Accessing Academe, Disabling the Curriculum: Institutional Locations of Dis/ability in Public Higher Education

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ACCESSING ACADEME, DISABLING THE CURRICULUM: INSTITUTIONAL LOCATIONS OF DIS/ABILITY IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

ANDREW J. LUCCHESI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Accessing Academe, Disabling The Curriculum: Institutional Locations Of Dis/ability In Public Higher Education

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Advisor: Mark McBeth

The field of Disability Studies has long committed itself to the project of making American colleges and universities more accessible places for disabled faculty, staff, and students. Indeed, many of the field of early ideological roots of the discipline of Disability Studies (DS) emerged from campus-based activist movements. This influence has impacted the ways DS scholars continue to frame their intellectual labor as a progressive public good. In recent years, composition/rhetoric scholars have begun applying DS approaches to questions of pedagogical and professional access as well. These critiques have drawn attention the ways teaching practice, administrative policy, and other aspects of academic life are undergirded by many of the same ableist values that pervade other professional environments.

This dissertation investigates the history of disability-related institutional work in the City University of New York across three distinct periods: I use archival analysis to discuss New York City’s unique municipal college system’s early 20th century programs, which defined disability access in terms of a medical rehabilitation model; second, I use oral history to document important institutional changes that came to CUNY (which was officially organized only in 1961) during the 1970s, when students began organizing disability activist coalitions and CUNY began institutionalizing system-wide disability services; finally, I draw from unofficial
archives and further oral histories to examine the impacts of the rise in learning and other invisible disabilities in CUNY in the 1980s and 90s. This history demonstrates both the complex problem of designing equitable programs for disability access, and the generative possibilities of incorporating disability into the mainstream mission of higher education.
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I am deeply grateful for the encouragement and support I have received throughout the process of writing this dissertation. Thanks to my examining committee—Mark McBeth, Cathy Davidson, and Steven Brier—who provided essential feedback and inspiration. Thanks especially to Mark McBeth, whose mentorship and motivating nudges have guided me through my early coursework, through this final project, and through my successful entry into the academic profession. Thanks as well to Joseph Straus and Emily Stanback, who first introduced me to Disability Studies and helped me find my own approach to it.

Much of the work presented in this dissertation began its life in collaboration with other scholars—the co-presenters, teaching-mates, and colleagues who I am honored to consider peers. I include in these thanks the members of the Graduate Center Composition and Rhetoric Community—especially Amanda Licastro, Sean Molloy, Benjamin Miller, and Dominique Zino. Thanks as well to the members of the CCCC Disability Rhetoric community who have co-presented with me or otherwise provided me with valuable mentorship—especially Amy Vidali, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price, and Stephanie Kerschbaum. In CUNY, thanks to Barbara Gleason, Sondra Perl, Mariette Bates, Sidney Van Nort, Barbara Sirois, and all the members of the CUNY Council on Student Disability Issues who have shared their stories and expertise for this project.

Finally, I would not have completed this project without the constant loving support of my friends Nathan Thomas and Joey Hirsh, my family, and all of the beautiful humans I met through the Graduate Center LGBTQ Support Group.
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PREFACE

I recently re-read my psychological learning evaluation. I’ve kept copies of it with me continuously since tenth grade, when I first had to have it done so I could take the SAT with accommodations. The report details my diagnosis based on my performance on three-days' worth of problem-solving exercises and literacy tasks. I had been informally diagnosed earlier, of course. I was flagged in kindergarten for sneaking away during reading time, and by first grade I was routinely staying late to repeat failed spelling tests. However, at age 16, I had to provide a more robust assessment to get my accommodations secured for the future. I presented my last remaining paper copy of the evaluation to the director of disabilities services at the CUNY Graduate Center. This allowed me to receive accommodations and special resources over my past six years as a Ph.D. student.

According to my report, I demonstrate a very rare level of discrepancy between my abilities to process information through speech/hearing and through reading/writing. I can follow complicated conversations and explain complex ideas aloud, but I move very slowly through reading tasks. I am prone to lose focus, and I also seem to have weaknesses in my short-term memory, which of course makes it difficult to retain what I read. I also have concentration issues, which keeps me from reading comfortably in even mildly distracting environments. Since there’s nothing observably wrong with my sight or hearing, these reading/listening impairments are presumed to be caused by one or more invisible neurological differences I have. In diagnostic terms: specific learning disability (dyslexia), dysgraphia, and ADD. In addition to these diagnoses and assessments, the report recommends academic accommodations. Books on tape are suggested, to help me move more quickly through reading assignments and avoid getting
lost. In truth, I’d been using them for years, but this report allowed me to get free tape recordings of my textbooks through my college.

The report also recommended I receive two accommodations for high-stakes exams, especially when they involve language processing—I should perform them in a distraction-free environment, and I should get twice the standard time to work. Based on this recommendation from a team of psychologists, I have been allowed double time and private testing on two SATs, three GREs; dozens of foreign language tests; and, most recently, my first-year Ph.D. qualifying exam. Without this accommodation, I would not have been able to achieve the middling scores I earned on these academic benchmarks. Without this diagnosis, it is exceptionally unlikely I would have had access higher graduate education in the first place, have achieved the benchmarks set by my Ph.D. program, let alone secured my upcoming position as a new assistant professor of Writing Studies.

Had I been born in a time before learning disabilities were medically and legally recognized, my story might have been very different. I have benefitted greatly from the work of disability activists and scholars who came before me albeit, perhaps, over-labeled. Likewise, I have been privileged enough to have parents who could afford to have me diagnosed and who could support me through my academic struggles. In the course of my graduate education and teaching career, I have met many students like myself who have considered leaving academia believing themselves to be too slow or too unfocused to succeed. Disability Studies has allowed me to understand my difference not solely as a source of difficulty, but also, powerfully, as a source of insight and an inspiration to perseverance. I try to pass these lessons along when I can. My personal trajectory of education imbued with issues of disability has acted both as an inspiration for this dissertation research as well as an example of the contours of disabilities
studies from the medicalized to the theorized to the researched to the pedagogically informed. As Cathy Davidson writes in *Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century*,

> We've sorted our life cycles in a similar way, with developmental theories of how children learn and geriatric theories of how we begin to forget. If there is any word that defines the twentieth century, it might be normative: a defining and enforcing of standards of what counts as correct. We've divided the "norm" from the non-normal, we've created tests to measure where we are on that scale, and we have elaborated forms of statistical analysis rooted in a theory that the mean is good and that it's important to measure how far we do or do not deviate from the mean. (279)

My narrative both aligns and deviates from the master narrative of disabilities, disrupting the normativizing storylines upon which they insist. Disabilities studies has firstly defined me as a neuro-atypical learner and, secondly, as a researcher alongside a growing number of disabilities scholars and, thirdly, as a classroom practitioner who strives to make classroom accessible to all students. If comp-rhet studies originally articulated the practitioner, the research, and the theorizer (See Stephen North 1987) as three disparate roles within the field, the introduction of the sub-field of disabilities studies within comp-rhet has reminded us how the three must be intrinsically linked and demonstrated how they must be inter-connectedly informing. Reframing the disabilities narrative through my archival research has offered the potentials of other readings and more generative interpretations.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION—INSTITUTIONAL RE-MEMBERING: ANIMATING THE TRACES OF DISABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Disability Studies (DS) approaches have long been guiding composition/rhetoric scholars to explore new understandings of student difference and to discover as well as new approaches to inclusive classroom instruction. In its Policy on Disability, for instance, the discipline’s flagship professional organization, the Conference on College Composition and Communication demands that disabled people must be welcomed within the field both as students and faculty. Further, it asserts that the perspectives of disability studies provide vital insights to our disciplinary mission as compositionists, including the areas of “literacy studies, . . . theories of difference[,]” and other intersections between language production, social identity, and assessments of human value (Policy on Disability). This policy statement—initially ratified in 2006—emerged following a decade of sustained engagement by DS scholar/teachers such as Patricia Dunn, whose study of learning disability in the writing classroom broke important ground in the field's engagement with disability as a facet of student or instructor diversity. Naturally, given our field’s historical commitment to teaching and learning, the space of the writing classroom has remained DS’s most robust site of engagement, critique, and reform.

It is only relatively recently that we have begun looking outside specific classroom practices and particular kinds of student bodies to consider how disability, as a concept and as a bureaucratic category, functions within academic institutions. In her work on mental disability in academic institutions, for instance, Margaret Price, examines a wide range of academic practices,
common across American higher education, that incorporate stereotyped beliefs about mental illness/health, normal behavior, and personal value. In *Mad at School*, Price forwards a model for applying robust rhetorical analysis to institutional texts, including accessibility statements used at major national conferences. Analyzing administrative documents about the so-called student mental health crisis, Price finds powerfully imbedded beliefs that (1) “mental disability must be an aberration” and, thus, (2) that the presence of people with mental disability need not be accommodated (*Mad at School* 231). This naturalized ideology affects every aspect of academic life, from campus housing policies to standards for tenure review.¹

In this study, I aim to extend our analysis of disability in academic spaces even further. As the CCCC Policy on Disability suggests, the primary value of DS for the broader field of writing studies is to promote the development of more equitable, progressive, and politically engaged environments both for students and for faculty. As with other social-justice-inspired movements within writing studies, DS compositionists must actualize their beliefs within colleges and universities—complex institutional sites that contain simultaneously conservative bureaucratic structures and progressive social discourses. For those of us who wish to develop more accessible programs, we must strike the balance between our ideological convictions and local institutional politics and material constraints. This reality puts us all, especially those working at the program-design level, within the role Richard E. Miller refers to as the “intellectual-bureaucrat”: rather than upturning the status quo wholesale, intellectual-bureaucrats “tinker at the margins” of the institution, making minor adjustments in curriculum, policy, and other structures within their reach (*As If Learning Mattered*, 212).

¹ For a detailed analysis of how these ideologies affect the role of Writing Program Administrators, see Amy Vidali, “Disabling Writing Program Administration,” *Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators* 38, no.2 (2015): 32-55.
Current DS scholarship in writing studies does not provide sufficient groundwork for contextualizing writing program reform within the broader history of disability access in higher education. One substantial shortcoming, I argue, results from the persistent present- and future-focus of DS scholarship. As a progressive movement, we make arguments about reform and implementation, arguments that have strong ideological value. For example, Margaret Price has recently proposed using social science methods to examine the professional lives of disabled faculty and staff (“New Directions for Disability Studies Research” 2015). This work would draw together important information from across multiple institutions, giving an important view of the accessibility of academic professions today. In these studies, however, we tend to take the present as our starting point.

My aim in this study is to take a historical approach to questions of disability and academic life. To date, our scholarship has largely left unstudied many important aspects of the rich history of disability access programming that has taken place on American college campuses throughout the twentieth century. This even as we have begun using DS perspectives to design and implement our own disability studies-inspired programs in our first year composition curricula. In part, we ignore this history because it is poorly recorded: disability-access programs are not often the subject of institutional legacy building. More than this, however, looking back at this history requires DS scholars to confront deep divides between our perspectives as humanities faculty and the perspectives of those other intellectual-bureaucrats who enact their own disability-access agendas on campus, disability service providers. To fully understand our perspectives about disability and accessibility we must look back at the (dis)connections between the labors of disability service providers and those of composition programmers and instructors.
Disability Services in American Higher Education

Disability services in mainstream American colleges and universities date back to the early 1940s, when programs to provide access and rehabilitation for returning WWII veterans emerged at a handful of major public universities (Fleischer and Zames 37). These programs emerged amid two competing forces, one political, one material. The political force derived from the common desire to provide returning veterans with access to higher education and middle-class jobs, society’s side of the bargain of military service. Materially, however, institutions of higher education exerted their own counter-force. While large land-grant universities often contained spaces that admitted disabled people as patients or research subjects, the spaces of learning and residential life were largely inaccessible to students with mobility or sensory impairments. These students might be welcomed through admissions, but left to navigate buildings and curriculum designed for the non-disabled. Eventually, albeit reticently, colleges and universities developed new administrative systems to manage this mismatch.

In our current moment, most institutions employ specialized disability services providers to manage these systems. Contemporary histories about the role of the disability service directors locate their origins in the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Oslund 2014). This law indicates as a turning point, a moment when institutions of higher education were mandated to fundamentally re-evaluate their relationships with disabled students. This law affected colleges and universities in two ways: first, it barred these institutions from excluding students or employees on the basis of disability; second, it required that the institutions themselves must pay for any adjustments that might be necessary for those disabled people to fully participate in campus life. This second provision put the onus on institutions to purchase alternate-format materials for students, install ramps and elevators in buildings, and provide
accessible bathroom, dining, and housing facilities. Any institution that failed to meet these standards risked civil rights lawsuits and the loss of access to federal funding programs.

The nature of disability services offered in colleges and universities has changed substantially over the last century as has the nature of the service provider role as it has become an established commonplace on American campuses. In the early days, very few standards for best practices existed, and those criteria that did were rarely based on rigorous research or scholarly assessment. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a complex academic field emerged devoted to disability access in higher education, including important debates in matters of program design, faculty relations, and curriculum reform. Now, a national discipline exists, with a flagship journal and organization, the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). In the City University of New York (CUNY) system, standardized practices of disability service administration are being taught at the field’s first Master’s level degree in disability services in higher education. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, this history closely parallels the development of writing program administration as a field, especially in the way Writing Program Administration (WPA) studies has engaged with questions of minority access and programmatic activism.

Jay Dolmage, a prominent theorist in the Conference of College Composition and Communication (CCCC) DS community, has critiqued the current prevailing model of disability access and the standard form of disability service provision. Under Section 504, institutions are only required to provide adjustments to the environment that are identified as “reasonable accommodations.” These accommodations, which are traditionally administered by a disability services director, are meant to ensure disabled students do not face unlawful barriers to their success, for instance not being able to access library resources, get to and from classes, or take
exams in an appropriately conducive environment. The problem is that the accommodation model, Dolmage argues, works as a "retrofit," offering only the minimum required alteration to what is fundamentally an exclusionary system (“From Retrofit to Universal Design”). The changes disability service providers are authorized to make are “one-offs,” applied only to one student in a single, individual instance. Reasonable accommodations do not lead to lasting or universalizing change.

While I find Dolmage’s critique of the “reasonable accommodation” model for disability access compelling, I think it overlooks the complex ways disability service providers have engaged in ideologically progressive programmatic work throughout the history of American higher education. There has yet to be a grounded study of their institutional role, and how it influences the work they do. One major reason for this gap, I believe, emerges from the unique nature of that role where disabilities programming often stands apart from faculty development and institutional policy-making as related to pedagogical understanding and classroom praxis.

In this dissertation, I argue that we can learn important things about the history of American disability by examining the way academic institutions have responded to the presence of disability in different ways at different times. Disability, as a cultural phenomenon, is not universal, but in fact, while it’s difficult to access first-hand accounts of this institutional/legislative mismatch, we can study it through programmatic initiatives and legacies that surface within archives. For instance, which parts of the administration are put in charge of overseeing disabled students? As more disabled students join the student body, we see more complex systems developed to provide services—new job titles, new equipment, new student data to collect and assess.
Disability History at CUNY

The research I present in this dissertation focuses on the history of disability-specific programming in the City University of New York system. The New York City municipal college system has a long and complex history. The system began from the city’s four original municipal colleges—City College of New York (which had both uptown and downtown Manhattan campuses), Hunter College (a Manhattan women’s college that began as a normal school), Brooklyn College, and Queens College. In 1961, the CUNY system officially incorporated into a single tuition-free university system, later launching the social experiment of Open Admissions in which educationally marginalized students were admitted into the university system. Yet, as I learned through my archival research, Open Admissions didn't represent the first progressive initiative of the university. In 1946, The City College of New York (CCNY) developed one of the first programs in the nation specifically aimed to integrate disabled students in a mainstream college setting. This program was at the cutting edge among the handful of other such programs around the nation and, thus, offers a rarified snapshot of early university attitudes about disabled students and their education.

New York’s municipal colleges also afford a wide scope in terms of institutional diversity. Since CUNY currently is comprised of seventeen teaching campuses, each campus has its own independently operated disability services office. Each is attuned to its individual campus character, whether that be its eleven community colleges, eight four-year “senior” colleges, or five graduate campuses. While each campus falls under the umbrella of legislation of a public university and centralized university policies, each college has a unique character and history, ranging from Hostos Community College—a bilingual institution with heavy emphasis on public health—to Hunter College—the system’s original women’s college, specializing in education
and psychology fields. The disability access programs developed on these campuses bear the marks both of their campus cultures, and also the politics of their era. Some of these programs proliferated and spread around the system, and some of them died out within a few years.

Each campus keeps its own institutional archives, though few include much on the topic of disability. Naturally, just as there are vast differences among the CUNY archives in terms of funding, vast inconsistencies exist in terms of what disability-related records are kept by each archivist and whether disability issues get any linear footage within the stacks. For instance, though I have surveyed the holdings of all the CUNY senior colleges, I have yet to find any materials related to disabled student clubs and organizations, though I know that they’ve existed since at least 1969 and now flourish on every campus. This demonstrates one of the profound ironies of college disability history: although disability policies are often framed as being about the experiences of disabled students, what remains within the institutional archives is often that which is most distant from the student’s experience—cold bureaucratic reports, policy statements, meeting minutes. This institutional fact also informed my own methodological approach of archival research accompanied by oral history interviews with disabilities directors who could supplement the gaps in archival resources.

Oral history provides a key to unlocking much of this history. I have interviewed fifteen current or former disability service providers from across the CUNY system. My informants range from people who began working in the field within the past academic year to those who worked on disability integration beginning in the mid 1970s. One informant was formerly a student with disabilities himself, who graduated through that early program at City College in the 1940s—he later went on to direct the disability office at his own alma mater. In addition to informing me about the nature of their work as service providers, these informants also give me
important information about the attitudes toward disability and access held by students, faculty, and other administrative branches of their home institutions.

CUNY’s unique multi-campus university system has created a kind of incubation chamber for sharing ideas about disability access. Those who know CUNY’s history of basic writing scholarship will be familiar with scholars like Kenneth Bruffee, Mina Shaughnessy, Sondra Perl, and many others. These scholars shared their work through self-designed networks around the CUNY system (such as the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors [CAWS], now defunct). In the absence of a formalized field of Basic Writing and Writing Program Administration, they learned from one another before spreading their work publicly. CUNY disability service providers did the same, forming a coalition of administrators with whom they could share ideas, develop best practice guidelines, publish scholarship, and organize for public engagement at the campus and at the state level. It is partially because of the close personal connections formed within this coalition, called the Coalition on Student Disability Issues (COSDI), that made my research possible. As many of the founding members of COSDI are reaching retirement, they are eager to get on record the important work that they did over the past five decades. Additionally, many of these individuals kept personal archives of their work, materials not available in any official archival collection.

