017) who observed that instructors hold a position of power over students in accommodation negotiations, as instructors determine the validity and reasonability of an accommodation request. This power dynamic will be further explored in the following theme.

To summarize, in this theme, we see participants wrestling with questions about their roles and responsibilities and the extent to which they must complete additional labor to accommodate Student A. This theme revealed that these conversations were sparked by and centered on a perceived lack of responsibility, as Student A was interpreted as slacking off rather than experiencing a health issue. In the ambiguity of Student A's request, instructors perceived Student A as having failed in the role's core responsibility, a key to the role of Student A. In response to this error, instructors named roles for themselves and Student A and used their

understanding of those roles to assign responsibilities moving forward. These responsibilities ultimately became accommodation decisions.

The Power You Didn't Know You Had

The second theme under this research question, *The Power You Didn't Know You Had*, traces a consistent gap between how instructors perceived their power in accommodation negotiations and how that power actually operated. Participants acknowledged the power imbalance in abstract terms and took steps to address it, but the steps they took rarely matched the power they were actually wielding in the moment. This theme suggests that instructor self-perception is an unreliable measure of the power dynamics at play in accommodation conversations, and that the student, rather than the instructor, is often the better barometer of how power is being exercised.

It goes without saying that instructors have an inherent power dynamic over students in the academy. However, as Rocco and Collins (2017) note, the power dynamic present in the instructor student relationship becomes exaggerated during accommodation negotiation due to the manifestation of the ADA in the academy. The ADA leaves accommodation to instructor discretion, allowing instructors full authority to determine if an accommodation is reasonable, or if it interferes too severely with their curricula. Thus creating a need to re-validate the existence of disability to each instructor in order to negotiate accommodation. Rocco and Collins coined the term 'forced disclosure' to describe the demanded disclosure which disabled students must make to institutions and then to individual instructors in order to be granted accommodations. They note that disabled students must share far more intimate details than the average student to acquire the same education that the average student has. As has been seen in the data set so far—when Student A did not disclose how their disability manifested their absence in class, some

participants determined that their accommodation request was not reasonable, and denied it.

Thus leaving the only path forward for Student A to be withdrawal, or forced disclosure. This is the exact power dynamic which Rocco and Collins wrote about.

In the post training interview, participants were asked- In what ways do issues of authority, power, or classroom dynamics come into play during these negotiations? Participants navigated their position of power in a number of different ways, but none seemed to fully engage with or understand the extent of the legally ascribed power which the ADA gave them. These moves are a focal point, as power and authority are center-pieces of the structure which is the accommodations system in the academy.

One participant, Ailbe, who chose non-accommodation, noted that students often feel that they have to prove that their disability is real and that their accommodations are needed:

I can feel from several of my students when I have talked to them about some sort of accommodation that they need, whether it's related to disability or just life circumstances, can feel the sense that they have to validate themselves. That they have to, like, prove that this is actually an accommodation that they need. I think that's stemming from a very real presence of the inverse perspective of saying that teacher perception of accommodation or administrator perception of disability is determinative of what is valid and what deserves an accommodation.

In this statement, Ailbe recalls negotiation conversations between themselves and students, naming an unspoken tension which pressures students to validate or explain their needs. Ailbe names the power that they have while simultaneously attempting to distance themselves from it. Ailbe diverts the power into the culture of academia, creating a distance between themselves and the power that creates this forced disclosure. There is some space to question Ailbe's reason for diverting the

blame of this power imbalance solely to the culture of academia. However, without actively observing their classroom, it is hard to say how or if they themselves have contributed to that power imbalance. Ailbe furthers that when a student starts down this path of validation-seeking or attempting to ‘prove’ need, Ailbe interrupts them, saying

I have authority and I have power in this instance, I do not have authority or power to tell you how your disability affects you or how your life circumstance changes your ability to engage with coursework. That's not my place.

Ailbe’s distance actively affects how they navigate the accommodation negotiation. Their intervention at the beginning of forced disclosure drives them to halt the conversation completely to verbally reposition their power distance with the student. Ailbe disowns the power to determine the validity of a need, while recognizing and maintaining institutional power and creating space for the student to advocate for a need without proving its validity.

