

# Addressing Mental Disability in the Postsecondary Classroom via Faculty Development Partnership (Practice Brief)

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## Abstract

Disability studies scholars have recently demonstrated the extent to which currently-hegemonic approaches to postsecondary teaching fail to account for the complex relationship between mental disability and academic commonplaces, such as presence and participation, with real consequences for the well-being of our students. Faculty development programs have been shown to positively impact the retention and success of students with disabilities (SWDs). However, such programs often fail to account for departmental policies and practices that shape inaccessible learning environments. This practice brief details a three-module faculty development program involving instruction in universal design for learning and disability studies literature, and the development and submission of programmatic reforms designed to address SWDs. Results from post-training interviews suggested meaningful improvements in faculty members' awareness of mental disabilities, accommodations for SWDs, and inclusive instructional practices, as well as their readiness to successfully intervene in departmental policies and practices to promote accessible learning environments.

*Keywords:* accessible learning, faculty development, mental disability, postsecondary education, disability studies

In *Mad At School*, Margaret Price (2011) posed what should be a critical question for any academic department serious about inclusion: "What transformation would need to occur before those who pursue academic discourse can be 'heard' . . . not in spite of our mental disabilities, but with and through them" (p. 10)? Despite nearly universal rhetoric of diversity and inclusion, current practices in postsecondary education ignore, exclude, and erase mental disability because teachers and students with a range of dis/abilities do not conform to ableist attitudes and conventions around mental health. Recently, disability studies scholars (Price, 2011; Wood, 2017) have demonstrated the extent to which currently-hegemonic approaches to postsecondary teaching fail to account for the complex relationship between mental disability and academic commonplaces, such as presence and participation, with real consequences for the well-being of our students.

This reality is a concern for both disability studies scholars and disability resources professionals, who,

in spite of common interests, may struggle to work together on their campuses. The authors of this practice brief, two non-disabled White men who work at a large university, came to collaborate on this project out of a desire to bridge this gap between disability studies and services. One author, a doctoral student in the English department, worked as a graduate assistant in the First-Year Writing Program (FYWP) administrative office. The other was the director of Disability Resources and Services (DRS).

For the purpose of this brief, we will use *mental disability* as a term that can encompass a range of cognitive and intellectual disabilities and abilities, to include anxiety, depression, and other (sometimes unnamed) experiences linked to mental health. Building on the work of disability scholars (Dolmage 2005; Yergeau et al., 2013) who conceive of disability as a mode of human difference, a social and political category, and an identity marker, this brief will focus its analysis on the ways that institutional attitudes raise barriers for students with mental disabilities. The

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brief proposes actions that academic departments and disability resources departments can implement to acknowledge the presence of students with mental disabilities in the classroom and begin to address the persistent barriers to their participation and inclusion.

### **Description of the Problem**

Students with disabilities (SWDs) comprise 19% of students in postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Students with mental disabilities (defined as a mental, emotional, or psychiatric condition) make up the largest proportion, 24%, a figure that has climbed steadily over the past two decades (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009). These students face a unique set of significant barriers in postsecondary education which impact their completion rates and the quality of their experiences (O’Shea & Kaplan, 2018; Salzer et al., 2008).

Classrooms and instructional environments are among the barriers to participation in postsecondary education most commonly identified by SWDs. Many faculty are unaware of the needs of SWDs or display negative attitudes about student accommodation requests (Park et al., 2012; Scott, 2019). Faculty who are aware of the institution’s accommodation procedures and those who have supportive interactions with students can have a powerful positive impact on the quality of a student’s experience. Recent research suggests a positive correlation between the “positive attitudes, active engagement, and receptiveness to inclusive instructional practices” of faculty members and the “retention and success of students with disabilities” (Hsiao et al., 2019, p. 92).

Many disability resources departments offer faculty development programs as an indirect way of supporting student success. These programs often focus on changes individual instructors can make to their own teaching practices. While foregrounding individual instruction can be effective for instructors who enjoy relative autonomy over the courses they teach, it may prove less effective for instructors who are beholden to departmental policies and procedures that clash with inclusive teaching strategies. For example, instructors of general education courses typically teach with “standardized” syllabi that include departmental policies (about attendance, participation, etc.) that can shape inaccessible learning environments. Standardized policies have wide-ranging implications for SWDs and for the instructors who enact them. The purpose of this practice brief is to describe a faculty development program that addresses not only inclusive instructional practices but the pol-

icies and procedures that shape in/inaccessible learning environments through an examination of a shared course syllabus.