**Student Disability as a Medical Phenomenon**

As a lens to better understand these students’ institutional positions, I research the programs that were developed to serve them on various CUNY campuses at different historical moments. I’ll explain what I mean with a few quick snapshots, which I will discuss in greater depth in their historical context in the following chapters.
The 1946 program housed at the College of the City of New York (CCNY), was initially designed to provide support for wounded WWII veterans. In fact, an influx of wounded veterans didn’t materialize in the admissions pool, and the program instead oversaw the admissions of a few dozen disabled civilians each year from 1946 to the mid-1960s.\textsuperscript{2} In general these students were designated as having either sensory impairments (i.e., blindness, deafness) or chronic health conditions (i.e., cardiac problems, seizure disorders, post-polio disorders). As a matter of policy, the City College campus was closed to students who used wheelchairs because the architecture of the campus, opened in 1906, did not accommodate them.\textsuperscript{3} There was at this time, of course, no popular concept of learning disabilities as a form of impairment for college-age students.

In some ways, this postwar program resembles disability services programs we see today. Students were assessed by college staff and received special help with registration. The students’ instructors received a kind of “accommodation letter” as they do today. However, unlike modern disability services, the program was designed from its inception to serve people recovering from military wounds, and so the entire enterprise was suffused with a highly medicalized view of the students and their educational needs. In order to gain admissions to the college, students were subject to examination by the Health Guidance Board, a group of faculty, administrators, and physicians. Until as late as 1968 when the Board disbanded, the City College Bulletin included a clause in the Admissions chapter describing their role: “All admissions are subject to the provisions that the candidate meets the health standards of the college. Severely handicapped students will have their applications reviewed by the Health Guidance Board to determine whether they could profit from college training” (CCNY Bulletin 1967/68). I find it striking that

\textsuperscript{2} Records from this time are from archival collections associated with the Health Guidance Board, an institutional body that oversaw disabled students for three decades at City College. I will discuss the Board and its archival legacy in greater depth in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{3} “The Board has . . . ruled that no wheel chair persons are to be admitted to the college” (Letter from Condon to Dean James Peace, February 16, 1959).
in this administrative document, students with disabilities are warned in advance that their admissions will be subjected to an additional degree of scrutiny. Under this system, the people who made the most important decisions about the academic prospects of disabled students were not faculty or administrators, but, often, physicians.

The CCNY Health Guidance Board’s mission went beyond simply assessing students for admissions. According to one institutional document, the Board also worked to “[effect] adjustment to the maximum correction of physical defects” in the students (Condon 9). The most widely publicized aspect of this recuperative mission came from a four-semester series of special physical hygiene courses disabled students were required to take to satisfy the university’s two-year hygiene requirement. Instructors in these “reconstructive education” courses were briefed on students’ health conditions and charged with designing each student an individualized rehabilitation plan. Students’ physical progress was charted, and bi-annual reports on their progress made available both to the Health Board and to “all instructors interested in the health of the student” (ibid.).

This early program reflects, in many ways, the medical model of disability that dominated before the advent of the disability rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In this model, disability is thought of as an individual problem, a defect located in the body and mind of the individual. A disability is a condition a person has: it is a specific kind of ill health. Under this medical logic, disabled students essentially lived as patients of the university. As the politics of disability changed in the mid 20th century, disability programs began to shed some of their medicalized perspectives and instead began to align with the social model of disability. As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, the programs would be dramatically de-medicalized:
disability services came to be more about engineering accessible campuses through ramps and other retrofits, and less about correcting and monitoring student’s physical bodies.

Within the social model, disability is understood as a problem of institutionally sanctioned social oppression, not a problem of physical defects. This logic argues that disabled people’s primary difficulty does not come from physical problems with their bodies—the problem is that built environments are not built for disabled people to use. Laws passed in the mid-1970s asserted that these resources and affordances were, in fact, their right. Programs developed during this period tend to bear the marks of this political alignment.

Student Disability as an Academic Phenomenon

I want to turn my attention to another program from CUNY’s past, one that shows a very different picture of disability-access programming. I know about this program entirely based on personal interviews and a pile of personal documents generously donated by my informant. The official institutional archives have no record of it.

By the early 1980s, CUNY was receiving an influx of a new kind of disabled student. These were students who had come up through the public K-12 system under the purview of federal Public Law 94-142, then called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which was passed in 1975. This law mandated that whenever possible, disabled students should be taught in mainstream classrooms. The law required schools to follow individualized education plans (IEPs) designed to help integrate these students into the classroom. This system applied across a wide range of disability categories including mobility and sensory impairments, but also learning disabilities, psychiatric impairments, and other kinds of invisible disabilities. In the late 1980s, Anthony Colarossi had been working as a school psychologist in Brooklyn’s Bed-Stuy neighborhood and advising the city’s Board of Education about learning disability (LD) issues.
In the wake of this federal commitment to disability education reform, the rise of psychological and cognitive testing in public schools, and the massive increase in diagnoses of learning disabilities, attention disorders, and other psycho-social impairments.

Colarossi came to CUNY’s Kingsborough Community College both as the director of disability services and as a member of the psychology faculty. Under his direction, the college developed a new link between counseling and disability services focused on learning and psychiatric disabilities. He also developed a resource center for LD that became a national model. In the late 2000s, Colarossi designed a two-semester special section of the college’s Skills Development courses specially suited to students coming to the college with disability diagnoses. The courses only ran for three years, and in all only 118 students passed through the sequence. However, Colarossi kept detailed records of the courses, which he shared with me, including student writing, class materials, and results from a survey administered to students in the course.

Most of the students in Colarossi’s course were also students we’d know as basic writers. For those who arrived at Kingsborough without a disability diagnosis, many of the students who ended up in these classes were flagged for his attention because they had failed the CUNY writing exam multiple times. As I will discuss in Chapter 4, the period in which literacy-related disabilities became firmly situated within the work of disability services represents an important moment for the definition of basic writers, particularly disabled basic writer. With the LD boom, there was a special population being identified within the broader community of basic writers who, because of medical diagnosis, held a different institutional position, a position that included access to specialized services. For students with the disability label, Colarossi’s class offered a
useful space for supplementary literacy instruction as well as a venue for psychological treatment and identity development.

The first semester of Colarossi’s basic skills course centered on how students would adjust to college life. In essence, it was a writing course based on students' educational experiences. In order to help students resist feelings of alienation, they chose a favorite spot on campus as their journaling spot and wrote weekly entries reflecting on their progress and hardships as a student. These weekly check-ins were then revised into a final narrative essay. Students also studied the nature of their own disabilities, a unit supported by lectures and activities about different learning styles, multiple intelligences, and other topics from the clinical side of the learning disability field. In another project, students wrote about the other courses they were taking, reflecting on how the instructors’ teaching style suited their own learning style. The course culminated in a final written exam, where students were asked to synthesize what they learned in writing, explaining the nature of their disability, their personal experience of it throughout their lives, and their perspectives on themselves as students. Throughout these courses, Colarossi employed pedagogy which practitioners in the composition/rhetoric field would recognize. Students used freewriting in their journals. Students shared drafts and gave oral feedback, in this case in a kind of group therapy setting. Throughout the course, students worked to develop a meta-cognitive awareness of their own thinking and learning styles, and to choose work habits that would work best for them.

Although Colarossi’s methods may seem more benign than the paternalistic curative model described earlier, from a disability studies perspective, there are still some troubling aspects of Colarossi’s approach. Students in this class were, ultimately, clients of the combined disability and counseling services. Each student in the course had an assigned
counselor managing their case, and this counselor got updates on their progress in the course. Indeed the course itself was taught by two employees of the counseling and disability services office. For this reason, it still took a kind of rehabilitative bent toward disability integration, in that the course was designed to work through many of the challenging psychological aspects of surviving a college education with a diagnosed disability. It wasn’t a course designed to cure defects, however. Rather, the course offered a medical understanding of learning differences to the students, but it also situated it within a culture of disability bias and helped students deal pragmatically with social limitations created by one-dimensional teaching and restrictive career choices.

**Accessing Academe/ Disabling the Curriculum**

Ultimately, in examining the history of disability access programming, I want to urge writing studies scholars to think about how we as a field are responding to the challenges of creating accessible programs today. What are the current beliefs about disability and access that are motivating us to approach this work as part of our mission as writing teachers and program designers? As we learn more about the values of the CCCC Policy on Disability and design our programs to help promote disability access, we should consider the politics and ideologies underlying those efforts. Just as these historic programs I have found lost in CUNY’s history reveal something about the politics of disability in their time, our own programs will reveal how we respond to the challenge of equal access and equal opportunity.

This dissertation will proceed through five chapters. Each chapter (excluding the conclusion) was written to stand alone. One reason I made this decision is that each chapter speaks to different academic audiences.
In Chapter 2, “Investigating the Cultural Locations of Disability in American Colleges and Universities: Campus, Curriculum, Culture,” I examine published literature that addresses disability studies critiques of American higher education. In the first section, I investigate the role college-based activism from the 1960s – 1990s plays in the overall narratives historians present about the disability rights movement. These historical narratives often claim, in essence, that the disability rights movement was forged and tested on college campuses, and that the coalitions that led to national change in the 20th century began their lives as student disability activists. In the second section, I discuss the emergence of disability studies as an academic discipline. I show how disability scholars applied the rhetoric of the disability-rights movement (especially the social model of disability) to critique a range of academic disciplines, especially fields that have traditionally claimed special expertise about disability, including medicine and social work. In the final section, I examine the emerging sub-field of disability studies in composition/rhetoric. As I describe, scholars in the Disability Rhetoric movement advance disability studies critiques of higher education by focusing on matters of college-level teaching practice and institutionally sponsored literacy tasks.

This chapter speaks most directly to an audience within mainstream disability studies. I draw many of my sources from canonical works in this field—for instance, Joseph Shapiro’s iconic history, No Pity, which is frequently assigned in introductory disability studies courses. Unlike my home discipline of composition/rhetoric—which continually publishes histories of the field, its origins, and its major movement—Disability Studies has only a limited discourse of its own disciplinary history. My intention, therefore, is to provide a plausible history for the growth of disability critique in higher education. I also hope to demonstrate that new critiques coming
from the Disability Rhetoric movement have deep roots in the values of early scholars and activists.

In Chapter 3, “Constructing Academic Dis/Ability: Archives of Remediation and Access,” I move away from published disability studies scholarship to examine the state of dis/ability in the early 20th century. For this chapter, I draw mainly from archival collections from the City College campus. In the first section, I focus on the period between 1906 and 1927 in which Thomas A. Storey served as CCNY’s first director of physical instruction. I describe how the college underwent a dramatic period of investment in student “social hygiene.” Through this period, Storey established health screening procedures and mandatory physical education requirements, both aimed at incorporating values of medical health into the broader picture of student academic ability. In the second section of the chapter, I examine the period from 1946 – 1960, when CCNY developed its first programs specifically for disabled students. I demonstrate that these two programs share the same fundamental structures, and that indeed, the ideologies underpinning CUNY’s earliest disability services programs were heavily steeped in the medicalized values of the Social Hygiene movement.

This chapter speaks to two central audiences. On the one hand, this chapter contributes to the history of CUNY as a ground-breaking public institution. While these two early programs receive fleeting mentions in other CUNY histories, no detailed analysis of either program has been published elsewhere. If nothing else, this chapter should demonstrate to the rich history of dis/ability related programming in higher education that has gone unexamined in disability studies. This chapter also seeks to speak to historians outside the CUNY system. While medical humanities scholars have made important contributions to our knowledge of the history of college medicine, the history of disability programming has gone largely unexamined. I hope this
case study of two moments at CCNY will inspire further case studies from other institutions nation-wide.

In Chapter 4, “Disrupting Ability: Student Disability Rhetoric in Action,” I focus on the period from 1969 – 1978, a decade that saw two important developments in CUNY disability history. In the first half of this period, disabled students at Brooklyn College formed the first disability activist coalition in the CUNY system. I examine the rhetoric these students used to engage in campus-based activism. In the second half of the chapter, I describe the dramatic influence that the 1973 Federal Rehabilitation Act had on college campuses. In response to this law, CUNY established networks of disability service providers on each campus who shared practices and developed new disability service programs that stepped away from the strict medical perspective discussed in Chapter 3. I draw heavily from oral history in this chapter, including two oral histories I took from CUNY disability services directors.

Like the previous chapter, Chapter 4 focuses on CUNY history, and thus will be of interest to local institutional historians. In particular, because it is situated in the era of Open Admissions, which was implemented after 1970 across CUNY, it aims to add a wrinkle to our stories about that much-analyzed time. Scholars in the Disability Rhetoric movement will be especially interested in this chapter for the way it presents examples of student disability rhetoric in context. Finally, for disability service providers, this chapter will provide a historical argument for the value of supporting student disability clubs and organizations. For disability researchers at other institutions, this chapter offers a point of comparison by which other disability programs may be measured and analyzed.

In Chapter 5, “From Ramps to Neurodiversity: Integrating Invisible Disabilities into the Critique of Access in Higher Education,” I turn from matters of campus access to the notions of
pedagogical access and multi-modal privilege. Here, I draw from disability studies scholarship
from within the field of composition/rhetoric to examine the unique character of so-called
“invisible disabilities” including learning disabilities, psychiatric impairments, and Autism
Spectrum Disorder. I compare this pedagogical scholarship with the programmatic efforts of
Anthony Colarossi, a psychologist who spearheaded programs for students with learning and
psychiatric disabilities at Kingsborough Community College between 1986 and 2007. Across
both the scholarship and the practice, we see that invisible disabilities continue to manifest in
academic settings as disruptions to academic literacy. I argue that compositionists are uniquely
positioned to advocate for progressive pedagogical reform that would make literacy instruction
more accessible for these students. This chapter speaks directly to the field of
composition/rhetoric, particularly to writing program administrators who might be looking for
ways to make their curricula more open and adaptable to the needs of disabled students.

As a collection of chapters introducing various eras of disability's history, these analyses
provide a historical framework by which disability scholars may re-evaluate theories and
research in the field as well as a point of departure for other disability's historians.
This chapter examines the ways institutions of higher education fit within the broad movements of American disability rights and academic disability studies. In the first section, I will draw from social histories published by disability studies scholars to argue that mainstream American colleges and universities have served as important hubs for disability cultural formation in two senses. First, as campuses began admitting significant numbers of disabled students, large public colleges became important gathering places for disabled people to meet, organize, and forge collective political and cultural identity. At the same time, as newly politicized populations of disabled students began engaging in public action, institutions of higher education became important socio-political battlegrounds for inclusion and access. As I will show, the fight for equal access to public higher education during the 20th century represented a key turning point in the history of disability activism. This story of campus organizing is central to the arch of published disability history in America.

In the second section of this chapter, I will describe the rise of disability studies as an academic counterpart to disability activism, including the field’s tradition of scholarly critique of colleges and university systems. In this transition, we see disability critiques of higher education broadening from questions of campus access to the politics of curricular reform. Initially, disability studies scholars focused their critique on the applied fields—medicine, rehabilitation, special education, and other academic disciplines that historically claimed specialized knowledge
about disability. Indeed, through a generation of critique, disability studies critics have shown how applied medical fields contributed to spreading dangerous, stigmatizing stereotypes about disabled people, contributing to their oppression throughout society and their poor treatment by medical authorities and educational institutions. Scholars such as Simi Linton, Paul Longmore, Sharon Snyder, and David Mitchell demonstrate that these fields, which approach disability through the lens of pathology or disorder, are fundamentally unable to address the social and cultural realities of life as disabled people actually experience them.

Empowered by the feminist ideology that the personal is political, activist scholars developed a new curriculum for disability knowledge-making in higher education. The new disability studies curriculum privileges the expertise of disabled people themselves—their experience as citizens, their shared history of oppression and community engagement, their values as a large and diverse subculture. This curriculum for disability studies knowledge-making offers a direct corrective to the applied fields’ traditional monopoly as academic experts on disability. As I will show, this movement to reform the disability curriculum of the academy directly spurred the development of disability studies as an established interdisciplinary field comparable to women’s studies or other social-identity based disciplines.

In my final section of this chapter, I will turn to a recent wave of disability studies critique associated with the Disability Rhetoric movement. As disability studies approaches became more established in the humanities, scholars within composition and rhetoric began applying DS approaches to broader questions of teaching and learning at the college level. These teacher/scholars—including the likes of Margaret Price, Jay Dolmage, and Brenda Jo Brueggemann—show how traditions of writing instruction have ignored the unique needs and capacities of students and faculty with disabilities, especially those with learning disabilities or
other forms of cognitive or psychological difference. By focusing on the reality of “invisible disability” in the college classroom, these scholars did more than expand the scope of disability studies—which had traditionally focused more on externally observable forms of disability such as mobility or sensory impairments. Indeed, members of the Disability Rhetoric movement have used the disciplinary tools of composition and rhetoric, and WPA studies specifically, to marshal broad critiques against the traditional practices of American higher education—not only how we teach college classes, but also how we assess professional competence in academic spaces. By focusing DS critiques on the everyday practices of academic life, Disability Rhetoric scholars have begun to demonstrate how academic institutions are suffused with ableist traditions that systematically exclude disabled people from both the student body and academic profession. As the most recent wave of disability studies to critique higher education, this movement does more than offer new tools for naming the locations of disability oppression in American colleges and universities; indeed, it expands the praxis of academic disability studies, asserting that disability studies is not only a political and intellectual movement, it is also a pedagogical movement.

**Part One: Disability Activism Goes to College**

Colleges and universities feature prominently in the stories disability historians tell, not only about the development of disability studies as an academic field, but also within the progress narrative of the disability rights movement more generally. Indeed, the most iconic narrative of the disability rights movement begins as the story of a college student, Ed Roberts. Within this narrative, Roberts, an academically capable and politically engaged disabled student, fights for admission to University of California at Berkeley in 1962. It is here that Roberts first begins to organize with other disabled people, conceptualizing networks of support and advocacy that later become the first Center for Independent Living (CIL), sparking in turn the broader
national Independent Living Movement. The framework and values of the Independent Living Movement set the tone for many decades of activism.

Many American disability historians trace a clear path of influence from Roberts’s student organizing at Berkeley to some of the most iconic achievements of the disability rights movement. For instance, in *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (1994), Joseph P. Shapiro's narrative explains how the 1975 sit-ins and protest at Berkeley "built on the early efforts at cross-disability activism by the CIL (*No Pity* 69).” Further, Shapiro frames important victory of the Section 504 protestors in direct reference to Roberts’s experience of educational discrimination: rather than permitting a continued second-class treatment of disabled people within the nation’s schools. Section 504 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act passed the same year, Shapiro writes, “would give rise to a new generation of well-educated disabled children, who then went on to college in record numbers” (69). Framed in this way, this pivotal moment that Shapiro refers to as the “coming of age” for the disability rights movement (ibid), is described as a direct result of the campus organizing efforts of a few disadvantaged students, a victory for educational justice.