Alondra, an instructor who taught a public speaking course and chose non-accommodation, came close to naming herself as someone with proximity to power, noting that she uses examples from her own life to communicate to students that she struggles with the same speaking apprehension they do. However, she followed up by saying that this helped to keep the “classroom dynamic as level and calm as possible.” Here, Alondra is taking active steps to lower her affective filter around her students, suggesting that on some level she is aware of the position of power that she holds. Yet it is not the dynamic between her and the students that she is leveling; rather, it is the dynamic of the entire classroom. While Alondra is making moves to lower her power dynamic, she is not naming it outright. When Carey, an accommodated participant, was asked about power, she spoke solely about her experiences as a student, recalling professors who appeared unavailable to negotiate: “I’ve had professors have done that.

They're just like, 'Good luck. I don't. I don't accept late work.'” She draws a connection to herself as an instructor, adding that if the proverbial ‘you’ were to mimic that behavior, students would be less likely to request accommodations: “When you begin like that, there's probably not going to be a lot of students that are like, ‘hey, I'm struggling. I need help.’” However, she never makes the connection back to herself. She does not discuss herself as someone who has wielded power. While she establishes an awareness that power is present, she does not make the connection that she has it and uses it.

Celeste, who chose non-accommodation reported having a low power dynamic between herself and her students, “So there's not so much fear of power or not being able to have his conversations with me.” This was a particularly striking assessment, as Celeste’s initial email to Student A read as follows:

I have been taking attendance in class and observed that you’ve missed at least a class in the past three weeks. You haven’t shared any email detailing why until now. According to my supplemental policy shared and as I announce in class, I’m sorry you can’t make up for these lost points, however, I could meet with you during any of my office hours to [illegible] you through the information you missed.

While Celeste perceived herself as low power and open to negotiation, her email to Student A completely denied any opportunity to make up lost points. Further, she detailed Student A’s absences, completely disregarding Student A’s accommodation requests. While Celeste perceived herself as available for these conversations, the recipient of her email, Ese, did not respond, bringing all attempts at negotiation to a close.

This theme displays that instructor perceptions of the power balance between themselves and students, especially in the context of accommodation negotiation, are rarely accurate. There

is a lot of ambiguity between the way that an instructor perceives their wielding of power and the way in which they wield it. Ailbe, Celeste, and Alondra all knew that they had institutional power and took steps to address it with varying results. This suggests that the most reliable measure of the power dynamic in accommodation negotiations is not the instructor's self-perception but the student's experience of it.

Understanding vs. Empathy: the shoe doesn't have to fit

The third theme under this research question, *Understanding vs. Empathy: The Shoe Doesn't Have to Fit*, names a counterintuitive finding in the data. Participants who described themselves as empathetic, and who attempted to place themselves in Student A's shoes, did not consistently move toward accommodation. In fact, the attempt at empathy sometimes centered the instructor's own experience in ways that produced partial or denied accommodation. By contrast, participants who extended understanding, even in the absence of detailed disclosure, more readily accommodated Student A. This theme argues that empathy, as a moral exercise of imagined identification, is a less reliable path to accommodation than understanding, which requires neither shared experience nor complete information to act.

This simulation-based training employed perspective-based exercises to help foster empathy for disabled corporealities among the participants. However, most participants already described themselves as empathetic people, the exception being Alondra, who in her interview, stated: "I'm constantly pushing myself to give more empathy, because that has always been, like, my family can attest, I have not always been the most empathetic person." However, true empathy is incredibly difficult to obtain in situations such as the one posed to the participants of this training. After all, Student A's email states that they forgot they had class. The email did not state that Student A's body had been in crisis for weeks due to stress exacerbating type 1

diabetes, which in turn worsened their trauma-based memory loss. Even if the email had shared those intimate details, could any instructor truly empathize with that lived experience? If they could, are any of them paid enough money to do so? The data indicates that understanding, or the attempt to extend understanding in the face of ambiguity, garners accommodation where empathy fails to.

Misunderstandings of hardship can often be conflated with a lack of empathy. An example of this appears in the data between Adeyemi and Ese. Adeyemi characterizes Ese's email as lacking in empathy. Her criticism toward Ese is that while Ese did not yet know about Student A's circumstance, she should try to know more. If we synonymize knowledge with understanding in this criticism, Adeyemi is conflating misunderstanding with the lack of empathy that she received; however, in her interview, Ese stated that she is "very empathetic and respective [sic] of anything, you need to put yourself in the shoes of a student who is trying to bring her problems forth." There is no way to determine who is and is not actually an "empathetic person" based on accommodation decisions made during a simulation-based training. However, there is room here to explore the possibility that Ese (and, in fact, most of the participants who chose not to accommodate in this study) is deeply empathetic in character and still sent an email harsh enough to elicit shame from Adeyemi. This possibility becomes more compelling if we consider that traits such as empathy and good moral character may have nothing to do with being effective accommodators. As Adeyemi noted, Ese did not know Student A's situation. This training was designed to be extremely ambiguous in that very sense. Empathy falls short when there is no detailed disclosure to empathize with. When instructors rely on putting themselves in students' shoes, there is a potential shortcoming: the student may not offer up the shoes to wear.