### **Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources**

This practice brief details a faculty development partnership, established by members from FYWP and DRS, within which FYWP’s faculty development program and DRS’s faculty outreach efforts dovetailed toward a common goal, namely, to render the university’s first-year writing courses more accessible for students with mental disabilities. The university’s FYWP operates within the College of Liberal Arts; within the fall 2018 semester, it served approximately 2,592 students, approximately 8.7% of the university’s total undergraduate population. The university’s DRS department is positioned within the Division of Student Affairs; within the 2018–2019 academic year, it served approximately 4,000 SWDs, approximately 10% of the university’s total student population. Predominant primary diagnoses reported by the students were mental health conditions (38%), attention deficit disorders (17%), health conditions (14%), specific learning disabilities (10%), brain injuries and neurological conditions (3%), autism spectrum disorders (3%), physical disabilities (2%), blind/low vision (1%), and D/deaf or hard of hearing (1%).

The training and support offered through the program emerged from a subunit of the Inclusive Teaching Institute, developed in a partnership between the campus faculty development office and DRS, as well as ongoing FYWP faculty development efforts. In designing the workshop and working group activities, the authors drew on contemporary disability studies literature centered on approaches to addressing mental disability in the postsecondary classroom. The program fostered a collaborative and dialogic approach to reimagining pedagogical practices and course policies to account for students with mental disabilities in first-year writing courses. The 18 participating members represented full- and part-time FYWP faculty and administration as well as staff from the writing center and the library, who volunteered to participate.

### **Description of Practice**

The faculty development program consisted of three modules: one faculty development workshop led by the DRS director and a FYWP graduate assistant, and two meetings of a faculty working group, led by the FYWP graduate assistant (access Appendix A). The overall goals of the faculty development

program were:

1. To increase faculty members' awareness of the prevalence of students with mental disabilities by examining demographic trends at the university.
2. To introduce faculty members to the idea that course design and policies can create environmental barriers to participation in the college classroom through a comparison of the medical and social model of disability.
3. To introduce faculty members to inclusive instructional practices through a discussion of individual accommodations and universal design for learning.
4. To identify potential barriers to participation in the first-year writing classroom and curriculum through a critical disability studies analysis of the course syllabus.
5. To create a revised course syllabus designed to be more inclusive based on principles of critical disability studies and universal design for learning, and submit the revised syllabus to FYWP administration for consideration.

The faculty development workshop used a slide-show presentation, which was also posted to the FYWP Canvas site, containing demographic information about the university's undergraduate SWDs, prompts for group activities related to inclusive classroom practices, references to disability studies texts, and information about universal design for learning. One group activity asked faculty members to consider the interaction between the experience of mental disability and barriers caused by inaccessible course design. The facilitators then prompted participants to brainstorm in small groups both accommodations that provide a one-time remediation of these barriers for an individual student, as well as universal design approaches to course development that could remove barriers for a multitude of students in every iteration of the course. Another discussion, in response to a disability studies text, asked faculty members to consider ways of giving students more agency with respect to elements of time in their classes. These activities were designed to enhance awareness of potential barriers faced by students with mental disabilities and develop universal design solutions to promote a more accessible first-year writing classroom environment.

Working group participants met two times over the Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters. They reviewed disability studies literature (Price, 2011; Wood, 2017) centered on academic conventions that clash with mental disability. Specifically, they exam-

ined Price's critique of the normative assumptions underlying many attendance and participation policies and Wood's analysis of the "barriers to access that . . . [normative] time strictures construct for disabled students" (p. 267). They identified elements of the syllabus that presented potential barriers to students with mental disabilities, including cumulative, interconnected penalties for absences, tardiness, and late work; a policy of not grading essay drafts; and the absence of policies designed to address issues linked to mental health. Echoing Price (2011), participants concluded that many attendance and participation policies in postsecondary education "ignore the fact that disabled students face barriers to attendance" (p. 65) and are undergirded by "assumptions about absent students' attitudes, lack of motivation, and failure to spend 'time on task'" (p. 71). Upon completing the training program, participants submitted a revised course syllabus to FYWP administration reflecting proposed changes to course policies and practices, including a newly drafted section directly addressing student mental health and listing campus mental health resources with contact information.

### Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Post-training interviews were conducted to gauge participant learning outcomes (access Appendix B for interview questions). Results from post-training interviews suggested meaningful improvements in faculty members' awareness of mental disabilities, accommodations for SWDs, and inclusive instructional practices, as well as their readiness to successfully intervene in departmental policies and practices to promote accessible learning environments. In addition, three themes emerged from the interviews (access Appendix C for quotes corresponding with each theme). These themes included increased awareness of potential barriers faced by students with mental disabilities, increased confidence in participants' abilities to shape accessible learning environments both in and beyond their own classrooms, and the attribution of small group work, combined with disability studies readings, to significant advances in learning.

### Implications and Portability

Disability resources departments, being mindful of their resources, must be strategic about efforts to influence faculty behavior. Working with individual faculty members on inclusive teaching practices can be effective. However, efforts to engage with departmental policies and procedures can affect entire academic departments and lead to changes in stan-

standard syllabi and other teaching practices that have a broader impact. Disability resources professionals may want to identify departments on their campuses that use standard syllabi, courses that have multiple sections taught by different instructors, and academic departments that are willing to engage in department-wide faculty development partnerships. While this practice brief details the collaboration between a disability resources department and a first-year writing program, there is no reason to believe that a similar collaboration with a Spanish, Chemistry, or Music Theory department would not have similar results. Raising faculty awareness of mental disabilities, sharing inclusive teaching practices, and drawing attention to procedural and attitudinal barriers in the common syllabus can be effective strategies for implementing change at the department level in any academic discipline. The combination of broad training for all faculty in the department paired with in-depth working group engagement with a core group of committed faculty members allows all faculty to learn the basic information while leveraging the energy of the passionate few to lead change within their department.

### Challenges

Maintaining a consistent level of participation among faculty members was the chief challenge of executing the faculty development partnership. Scheduling conflicts and work-related commitments contributed to a decrease in participation over the course of the working group sessions. Distribution of the online slideshow presentation provided supplemental means of participation; however, online content did not provide participants with the scope and breadth of information offered via the in-person workshop and working group sessions. For example, online participation did not allow for faculty interaction with program leaders. Furthermore, faculty members' comfort level with Canvas software varied and in some cases resulted in decreased access for participants. Future iterations of the program should address ways to expand online content, improve interactivity, and enhance faculty members' comfort level with software.

While faculty members attended the workshop as part of a departmentally required set of professional development sessions, participation in the working group sessions was strictly voluntary. Consequently, the success of the working group sessions depended on the extent to which individual faculty members were personally invested in the objectives of the partnership.

### Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the work of critical disability studies scholars, disability rights activists, and proponents of universal design for learning, future scholarship can help to increase the efficacy of comparable faculty development partnerships by “consciously and systematically asking for and utilizing feedback from students, especially students with disabilities” (Dolmage, 2005, para. 32) at the stage of program design. In other words, it is imperative that students' articulations about the barriers they face in the postsecondary classroom inform the design and objectives of faculty training programs aimed at rendering academic departments and programs more accessible for SWDs. In addition, further scholarship can benefit from an examination of the portability of the faculty development partnership for use in other campus programs and services, such as writing centers and centers for academic advising. Administrative involvement at each stage of the training program may increase the efficacy of the program.

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## Appendix A

### Faculty Development Program Module Outlines

#### **Module 1. First-Year Writing Program (FYWP) Faculty Development Workshop: Centering Disability in the First-Year Writing (FYW) Classroom**

1-day workshop led by the Director of DRS and the FYWP Graduate Assistant

1. DRS Demographics and Accommodations (DRS)
  - a. Increase in number of students with mental disabilities
  - b. Impact on instructors' expectations of teaching and learning
  - c. Discussion of attendance, extensions, and participation-based accommodations
2. Accommodations and Universal Design for Learning (DRS & FYWP)
  - a. Medical model vs. social model of disability
  - b. Small group activity: limitation/barrier/accommodation/universal design
3. Mental disability and pedagogy (DRS & FYWP)
  - a. Shifting from accommodation model to accessible pedagogy and curriculum
  - b. Syllabus statement activity

#### **Module 2. FYWP Working Group: Accounting for Mental Disability in FYW Curriculum: A 1-day workshop led by the FYWP Graduate Assistant**

1. Disability studies text: Margaret Price's *Mad At School*
  - a. Review of academic commonplaces (e.g., presence; participation) that can cross problematically with mental disability
2. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)
  - a. Barriers/Universal Design/Implementation worksheet
  - b. Examination of potential barriers represented in FYWP standard syllabus
  - c. Development of UDL solutions (language, technology, policy, or practice)