Inevitably, these narratives connect back up to the founding of disability studies as a scholarly discipline. In his iconic essay “The Second Phase: From Disability Rights to Disability Culture,” Paul Longmore identifies this emergence of Disability Studies as an outgrowth from activism in two stages: initially, DS emerged as a social science and policy-related discipline, where highly educated activists leveraged their academic acumen to help other activists push public change (Longmore 221); later, in what Longmore calls the “second phase,” DS expands into an academic movement which would study the experience, values, and identities of disabled people, both individually and as a minority group (ibid). This second phase steps away from
direct policy application to promote “disability” as a valid topic of scholarly inquiry across the whole range of disciplines, including history, music, literature, and art.

Taken in broad strokes, then, those who tell the history of disability activism and academic disability studies have also, simultaneously, been telling stories about colleges and universities themselves, about academia in both its material and cultural valences. Rather than being passive settings in which disability activism occurs, colleges and universities emerge from these social and disciplinary histories as active agents, as antagonistic actors exerting broad influence over the entire enterprise of disability rights. Thus, if we can say the disability rights movement has had enormous impacts on the present state of American colleges and universities (evidenced most concretely in Section 504 mandates that continue to this day), we must admit that institutions of higher education, as complex dynamic historical actors, have exerted their own powerful influences on the disability rights movement.

**Campus as Gathering Place**

One central function colleges and universities play throughout the history of disability activism is to group disabled people together. After Ed Roberts won the right to attend UC-Berkeley as part of his State Vocational Rehabilitation support plan, the university still had to devise ways to facilitate Roberts’s access to campus life. At the time, UC-Los Angeles had established its reputation for campus accessibility by developing robust (for its time) programs for wheelchair-accessible housing, intra-campus transportation, and curricular accommodation (Shapiro 44). UC-Berkeley, where Roberts applied, had no such programs and no such material resources to accommodate Roberts’s impairments. Most notably, the university had no dormitory facilities that could handle the eight-hundred-pound iron lung which Roberts’s used to aid his
breathing for eighteen hours a day (Shapiro 45). As a solution, Berkeley retrofitted a floor of its campus infirmary, converting it into a private residence hall for Roberts alone to use.

In the years that followed, the institution used this space to house other disabled students, establishing, in effect, a segregated disability community within the broader residential campus. It was here that Roberts and his peers developed a model for collective organizing around issues of disability access. Shapiro notes that for many students, living in Cowell Hospital allowed their first opportunity to intimately know other disabled people (46). It was in this space and in this community that these students came to understand their own concerns not as individual subjectivities but as matters of collective experience. By 1967, this group had become an active force in campus life, calling themselves the “Rolling Quads,” and participating in political issues ranging from black civil rights and unemployment inequity to the war in Vietnam (43).

In essence, UC-Berkeley, as with many residential universities, developed a segregationist disability management policy as a workaround to direct denial of admission to students with severe mobility impairments. As I will describe in my next chapter, this approach differs significantly from the tactics taken by non-residential institutions like the campuses of the City University of New York during the same period. As the Berkeley example demonstrates, practical issues like housing can have significant impacts on the ways disability culture grow within a campus environment. Further, each aspect of disability-related programming, depending on its values and implementation, can motivate different responses in the students targeted by the administration. We see from Roberts’s own biography, for instance, that when he had previously attended a local community college where on-campus residential living was not part of the institutional picture, his experience of institutional access was much less forcefully managed (Shapiro 44). It wasn’t until Roberts got to Berkeley that he began organizing fellow students.
Campus as Activist Battleground

Naturally, as disabled people formed coalitions at college, campuses came to serve another function: sites of protest and as the important early sites of public demonstrations on disability issues. Shapiro cites, for example, an instance in 1968 when directorship of what was by then called the Cowell dormitory became the responsibility of the state department of rehabilitation. When the new director tried to institute new academic performance benchmarks exclusively for disabled students living in Cowell, Roberts and the other Rolling Quads undertook a public media campaign to fight back. Shapiro recounts the events:

[Roberts] led a rebellion, petitioning university administrators and appealing to Berkeley’s liberal student body. It was unfair, he argued, for the freewheeling campus to apply stricter rules of behavior to a pocket of disabled students. Thinking back to his own fight to get into Berkeley—and then the protest movements he had seen on campus—Roberts put in telephone calls to the local newspapers, radio, and television stations. “We haven’t had a villain like this in a long time,” one reporter confided to Roberts. Other students at Berkeley offered words of encouragement on the street. Within a few weeks, the counselor [who had proposed the new rules] was reassigned. (48)

While this action was relatively small on the broader scale of the disability rights movement, Shapiro identifies it as a pivotal experience for the Berkeley activists in developing a sense of their own collective power. It is also significant that Shapiro mentions the influence of other campus protest movements. Throughout their accounts of early disability protest movements, both Shapiro and Longmore identify that Roberts and his contemporaries studied the tactics of black civil rights activists, active in Berkeley at the time.
The most iconic case of campus-based protest cited by historians, however, is the 1988 Deaf President Now uprising at Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. Since its establishment in 1864, Gallaudet served as the premier university for students with hearing impairments. At the height of the pre-ADA disability rights movement, the university emerged as a national center for the growing Deaf cultural movements of the 20th century. These movements centered on a shared sense of deafness as a cultural identity, primarily identified by its shared language, American Sign Language. While Gallaudet promoted the condensation of Deaf culture in higher education by virtue of its specialized mission, the instruction at the university was not always well attuned to its students’ values (Brueggemann 1999). Throughout the early 20th century, American Sign Language declined as the language of instruction in most educational institutions, largely replaced by an approach to deaf instruction known as oralism, which privileged lip reading and oral speech over signing. By focusing instruction on students’ ability to pass as hearing in the hearing world, oralist instructors in effect gave favorable treatment to students with more hearing ability and left those for whom oral communication was impossible to languish at a lower status within their own institution. Rather than accommodating the needs of aurally divergent populations, oralism accommodated a society whose discomforts with deaf students and their alternative language took precedence over actual student need.

It was in this context of an institution divided against itself that, in 1988, a new president was selected for the university. Gallaudet had never to this point had a Deaf president, and although two of the three shortlisted candidates were Deaf or hard of hearing, the university’s board of trustees chose the only hearing candidate who interviewed for the position. This decision sparked incendiary responses from both students and alumni, leading to a mass campus walk-out and building occupation, all to push for the removal of the new president. Shapiro calls
the Deaf President Now protest “a defining moment for the disability rights movement . . . the closest the movement has come to having a touchstone event, a Selma or Stonewall” (74). Part of its importance comes from the broad public recognition the protest drew, including its wide coverage in the national media.

More than that, however, and like the other campus-based movements I have mentioned, the Deaf President Now protest served as an important point of articulating shared identity and resistance. The protesters utilized the rhetoric of civil rights—chanting in sign “Deaf power” and making an analogy to the important role of black leadership within historically black colleges (Shapiro 77, 79)—thus, directly comparing their own oppression by the hearing world with the struggles of black communities. In demanding Deaf leadership for the nation’s oldest and most important university for the deaf, the Gallaudet protesters rejected the notion that hearing people knew better about the educational needs of Deaf and hard of hearing people. This moment epitomizes in spectacular detail the important ways that institutions of higher education have served as sites of both communal identity development and battlefields for political consciousness raising for many generations of disabled students.

Part Two: From Disability Activism to Disability Studies

Disability studies, as an academic discipline, traces its values and concerns back to the activist roots sketched above. Indeed, disability studies, like many academic fields with activist roots, continually rehashes the question of what distinguishes disability activism from disability studies. When disability scholarship is directed outside the university, for instance in public policy (in what Longmore calls “first phase” disability studies) we see clear examples where disability scholars use their academic posts to achieve activist ends. But in what sense can disability scholars who do work in the humanities or humanistic social sciences claim to be
activist? Is there something inherently activist about disability studies by virtue of its social-justice roots, even as it is applied to such contexts as sophomore literature classes or graduate critical theory seminars?

We turn now to examine the transitional moment that occurred at the end of the 20th century when disability studies scholars who claimed activist roots began to lay out plans for reforming universities from within their own hallways. In one sense, this narrative documents the building of an academic discipline, and thus fits neatly with the early institutionalization efforts of women’s studies, black studies, and other interdisciplinary critical identity politics movements. However, because of the unique nature of disability as a social identity, and because of academia’s long history as a producer of medicalized “expertise” on disability, disability studies scholars came to articulate a politics of institutional reform that expanded beyond simply wedging open their own spot in the academy.

**Behind Enemy Lines: Disability Knowledge-Makers**

Universities have long been sites where disability knowledge is made. Indeed, since the mid-nineteenth century, research universities have been the hubs of the major fields that claim to specialize in disability: by now the list includes such fields as psychology, allopathic medicine, rehabilitative therapy, assistive technology design, social work, and special education. As Hunter College psychologist, memoirist, and activist Simi Linton observes, these fields traditionally share the same fundamental alignment: the practitioner of the discipline (the person doing advanced study in, say, special education or audiology) is assumed to be able bodied, and the person on whom or with whom the practitioner works is assumed to be disabled (72). It is the practitioner, certified in the applied field, who is authorized to publish research on disability, and
it is this practitioner and her/his peers who design the curriculum for training new practitioners. Across the generations, these fields reinforce the idea that disability can be understood fundamentally as a medical abnormality, and that the fundamental goal for studying the topic is to devise interventions to treat the problem. This well-accepted approach to studying disability, obviously, does not sit well with disability studies scholars working in the academy.

David T. Mitchell and Susan Snyder summarize this perspective on the state of disability knowledge-making in the traditional American university: “Historically, disabled people have been objects of study but not purveyors of the knowledge base of disability” (Snyder and Mitchell 198). Indeed, it is this long history of disabled people’s presence in university-authorized spaces that distinguishes disability studies from other identity-studies fields. Whereas feminists could point to the many academic disciplines and rightly critique them for excluding women and ignoring their experience in general, huge branches of the university system thrived on producing and consuming knowledge about disability (Linton 83).

To describe their experience operating as disability studies scholars in this historically medicalized space, Snyder and Mitchell identify the field as a subaltern, feral presence in the university, like a child raised by wolves being invited to royal court (188). Disabled people have, by nature of the traditional non-disabled monopoly on disability knowledge, been discursively excluded from the conversation. Disability studies claims activist imperatives and espouses values attuned to activist ends—such as the belief that disabled people constitute a minority group that has been systematically disenfranchised by social policy and cultural bias against the disabled. This perspective remains at odds with the education most health science students receive (Linton 87, Michell and Snyder 196).
Snyder and Mitchell describe the daily indignities of walking the halls of their institution, George Washington University, where the disability studies department is situated immediately next to the health sciences departments. When disabled students and faculty walk the halls with white-coated students and faculty who make their careers in impairment-based research, they feel the press of their outsider status and the scrutiny of the diagnostic gaze (Snyder and Mitchell 196). The discomfort goes both ways, of course. Disability studies’ political critique cuts deep at the authority and ethics of the health fields. As Snyder and Mitchell put it, “These professions have always imagined their commitment to disabled people as their primary value, and hearing that disabled people—particularly those in disability studies—do not necessarily share this sentiment often comes as a shock” (191-92).

And yet, despite the fundamental ideological discontinuity between these two fields’ approach to disability, they both recognize that they stand to benefit from some form of collaboration. While disability studies scholars prefer to engage with disability as a social and cultural phenomenon, they acknowledge that the medical interventions developed within the health fields have offered material benefit to the lives of many disabled people (Linton 81). A medical establishment that understood and incorporated the perspectives of disabled people themselves—one that even welcomed disabled practitioners, for example—would be a great benefit to the disabled community, indeed the whole population, since everyone can potentially become disabled. Likewise, the health fields, by reaching out to include disabled people in meaningful partnership, could render themselves “beyond reproach in their humanitarian commitments” (Snyder and Mitchell 190), and thus access some of the political and ideological ethos disability activists bring to their academic work.
Critiquing the Curriculum of Disability Knowledge-Making

One avenue for disability studies scholarship in the humanities has been to identify sites of disability knowledge-making across the disciplines. For example, while much of Snyder and Mitchell’s published disability studies work focuses on literary theory and analysis of historical cultural texts, they also argue “disability studies must recognize that its critique should be trained on the institution of the academy as much as on the social and political context outside its walls” (196). In specific, Mitchell and Snyder aim their institutional critique at the standard curriculum for health science students, which they believe inadequately examines the experiences of disabled people and thus allows future health practitioners to avoid examining their own internalized ableist beliefs.

Simi Linton also argues that it is an important mission for disability studies to take on the university’s health-focused disability curriculum. Linton, herself a trained psychologist and experienced activist, taught at CUNY’s Hunter College, a campus with heavy investments in the fields of psychology, special education, social work, and rehabilitative therapy. From her position in close institutional proximity to these fields, Linton identifies a dangerous tendency in these applied fields to segregate disability as a specialty topic within the course sequence. For instance, because disability topics tend to be relegated to courses on special education, standard education majors tend to get taught about disability as a rare, exceptional occurrence, a topic sequestered from the standard education field; present in many applied fields, this “divided curriculum” reinforces, the belief that disability can be understood wholly as an aberration from the norm, a physical anomaly, rather than as a standard feature of common human diversity (Linton 82). These specialized, segregated fields—special education, rehabilitation counseling—tend to be poorly equipped to go beyond medical understandings of disability, thus they remain
ill-equipped to examine the social, political, and cultural factors that affect not only the lives of disabled people but the general population as well (82-83).

To counterbalance this problematic history of "medicalized" disability, Linton argues in Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity (1998), “it is time for courses in disability studies, from a liberal arts perspective, to be introduced into applied fields” (83). These courses would center on ideas emergent from the disability rights movement: that disabled people’s lives are not defined wholly by their impairments; that disabled people can and routinely do lead complex, fulfilling lives; and that the strongest barriers disabled people face in leading fulfilling, independent lives emerge from the culturally pervasive bias against disabled people as well as inaccessible environments. These perspectives, Linton argues, are best approached through a humanities lens. One reason Linton offers is that humanities courses are better situated to incorporate the voices of disabled people themselves, often through the media of personal biography or cultural history telling. Indeed, in the time since Linton published this call for curricular change, curricular movements in the medical humanities and other related hybrid fields have become more commonplace.

The ultimate aim of Linton’s curricular reform was two-fold: most immediately, Linton argues for the epistemological power of disability studies perspectives. In overview, she claims that the knowledge produced across the university is deeply flawed in its inability to accurately and realistically understand disabled people’s lived experience (115). She establishes the need for an interdisciplinary field of disability studies, which can function as a counterbalancing force in the academy. To demonstrate the utility of this field, Linton explicates how disability studies perspectives can open new avenues for socially progressive research in hard science, social
sciences, and all fields of the humanities. Linton does not see this epistemological critique as merely academic. Indeed, she argues:

As currently rendered, the knowledge we generate in the academy and disseminate to students perpetuates a society in which disabled people are often cast as other, marginalized, and denied civil rights and economic opportunities; relegated to segregated and inferior education; and restricted in their opportunities for pleasure, social and sexual interaction, parenting, marriage, religious expression, and freedom of movement. (130)

Here, Linton argues that the curriculum of the academy has direct repercussions on disabled people outside the university walls. By incorporating disability studies perspectives into a range of fields, Linton believes the university can also become a key force in producing a more disability-inclusive society. She closes *Claiming Disability* with a broad look at the possible applications of disability studies perspectives in a wide range of non-academic employment sectors. In her progressive vision, disability studies could provide training for a generation of HR directors, museum curators, architects, and travel agents (161-170). In effect, college disability studies courses could become an educational hub for spreading progressive attitudes about disability around the professions, thus helping to engineer a more accessible society for disabled people.

The epistemological critique forwarded by central DS scholars like Linton and Mitchell and Snyder have had substantial effects. In the past twenty years, we have witnessed the flourishing both of disability studies programs (including B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. programs), and the development of new hybrid disciplines in the medical humanities. These disciplinary developments have allowed for new approaches to studying disability across a wide range of
fields. In addition, by popularizing critical ideas from disability studies, it has become easier to identify and put into question the kinds of ableist ideologies that make some courses unwelcome to disabled students themselves. Indeed, both Linton’s and Snyder and Mitchell’s critiques name student access as among the primary aims of disability studies—that is, they believe promoting disability studies will result in more disabled students being able to participate in spaces of higher education (Linton 113, Mitchell and Snyder 198).

**Part Three: Toward a Disability Studies for Composition/Rhetoric**

But what, exactly, is meant to be the mechanism by which an increase of disability studies research will promote the inclusion of disabled students in university life? While Linton and other central DS figures have rightly taken aim at the academy and its history of ableist knowledge-making, these critiques of “the curriculum” tend to stay well clear of any engagement with college-level pedagogy. These critics do not discuss new kinds of classroom practice or new conceptions of student intellectual labor. This omission gives the impression that while DS offers new epistemological opportunities to the academy, its understanding of the intellectual work of teaching and learning fits perfectly well with the status quo. That is, aside from the content of the courses, DS courses are to be taught just like any other course.

This omission points to a serious problem in DS engagement with higher education. While disability scholars are equipped to critique the epistemology of academic professionals, the field has remained largely silent and inactive about the practical factors that keep disabled students from entering and succeeding in higher education. Admittedly, there may be serious professional risks involved in asking deep questions about student access and pedagogical practice in academia. However, as I will show in the following section, composition/rhetoric scholars have begun to demonstrate that DS approaches can powerfully influence classroom
practice. With this growing movement of DS pedagogues, we see a new emerging praxis for disability reform in college instruction.

As an inherently interdisciplinary field, DS adapts itself to the research methods and practices of the academic practitioners drawn to it. As scholars in composition/rhetoric began exploring disability studies, naturally enough, they connected disability issues with many of the major social justice discourses already present in the discipline.

There are many ideological concerns shared between mainstream composition/rhetoric discourse and the emerging subfield of Disability Rhetoric, the community of DS scholars associated with the CCCC position statement on disability issues and the online network disabilityrhetoric.org. First we see attention to disability as a variety of student difference. Here, the earliest Disability Rhetoric scholars argued that teaching practices should be developed that acknowledged the cognitive, emotional, and psychological diversity of our students. This work essentially expanded on groundwork already laid down in understanding and responding to other sites of student difference, including race, gender, and cultural and sexual identity. Second, a related discourse emerged extending composition’s investment in examining and honoring non-mainstream cultural rhetorics. Third, we see Disability Rhetoric scholars taking up composition discourses about institutionality. For instance, Disability Rhetoric scholars observe the ways disability identity plays out in admissions essays, or the rhetoric of syllabus accessibility statements. This focus extends to methods of institutional critique. Composition has a rich history of scholarship about the field’s position within the broader university structure, including critical examinations of such matters as adjunct labor, tenure equity, turf battles within English departments, and the so-called “service mission” of composition as a field. Disability Rhetoric scholars have extended these branches of scholarship to examine the issues that directly pertain
to disabled faculty working in our field, including issues of professional accommodation and the politics of self-disclosure.