Carey attempted to engage in empathy, writing in her reflection that she “felt bad for the student because I know they were probably stressed, I know I would be in that situation.”

However, Carey only offered partial points. This contrasts with Maria, who allowed Student A to make up for full points. She responded to Student A’s email, “I completely understand you forgot you had a class today. I am also happy about the fact that you reached out to me to inform me about your absence.” Maria does not yet know the reason that Student A forgot about class—and neither does Carey. A key difference reveals itself as Carey continues attempting to empathize with Student A in her reflection, “I have forgotten about important deadlines before so I wanted to work with them to be able to make up what was missed.” Here we see an instructor following a path of empathy toward accommodation. While it is a net positive that some form of accommodation was achieved, it’s worth noting that the accommodation was partial because it centered her experience, which she deemed worthy of partial points.

Circling back to Maria, she has not empathetically lived Student A’s experience, but she extends understanding. In her reflection after responding to Student A, she writes that she wants to be careful with how she approaches Student A: “I was ready to help Student A with their needs, without making them feel bad.” Here we see that Maria perceived that Student A was emotionally vulnerable in their request for accommodation. This path of understanding not only led to greater accommodation but also centered the student experience and took proactive measures to prevent trauma during the negotiation. In this ambiguity, Maria extends understanding, the knowledge that Student A needs help, and offers it in accordance with their university-issued accommodations.

Adeyemi, who awarded Student A full points, arranged a meeting time with Student A, and in her reflection wrote that she hoped this meeting could be “a one-on-one communication

so that I can understand the situation better.” Adeyemi recognizes that she lacks details about why Student A needs accommodation, but despite the ambiguity, she assumes the student needs them and works to improve her understanding. There is some room to question what she means by saying she wants to understand the situation better. This could mean that she plans to ask Student A for more detailed explanations of what is going on. It could also mean that she plans to figure out how to best accommodate Student A going forward. And again, it could also mean that she plans to find out how Student A is doing on their final project. Without the communication actually taking place and being observed, it is impossible to predict how that meeting would have impacted ongoing negotiations. What is documented, though, is that, in the absence of detail, Adeyemi provided accommodation and began pursuing understanding.

Finally, in the simplest example of understanding, Shay fully accommodated, offering full points and the opportunity to confer about the final project. In her reflection, she wrote, “I really understand the accommodations this student [has], so flexible attendance and deadlines are understandable.” While this may seem simple, its lack of simplicity is evident in the fact that it happened only once. Another key aspect of this training is that Student A did not remind the instructor of their accommodations in the email about the missed class. Participants were made aware of the student’s accommodations when the context was established. This was done to mimic how the hosting university handles accommodations. Instructors are usually notified via email at the beginning of the semester, and all their students’ accommodation requests can be found in a portal, but at the moment, they are responsible for remembering whether a student has accommodations unless the student reminds them. Sometimes, as the evidence suggests, simply understanding the accommodations system as it exists is not as straightforward as it seems, as there is no playbook for implementing each accommodation for each accommodation request.

This theme suggests that in regard to accommodation negotiation, a lack of empathy is not necessarily a main inhibitor. True empathy for a disabled corporeality is very hard to achieve on a mass scale via training administered to instructors. However, one commonality amongst the participants who allowed full accommodation to Student A is understanding. The moral exercise of placing oneself in another's shoes is admirable— but difficult to achieve. This data suggests that the empathetic shoe may not be the most effective tool in convincing instructors to accommodate disabled students as it centers instructors' experience over student need. However, due to the structure of accommodations systems at the host university, understanding in the more simplistic sense, as it applies to literally understanding accommodations well enough to execute them reliably requires a level of labor that instructors may struggle to sustain.