#### **Module 3. FYWP Working Group: "Crippling Time" in FYW Curriculum: Second 1-day workshop led by the FYWP Graduate Assistant**

1. Disability studies text: Wood's "Crippling Time in the College Composition Classroom"
  - a. Review of Wood's alternative pedagogical framework ("crip time")
2. Universal Design
  - a. Review of universal design solutions
  - b. Development of UDL solutions (language, technology, policy, or practice)
3. Implementation strategies and considerations
  - a. Determinations: reforms for submission vs. reforms that warrant further study
  - b. Development of reform language and revision of standard syllabus
  - c. Submission of proposed reforms via revised syllabus

## **Appendix B**

### **Participant Interview Questions**

1. To what extent did the training program contribute to your awareness of mental disabilities, accommodations for SWDs, and/or inclusive instructional practices?
2. To what extent did the training program prepare you to successfully intervene in departmental policies and practices to promote accessible learning environments?
3. What aspects of the training program or the facilitator's approach contributed most to your learning?
4. What aspects of the training program or the facilitator's approach would you change to improve the learning that takes place in (or the efficacy of) the training program?

## Appendix C

### Themes and Illustrative Quotes

#### **Theme 1: Increased awareness of potential barriers faced by students with mental disabilities**

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“I was already aware of the fact that students at [our university] are impacted by physical and mental disabilities and I was familiar with the accommodations provided by DRS. But I was not aware of how being physically present in class can be so painful and non-productive for students with mental disabilities. Reading the chapter from *Mad at School* really helped me gain a better understanding of what students with mental disabilities experience in the classroom. I always take accommodation letters very seriously, but I was not aware of how some of our FYW policies are hard on certain students.”

-Participant 1, FYWP Faculty Member

“I already had a proficient awareness of mental disabilities and institutional accommodations. The training program was very meaningful, though, in getting me to be creative and self-reflexive in the ways that I can be a more inclusive, effective instructor. I left the program with new perspectives and new strategies for implementing universal design in my classroom.”

-Participant 2, Graduate TA

“I appreciated the way that mental illness was included under the umbrella of ‘mental disability.’ Though it wasn’t the first time I had encountered that classification, hearing it classified that way helped me broaden my understanding of disability. Another way my awareness was expanded was through considering the concept of ‘presence’ through a disability lens. While I have had discomfort in the past with strict and narrow attendance policies (both as a student and as an instructor), my eyes were opened through this training program to how the virtue of ‘presence’ is ableist.”

-Participant 3, Writing Center Staff

#### **Theme 2: Increased confidence in participants’ abilities to shape accessible learning environments both in and beyond their own classrooms**

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“I felt that as a group, we were able to successfully modify some of the FYW policies about absences and participation. As an individual instructor, I feel as if I have gained knowledge that I can use in staff development meetings or in future curriculum development projects. In FYW, we tend to be very strict with enforcing the rules. But we can also try to find creative approaches that will help students with mental disabilities get more out of our courses. This is especially important as the number of students with mental disabilities continues to increase.”

-Participant 1, FYWP Faculty Member

“I think [the training program] prepared me very well in two main ways. First, it allowed me to interact and share ideas with instructors who had already implemented innovative learning activities and learning design into their classroom. Second, it gave me a sense of confidence and autonomy knowing that successful interventions are possible.”

-Participant 2, Graduate TA

*(Appendix C Continues)*

*(Appendix C Continued)*

“I was able to participate, through the working group part of this training program, in discussions that led to accessibility-enhancing recommendations for the FYW syllabus and its policies. Those recommendations were partially successful, but partial success is better than none—and likely nothing would have changed without this program.”

-Participant 3, Writing Center Staff

### **Theme 3: Small group work, combined with disability studies readings, contributed significantly to learning**

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“I really liked how we applied what we learned in Mad at School by discussing it briefly and then going over the Standard [FYWP] syllabus. It was eye opening! I also got a lot out of The Tara Wood article, ‘Crippling Time in the Composition Classroom.’ As I mentioned to you several times, this really was a learning group for me, since disability is not my field. [I] try to be understanding, but what I really need to be is knowledgeable. Reading Disability Studies texts really contributed to my learning.”

-Participant 1, FYWP Faculty Member

“I think the small group work was really generative

- I appreciated the close attention to specific texts and policies in the syllabus
- The Policy/Learning Barrier/Solution chart was practical and effective”

-Participant 2, Graduate TA