Each of these foci represents a moment of transformation, both for composition/rhetoric scholarship and for disability studies. On the one hand, disability topics offer new objects of study for composition researchers of many stripes. This is not to say, of course, that all disability-focused composition research has aligned with disability studies’s activist values; indeed, the same medical model/social model divide Linton describes in the broader university community plays out again within composition. As I discuss in Chapter 4, sometimes when compositionists approach topics like learning disabilities, they uncritically accept entirely medicalized views on the topic. At the same time, however, compositionists have in turn exerted our own disciplinary interests back on disability studies. On the one hand, they have provided in-depth study of disabilities that are common in college classrooms, like learning disabilities, attention disorders, and mental disabilities. These experiences had previously been under-theorized in traditional disability studies texts, which, by drawing their history back to the activism discussed above, tended to favor perspectives rooted in physical or sensory disabilities. Because of their disciplinary training in college-level pedagogy theory, compositionists are best equipped to bring the university itself into the purview of disability studies critique. Thus, we see in the rise of Disability Rhetoric a specific case study for two relatively young academic disciplines empowering one another’s legitimacy and diversifying one another’s discursive landscapes.
Institutional Rhetoric and Disability

One major intersection of composition/rhetoric research and disability studies focuses on the rhetoric side of that standard disciplinary binary. It is a central tenet of disability studies that disability is culturally constructed—that the way disabled persons lives their life is determined by the beliefs about disability privileged in their culture through language, narratives, social etiquette, and law. Each of these aspects of cultural discourse relies on the rich rhetorical power of disability. As literary scholars Mitchell and Snyder argued in their groundbreaking literary study *Narrative Prosthesis*, fiction writers often rely on stereotypes of disability (as burden or punishment) in order to structure their narratives (2001). Within the privileged able-bodied imagination, disability holds symbolic power to represent any number of abject states; we see this semantic connection in the easy linguistic slippages that occur, largely unquestioned, between language of impairment and general incapacity: to be blind is a metaphor for not understanding; to be crippled by something is a metaphor for being incapacitated; to be deaf to pleas or complaints is to be stubbornly apathetic. Notions of disability and impairment have impressive rhetorical power, though in examples like these, the effect is also to confirm stereotypes that disabled people themselves are ignorant, incapable, or in need of cure.

The reverse image of disability’s rhetorical potency as a symbol of abjection is the reality that people with impairments are, by virtue of being associated with these stereotypes, disabled rhetorically. In myriad venues, disabled people are treated as if their ideas, desires, and requests are not of valid concern. This is especially the case for people with mental or intellectual disabilities, who are widely judged as not knowing their own best interest, as not having access to the rational abilities to hold authority as credible rhetors (Price 2011). Much of the purpose of the early disability rights movement—including the Independent Living Movement and the
movement for de-institutionalization of psychiatric patients—sought to establish means by which disabled people could exert their own desires for independence and self-determination in the face of paternalistic social systems that confined their movements and ignored their experiences.

**Disabling Institutional Critique**

The most recent wave of disability studies scholarship in composition takes up broader approaches to institutional critiques and applies them to questions of diversity, inclusive policy, and access. Many aspects of this critique stay within the common ground of composition/rhetoric: writing curriculum, classroom practice, genre analysis. However, many scholars have recently turned to administrative and bureaucratic discourse to identify cultural locations of disability in higher education. For instance, in *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*, Margaret Price examines how popular conceptions of mental illness influence admissions and student behavior policies in colleges. Likewise, Stephanie Kerschbaum takes aim at administrative discourse about diversity, identifying how ideological underpinnings in the definition of *diversity* determine the pedagogical programs developed in its name (*Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, 2014).

Within this paradigm, disability studies scholars trained in rhetorical analysis and Writing Program Administration (WPA) are moving beyond studies of individual disability or case studies of individual disabled students. Instead, everyday administrative discourse and policy documents are becoming a vibrant site for investigating social and cultural manifestations of disability in higher education. As this chapter has demonstrated, this work follows an established tradition of critiquing college and university systems from within, using perspectives of disabled people to identify and combat sites of ableist bias.
Disability rhetoric scholar Amy Vidali provides useful insights on the power of disability rhetorical tropes within academic institutions, both at the student and the faculty levels. For instance, in her *College English* article “Performing the Rhetorical Freak Show: Disability, Student Writing, and College Admissions (2007), Vidali examines the ways students with learning disabilities discuss their disability identity in college admissions essays. Vidali finds that these students are savvy rhetors, well aware that admissions committee biases might have a big impact on their chances to get admitted. As she puts it, students must “manipulate both existing and unexpected rhetorical tropes [about disability] for their own ends” (616). However, the narratives students must use, which tend to focus on overcoming personal adversity (623), put the students in a precarious rhetorical position: they must convincingly represent their experience of impairment (without seeming to be complaining) in order to claim the disabled identity that makes them unique. But they must also re-assure the admissions committee that their disability poses no significant obstructions to their college success. As Vidali writes, “such a difficult rhetorical task requires that they simultaneously ‘come out’ as disabled and ‘pass’ as able-bodied” (634).

Vidali’s aim here is to confront the ways that disability tropes have an impact on the institutional processes that regulate one of the most important writing evaluations of the student’s academic career. Indeed, college admissions essays represent just one of the many ways that members of the university community engage in important institution-sponsored literacy tasks. Each of these interactions—whether they happen purely in writing or in the real-time space of a faculty-hiring interview—is overlaid with complex cultural beliefs about normal
academic ability and conventions about etiquette attuned to able-bodied tradition. Disabled students, faculty, and staff who don’t learn to understand and work within the implied ability expectations of this environment quickly get the picture they are not welcome.

Vidali identifies one dangerous repercussion of this pervasiveness of disability tropes in higher education. In her 2015 article in WPA Journal: Writing Program Administration, “Disabling Writing Program Administration,” Vidali demonstrates that the stories writing program administrators publish about their work tend to re-enforce dangerous narratives about both WPA work and disability, especially psychosocial disabilities like depression and anxiety. Stories of WPA work tend to present progress narratives, before-and-after stories wherein the “before” at the beginning features a WPA made anxious and depressed by some failed part of her writing program as well as inherent stress of WPA work; in the “after,” her program problem is in some way resolved, and with it, the anxiety and depression abate.

These narratives, as Vidali points out, conflate WPA’s emotional difficulties with poor performance of the job, suggesting that WPAs who are professionally successful necessarily are also mentally rugged and independently capable. By accepting and validating these narratives about our professional lives, WPAs are enforcing among their own ranks the expectations (1) that we hide our anxieties and present a fully able-bodied persona to the world, (2) that this persona work is a mandatory component of our profession, and (3) that those who can’t handle this work are not equipped to be WPAs. As Vidali observes, the stigma surrounding psychological impairment in WPA work hurts us as a discipline. We don’t explore other options for WPA work, including more communal models for Writing Program leadership or

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4 Margaret Price uses the term *kairotic space* to refer to academic/professional environments in which academic ability is assessed in real time, unscripted, interpersonal interactions. These kairotic spaces traditionally favor the participation of non-disabled individuals (*Mad at School* 21).
professional practices that would more fully enable the participation of faculty with different abilities and interaction styles (43).

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My aim in this chapter has been to present an overview of an important tradition within academic disability studies centered on reforming the institution of American higher education. Disability historians, in the course of narrating the origins of their field, routinely locate those origins in campus-based activism. The college protest and the student disability coalition, for this reason, retain important symbolic currency in DS’s canonical disciplinary histories. When disability studies emerged as an academic discipline, it came to include institutional reform as one of its central objectives. Now, as DS becomes a vital subfield within composition/rhetoric and writing program administration, we see new avenues emerging for examining the state of abelism and disability in colleges and universities.
CHAPTER 3

CONSTRUCTING ACADEMIC DISABILITY: ARCHIVES OF REMEDIATION AND ACCESS

The graduate without health is a graduate with a limited efficiency. The healthy grammar school, high school, college, or university graduate is worth more to himself, worth more to his community, and worth more to his country because of his health. . . . [E]very man in every activity of life draws his vitality, his vigor and his endurance from his store of health; and upon his good health he builds his domestic, business, professional, religious, or academic success.

Thomas A. Storey, “The Responsibilities of the Training School for Teachers in Matters of Hygiene,” 1910

I have two aims in this chapter—one theoretical, one pragmatic. As the first part of my title suggests, I aim to explicate the concept of academic disability, the unique category that I have discovered and, subsequently, defined through records and documents representing the institutionalization of disability access programs. Throughout this chapter, I forward the argument that academic disability takes on the character of its local institutional context, as well as a more general public politics of disability that pervades a given historical context. To demonstrate this perspective, I draw on institutional archival traces from two important moments in the history of dis/ability at CUNY. I aim to demonstrate both the features of academic disability as a construct, and also the ways that construct changes from moment to moment alongside other important changes in society.
Underpinning my theoretical argument is a practical intervention that I am trying to make about CUNY history more generally. As I discussed in my introduction, much of CUNY’s history of disability programming has been lost through what Mark McBeth calls institutional amnesia (“Memoranda of Fragile Machinery,” 2007). While we can learn much by examining the persistence of disability’s invisibility in the historical archive, we also discover important insights by looking closely at the scraps of this history that remain within official archival spaces. To this end, I focus this chapter on two small bodies of archival documents housed in collections at CUNY’s City College of New York library in Harlem (CCNY). The documents preserved in these archives focus not on day-to-day lives of disabled students or disability service workers. Rather, they focus on moments of institutional investment. For example, when, in the second decade of the 20th century, Harlem’s City College of New developed its first health and hygiene programs. In this moment, CUNY simultaneously invested in both physical and bureaucratic infrastructure for managing the bodily health of its students. This moment left traces—new policies, press releases about new facilities—all of which were circulated widely as national exemplars from the cutting-edge public institution City College then was.

I aim in this chapter to lay out a theory of academic disability, which I conceive as a kind of shadow side of our most valued academic currency, academic ability. I argue that both concepts rely on an ideology that student capacity for success (in school and in life) corresponds to capacities rooted in the body. As colleges seek to define and widen the scope of “academic ability” they invest in new programs, facilities, and policies. I will examine the ways academic ability came to include aspects of students’ physical fitness, an ideological shift that would have important implications for CCNY students with disabilities throughout the first half of the 20th century.
I offer one possible origin story for this kind of embodied student ability in the social hygiene movement that, between late 1900s and the mid 1920s, drove the development of health departments and fitness infrastructure around the United States. City College was at the epicenter of this movement. Its program, designed by Thomas A. Storey—a prominent leader of the social hygiene movement—was among the first public university initiatives to institute physical hygiene requirements for all students, including general education hygiene courses, medical screenings, and other infrastructural investments in line with the broader eugenics movement’s commitments to the physical and reproductive improvement of the white middle class.

As I will show, this institutional investment in physical hygiene produced a new kind of academic ability centered on eugenic principles, which affected the academic lives of disabled students for decades to come. As I will discuss in the second section of this chapter, the early CCNY programs which I will discuss in the second half of this chapter, were, in fact, modeled on the structure laid down by Storey and his Hygiene program. In the final section of this chapter, I will demonstrate how the fundamental medicalized nature of this early disability services program produced a discourse of student disability that favored the most able-bodied students while abj ecting others. By examining the archival traces of this period of rapid dis/ability-related institutional investment, I hope to demonstrate important aspects of academic disability not currently addressed in the disability histories glossed in the previous chapter.

Part One: The Rise of Hygiene at City College

In the fall term of 1906, Dr. Thomas A. Storey took his position as founding director of Physical Instruction and Training at the College of the City of New York (CCNY). The College

5 “City College” New York Post, Sept 29 1906
had recently moved from its original midtown Manhattan location to its present-day site in Harlem. City College historian S. Willis Rudy describes this period of rapid change in the college, which included the development of new department and investment in new, modern buildings. Rudy describes how Storey, a recent Stanford graduate, was actively courted by the CCNY administration for his expertise in the newly emerging field of college physical education (*The College of the City of New York, a History*, 289). Rudy writes:

> Thomas Andrew Storey had an excellent equipment for his difficult task at City College, which was nothing less than to organize a completely new department of physical training from the bottom up. Going about his task with great enthusiasm and intense application, Storey organized a competent staff, secured necessary equipment, and was successful in increasing the number of hours assigned to physical training in the curriculum. Quietly, patiently, but none the less effectively, he set up a smoothly functioning division of physical training at C. C. N. Y., causing the *American Magazine* to comment: “Remember that thousands of these boys are led to take intelligent care of their bodies for the first time in their lives on entering the preparatory department of this institution.” (Ibid.)

Storey’s appointment marked the beginning of a remarkable period of investment in the health and athleticism of City College students. Throughout the early 20th century, the CCNY committed vast resources to an expanded view of the institution’s educational mission, which in this period came to include the to produce students who were clean of body and also receptive consumers in the emerging medical consumer market. This investment also put City College at the forefront of a national movement in public health education.
Social Hygiene in College and Beyond

Medical historian Heather Monroe Prescott details this period of rapid development in student health and hygiene programs in *Student Bodies: The Influence of Student Health Services on American Society and Medicine*. As Prescott describes, during the first decade of the 20th century, the social hygiene movement emerged as an offshoot of the broader eugenic movement. When we think about eugenic practices, we often think of examples of so-called “negative eugenic” programs designed to reduce the breeding potential of non-desirable members of society. In the United States context, negative eugenics lead to practices including forced institutionalization and sterilization of people deemed to be hereditarily predisposed to feeblemindedness, criminality, licentiousness, and other forms of social immorality. The aim of negative eugenics, then, was to weed negative hereditary influences from the American breeding pool; naturally, these negative hereditary lines were, according to eugenicists, most prominent among the poor, criminals, recent immigrants, and people of color. Eugenicists, who included prominent politicians, scientists, and intellectuals, thus lent their support to institutions that helped to manage this social engineering project—including most prominently state-run asylums and the legal mandates that authorized the imprisonment and sterilization of the hereditary menace.

Storey was part of a generation of Stanford graduates foundational to the Social Hygiene movement, a prominent “positive eugenics” campaign that centered on matters of public health and sanitation. The distinction between negative and positive eugenics points to the style of intervention being attempted. The Social Hygiene movement did not focus its efforts on the hereditary stock of the nation. Instead, it focused on improving the health—and especially the fertility—of the white middle class (Prescott 94). Proponents supported massive screening and
education campaigns about communicable diseases including tuberculosis, polio, and sexually transmitted diseases (Christmas and Dorman 6). In one sense, these efforts amounted to a campaign to popularize the findings of an especially fertile period of discoveries in microbiology and immunology (Christmas and Dorman 4). On the other hand, as the 20th century progressed, the efforts of Social Hygienicists came to center squarely on the perceived social ill of venereal disease. Hygienicists proposed a wide range of programs targeted at stamping out the spread of VD, especially as syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia rates seemed to expand among military servicemen, a source of great anxiety during the First World War.

Storey’s tenure as director of City College’s hygiene program from 1906 to 1927 is, in most accounts of this period, a side note. In both Prescott’s analysis of student health programs and in a biographical essay about Storey published in the Journal of American College Health in July 1996, Storey’s appointment at CCNY simply marks the beginning of his public work in the social hygiene movement. By 1915, Storey had become a founding member of the American Social Hygiene Association, which would host the field’s most prominent peer-reviewed journal; by 1918, he was appointed to the federal United States Interdepartmental Social Hygiene Board. As executive secretary of this board, Storey was in charge of dispersing more than $4 million over a two-year period to fund local community health boards and to establish a Division of Venereal Disease within the US Public Health Service. Many of his programs and scholarship focused on dealing with VD in the military population: for instance, his first book, published in 1918 while at CCNY, was A Syllabus on Hygiene, a handbook designed for the student army training corps (Christmas and Dorman 8).

However, Storey’s credentials as an educator were also key to his public ethos. For example, in the months preceding American entry into World War I, the New York Times
reported that Storey had been appointed State Inspector for Physical Training by the State Military Training Commission to “direct the operation of the new law requiring military training in the public schools of the State” (“Dr. Storey to Direct Schoolboy Training,” 9 July 1916). While this initiative targeted the fitness lives of school age boys, Storey also made waves at the college level. As part of his role dispersing funds from the Interdepartmental Social Hygiene Board to fight VD, Storey was charged with distributing over $500,000 to address venereal disease on college campuses (Christmas and Dorman 5, Prescott 93). As Prescott reports, though much of this money went to set up VD screening centers on campuses, it also spurred the spread of student health centers and physical education departments around the country at previously unprecedented rates (Prescott 94).

**Thomas Storey at City College**

Although Storey’s work on the national stage is relatively well documented, his work at City College is omitted from both Prescott’s and Christmas and Dorman’s analyses. It is logical to assume that the ideas Storey popularized at other colleges would reflect his programmatic developments at CCNY. To some extent, this assumption is supported by the limited holdings on Storey at the City College archives. No internal programmatic documents remain from the period of Storey’s tenure. However, the archives contain a mix of documents Storey authored that relate directly to his programs at City. As I will show in what follows, these documents provide an inside look at how Storey’s philosophies toward health and citizenship came to be institutionalized in the college curriculum. One set of documents I will examine come from Storey’s faculty publications file, which includes some of his published essays and a small number of unpublished conference presentations, for example one presented in 1906 at the college gymnasium directors association. While these essays and talks don’t often discuss
Storey’s own role as a program director, they do provide occasional hints about how he applied his theory in institutional practice.

The most valuable archival document from the Storey tenure at CCNY is a sixty-four-page booklet titled *Department of Hygiene of the City College of New York: Illustrated Description of Its Building Equipment and Plan of Work*, published by Naragansett Machine Company of Providence, Rhode Island. Naragansett, which was a leading gymnasium equipment designer and manufacturer, includes this notice printed inside the cover:

Believing that it would be worth while to illustrate and describe in detail both the curriculum and material equipment of an American college gymnasium. We, with the co-operation of Dr. Thomas A. Storey, present this description of the department of hygiene in the college of the city of New York, with our compliments. (1913).

This booklet provides a fascinating view of Storey’s program in action. As this passage indicates, the booklet contains both a description of Storey’s curriculum and approach, and a detailed overview of the material equipment used in the facilities. It includes detailed blueprints of the various floors of the gymnasium building in addition to staged photographs showing students exercising and using the various apparatuses. Accompanied as they are by Storey’s rousing narration about the program, this booklet provides a uniquely compelling object of study.

I will focus here on three aspects of his program at CCNY: the way it instituted a system of medical care as a mandatory aspect of student life, the way Storey established the hygiene curriculum as an intellectual academic subject, and the way these programs demonstrate the eugenic philosophies central to the broader social hygiene movement of which Storey himself was a leading figure.
Monitoring Student Health

The most striking innovation of Storey’s early tenure at CCNY was the implementation of a system of individualized medical oversight for every student admitted to the college. Students were required to submit to medical examination upon admission, which included gathering the student’s family history and personal medical information. More than a simple checkup, this system allowed Storey and his medical staff to exert authority over the lives of all students. Based on the findings of this initial exam, about half of all students were given specific medical advice they were required to follow to address specific personal medical problems, such as dental care needs, eye care, or chronic health problems.