To answer research question #3, *what narratives do graduate instructors construct about empathy, responsibility, and power in the context of accommodation negotiations*, the three themes in this section together suggest the following. *Irrespons(ability)* revealed that ambiguous, low-disclosure accommodation requests like Student A's can be misconstrued as not being accommodation requests at all. When a mistake like forgetting about class is interpreted as a failure of responsibility rather than a disability-related need, instructors fall back on their pre-existing understandings of the student role to guide their response. The data also suggests that a key unspoken responsibility inherent in the student role is being able-bodied, which positions Student A and students like them as perpetually irresponsible. *The Power You Didn't Know You Had* showed that instructor perceptions of their own power were not a reliable measure of the power distance they created in accommodation negotiations. Some instructors perceived low power distance and still shut negotiations down; others perceived low power distance and negotiated full accommodation. Perceiving low power distance, in other words, is not in itself

sufficient to create safe negotiation spaces. *Understanding vs. Empathy: The Shoe Doesn't Have to Fit* found that instructors who extended understanding accommodated more consistently than those who tried to empathize. True empathy was difficult to establish in the absence of detailed disclosure, and efforts at empathetic accommodation tended to center the instructor's personal experience rather than the student's. Understanding, by contrast, did not require shared experience or complete information to produce accommodation.

Drawn together, these themes suggest that graduate instructors, just like any other human that wants to be good, believe themselves to be high empathy. However, the ability to put themselves in Student A's shoes fell short. Along with this, instructors created narratives where Student A was inherently irresponsible, rather than in need of accommodation and as a result assigned or reminded Student A of additional responsibilities moving forward. Finally, instructors have a varied interpretation of their own power dynamic with students that is hard to predict and often not aligned with the experience of their students.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Summary

This research proposed an intervention in the accommodations process via a simulation-based training piloted on first year graduate teaching assistants. Grounded in the critical interpretive study of organizational communication, this work posits that ableist violence is embedded deeply within the structure of academia, which bubbles up in face-to-face interactions such as accommodations negotiations between instructor and students. This work focuses primarily on the centering of untrained instructors in the accommodation negotiation process which also elicits repeated forced disclosure (Rocco & Collins, 2017). Grounded in Kafer's political/relational model of disability, and informed by critical queer theories, this training sought to challenge the rigid, normative structures present in the accommodations process which demand validation and documentation while creating more embodied, relational and politicized understandings of disability amongst its participants.

Informed by queer theory, this work encouraged participants to embrace accommodation despite ambiguity. This move to accommodate despite ambiguity was done in recognition of the research which shows that one of the most common barriers to accommodation is that instructors are not knowledgeable about the wide array of experience that is disabled reality; meaning students are placed in the position of further repeated disclosing by default (Carroll-Miranda, 2017).

This training used the my personal lived experiences as a disabled student and instructor for the simulation, giving participants the opportunity to experience accommodations from both the instructor standpoint but also from the standpoint of the student. This training also utilized real-time disclosure, as I disclosed that Student A, the student whom the entire scenario was based around, was ed experience. This use of disclosure served to spread awareness amongst participants that disability is unpredictable in the way that it manifests, and it is not easy to spot

or understand. This disclosure had a major impact on perceptions of disability amongst the participants, As Celeste put it,

I think it was when you gave an example of yourself. So there was a real life, like now there was something to point out, to say, oh, to be honest, if I did not, like, if you did not explain that afterwards, I still felt like I would have held on to what I thought was right and appropriate

When I revealed that I was Student A, standing before the participants as the living person behind the scenario, I showed them in real time that there is no way to predict or accurately envision how Student A, or any disabled person, is supposed to look, behave, or learn. A major finding throughout this work is that the accommodations system, as it stands, is utterly unequipped to allow any room for the ambiguity of the disabled experience. Instructors are positioned as the central actors in the accommodations process while simultaneously being untrained in navigating accommodation negotiations. Further, in the face of ambiguity and the lack of training, instructors rely on pre-existing schemas such as empathy or responsibility, meaning students' needs and disabilities become entirely excluded from the conversation. In the absence of detailed disclosure from Student A, several participants' pre-existing schemas depicted Student A as having experienced a lapse in responsibility, and thus they refused to accommodate.

However, hope was not lost in this study. Participants in this study reported a shift in their focus during accommodation negotiations conversations after the study. Several participants reported that they felt less need to extract details from their students and instead chose to focus on moving forward with solutions and accommodations. Further once participants were made aware of how vital their role in the process was, they voiced a unanimous desire for

more training. The message was clear that they wanted to do better, they knew they just needed to learn how.