In a conference presentation he gave in 1909, Storey details the scope of his information-gathering system. He goes further, describing the level of oversight students received:

[W]e have found it necessary to advise over sixteen hundred boys concerning remediable physical conditions and hygienic imperfections, and we have followed each of these cases to final acquiescence to our advise or to debarment from the institution. This means that in a fairly large number of cases the parents have joined with the department in forcing their boys to cultivate good health habits.

(Comments on the Announcement of the Department of Physical Instruction, 5)

Notice that students’ diagnoses were shared with their parents, and students were required to return for a follow-up inspection and provide proof that they had followed the medical advice they’d received. Failure to follow the prescribed course of treatment was grounds for dismissal from the college.
This system of medical oversight continued through the first two years of college life, providing medical oversight both at the time of initial admission to the undergraduate student body and also at the rising junior level, when the student left direct medical supervision. Beyond the remarkable scale of this information-gathering system, which by 1913 had gathered the medical records of hundreds of young men, this exam-and-consultation system evidences a more striking change in the power structure of the institution. As I mentioned previously, Prescott observes, the early 20th century was a time when allopathic medicine was still ascending as a professional field. Here, through this required system, students were indoctrinated into a uniform standard of medical consumption, becoming habitual medical consumers and understanding their position as patients. What’s more, medical authority was given new power within colleges themselves, as non-compliance with the campus medical staff was grounds for dismissal from participation in the institution itself.

**Formalizing the Academic Status of Hygiene**

The second significant impact of Storey’s work at CCNY was his development of an academic model for physical instruction. Writing to a consortium of gymnasium directors in 1906, Storey remarked that while colleges and universities had begun to get behind the importance of fitness and physical instruction for their students, the work conducted in physical instruction classes was not “academic” or “intellectual” (“The Academic Status of the Gymnasium,” 1906, n.p.). He insists that the work of physical instruction is profitable, but he distinguishes it from other academic departments. However, here, in this speech Storey presented just as he was beginning his work at CCNY, he starts to articulate an alternative.
Storey suggests the way a “hypothetical gymnasium course” physical education courses could incorporate content from the fields of public health and human physiology.

At the beginning of each class period throughout the year I would spend from five to ten minutes discussing subjects related to personal health. The body of the hour with its medical examinations, variety of interesting and approved exercises, and opportunities for bathing, would give occasion for the fulfillment of a number of the fundamental laws of health. (1906 n.p)

In addition, readings, exams, and take-home experiments to “bring [them] into more intelligent relationship with some of the simple fundamental phenomena of human physiology” (Ibid.).

Additionally, uniform fitness and academic requirements were imposed. This seems foreign to us now where general education requirements focus on literacy skills. In report presented at Society for Directors of Physical Education in Colleges, in 1909, three years into his work at CCNY. Storey gives this description:

the student entering the collegiate department of the College of the City of New York must have covered the courses in physical instruction required of the students in the academic department. Physical instruction is therefore an entrance requirement. If the incoming Freshman has had no work in physical exercise or hygiene, he must take that work wit the preparatory classes. If he cannot swim, he will enter with a condition which he must remove before he can begin his second term’s work in the department (6)

This evolving curriculum reflects a further investment in the academic status of physical education. Under Storey, students were required to demonstrate a high degree of physical proficiency in order to retain their spots at the college. Additionally, throughout their first years
at the college, students undertook a progressively complex curriculum. This would have big influences when decades later, systems were set up for incorporating disabled students. Clearly, in the context of Storey’s health requirements, physical fitness and compliance with medical authority was indeed an academic asset. As I will discuss in the final part of this chapter, this context had particularly damaging implications for students with disabilities who wanted to join the student body.

The faculty in Storey’s physical instruction department—which by 1910 he had re-named the Hygiene Department—were also lecturers and researchers. We can see hints of this new professional dynamic in some of the booklet images, which show Storey’s staff engaged in various aspects of their jobs. For instance fig. 3.1 shows a photograph with the caption “‘Floor talk’ on hygiene.”
“Floor talk” is how Storey refers to the short pre-exercise lectures that would provide content for the course’s exams and reports (Storey 39–41). These talks—sixteen of them in each of the four required semesters—were designed to accompany the medical inspections and exercises incorporated into the curriculum. The lectures, which were as long as 20 minutes, were presented in the gymnasium space itself—hence the name floor talk.

We can see, indeed, that the staging of the photograph presents the gym floor at an extreme wide-angle, drawing connection between harmony and order in both the building and the students themselves. The seventy students sit in neat rows, lined up with the taped lines on the gym floor. The photograph is composed so that the scene is contained by the architectural
lines of the building, including the vertical poles that sit in the extreme foreground of the shot. The sharp geometry of the gym’s equipment suggests precise design, scientific purpose, and military precision.

Framed by the orderly angles of the gym is a scene of instruction. At the front of the classroom, the instructor stands reading the floor talk. The clearest distinguishing feature among the figure's pictures is the clothing. While everyone wears clean white uniforms, their differences suggest differences in authority in the space. The instructor, who stands front and center, is the only figure wearing black trousers and a white lab coat. Around the perimeter are men standing at attention, also wearing distinctive uniforms, suggesting some level of authority as well. The students are in the position of least authority: they each uniformly sit with their arms hugged around their knees as they listen to the lecture. Their faces are not clearly visible at this distance. Most clearly visible are rows of white uniforms sleeveless t-shirts and shorts. The image portrays students as disciplined, orderly, and compliant.

**Promoting Good Character through Hygiene**

Storey’s curriculum went beyond simple hygiene and cleanliness practices, however, to put health and wellness within the public sphere and public parlance/discourse. For instance, by the third semester of Hygiene instruction, students were asked to explain “How may personal, family and community habits be regulated for defense against disease?” (60) “State five lines of legislation which have been followed for the protection of society against disease” and were asked to account for both the symptoms and “economic importance” of diseases including tuberculosis, malaria, and gonorrhea (61) In essence, this curriculum established Storey’s
approach to educating students in both personal health and public health. As he states in the closing summary of his program overview:

> We hope and plan each year to send out a group of healthier, stronger, more rugged, more efficient young men who, because of our influences, will be of greater academic, social, moral, economic, and political value as American citizens. We hope and plan to join the other departments of this great College in the development of character and in the making of men (51)

In some senses, the tenor and approach of Storey’s Hygiene program is beyond reproach. His concern with eliminating communicable disease from the American population was a clear commitment to the public good. The curriculum Storey developed at City College, with its focus on personal hygiene and public responsibility, went on to provide the model for further public health campaigns, including a program he implemented in the New York City elementary and high schools after he left City College in 1927. However, we also see within his curriculum and his institutional efforts shadows of a eugenic philosophy that would have impacts on later generations of disabled students at the college. Within the quotation I included above, we see two of these values set at the heart of his objectives: efficiency and civility. On the one hand, Storey claimed that the training his program provided made his graduates better workers and citizens: they were trained to respond quickly to direction and to use their bodies more deliberately in the workplace. For Storey, the efficacy of this training went beyond usable skills, however. Indeed, Storey repeatedly argued that what he was offering really was character training—“the making of men” (51). Though education in team cooperation and hygienic public responsibility, Storey was helping craft the characters of his students. This approach confirms the logics that health and social value are equivalent: to be fit and clean as a moral good. Certainly in
light of Storey’s commitment to stamping out communicable disease, especially sexually transmitted diseases, this philosophy has special cogency. However, there are moments where the compulsion for cleanliness and social conformity can be seen to crack through the surface of Storey’s program.

Early in the booklet I have been analyzing, which describes Storey’s program and institutional infrastructure, Storey describes at length the swimming facilities and curriculum. All students were required, as a graduation requirement, to demonstrate the ability to swim, including the ability to perform swimming rescues. Storey goes to great lengths to describe the efforts made to ensure the safety and cleanliness of the swimming pool, a serious concern in a time when pools could be easy vectors for typhoid, E coli, and other communicable diseases. Again, hygiene is framed for the students as a public obligation, as they were instructed “several times each year concerning the obligation of each student to do his share to maintain the sanitation of his surroundings and particularly the sanitation of the pool.” (8)

For Storey, the swimming pool became the location of utmost purity and order, the pinnacle of modern social education. As we already saw, swimming ability was by this point incorporated into the rising junior requirements. However, as Storey describes the swimming curriculum and its efficacy, he again suggests a close relationship between the hygienic space and the physical and moral character of the men:

This great room, with its clear pool, white tiled bricks, bright, natural light, and fine ventilation, its straight lines, balance and symmetry, and its easy and attractive utility, must and does have a powerful influence upon the student. Here he receives healthful exercise and here he learns to swim, possibly for the preservation of his own life or that of another human being; here he meets
scores—it may be hundreds—of his fellow students on the basis of social intimacy and social equality which is elsewhere attained only in the exercising hall of the gymnasium. And it is all clean. His surroundings are clean. His object in being there is clean. His social intercourse is clean. The habits he cultivates are clean habits. (9)

I quote Storey at length here because I see here a rare moment of emotional engagement amidst his largely administrative, formal writing. In this moment, Storey makes clear connections between the cleanliness and order of the pool building, with its straight lines and white brick, and the student bodies themselves. Storey extends the cleanliness of the space into the behaviors and interactions of the men themselves.

The ideologies underpinning Storey’s program are important to consider as we look forward in the historical record. By 1927 Storey had left CCNY behind, returning to Stanford to direct programs there. In addition, he continued to work on massive public education initiatives, especially those related to military training. What I see in Storey’s career at CCNY is the establishment of an institutionalized infrastructure for incorporating physical fitness into the way the college understood student ability. Storey developed a new institutional position for physicians at CCNY, where they could exert authority over decisions including admissions standards and universal curricular requirements. As the twentieth century progressed, and CCNY

6 “Dr Thomas A. Storey, Director of Physical Training at City College, has been appointed State Inspector for Physical Training by the State Military Training Commission, which will direct the operation of the new law requiring military training in the public schools of the state.” (“Dr Storey to Direct Schoolboy Training,” 1916).
came to develop programs designed specifically to integrate students with disabilities, Storey’s infrastructure would provide a basis. In the next section, I will argue that the ideological groundwork laid by Storey’s hygiene program is just as important as the infrastructural one. We have seen that Storey espoused the belief that physical instruction could have important effects on students’ character. As we will see, this logic is particularly powerful for disabled people.

Part Two: Managing Disability Post WWII

After Storey’s departure from CCNY, the archival record of disability fades out for nearly two decades. However, World War II brought new motivations for the institution to confront its investments in student physical ability.

In 1944, Margaret E Condon, came to CCNY to direct a vocational program for returning veterans. Condon was completing her Ph.D. in rehabilitation at NYU, and her dissertation work focused on the observations and outcomes from this CCNY program, which tried to help wounded vets find and keep jobs after leaving the college. Following the success of this program, an official institutional unit was developed for the college with the aim of providing broader services and access for disabled students. This program, explicitly designed to serve the rehabilitative needs of wounded veterans, became the model for disability services for decades to come. The end of WWII (Sept. 1945) would be the beginning of a Fall semester at CCNY with new possibilities for war veterans, specifically for those who had suffered physical injuries.

The controlling force of this post-war program was the Health Guidance Board, a panel of faculty, physicians, and administrators who were responsible for overseeing all students who entered the college with disabilities. By 1946, the Health Guidance Board had become part of the
official institutional mechanism, with their managerial function listed in the college bulletin’s official admissions procedure.

As with the Storey program, much of the legacy of the Health Guidance program has been lost from the CUNY historical narrative. All that survives describing the board and its work are a few administrative reports, and a small handful of articles published in the college alumni magazine during the 1950s. Nearly all of the historical traces from this period center around Margaret Condon herself, as she—like Storey—used her position at CCNY to push a career of public speaking and writing in an emerging field. Condon published frequently in the field of rehabilitation, and she spoke widely at colleges and universities around the world, advertising the model she pioneered at CCNY. While her public writings and speeches give some indications of her philosophy and approach, they don’t directly catalog the history of her program at CUNY.

The most revealing bureaucratic document from this period’s archival history is Condon’s Fifteenth Annual Report for the Health Guidance Board (1960), which usefully describes the objectives and mechanisms of the Board. For instance, in a model letter sent to department chairs included in the report’s appendix, Condon (speaking for the board) writes:

This program aims to facilitate the education of the handicapped students with minimum disturbance of normal instructional and general student activities. The program includes:

1. arranging satisfactory programs for certain types of physically handicapped students
2. procurement of readers and braille reading material for the blind
3. initiating action when changes of degree requirements are deemed advisable
4. effective adjustment to the maximum correction of physical defects
5. discussing classroom problems of the physically handicapped with individual instructors
6. arranging for the utilization of such aid as is offered by public and private agencies. (17)

In this letter, Condon sets out the institutionally devised and sanctioned goals for the Board. Some of these bear resemblance to present day disability services work—for instance, point 5 and 6, liaising with faculty and helping the student get access to public support programs. This early program was also a pioneer in services for blind students, being one of the first public school programs to invest in braille and audio textbook resources. This, too, is a hallmark of modern disability services, which in most institutions were not in place in a formalized way until the 1970s. The Board clearly included many aspects of their work that fit within the “accommodation” paradigm I discuss at greater length in chapter 4.

However, this program also bears clear marks from the legacy of Storey and his hygiene infrastructure. In Point 4, we see that this program included in its mission the goal of correcting students’ physical defects, directly echoing Storey’s own institutional mission in establishing the hygiene curriculum. The mechanisms offered for these corrections also derive from Storey’s model. Students who are flagged for supervision under the Board were enrolled in special segregated hygiene courses, which allowed health faculty to provide individualized health instruction focused on rehabilitation. They also provided a system for monitoring these students’ progress in reports that would be provided to Condon and her board.

**Early CCNY Disability Publicity**

The archives do not preserve individual accounts of this early program. However, this program did occasion a compelling set of public writings about disabled students. As I discussed
above, it was with the establishment of the Health Guidance Board that we first see handicapped students discussed in the student bulletin’s admissions procedures. This public acknowledgement of the presence of disability within the student body following WWII is certainly historically important. Obviously, most institutional writing about these students and these programs were not written for a public audience. I will return to the internal institutional writing in a moment. However when we look at the first fifteen years of the Health Guidance Board when Condon was leading the charge, we see a proliferation of public discourse coming from the college regarding students with disabilities and the programs designed to serve them, especially in the college’s alumni magazine and local New York City newspapers. As I will show, the disability discourse included in these public writings demonstrate the ways a medicalized discourse of student ability were normalized within the picture of disability at CCNY.

One central feature of the Condon-era disability services program is the special Hygiene course offered to Health Guidance Board students. One article in the CCNY Alumnus Magazine discusses this course. By this time, the health requirements had been reduced to only one year of physical education for all students. The article describes the special courses for disabled students. Published in the June 1957 issue of the college’s Alumnus Magazine titled “City College’s ‘Sturdy Sons’: A veteran physical education professor tells the inspiring story of an unusual group of students.” In this brief article, Anthony Orlando, a hygiene instructor who had been working at the college since the 1920s, describes his experience working with the special hygiene courses where “spastics, blind students, epileptics, post-polio cases, diabetics, the hard-of-hearing, and heart cases” could satisfy their four semesters of required hygiene education (Orlando 9). He describes the scene in the workout room as “perplexing” to a typical observer, with all students working at different activities without the typical order characteristic of other
health courses. He then goes on to describe specific cases of students who experienced impressive improvements through the program, such as a blind student who mastered golf.

On the one hand, this article provided for curious alumni and the campus readership an inside view of disabled students in a segregated campus space. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has argued, this is one of the functions of the freak show—providing a permissible space for nondisabled viewers to indulge their curiosity about the everyday lives of people with extraordinary bodies (*Extraordinary Bodies*, 1997). However, this article does not focus exclusively on the peculiarity of the disabled students in these classes; rather, it focuses on the ways they “compensate” for their impairments in order to reach the status of the nondisabled student population.

We can see a telling example of how talking about disability is often, in fact, a way to talk about the positive values of ability. For example, in his initial definition of the “‘special’ courses,” Orlando explains they are “designed for those who, for some medical reason or other, may not be able to participate in a rugged program of physical activities—particularly if they have to compete against others who possess greater strength, coordination and stamina” (9). Here the hygiene teacher describes two student populations simultaneously: first, he defined the special population of these courses by their medical infirmity; at the same time, he defines the able-bodied population by their strength, coordination, and stamina. In both cases, these embodied characteristics are compared to the rugged curriculum itself, which promotes competition as its central feature. Against this measure, which was still at the time enforced in the mandatory hygiene course requirements, students with medical problems are rendered as vulnerable and curious members of the student body. The process of enfreakment serves to distinguish the two sides of the able/disabled binary.
Orlando’s aim in this article, in addition to allowing readers a peek into this special disabled space is to show the positive characteristics of determination and sportsmanship that allow his students to succeed in spite of their physical limitations. He writes:

The perseverance they show—even in the face of slow initial progress—is amazing. Most of us would probably give up. But my youngsters keep at it. Why?

Because it’s important to them to be able to join their friends on some common basis. (11)

Again, Orlando makes clear the us/them binary of his address. As we able-bodied readers observe his struggling students, we are invited to have a sense of amazement and admiration, that while the students may be physically inferior, they have superior resources in the form of perseverance. Additionally, Orlando associates this perseverance with a positive commitment on the student’s part—the wish to share a common basis with his able-bodied peers.

This passage evokes two related disability studies concepts, which will motivate us forward in this historical investigation from this particular case into a larger analysis of academic disability in this post-war period. The first comes to us from queer/crip theorist Robert McCruer, who adapts Adrienne Rich’s concept of compulsory heterosexuality to account for the social prerogative that demands disabled people to, at all times, act as able-bodied as possible in order to gain social acceptance. Under the regime of compulsory ablebodiedness, McCruer argues, the personal labor we everyday undertake to perform as healthy, independent, and cheerful is cast as a virtue, as a commitment to social good (Crip Theory, 2006). Within a physical education class based on the rugged, ablebodied norm, students who strive to achieve ablebodied performance standards are lauded as inspirational. In praising the high levels of determination these students display, Orlando both reveals and misses the point that these students feel compelled to perform
high levels of athletic performance in order to access “some common basis” with their classmates. By focusing on the grit and moral strength of these exceptional students, Orlando functionally erases the ways social pressure and the hygiene infrastructure itself demand the kind of ablebodied performance his article praises.

When CCNY disabled students are discussed in the Alumnus Magazine and other popular press during this post-war period, the focal points are often students who have achieved high levels of normalcy, figures who disability studies scholars would recognize as “super crips.” The super crip is a figure of a person who has worked so hard to overcome the limitations imposed by disability that they have gained some kind of extraordinary capacity. This can simply be a matter of a person who has compensated so well for his or her disability that they can pass as nondisabled—for instance, a person with hearing impairments who can seamlessly read lips. Or, at its most extreme, the super crip gains extraordinary powers that surpass even nondisabled peers—as can be seen in popular “believe it or not” accounts of people with visual impairments learning to navigate by echolocation. As images of the super crip proliferate in public discourse, as, in the post-war CCNY discourse, they are touted as models for disabled success, we see the struggles of discrimination and poor access fade into the background.

One useful example is Norman Balot, CCNY class of 1955. Balot was a blind student admitted through the Health Guidance Board program. His story is featured in both Orlando’s article and in another 1955 article titled “Help for the Handicapped” by Philip Wolcoff. The article’s subtitle reads “The campus has many students like blind wrestler Norman Balot. They work hard, take part in campus activities—and get help, not pity, from College officials” (14). This article initially focuses on the Health Guidance Board itself, which by this point was in its ninth year of operation. Using Balot as a “typical” example, the article explains the Board’s
structure and its procedures for admitting, assessing, and counseling incoming students with disabilities. Through his example, the article demonstrates the various resources available to disabled students—including special registration and paid readers for blind students.

Balot himself is an impressive figure. Billed here as “blind wrestler,” he is first pictured in the article on the wrestling mat.

Figure 3.2 Photograph. Norman Balot Wrestling. Credited to Morton Berger. Featured in The City College Alumnus June 1953 and Jan 1955

The image caption clearly indicates that Balot has developed special skills in order to “make up for his lack of sight,” including a “highly-developed sense of hearing” (14).

As we see in the “Help for the Handicapped” article, however, Norm the Blind Wrestler has impressive skills that extend beyond athletics. He is also pictured (fig. 3.2) on the following
page seated in a classroom with his peers as they all read from textbooks. Balot, who sits in a suit and bowtie among his casually dressed classmates reads from a Braille text. His success as an athlete and student are demonstrated in the article’s concluding paragraph. Balot explains that he intends to go for a master’s degree in psychology so that he may become a vocational guidance counselor, “helping to rehabilitate handicapped persons” (16)—that is, to do work like the members of the Health Guidance Board have done for him. The article closes by saying “Norm has learned the wisdom of a well-known prayer: ‘God gives us grace to accept with serenity the things we cannot change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference’” (16).

The public image coming out of CCNY during this first decade of the Health Guidance Board focuses on figures like Balot, exemplary students who not only succeed, but who personify values of studiousness, friendliness, and physical fitness. Of course, the danger of the supercrip image is that it often comes to dominate all discourse about disability: when the only time a disabled student is mentioned, he happens to be a star athlete who loves the college’s rehabilitation-focused program, we get a number of false impressions. One myth of the supercrip is that disability can be overcome through determination; one consequence of this belief, of course, is that for disabled people who do not overcome their embodied reality, this failing justifies a diagnosis of weak will, of lack of determination. The personal achievement central to the supercrip myth also obscures the fact that not all disabled people face the same barriers and restrictions. However, in a public discourse that still saw disabled college students as an oddity, figures like Balot and his peers earned the Health Guidance Board public acclaim (“Blind Doing Well at City College” New York Times, 1964).
The Shadow Side of Extraordinary Ability

I want to turn in the final section of this chapter from the public image of disability at CCNY to the image displayed in administrative reports generated by the Health Guidance Board itself. This report, written by Condon on behalf of the Board, describes the development of the program across its first fifteen years, 1946-1960. After laying out the purpose of the board and its processes for locating physically handicapped students (1-2), the report includes a lengthy section titled “Services rendered to the physically handicapped students,” which is broken down into individual disabled populations.

The first such category, “Blind and Visually Handicapped,” contains ten subpoints, which detail the resources developed over the first fifteen years of the program. Included among these are volunteer programs staffed by the honors society, priority registration, specialized entrance exams, textbook recordings produced by volunteers and members of the speech department, and the use of special sound-proofed rooms where blind students and their readers could work together. This list speaks to a long period of investment into capacity building for the support of blind students.

While Condon and her peers expressed great pride in the resources allocated for blind students, they had little to say about the second subcategory of disabled students listed in the report, “Deaf and Hard of Hearing.” According to the Board’s data, the population of deaf students had grown significantly since the mid 1950s, becoming the second most prominent part of the disabled population from 1955 to 1960 (Condon 1960, Table 1). Despite this population’s growth in the student body, the report only lists three “services rendered” for this population. The first service offered deaf and hard of hearing students is “advisement” in managing interactions in class. They were advised “to make their handicap known” to instructors and to seat
themselves close enough to read their lips (4). The second service offered was conferences. Condon and the Board would facilitate conferences between the student, their parents, state counselors, and the instructors. The final “service offered” is not a service, but a peculiar kind of disclaimer or deferral. I will quote it here in full:

3. Of all disabled students those with a hearing loss are the most difficult to work with as they fail to wear hearing aids, insist they can read lips when further training is obviously required, and become very suspicious of others. Professor Pennington and other members of the Speech Department have been untiring in their efforts to improve the speech of the deafened, the hard of hearing, and the cerebral palsied students. Mrs. Elanor Ronnei of the New York League for the Hard of Hearing has been most cooperative in giving tests and advice to our students. (4-5)

While all ten points of services for visually impaired students list practices or resources available to these students, this final subpoint about services for the deaf seems instead to list a programmatic failing. It describes services offered, but not successful ones. However, this failing is located in the students themselves, who are characterized as deceptive, careless, and suspicious. Clearly, the Board has invested some university resources in providing services for this population, but those have been focused on correcting the supposed defect of these students through speech therapy. The details of this speech therapy program are nowhere given in the report or in other archival sources. Whatever they may be, it is clear from the frustration displayed in this subpoint that they have not been effective to the Board’s satisfaction.

This is the first of many references to the problem posed by hearing-impaired students under the CCNY program. For instance, Condon explains, “Deaf students seem to be more
severely handicapped academically than students suffering from other disabilities” (7). The concept of being “handicapped academically” offers a useful focal point in to the distinctions Condon and the Board recognized among disabled populations. There were some kinds of disabled students, especially blind students, whose impairments did not result in serious academic handicaps. As we have seen from the public image of the super crip success story, these students are frequently portrayed as both individually exemplary and also committed to the normative values of the broader student body. Students like Balot are not disruptive elements—indeed, the programs designed for their access are widely touted as successes for the institution as well. However, when this internal report describes the plight of hearing-impaired students, the institutional resources and other external factors fade from focus: it becomes a problem with the student’s body, mind, and attitude.

The final section of Condon’s report, “What We Have Learned,” documents, as one might expect, the primary lessons gleaned from the Board’s successes and failures in its first decade and a half of operation. The focus in the first few paragraphs offer general reflections on the fact that disabled students face the same kind of emotional and social challenges as other students, and that the personality factors that make one disabled student pleasant and hardworking and another “depressed and dependent” are too complex to know at this stage (11). This section then goes on to offer striking comparisons between deaf and blind students. Condon writes:

We have learned after fifteen years that one of the most difficult of all handicapped students to have in a large college is one with a severe hearing loss. These students say that they live in a world of insulation and isolation. They feel that people are impatient with them. This is true but some of the fault lies with
them. They fail to hear an alarm clock and come to class late. They then become indignant when they are marked ‘absent.’ Many of them refuse to wear hearing aides and state that they can read lips, when the opposite is true. It would be more profitable for deaf students to be in a college for those deaf if they cannot cooperate. (12-13)

Here, Condon’s assessment begins by recognizing the experience of the students themselves—she acknowledges that they report being isolated, being subjected to the impatience of others. However, she goes on to blame the students themselves for the discrimination they experience. They fail to succeed as a population, at least in part, because “they cannot cooperate.”

This conclusion carries through a consistent thread within the logic on which the Health Guidance Board’s approach was based. Blind students do particularly well during this period, reaching high levels of integration into student life and also becoming the exemplars touted in the college’s public discourse about the disability programming. Condon acknowledges in the report that these students receive a robust set of services and support (13), but the success they experience is consistently presented as a result of individual character and determination. This characterization of success as reward for a personal struggle is consistent with the rehabilitation logic that founded the Board, as well as the social-medical goals of the hygiene program that preceded it.

Hearing impaired students don’t fit well within this curative paradigm. Oralist approaches—which emphasize teaching students to read lips and speak aloud—offer a seemingly plausible route to “correcting defects” for these students. However, unlike most of the disability conditions the CCNY program was designed to serve, the nature of difference experienced by hearing-impaired students reaches academic practices beyond the individual physical body.
Students with mobility impairments encounter an obstacle in the required hygiene courses, necessitating the retrofit of a special curriculum.

Hearing impairment disrupts the academic status quo in more troubling ways. Physical training and campus habituation are not effective at reducing barriers that are, ultimately, cultural and communicative. Without the provision of sign interpreters or alternate formats, many aspects of traditional instruction become inaccessible, especially lecture and discussion. The suppressed record of deafness in this period points to the fact that “academic disability” is really about cultural and communicative differences, ruptures in compulsory ablebodiedness enshrined in the institutions values of student success.

The historical period covered in this chapter shows significant investment in physical ability as academic good. As I have suggested, this investment began at the start of the twentieth century, when physical education became part of the mainstream mission of the college. This investment can be understood as part of a larger project to encourage physical conformity and social uplift using public health. As disabled students joined the CCNY population in larger numbers following WWII, they came to be understood through the lens of physical ability established earlier in the century. It is within this logic that Condon’s Health Guidance Board came to see remediating the body as one of their key missions. This remediation imperative became the public face of the programs and the university’s attitudes toward disability. Within this scheme, the institution’s obligation is to manage, monitor, treat, and cure. Students are judged for their academic fitness based on their ability to perform as ablebodied. As a result, persistent disabilities, like hearing loss, are constructed as impossible to accommodate.
This dynamic reveals an important character of academic disability. Academic disability is defined by the accepted standards of academic ability built into the curriculum and physical infrastructure. That which is left out of the scheme is functionally beyond the institutions’ reach. Externalized to a problem of the individual, of the student, of the student’s attitude and character. This individualized, medical view of student disability would hold sway until the politics of disability forcefully changed in the 1970s. This is where we turn in the next chapter.
This chapter examines developments that occurred during the 1970s as new movements in disability rights came to affect the landscape in higher education. In the previous chapter, I focused on the archival traces of the first disability-access program in the CUNY system, which used a medical model in defining student physical ability and providing access. While this program had presented itself as objective and benevolent, it emerged from ideological foundations of the earlier eugenics programs that linked fitness, social conformity, and academic success. Within this paradigm, students with disabilities received special treatment and a provisional kind of participation in the student body. But their access, through the system of the Health Guidance Board, was constrained by a case-by-case assessment of the students’ limitations and the extent to which medical authorities believed the students would benefit from a college education.

Moving into the highly politicized period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, we see the institutional landscape of disability shifting in even more dramatic ways. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the disability rights movement traces its origins to the social activist traditions of the late 1960s, specifically to student organizing by Ed Roberts and The Rolling Quads on the campus of UC-Berkeley. Movements like Roberts’, incubated on college campuses, flourished on the national stage in the 1970s, motivating change in the ways disabled people accessed services, while also providing a platform for pursuing a rights-based agenda for the movement. At the heart of these efforts was a radical redefinition of disability: disabled people, the
movement argued, are not defined by their individual impairments or their medical conditions—rather, they are a collective minority group, a class of citizens who have suffered discrimination in nearly every aspect of civil life from educational access to housing to employment rights. Institutional systems—medical, architectural, educational—have defined them without allowing them the dignity to voice their own definitions. By the end of the decade of the 1970s, a number of major federal laws would establish this model of disability as a civil rights issue.

I will discuss in this chapter how this disability rights movement and the social model of disability more broadly had significant impacts on the institutional landscape of disability in higher education as the 20th century progressed. Within the CUNY system, as indeed across the nation, the 1970s saw the rise of student coalition-building around disability issues and the development of a shared identity modeled on other minority movements of the time. Students were coming to claim their identity as disabled people and to work together for their shared interests. The epicenter for this action in CUNY was Brooklyn College, where wheelchair-using students rallied together with other disabled students to force the administration to take seriously their demands for accessibility on the campus. See figure 4.1, which describes these actions in dramatic language.
The student coalitions formed in this period utilized an emerging civil rights rhetoric to achieve their goals. A story in the New York Sunday News describes the students’ efforts with triumph:

Being physically disabled often carries the added handicap of complete indifference on the part of the world around you. But this has been conquered by a group of Brooklyn College students, many in wheelchairs, who have been fighting the college administration for a year to get facilities there they can cope with. Much to their delight, they’ve won every hard round. (Kalter, “Disabled Club Gets College to Mend Ways” Sunday News, November 31, 1971)
Here we see disability issues discussed in a dramatically different way than the topic was presented even fifteen years earlier in the City College Alumnus. In the article’s opening sentence (quoted above), the reader is placed directly into the disabled position, asked to consider living in a world of “complete indifference”; later, we imagine what it must be like to be in a campus environment we can’t even “cope with,” not a particularly high bar. We should remember that at least City College had a policy explicitly forbidding wheelchair-using students from attending the college. The fact that these students used wheelchairs becomes central to the rhetoric employed here. As I will describe throughout the first half of this chapter, the wheelchair-using student became a powerful rallying symbol for student disability activism during the 1970s (see Fig.3.2).

Figure 3.2 Illustration. S.O. F.E.D. U.P. Handbook for the Disabled Students of Brooklyn College, C.U.N.Y. 1971.

7 “The Board has . . . ruled that no wheel chair persons are to be admitted to the college” (Letter from Condon to CCNY Dean James Peace, February 16, 1959).
We can see behind this rhetorical power a fundamental development in the politics of disability, one that focuses attention away from medical models and toward anti-discrimination models of disability access. So, too, did the administration tap into this rhetoric in designing the pervasive system of disability services that also came into being during the 1970s. Both the student disability activist and the institutionally empowered disability services provider took their place on campuses during this time. We can learn much by looking closely at the rhetorical and institutional landscapes in which they emerged.

**Emerging Disability Rhetorics**

By focusing on the activist history at Brooklyn College, I aim to demonstrate how this period saw the emergence of a new, non-medicalized disability rhetoric in higher education—the rhetoric of access and opportunity emerged, which framed the strife of disabled students on college campuses as a problem of unequal access. Using this rhetoric, student activists demanded infrastructural change on their campuses, most prominently in the retrofitting of inaccessible buildings. Within this rhetoric, students with high academic potential demonstrated that their educational potential was being impeded by non-educational barriers, barriers as practical and material as lack of appropriate bathroom stalls. To manage this rhetoric, which is particularly powerful within institutions like CUNY that claim an explicitly public-serving mission, the institution reacted by establishing formalized systems of “reasonable accommodation” that complied with new federal mandates while also managing the financial disruption caused by new disability laws.

In examining the history of student disability activism and the initial development of reasonable accommodation programs during the 1970s, this chapter largely steps away from the official archives. Judging by official archives alone, we would know almost nothing about the
vibrant history of student organizing and program development that occurred in the 1970s around CUNY. While I don’t claim that my analysis can fully represent the scope of the period, I hope it will offer some compelling examples of how the political and legal developments around disability issues in this time set a new course for programs in higher education. As I will show in the final chapters of this dissertation, this course has led us directly to our current disability landscape, even as the definitions of disability and access have continued to evolve into previously unanticipated realms.

This chapter will proceed in three sections. First, I will focus in on the case of Fred Francis, a disabled student who in between 1969 and 1971 organized disabled students at Brooklyn College. His efforts produced one of the first disabled student coalitions in the nation, and also led to a series of access-focused building renovations at the college. In the second section, I will examine the institutional developments of this period, in particular, the establishment of official systems for access-based disability services that emerged in response to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The civil rights mandates laid out in this law echoed the efforts of activists like Francis, and the systems developed through coalitions like the CUNY Council on Student Disability Issues (COSDI) represented earnest attempts to institutionalize these social-justice values. As this second section will describe, the institutionalization of disability accommodation systems was contentious, and remains so. The first generation of post-504 service providers had to fight for systemic change, while also limiting the financial expense and upholding the academic authority of the university. In the final section, I will examine the legacies of 1970s activism and civil rights institutionalization, looking at how disability service providers today reflect on this history and on the persistent role of activism on CUNY campuses. While many service providers continue to take pride in their
field’s activist origins, many of the methods and traditions of this history have been lost, just like the history of student organizing on the campuses.

**Part 1. Student Disability Activism, 1969-71**

In 1969, Fred Francis re-enrolled in daytime courses at Brooklyn College after several years’ hiatus. Francis was newly disabled. He had been a successful high school athlete, and had received scholarship offers to play baseball at Long Island University (Oral History of Fred Francis 1-2). However, at age nineteen, Francis had both legs amputated above the knee, requiring him to rapidly adjust to life as a wheelchair user in a world not built for his access. While enrolled at Brooklyn College, Francis became involved in civil rights and anti-war organizations, and began integrating these interests with his career ambitions to work in rehabilitation therapy.

Very little evidence exists to attest to the rich history of student disability organizing in CUNY or Francis’s important role in it. Since at least the 1980s, nearly every campus has had disabled student clubs or organizations, and disabled students have been involved in all levels of student leadership. However, even as the archives contain only meager traces of the official disability programs I discussed in the previous chapter, they contain essentially nothing about these student-generated efforts. Thankfully, Fred Francis left a textual legacy as an intentional component of his own organizing efforts. The one document retained by the Brooklyn College archives that discusses Francis is the transcript of a student-produced oral history interview conducted by a student named Marie Pascal in 1980. By this time, Francis had finished his graduate education and was working in the New York State legislature organizing rehabilitation programs at the state level. Pascal, the student interviewer, conducted the interview for a project in her course, Speech 60—Oral History. While the interview contains some clear transcription
errors, it provides a compelling narrative of Francis’s trajectory at Brooklyn College, including his organizing efforts. This is the only item in Brooklyn’s collections that tells his story.

Unlike City College in Harlem, which by the mid 1960s had more than two decades of experience with disability-specific programming, Brooklyn College where Francis enrolled had no established disability accommodation infrastructure before the students advocated for it. In 1969, Francis began working at the campus’s first psychological counseling center, which was staffed largely by psychology and sociology undergraduate students in the role of peer counselors. Francis carved out for himself the role of special peer counselor for disabled students. At the time he began this role, neither Francis nor the counseling center knew of any other disabled students on campus (Oral History of Fredrick Francis 5)—a consequence of there being no specialized programs for their admission and thus no data being kept. Francis went on a recruitment campaign in the campus newspapers, which is how he met fellow a wheelchair-using student who became his first disabled client in the counseling center.