These findings, taken together, have implications that extend beyond the particulars of this study. The sections that follow take up those implications in two registers: first, the theoretical contributions this work makes to the fields of critical disability studies, crip theory, and critical interpretive organizational communication; and second, the practical contributions this work offers to institutions, instructors, and future trainings designed to support disabled students in higher education.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends Rocco and Collins' (2017) concept of forced disclosure by distinguishing between necessary disclosure and coerced disclosure as gatekeeping. Second, it offers queering as a pedagogical intervention, proposing that accommodation can be granted in the presence of ambiguity. Third, it differentiates empathy from understanding as distinct paths to accommodation.

Complicating forced disclosure

While Rocco and Collins may have used the term 'forced disclosure' to describe the legally mandated disclosure which disabled students must make to the institution to begin the accommodations process; we must challenge this term both in the way that it limits necessary disclosure and also provides terminology for coerced disclosure within imbalanced power dynamics. Sometimes, disclosure is necessary to manifest or inform how accommodations will be implemented, or to inform safety procedures. One question that Rocco and Collins does not answer is "How does the university provide help if the student does not ask for it?" This does require some amount of information. However, to understand forced disclosure and the implications that this research has for it, we must contextualize what forced disclosure could

encapsulate. Forced disclosure could also be used to depict the repeated act of disclosing to every instructor multiple times per semester. Forced disclosure could involve educating instructors about the nature of the disability that the student has and how to accommodate it. Forced disclosure could be the act of turning over intimate details to a stranger within an unbalanced power dynamic. Forced disclosure could be the act of attempting to prove the need to individuals who, as this research found, are not trained to navigate these conversations. It is in this space that we find the answers to research question #1: How do instructors understand and respond to student disability disclosures in instructional settings? This study captured two main reactions. The first was an emotional awareness, which led to a move to meet face to face. The participants who recognized this disclosure as a sensitive matter and moved to immediately connect wrote in their reflections that they wanted to avoid harming Student A. This suggests that these instructors are not just observers, but are attempting to intervene in the political context, which creates trauma for disabled students in academia.

Second, in follow up interviews participants recounted disclosures that they experienced prior to the training. Several participants affirmed Carrol-Miranda's (2017) research which found that university issued accommodation letters are often insufficient without students further disclosing, educating, and teaching instructors how to accommodate them. Further, these disclosures again confirmed the need for Kafer's political/relational model, as instructors who understood disability through a purely medical model reported shutting down in response to student disclosure, claiming, "I'm not a doctor." However, there is room to roam here. Often, some disclosure is necessary. Further, there are times when disclosure is not voluntary or optional as some disabilities announce themselves audibly or visually. Some disabilities need to be disclosed due to safety reasons. The issue arises when disclosures steadily require increasingly detailed extraction as a bargaining chip to obtain equity. When instructors reject accommodations because they don't believe their students. There needs to be more terminology for the kind of disclosure that happens after necessary disclosure. This exact kind

of detail extraction may have happened in response to some of the emails in this data set. Present in this data there were instructors who told Student A that their memory loss was “not a good enough reason”. There were instructors who emailed Student A reminding them of how often they had missed class, telling them that they would “do well not to miss any upcoming classes.” In order to explain why they had missed class, Student A would have needed to disclose even more intimate medical information. That kind of disclosure feels like a more accurate use of the term forced disclosure, especially when incorporating the themes of power and responsibility that Rocco and Collins were addressing. It is here that this work challenges the limits of Rocco and Collins’ term ‘forced disclosure’, calling for a distinction between practical/pragmatic or necessary disclosures and disclosures that are demanded when instructors use their position of power to deny a student equity.

Queering the accommodations process

Eugenicist ideals of the perfect body, brain, and student emerged in the findings of this work as despite participants being made aware that Student A was disabled via accommodation letter, participants assumed irresponsibility. I argue that this assumption was influenced by the eugenicist history which scholars like Ordovery (2003) and Dolmage (2017) document within the academy. Initial participant responses which highlighted Student A’s failure to perform, or which assigned Student A additional responsibility in accommodating themselves are a manifestation of the rejection of that which is imperfect, unsightly, or untimely (Kafer, 2013) The queer approach was vital for this training. Queering the accommodations conversation encouraged participants to challenge these intensely normative constructs regarding time, disability, and responsibility, asking participants to practice the art of queering moving forward.

This simulation-based training made instructors aware that the accommodations system, as it currently stands, centers them communicatively (Rocco and Collins, 2017). The training then turned that awareness outward, encouraging them to decenter themselves and recenter the student. A second result of this awareness of their communicative role was a desire for further training on accommodations. Further, this research engages with the tradition of crip/critical

disability studies and is informed by queer studies, as it attempts to queer the approach participants took in their accommodation negotiations going forward by encouraging instructors to accommodate and accept what they found ambiguous. Thus, fulfilling Manning et al.'s (2020, p.3) description of what it means to queer communication. Although accommodating despite ambiguity could be seen as an introduction of a new norm– that is not what is happening here. What is actually happening is that participants are challenging the normative schemas which would have prevented them from accommodating in the first place. I am not arguing that instructors accommodate while knowing nothing. Instead, this training was successful because it helped instructors recognize ambiguity as a space in which they could challenge normative structures that would define Student A as irresponsible or lazy, rather than as spaces where they should rely on said normative structures. This training encouraged instructors to recognize ambiguity as a space to criticize that which places strict boundaries upon not just the student- but also them. This does not mean automatic accommodation every time without question, as the data set revealed that in some instances, accommodations given carelessly are as good as no accommodation given. Rather, the queer approach worked here because it transformed ambiguity into a space of comfort and exploration, rather than a space in which normativity could define the outcomes of accommodation negotiation without recourse .

Accommodations negotiations are often hyper-focused on documentation and validation of need, centering the instructor's judgment of that need's validity. This simulation-based training shifted that approach by minimizing forced disclosure in interactions between participants and their students after the training. Not only did the simulation-based training change the instructor's approach to the conversation, but it also changed the participant's view of

their communicative role, shifting them away from being investigators and documenters of disability and toward being educators and accommodators.

The difference between empathy and understanding as paths to accommodation

Finally, this simulation-based training uncovered a wide range of data concerning the narratives which graduate teaching instructors constructed regarding power, empathy, and most importantly responsibility. In the face of ambiguity, several instructors relied upon the pre-existing ableist narratives in which the student was inherently irresponsible rather than disabled. When disability was removed from the conversation, instructors use their pre-conceived notions regarding what responsibilities a student and instructor must fulfill according to their roles as ‘student’ and ‘instructor’ to guide their responses moving forward. This manifested by flipping the responsibility of information gathering onto the student, reminding Student A of their errors, and telling Student A not to miss further classes. This assumption of irresponsibility often came with the assertion that Student A’s reason for missing class was invalid. This supports previous research, which claims that academia centers itself around the able-bodied/minded student, displacing the disabled body-mind as inferior and irresponsible (Kafer, 2013; Miller, 2020; Dolmage, 2017). This prevailing narrative supports the need for this training, as the data suggests that when these schemas go unchallenged, disabled students will continue to be denied accommodation.

Instructors also perceived themselves to be highly empathetic. However, instructors who attempted empathizing with Student A accommodated less, as they knew very little about Student A’s situation. The issue with empathy as a tool to navigate accommodation negotiation is that it centered the instructor’s experience of the request rather than the student’s need, so the accommodations granted were not as forgiving. Further, empathy was not a strong framework

for navigating accommodations, as instructors who extended understanding accommodated more than those who tried to empathize.

Finally, instructors' narratives about their power dynamics in the context of accommodation negotiation seemed distorted. It was difficult to capture in this study, but it seemed as though the instructor's perception was not a reliable metric of the actual power distance that they wielded during negotiations. Evidence suggests that the best metrics for instructor/student power dynamics likely come from students experiencing the negotiation.

Drawn together, instructors tend to vary in their understanding of their own power dynamics. However, those who perceive themselves to be high-empathy tend to falsely assume that they are also high-level accommodators when they may be centering their emotional experiences over student need. Unfortunately, the most consistent narrative that appears in ambiguous, low disclosure requests is that the student requesting has been irresponsible, rather than unable to access the classroom.

Practical Implications

The theoretical contributions of this study carry practical implications for how institutions prepare instructors to participate in the accommodations process and for who leads that preparation. Two implications are developed here. The first addresses the substantive gap in instructor knowledge about the accommodations process itself, and the need for training that equips instructors with the specifics of what they are asking students to do when they offer the standard referral. The second addresses who should be designing and leading accommodation trainings in higher education, and argues that disabled scholars are uniquely positioned to do this work.