By the end of his first semester of recruitment, Francis was working with three other disabled students, and he was getting a sense of the access issues they faced. Francis explains “as the peer counseling role [grew] … other students would come to see me to talk about other problems they were having in the school in dealing with teachers and faculty, and the conditions of the campus, it became fairly obvious that the answer was not counseling but some form of action” (5). This transition from his counseling work to community organizing was a significant extension of Francis’s work. In the counseling center, individual students could talk about their personal and academic challenges; but as students working together politically, Francis and his peers would be able to begin collectively agitating for institutional, infrastructural change.
In fall semester of 1970, Francis undertook a series of actions to demand change in the campus’s accessibility problems. Most of the campus buildings had serious accessibility issues: none had accessible bathrooms, those with ramps were not designed to code. For Francis and other wheelchair-using students, many important academic and administrative buildings they were functionally locked out. Likewise, at this time, Brooklyn College had no provisions in place for disabled students to get priority registration. This is commonly now offered as a reasonable accommodation, because choosing classes before the rest of the student body allows disabled students to pick course schedules that minimize long-distance travel across campus between classes. Francis tells a number of accessibility horror stories in his oral history, ranging from times he’d had to drag himself and his wheelchair up stairs, to a time when he got pneumonia from being stuck outside in the rain when his designated accessible entrance (really a freight loading ramp) was locked (Oral History of Fredrick Francis 3-4).

Francis reports that initially, he tried to use his role as a peer counselor in order to address these accessibility issues. He gathered stories from the students he worked with and presented a set of recommendations to then Dean of Student Affairs, John Kneller. Francis recounts that the administration initially responded to his requests positively; however their enthusiasm didn’t last:

[A]fter providing [. . .] a Dean and team of campus planning at that time, tons of resource material and receiving three different commitments for the school to be made accessible which were broken, we were told that we were no longer considered a priority and we were just shattered. (9)

Why might the administration have done this, responded favorably to the students’ requests then shut them out? I do not have access to the administrations’ version of these events. However, we
may speculate about why Francis’s requests may have been given such a low priority. This was the year Open Admissions began in CUNY, after all, and dramatic changes were happening in many aspects of the system. Additionally, Francis at this time only spoke for four students, a constituency that only a year ago was not even counted as a group.

From his initial cohort of four such students, Francis founded CUNY’s first disability activist organization, which they named the Student Organization for Every Disability United for Progress, or SO FED UP. As Francis explains, the name was chosen to suggest the frustration disabled students felt in having their access needs ignored by the broader administration:

[The students] were basically fed up with having to deal with insensitivity, with the oppressive physical grounds of the buildings and requirements made upon them. They were fed up with having to be alienated and isolated from most of the cultural and social activities of the school which are the buildings that presented barriers to them[.] (7)

**Crafting Disability Identity Rhetoric**

It is worth pausing to consider the name of the organization. Obviously, the name sets rhetorical positions: the group member represents a constituency who are frustrated, oppressed, ignored. It is no coincidence that this group framed themselves as a constituency united by an opposing force. As disability theorist Lennard Davis has observed, disability is a category that stretches the traditional understandings of what defines a minority group (See Davis *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era*, 2014). Disability is, after all, an umbrella term that covers a huge range of specific embodiments. Minority groups are typically defined, however, by shared social or cultural identity. What unites disabled people as a single constituency, disability activists argued, was an experience of abelistic discrimination. Seen in this way, the opposition
provided by the Brooklyn college administration provided a useful counterforce for Francis to use in rallying an organization around shared interests. Francis called this his best accomplishment in “creative advertising” (7).

While the Brooklyn College archive does not have any further materials on Francis or SOFEDUP beyond the newspaper article and student-conducted oral history I have already mentioned, there is a third document I will introduce now. Francis and his co-founders in SOFEDUP created a 21-page booklet titled *S.O. F.E.D. U.P.: Handbook for the Disabled Students of Brooklyn College* (1971). The booklet lays out the organization’s key aims and values, and it also contains a detailed assessment of the accessibility features (and problems) of each of the academic buildings. Francis reports that this booklet was printed and distributed to new SOFEDUP members at the beginning of each school year. It served, therefore, as a kind of auto-archive for the group, allowing them to pass on useful elements of their gathered institutional knowledge in a legacy document. Thankfully, the full booklet is available online through the ERIC database, archived by the US department of Education.

Francis points out that his coalition building fit in comfortably with the politics at Brooklyn College in 1970. Indeed, he frames the group’s goals directly in relation to the politics of Open Admissions. Here, Francis lays out one of the group’s goals in the subsection “Purpose”:

To advance higher education for the disabled in City University by eliminating all architectural, educational, motivational and bureaucratic barriers that presently exist for the disabled and thereby making Open Enrollment a valid program affecting all, whereas now, only the disabled are totally overlooked and alienated from its benefits. (1971, 6)
Here Francis articulates a wide critique on CUNY’s accessibility. It should be noted that this call for removal of barriers would not be codified into law in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (which I will discuss in the final portion of this chapter). Francis doesn’t point to CUNY’s legal obligations to the disabled; rather, he points to CUNY’s political and moral commitments and how they’re falling short for disabled students. This argument would prove useful to Francis and his peers’ efforts.

SO FED UP Gets “Militant”

Since, as Francis reports in his oral history, it was clear to SO FED UP that their needs were not a concern for the administration, they turned instead to the students and faculty for support. Francis recounts the story of going with the other leaders of SO FED UP to a meeting of the Brooklyn College student government. There, speaking on behalf of the group, Francis explained the ways they had been ignored by the administration. Further, he admonished the student government leaders for not prioritizing disabled student’s rights in their own work with the administration:

I blasted them. I told them that they had absolutely no concern or no level of interest in the needs and rights of students—fellow students on this campus—and that they are an organization totally for the able-bodied. They were an organization that represented supposedly people of various self-interest groups in a multi-dimensional campus such as Brooklyn College in the center of the largest urban city in the world—and if you belong to that interest group and you were disabled, you were totally disenfranchised from their concern. ...
I embarrassed them. I challenged them. I didn’t expect them to turn around to me and say “well, let’s do something about it. Let’s do something right now.” And there was a meeting of the faculty council at the time and you have to think of the time how the spirit of this movement just began to reverberate in this room. Here were four disabled students frightened out of their minds and me in front of them frightened more than they were: speaking to fifty other students, telling them they were really not responding to us in terms of their social attitudes, and those people saying We’re with you, let’s go do something and we all of a sudden are going out of the meeting and going through the hall to the faculty council. We stormed into the room. (11)

In what Francis describes as the first “militant action” of his life, he led the group of students to interrupt the Faculty Council meeting and demand the right to speak (cite). Wheelchair-using students blocked the hall’s doors, blocking the faculty in while they waited for the microphone. Again, the students of SO FED UP argued that their rights as students were being ignored by the administration. Again, to Francis’s surprise, the faculty came out in support of SO FED UP, and sent a representative to the president’s office to speak on the group’s behalf. By the end of the scheduled faculty council meeting, Francis had an appointment to speak with the president about their demands.

**Access as Activism, Activism for Access**

I go to such great lengths in setting up this particular moment from CUNY disability history because it provides a useful demonstration of the emergence of a new kind of disability rhetoric within the academic landscape. In characterizing the rhetoric of disability access, I aim to describe a new way of making arguments that emerged during the early 1970s—a new way of
making arguments about disability afforded by the minority model of disability. The earlier period approached disability through a purely medical lens, with disabled people as individual patients. The ideological focus on curing impairments leads logically to a particularization of disabled experience, with best rehabilitative practices tailored to one sub-population or another. However, a central feature of SO FED UP’s initial organizing was drawing together disabled students across a wide spectrum of impairments. Though Francis and many of the first generation of SO FED UP students used wheelchairs, they had a spectrum of impairments, and the coalition also represented students with sensory impairments. SO FED UP came to the student government, it came as four students representing a larger constituency. Francis’s group represented the needs of a broad and growing population of students at Brooklyn College who were being left out of the institutions’ priorities; however, their small number itself demonstrated a useful rhetorical point.

As Francis pointed out, one reason the numbers of SO FED UP were so small was because so few disabled students bothered to apply to Brooklyn College. Instead, these students were forced to apply outside the free CUNY system to Long Island University, which had better accessibility programs for wheelchair users. This fact demonstrates one of the paradoxes of disability visibility that tends to dominate in poorly accessible public spaces: few disabled people go to the extreme burden of fighting their way into a poorly accessible campus—it appears as a result that there are not enough disabled people on campus to justify comprehensive overhauls to buildings and policies. Francis broke through this logic by claiming to represent more than the meager disabled population at Brooklyn College, he claimed to speak for the disabled students who were barred in advance, those who never applied to CUNY despite having every right to a free education on par with their non-disabled peers.
By asserting that disabled students represented a unified (albeit under-represented) constituency, Francis effectively made two other claims. The first is definitional—that disability is not defined by one specific embodiment or another, but rather by a shared experience of inaccessibility. Whether they were blind or quadriplegic, the students of SO FED UP shared an experience of facing barriers in the campus environment that made their lives more difficult. They had been kept out, forgotten about. By defining disability as an institutional barrier rather than a physical difference, Francis also makes a second claim: he draws attention to those who do not experience the inaccessibility of the environment, those who don’t notice a lack of ramps or braille, those who make up the constituency of the able-bodied. In so doing, he names them as representatives of another kind of constituency, a chauvinist majority whose biases line up neatly with the able-bodied administration. So, at the same time that he re-defines the unifying identity of the disabled, he also names the previously naturalized majority identity of the able-bodied. For students who view themselves as radical and take pride in their commitments to social justice, this re-definition as a member of a chauvinist, privileged majority clearly articulates a cutting critique.

SO FED UP’s focus on physical accessibility also offers a useful rhetorical function by providing a clear means of action. While social bias and prejudice are clear concerns facing the disabled student population, the specific calls to action Francis and his group proposed addressed clear, material interventions. Buildings need new ramps, they said—libraries need new equipment; registration and classroom allocation policies need adjusting. Compared to the massive shake-ups involved in Open Admissions in the name of breaking down racial and ethnic barriers in CUNY, these material changes proposed by SO FED UP were both achievable and uncontroversial. The able-bodied student government had a clear path to demonstrate their
commitment to equality for the newly vocal disabled minority: get the administration to pay for ramps.

Francis and his co-organizers got their meeting with the college’s president, and within the month following, also saw the start of new construction to install ramps and improve classroom accessibility across the campus. One reason for their success, Francis believes, is the way the disabled students had motivated the participation of a wide range of stakeholders behind their cause. Following the student government and faculty council actions, Francis took out a full-page ad in the student newspaper, thanking a number of prominent student and faculty groups for their support, including the “Black Student Unit” and the “Puerto Rican Lions,” and other groups who had a reputation for activist work on campus (11). This was a gambit on Francis’s part—he had not actually received pledges of support from these organizations. He was hoping these groups would be unwilling to publicly deny their involvement in the coalitional movement.

Some years later, when he had graduated and gone on to work for the New York Department of Vocational Education, Francis had occasion to speak with Dean Kneller about the events of 1970. Francis recounts that Kneller explained that he’d been most moved by the way other campus groups got behind SO FED UP’s demands: “He always marveled at how all the cohesiveness of all these organizations at a time on campus, came behind the disabled students” (14). Francis summarizes the outcome:

I confided in him that that was a total gamble. I had never gotten the support of those organizations. I gambled that no one would jump on me thanking me for a success like they would if I thanked them for a failure. And he told me that that’s what moved him. The action at the time. So, the whole thing came about as a
result of some action backed up by a bluff which was responded to by fear of some larger issue being created and that’s how the ramps and concessions got there. (Ibid.)

As Francis recounts the event, it was precisely the rhetorical power of SO FED UP’s broad alliance that most motivated the administration to respond. In 1970 at Brooklyn College, “some larger issue being created” may have had special currency to it. If it was between building some ramps and inviting another incident of political unrest at his campus, the ramps didn’t seem so burdensome. In effect, by aligning the SO FED UP demands with the longstanding efforts for minority representation on Brooklyn College’s campus, Francis was able to tap into an effective rhetorical position for his group, one not afforded by the individualist, medical view of disability that had pervaded in previous periods.

Francis and his co-organizers in SO FED UP were members of a unique generation in student disability activism at U.S. colleges. The rhetoric of access and opportunity that they employed came directly out of the landscape of open admissions and the overall climate of radical action motivating racial equality in public higher education. Disabled students were seeing themselves as a constituency with shared needs and values, one with an equal right to educational access. In 1970, when SO FED UP came into being, this mentality was still local, generated when individual campuses accepted enough disabled students to spark a movement. However, by the end of the 1970s, federal law began to catch up, forcing all institutions to confront the rhetoric of opportunity and access.
Part Two. Institutionalizing Civil Rights for Disability

This time period saw students organizing voluntarily, but it also saw institutions being compelled to organize by external forces. In 1973, the United States passed the Federal Rehabilitation Act into law. Section 504 of this act directly addressed disability access. As Shapiro’s history of the law’s passage reports, 504 was never meant as a massive civil rights watershed, it was added to an otherwise uncontroversial act that was aimed at providing services for military and workplace injuries (59). Section 504 was written with a broad mandate, however, allowing it to have a powerful influence. First, its authority covered all institutions that received federal funding. This included a wide swath of institutions—obviously government agencies (DMV, IRS), but also public resources (libraries, hospitals); however, it also applied to privately owned organizations that received some kind of government funding, including large employers that received federal tax remission, churches and other religious institutions that benefitted from federal tax exemptions, and colleges that received federal funds through student loan programs and direct budgetary support from tax dollars.

Under Section 504, these organizations had a new benchmark to reach in order to continue receiving their federal funding. The regulations laid out in 504 came with additional financial stakes. The law has two essential components: anti-discrimination and accommodation. First, an anti-discrimination standard, stating that no individual may be discriminated against solely for reasons of disability; this forbade, for example, landlords from refusing applications from disabled individuals, employers from rejecting applicants on account of disabilities. The bigger challenge of Section 504 comes when you think about disability discrimination beyond the model of racial and gender discrimination into the realm of access discrimination. As we saw in the Francis example, discrimination in institutional settings often goes beyond personal biases
or explicit bigotry: discrimination is built into the architecture, the dimensions of bathrooms or the presence of a ramp. This non-discrimination standard, by pointing to the environmental factors as aspects of discrimination, helped reveal the scope of disability discrimination, but also made the stakes, for the first time, the concern of the able-bodied institutions themselves, rather than the individuals.

The second central feature of Section 504 addresses the gap between the anti-discrimination edict and the physical realities of the institutions. It requires that institutions covered under the law provide “reasonable accommodations” to ensure the equal participation of people with disabilities. For example, an office employee who is hired and who uses a wheelchair, whose work requires him or her to go between floors in an office building, could reasonably be accommodated a number of ways: be provided with an elevator key, or have all office work moved to single floor. The broadness of “reasonable accommodation” allows institutions to tailor their responses to disability access to their individual capacities. However, the financial burden stays with the institutions, not the individuals.

The anti-discrimination and “reasonable accommodation” mandates had unique implications for institutions of higher education. Colleges and universities are more than assemblages of classrooms, of course: they are comprised as well of administrative offices, dining halls, dormitories, resource centers, parking lots. Colleges invest heavily in institutional infrastructure as they grow and specialize in mission: new buildings, new facilities, new resources. They are cities unto themselves. This reality puts colleges and universities in a different situation than many other institutions covered under 504. In the typical workplace, the only things that need to be reasonably accommodated are factors pertaining to the job itself: the
disabled person should not have undue burden in carrying out the job. The narrowness of the job
description, then, puts a limited scope on the employer to provide accommodations.

As colleges grow more complex, so too does the institutional investment in student life
and thus the complexity of the needed accommodation structures. We saw one example of this in
the growth of the student health infrastructure at City College. There, financial and philosophical
investments in public health and personal hygiene set the college on a path that led to the
adoption of mandatory physical education courses as part of the general education curriculum.
This investment had lasting effects on the accessibility of the college in both positive and
negative ways. In our present moment, as more institutions invest—again financially and
philosophically—in the affordances of internet-based education, we see student life including
mechanisms for cyber privacy, social media policies, and inclusion of digital technology training
in the general education mission. We also see the rise of new accessibility issues within the
digital environment.

When enforcement protocols for Section 504 finally went into effect in 1978, many
CUNY campuses had some sort of disability services program. In addition to Brooklyn’s
program, which grew out of the student counseling center, independent programs had sprung up
at Hunter, Queens, and a handful of CUNY’s community colleges. These programs offered a
range of specialized focuses—some in job placement or other vocational services, some in
academic support or multimedia services. However, these local programs were not developed to
handle the universal access mandate of section 504. Likewise, the admissions process had
accounted for disability, but fell far short of legal demands.
“The Floodgates Were Open”

Merrill Parra began working at CUNY’s Queensborough Community College (QBCC) in 1976, the time between Section 504 being passed and when it became enforceable. She describes the sudden change this law brought about: “It was basically like the floodgates were open. People with disabilities were going to be coming to college campuses” (2014, 2). The CUNY chancellor formed an official advisory council to set policy for the CUNY system, called the Council on Student Disability Issues (COSDI). Representatives from each of the CUNY campus were appointed to the council.

Despite CUNY’s unique history of disability services development, COSDI's history is in even worse shape than SO FED UP’s. COSDI was a cross-campus network with no specific institutional home. Since CUNY has no functional university-wide archive, there is no obvious institutional repository for collecting materials about COSDI's history. Through the course of my research for this dissertation, I interviewed fifteen current and former service provider members. While some of the directors from this period are still actively working—thus easily available for an interview—many have since retired or moved on to other careers. These interviews are one part oral history—I asked about their professional and personal backgrounds, how they came to work in disability services. I also had them each characterize the function of COSDI and their personal relationship to it in their careers. The second part of the interview addressed their philosophy toward disability and accommodation. Particularly relevant to this conversation, was their perspective on activism. This proved to be an important factor, as understandings of COSDI and indeed a philosophy of access differentiated along generational lines. The first generation of service providers, whom I will focus on here, worked within a very different

8 See Appendix 1 for oral history interview script.
CUNY, and their long-view of the system’s development informs their narrative of the organization.

What were the professional backgrounds of the first generation of Section 504-era service providers? The first generation came from fields in psychology, social work, and counseling. I interviewed Merril Parra in her office in Lehman College in 2014 and 2016. She began her work as a social worker at QBCC, where she directed a grant-funded distance-learning program for severely disabled people. This was funded by a federal TRIO grant, a program for underrepresented populations in college. Parra was a founding member of COSDI, and served as its chair for many years. She was also tied in to the larger landscape: she was on the board of the Queens Center for Independent Living; she was also founding member of AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education and Disability (now the national professional organization for college disability service providers).

I asked Merrill to help me understand the CUNY administration’s concerns at this moment when disability law was changing in such dramatic ways.