Ongoing training on accommodations processes

The most present implication is that instructors not only need but want more training regarding accommodations and disability. Instructors in this data requested more training, ranging from making their projection slides more accessible to implementing better hearing devices. Along with this, they want more information on how to help their students navigate the systems at their universities. At many institutions, instructors serve as the main referrals to offices of accommodations. However, they rarely know what the process of filing for accommodations entails. Instructors need training on what the process looks like from a student's point of view. Students who are already struggling academically are easily overwhelmed by the unknowns behind the sentence "You should file for accommodations". If instructors are going to continue to function as the main touchpoint for these referrals then they must know what they are telling students to do.

Nothing About Us Without Us: Disabled Scholars Leading Disability Training

Finally, this training was successful because it was led, based on, and presented by a disabled person. This researcher knew how the accommodation system functioned at the university where this research took place because he had navigated it both as a student and as an instructor. The narrative used was a good exercise for the unique situations that occur in real accommodation negotiations because it was drawn from a real experience in my life. Universities are in dire need of disability training, and disabled people are the best people for that job. The age-old saying applies: Nothing about us without us! To create safer spaces in academia, disabled scholars must be employed to create and lead training like this one.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study's findings should be read in light of several limitations. The dataset was small: nine participants contributed training data and five completed follow-up interviews. All participants were first-year graduate teaching assistants rather than experienced faculty, and because the training was voluntary, all participants were pre-disposed to want to improve their teaching. The training has not yet been tested with mandatory participants or with instructors whose classroom practices are already established, and its efficacy with those audiences is unknown. Future research could usefully pilot this training across longer career stages and less self-selected populations.

The training itself was delivered in a single 50-minute class session and was cut short by time constraints. Portions of the planned training were therefore not delivered and not available for analysis. Participants also reported feeling rushed in their written responses, which may have shaped the texture of the data. A logical next step is to expand this training into a series of sessions that allow room for disability history, theory, access, and lived experience to be developed more fully.

Most participants in this study were multilingual, and most of the training data was handwritten before being transcribed. This introduced some ambiguity into the analysis, which I addressed by acknowledging multiple plausible readings of less legible or less clear responses. Participants also brought a wide range of cultural schema into the study, and not all of that context could be fully captured through the written responses alone. Future studies working with multilingual participants should build in additional means of capturing participant context, including options for oral reflection or participant member checking.

A methodological note on the accommodate/non-accommodate binary is worth repeating here. The binary was an intentional analytic choice designed to make the equity stakes of each response visible in this specific case, where Student A's request was to complete the same work in a modified manner. Future research on accommodation should not assume the binary generalizes. Accommodation more commonly exists along a spectrum, and future studies should build analytic space for that ambiguity.

Finally, this training was grounded in Kafer's (2013) political/relational model, which gave participants a politicized rather than medicalized encounter with disability. This grounding is a strength of the training, but it also raises a limitation worth naming. Participants who received accommodating letters, as Student A, did not experience the negative instructor response that the simulation was designed to surface. Their experience was instead to respond to Student A, imagine being Student A, be accommodated as Student A, and then meet Student A in person. It is difficult to say how this configuration shaped those participants' takeaways. Relatedly, no participants were asked whether they themselves were disabled, though several disclosed disabilities in follow-up interviews. Future research using simulation-based disability trainings should consider how such trainings affect disabled participants in the room, and whether the training may compound rather than illuminate experiences of ableism. When thinking through approaches to disability training, we must not forget the Student A's already seated among us.

Concluding Comment

This research is personal, but no more personal than the act of teaching or the act of accommodating or the act of disability disclosure. The accommodation system, as it stands, is highly unpredictable in all but two ways: 1) It centers un-trained instructors, while 2) forcing

repetitive disclosure from students. This research is an incredibly personal attempt at queering this over 30-year-old practice. Disclosure is not inherently problematic when it is met with accommodation. In fact, disclosure can be and is empowering, when it is a choice. This study is a prime example of that. However, until ambiguity becomes an accepted aspect of the accommodations process, increasingly intimate and invasive disclosure is going to continue to be a repetitive toll demanded as price for equity.

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Appendix A - Participant Packets

Phase One

Name:

Preferred Pseudonym:

Student A has the following accommodations:

- Extended time on tests.
- Flexible deadlines.
- Flexible attendance.

This student, we will call them student A, is enrolled in your public speaking course which meets Mon, Wed, Fri from 12:00 PM- 12:50 PM. During week 14, you tell students on Monday that it is very important that they come in on Wednesday, as you will be doing a Q&A about the final project, and meeting with students individually to discuss their final project.

Student A has missed at least one class per week for three weeks now, and misses the Wednesday class. They contact you via email. The email reads:

Hello professor,

I hope this email finds you well. My sincerest apologies for missing class, I forgot that we had class today. I am reaching out because I am aware that I missed some very important information. Further, I know that I lost points for not conferencing today. Is there any way I can make up for the points I lost?

Thank you in advance for your flexibility,

Student A.

Please write a response to this email. You must decide if you are willing to take time to conference with the student about their project, and award any points which they missed by missing class. Further, this student missed valuable information when they missed class. Will you be the one to fill them in? Right your email response on the following page.

Preferred Pseudonym:

Write Your Email Response Below:

Name:

Preferred Pseudonym:

What were you thinking when you wrote your email response to Student A?

What were you feeling when you wrote your email response to Student A?

Phase Two

Your Preferred Pseudonym:

Student A Perspective:

Currently, you are navigating your second semester in college. You are managing a heavy class load, and figuring out how to handle your time. However, you experience extra challenges as you navigate time management, deadlines, and other responsibilities. You have mental health disorders, as well as physical health challenges. You are an insulin dependent type

one diabetic. Sometimes, due to blood sugar fluctuations, you experience severe fatigue and have trouble completing your daily tasks such as attending class or even getting out of bed. Along with this, you have severe PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Your PTSD produces a symptom called ‘chronic amnesia’. Because of your chronic amnesia, you often forget things like appointments, due dates, names, addresses, phone numbers, etc. You tend to write everything down, track due dates on multiple physical and digital calendars, and set reminders on your phone. However, you still forget things more than the average person. Forgetting things can be very embarrassing, as it can lead to you being perceived as careless, lazy, or incompetent. Further, explaining why you forget things is difficult. Because PTSD is caused by trauma, you tend to keep that you have it to yourself, because you do not want to discuss the fact that you have experienced trauma at all.

d, which exaggerates your mental and physical symptoms. Your blood sugars are out of control, leaving you exhausted. Further, because You have accommodations that grant you flexible attendance, but you are missing at least one class a week, and it is affecting your ability to succeed in one of your courses. The course you are missing most often meets on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. During week 14, you are very stressed you’re tired, you are having an even harder time remembering things than usual. Due to this, you completely forget that you have class on Wednesday. As a result, you miss a class in which the professor was going to discuss important details about the final project, as well as conference with everyone individually about their final project.

You write the following email:

“Hello professor,

I hope this email finds you well. My sincerest apologies for missing class. I am reaching out because I am aware that I missed some very important information. Further, I know that I lost points for not conferencing today. Is there any way I can make up for the points I lost?

Thank you in advance for your flexibility,

Student A.”

Read the instructor response that was just handed to you.

Write the instructor’s pseudonym here:

Now, you are Student A. Write an email responding to the instructor’s email below. If you are confused, ask for clarification!

Student A Email Response:

Please answer the following questions:

“What were you feeling when you read your instructor’s response?”

“What were you feeling when you wrote your response as student A?”

“What were you thinking when you wrote your response as student A?”

Appendix B - Follow Up Interview Questions

When a student discloses a disability to you, how do you typically respond in the moment?

What factors do you think shape the way you approach these conversations?

Can you describe a time before the training when a student disclosure or accommodation request stood out to you? How did you handle it?

Thinking back to the simulation-based training, what moments stand out most vividly to you?

How, if at all, did the training shift your awareness of your communicative role in the accommodation process?

Since the training, have you noticed changes in how you approach or think about accommodations, conversations with students? Can you give an example?

What, if anything, still feels challenging or unclear to you after the training?

How do you see empathy playing a role in your conversation with students about accommodations?

When thinking about your role as an instructor, how do you understand your responsibilities in the accommodation process?

In what ways do issues of authority, power, or classroom dynamics come into play during these negotiations?

If you were to tell a story that illustrates your perspective on accommodations, what would that story be?

What advice would you give to other instructors who are navigating student disability disclosures and accommodations?

Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't covered?