In that day, we formed a council that was an advisory council to the chancellor. Because all of this was happening—the [Section 504] amendments, the ADA, and access—the chancellor wanted an official advisory board formed. And representatives from all of the campuses would meet monthly to discuss issues related to access, accommodations, 504 compliance, etc. And we were an extremely dedicated, hardworking group. And most of us remain as very close friends. (2014, 2)

This first generation took up their posts at a time when there was a substantial knowledge gap about how disability accommodations could work in practice at the college level. One initial
function of COSDI was to bring some form of standardization and oversight to accommodations across the CUNY system. Since COSDI was comprised of representatives from a range of professional backgrounds, it contained specialists of many stripes. Many, like Parra, brought experience from the field of social work. As a result, COSDI meetings became places where service providers could discuss individual case studies—of how they counseled a particular student or how they negotiated with a resistant faculty member. It also provided a space for interpersonal support where service providers, who as Merrill points out “had no parallel” colleague on their campuses, could commiserate about the job’s many stresses and uncertainties (2-3).

COSDI was charged with helping establish a comprehensive playbook for disability accommodation across CUNY. This required them to confront fundamental questions: "We looked at issues around ‘who is a person with a disability,’ ‘what kind of documentations do we require,’ ‘what kind of protocols do we set up regarding testing,’ ‘how do we work with faculty’[…]?’ (2014, 2). These philosophical questions attest to the difficulty of applying legislation to local bureaucratic systems. Some campuses did not have comprehensive data about either the number of disabled students on campus or the legacy of accommodation practices that had been used there. Merrill describes one important function of these monthly meetings as information sharing. This included, of course, sharing practices for gathering student data in the first place, including how to manage challenging legal aspects of disability management such as student confidentiality. This network became key for creating progressive, comprehensive accommodation programs system-wide. On the one hand, COSDI members became their campus experts on disability law—they could wield potent arguments about the legal requirements for 504 compliance ("At the beginning, the law carried a lot of weight, it really did") [6]).
Over the course of COSDI’s first few years, members studied one another's practices and used them to refine their own local programs. As Parra herself describes it, “We were able to use the argument that ‘This is what my colleagues are doing… they’re doing this at Bronx Community College… they’re doing it at Queens [College]… Lehman should be having this kind of program also…” (6). COSDI provides a useful test case for the notion of institutional activism. Clearly, COSDI had an enormous influence on CUNY disability history. But how can we contrast it with groups like SO FED UP? The connections between these two histories illustrate a fascinating moment when rhetorics of activism are integrated within the institution itself.

**Disability Services as Activism**

I asked my informants if they felt their role was activist. On the one hand, I wanted to know their perspective on the term activism, I also wanted to see which aspects of the work they would identify one way or the other. Many informants claimed activism in the day-to-day advocacy of their roles: counseling students, mediating with faculty, providing accommodations. They recognized that without their labor, these students would not be able to access the college. Others specified their role as disability advocates, helping people understand the politics and ethics of disability access—an extension of their counseling work. In this way, they see themselves as extensions of a larger activist project initiated by Section 504 and later the Americans with Disabilities Act.

First generation COSDI members saw themselves as being in the vanguard of disability access in higher education during this period. Parra claims that in the absence of established systems, the work of information sharing took on an activist imperative. Within COSDI’s first decade, the coalition had published one of the first comprehensive guides on disability issues in
higher education. Titled *Reasonable Accommodations: A Faculty Guide* and published by PSC-CUNY, the university’s faculty and staff union, this guide provided concrete definitions of accommodation practices, including what the law explicitly said and how service providers work to provide appropriate accommodations. Based on these kinds of newly developed best practice models, service providers were able to set up formalized systems for matters like intake of new students, setting up testing and tutoring resources, and providing faculty development training on accessible classroom methods.

Not all service providers identified their role with activism. For those who didn’t claim an activist designation, they often claimed “advocate” as an alternative description. I spoke to Christopher Rosa, a second-generation informant, who formerly was director at Queens College, and is the current dean of student affairs for the CUNY system. In effect, his office directs disability services for the entire system. When I asked him whether he saw the disability service role as potentially activist, he responded with some ambivalence:

I think that if you look at the way in which the role is best situated and best positioned, you’re striking a balance between advocating for students, in terms of removal of barriers and a level playing field, but also advocating for the rigor of academic standards. So, I guess, if you’re an activist, you have to be an activist for both. If you’re an activist too much for one or the other, then you’re not, in my opinion, you’re not doing your job well. Because, I mean, I think, as an activist, when it comes to pushing the envelop on student rights and student benefits,

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9 Archives do not contain the first edition of this publication, which I believe was published in the very early 1980s. The guide has since undergone four revisions, including the most recent which was the first entirely digital edition. In a future work, I will look more closely at the editions themselves, particularly the ways definitions expand and technologies enter the picture.
you’re fine, unless you try to push past the rigor of academic standards as a brake.

That’s the brake on activism. (13 – 14)

I should point out that Chris Rosa knows from activism. He was a student at Queens College in the 1980s, where he was himself a leader of the student disability activist group on that campus. Rosa was involved in a wide range of public actions, including an occasion where the student group traveled to Albany to lobby for disability services funding for CUNY. As part of his activism, he received training in federal accessibility regulations, and thanks to his organizing work at Queens, he had a strong sense of the institution’s infrastructure. Rosa brought these experiences to his work as director of disability services at Queens College upon his graduation.

However, as we spoke in his office in the CUNY Central Office, Rosa argued that disability services must operate—at least in part—as a part of the institution and as a stabilizing force. This includes setting up policies that will protect the college from lawsuits and handling potentially litigious conflicts between students and faculty. In the context of high-stakes and complex laws like Section 504, the disability service provider provides an important service to the institution. But also, in order to be effective advocates on students’ behalf with other branches of the administration, service providers must constantly demonstrate the benefit their services provide the institution.

Merrill Parra had a unique take on this question of activism. She did identify her role as activist, and gave examples of public action that had material effects in the world. I already mentioned the lobbying efforts Parra and her generation led to get a stable funding line in place for CUNY disability services. They also took on other legislative matters—for instance, when in the 1990s COSDI lobbied to amend a financial aide law that discriminated against students who took reduced course-loads as a reasonable accommodation.
However, Parra also gave an interpretation of the activism question that reflects the deep connections between the two histories of disability coalition-building. Parra cited one key approach COSDI took in its public efforts was to rally local student activist groups to their side. As Parra explains:

As a strategy, we created a student group: The CUNY Coalition of Students with Disabilities—that paralleled our council [COSDI]. There were student representatives who met monthly, so we were able to call upon this group to come with us and we went to Albany and eventually we were able to get a line item on the budget that really would fund [...] disability services in a good part of the CUNY system. (2014, 3)

Here, Parra explains a valuable approach that helped COSDI be more rhetorically effective in their work effecting change outside the university’s walls. Disability service directors might not be ideally positioned to enact disruptive actions on their campuses. However, many of the directors I spoke with did feel they are ideally situated to advise and encourage students to form their own organizational networks. Indeed, many of the directors I spoke with had once or were currently serving as advisors for their campus’s disabled student coalition. From his position at CUNY Central, in fact, Dean Rosa advises the system-wide Council of Students with Disabilities, the student body that represents all of the local disability clubs on the campuses. Perhaps this kind of disability culture building is a hallmark of CUNY disability services, an outgrowth of the particular political and institutional context in which disability services developed here. This is a question I intend to pursue in further research.

This history may provide a useful lesson for disability-studies influenced writing program administrators and composition and rhetoric scholars. There has not to date been detailed
research of the writing and rhetoric composed by disabled student organizations. This is partially a problem of access, of course—as I’ve said, in my own research, official archives evidenced an astounding paucity of student disability organization documents. Because CUNY has had such a long history of student activism, it can provide many examples for Disability Rhetoric scholars to employ when looking for grounded examples of disability rhetoric in action within academic settings. And the fact that these texts are often student-produced is significant for classroom instruction in disability-studies influenced composition/rhetoric courses. In such a course, student writers could seek out and access local stories of student organizing, local ephemera, handbooks, and first-person accounts. This kind of student-produced, local disability research would provide a useful service to future researchers of this topic.
Beyond Mobility and Sensory Disability

I wish here to move away from thinking about academic access in terms of mobility or sensory impairment, to consider instead disabilities that thoroughly challenge the legal mandate for accommodation. The impediments faced by students and faculty with mobility and sensory impairments in academic spaces are substantial, to be sure, but accommodation, as it is traditionally conceived, tends not to unsettle the status quo of academic cultural values in the way that a host of invisible, cognitive and psychological disabilities do. With mobility and sensory disabilities, the embodied nature of the impairments leads to a relatively straightforward notion of access and inaccess. An academic building cannot be entered, or a lecture cannot be absorbed--access here is rendered as a straightforward consideration of material affordances that do not fundamentally alter the nature of the knowledge itself. It is easy to claim that access is being unfairly withheld from individuals who would be perfectly capable of participating in academic life if only their physical differences were taken into account.

Intellectual and psychological disabilities, on the other hand, challenge the notion of disability accommodation in higher education in key ways. As I will explain later, one factor
comes down to the lack of clear physical impairment—their status as “invisible” disabilities whose cause is believed to reside in the brain, thus requiring specialist diagnoses to understand. As impairments of the brain and its functions, they raise special issues within rigorous intellectual environments like colleges and universities. Academic institutions gain their social credibility as credential-granting bodies by distinguishing between the academically able and the academically disabled. Those who receive credentials are certified for their aptitude in the habits of academic life—they are disciplined students, able to study and learn independently, and they are able to show mastery of the knowledge and methods valued by their fields. Those who fail to attain degrees, therefore, likely lack the discipline, adaptiveness, and intelligence to persist through the curriculum. Or, at least, that’s the implied dynamic of meritocratic attainment at the heart of higher-education credentialing. In this context, granting access to those whose impairments by definition label them as poor learners (in the case of learning disabilities), poor concentrators (in the case of ADD/ADHD), or mentally uncontrolled (in the case of psychological disability)—this seems to fly in the face of the foundational mission of higher education. The standards of higher education seem to demand that those who are constitutionally weak at learning do not belong in institutions of higher learning. People wash out for a reason, and this is part of what makes the degree of value to those who persist.

In what follows, I will look more closely at the challenge of learning disability in higher education. Drawing from my oral history and archival research, I will discuss the work of Dr. Anthony Colarossi, former director of disability services at Kingsborough Community College. Colarossi was a prominent learning disability specialist across the CUNY system. From his oral history, we get a rich image of an institution wrestling with an uncomfortable transition. I will examine the programs he developed, which use multi-modal, literacy-based pedagogy to teach
students about their disabilities. I will also examine the faculty development materials he used to give workshops on invisible disabilities for faculty across the disciplines. Colarossi’s work grew out of the institution’s specific circumstances. Compositionists have tried to apply similar approaches to our scholarship and our practices as a field. I want to get at these connections, going not from theory to practice, but from practice to theory. I want to show that with LD, we see a new period for disability in higher education—where disability becomes about literacy. Literacy becomes a means of intervention.

To contrast my specific examination of Colarossi and his work in CUNY, I will draw comparisons to learning disability scholarship that has emerged from within composition/rhetoric over the past two decades. Whereas Colarossi approaches topics of invisible disabilities as a psychologist, compositionists approach them through the teaching of writing. As disability-studies-influenced compositionists take up issues of learning disability, we see the emergence of a new kind of writing to learn pedagogy focused on the positive potentials of neurodiversity for college level writing instruction. Colarossi’s curriculum provides one provocative model of what this progressive pedagogy might look like in practice.

Part 1: These Other Students?

I interviewed Anthony Colarossi in the small Brooklyn office where he maintains a small therapy practice. Colarossi was an important figure in the history of learning disability programming at CUNY. He had spent the first half of his career working for the New York City Board of Education. He did psychological and cognitive testing for LD diagnoses. It was the basis of this experience that, at age 42, Colarossi came to CUNY’s Kingsborough Community College in 1986. Colarossi had earned his Ph.D. in psychology, and was hired as a tenure-line
faculty member, charged with running the counseling center’s special services for students with disabilities. Colarossi describes the state of things when he initially began his work:

In that time nobody knew about learning disabilities. I came in just after the first wave, physical disabilities. People in wheelchairs. That kind of accessibility was already getting to be a little bit accepted. People moaned and groaned about it, but they were getting the issues. But these other students? You’ve got to be kidding! Who the hell are they? (2014, 3)

Colarossi recounts being given wide latitude to develop programs at Kingsborough based on his long experience working with LD issues in K-12 settings. Until his retirement in 2009, Colarossi was a central figure in the CUNY disability landscape. However, no institutional archive collects the materials from his programs. The materials I will discuss derive entirely from my personal conversations with Colarossi and a small box of papers he loaned me to examine for my research.

In our conversation, Colarossi emphasized the suddenness with which Learning Disability arrived at CUNY. He also drew connections directly back to the disability laws of the 1970s, which established the precedent for accommodating learning differences.

What happened is that it was back in the 70s that the original Vocational Education Act came out, and that’s when they started doing the mass testing of kids in the schools. And by the time we got to the 90s, all those kids were graduating from the ‘70s. So if you were 10 years old in ‘77, then by the time we came to ‘93, you were ready to go to college. All of a sudden you were getting kids I had tested with IEPs and the Psychs. I used to read through them because I had written a million of them. (2014, 11)
Here, Colarossi was reflecting on the way his experience conducting student diagnoses with the NYC Board of Education gave him some basis for working with these students. He understood, for instance, the difference between disability resources available at the K-12 level and the college level, periods that fall under different federal laws. Some students were arriving who had already been diagnosed and given an accommodation profile, which Colarossi simply had to implement. Others came without diagnoses, in which case Colarossi was able to help test and design accommodations himself. Under his supervision, the number of students served at Kingsborough’s disability services grew from 83 to over 500 across Colarossi’s first decade from 1986 to 1996 (Oral History 9).

One characteristic of this period of rapid growth is a corresponding rapid growth in disability knowledge-making. As a member of the psychology faculty, Colarossi published and presented widely about his work on LD issues. In particular, he wrote about his model of disability service administration, which takes a heavy focus on students’ psychological wellbeing and emotional health. He gave a conference talk on the topic for an early regional conference of the Association of Higher Education and Disability, titled “Clinician, Administrator, Educator: Reconciling the Roles.” While it is now uncommon for disability service directors to also provide clinical evaluations, Colarossi’s iteration of disability services blended these roles together. And Colarossi was not alone in this. Psychologist/service providers at Hunter College also published on Learning Disability issues in higher education, producing comprehensive guides for faculty and administration alike (Garnet and LaPorta, Dispelling the Myths: College Students and Learning Disabilities). By 1997, Colarossi and his peers in COSDI had set up the CUNY Learning Disability Center, a resource designed to disseminate LD knowledge around the system through workshops, tutor trainings, advisement, and information sharing (Colarossi Oral
Much of the knowledge and resources that continue to circulate around CUNY today originated during this fertile moment.

**LD, Literacy, and Cognitive Difference**

It will be useful to look for a moment at the notion of learning disability in general. This will provide the basis for understanding the way disability studies scholars in composition/rhetoric have come to critique aspects of the medical model of LD.

Different medical theories have emerged about the causes of LD, though none have managed to identify a sole cause or prove without controversy that LD exists as a biological impairment. Some researchers looked to right- or left-hemisphere dominance in the brain, arguing that the delay in written language processing could be blamed on a mismatch between hemispheric dominance and eye and hand dominance. In essence, this understanding of learning disabilities uses a wiring metaphor: dyslexic children have crossed connections between their brains, eyes, and hands, and as a result, the so-called natural process of language acquisition misfires, shorts out, and signals go to the wrong place (Dunn *Learning Re-Abled*, 25 - 26): the perceptible evidence is slow processing time. As neuroscience has improved our understanding of brain structure, more theories have emerged locating the problem of dyslexia in the specialized structures of language processing in the brain. It is worth describing the most basic popular understandings of LD in order to highlight the connections between the neurological-

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10 I will frequently be alternating between the term dyslexic and learning disabled for a number of reasons. LD is an umbrella term used to cover a range of learning disabilities, including dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia and other impairments believed to result from neurological difference in information processing capacities. Dyslexia was among the first specific learning disabilities identified, and much research predating the popular adoption of the term LD prefers this term.

impairment model I am summarizing and the accommodations available in colleges and universities.

One reason for the uncertainty is that LD or even earlier, more specific terms like dyslexia or specific learning disability or congenital word blindness, have never defined a single phenomenon. A range of factors may contribute to the delayed literacy development of a given child, so finding a single smoking gun in the brain often fails. The most consistent diagnostic criteria, however, comes back to a cognitive discrepancy model: for reasons that can’t be explained on environmental or cultural factors, the child persists in delayed literacy acquisition that would be expected of a normal child who has no disabilities (Fletcher “Classification and Identification of Learning Disabilities” 2012, 4). By default, in the face of otherwise unexplainable discrepancies between a child’s IQ and level of achievement, the child must have disabilities that are not obvious.

You will have noticed that in tracking through impairment models of LD I have been talking about children rather than college-age adults. The truth is that most common knowledge about learning disabilities associates the phenomenon exclusively with children and school-age literacy difficulties. In this respect, LD bears similarities to other cognitive impairments like Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Popular representation of these disabilities tends to focus on children, often ignoring the experiences of adults with cognitive impairments and downplaying the continued need for accommodation and inclusion in the world outside of primary and secondary school that most significantly affect college-level students.
Part 2: Disability Support through Literacy Support

Apropos of the problems students face when arriving at college, Colarossi told me about a program he developed at Kingsborough to deal with some of the difficulties his students were having as they made that transition. He had read a study about an academic skills course piloted at UC-Berkeley that seemed to produce good results getting students with LD and ADHD to achieve higher grades and persist longer in college (Chiba and Low 2007). Colarossi decided to try his own experiment in creating such a course for his students at Kingsborough. The result was a series of two Skills Development courses, SD-10 and SD-84. These courses were taught by Colarossi, who designed the curriculum; it was also co-taught by other counselors from disability services.

Colarossi was able to provide me with most information about the first of these two classes, SD-10. This was a pass-fail course that earned students one academic credit—while this is not a high level of academic stakes, it is notable that the course was offered for credit at all, since CUNY by this time offered no academic credit for remedial literacy courses. Colarossi describes it as “a course on self-exploration,” where students can learn about their disabilities and come to terms with the stresses and possibilities of college life (Oral History 3). Students arrived in the class one of two ways. Either they were students who had received disability services in high school, and were coming to Kingsborough with a diagnosis and profile already in place; or, alternatively, students may have come to the class simply because they had failed to pass the CUNY writing proficiency exam multiple times (sometimes more than ten times). Failure on this institutionally sponsored writing exam, in these cases, served as proxy for an official diagnosis.
The SD-10 course was designed to provide a bridge for these students to access college-level learning. Colarossi showed me a small set of materials from this course, including syllabi, assignment sheets, and, most usefully, an extensive slide presentation he wrote about the course and presented widely in the years before his retirement (Assisting Students with Disabilities Transition to College: A Course-Based Model). While these materials must necessarily lose some detail of what happened in those courses day to day, they still provide a useful insight into the approach Colarossi used with these students.

Rather than offering skill-and-drill exercises in note taking or other study skills, Colarossi’s course focused on two major content areas: the science of learning, and the experience of student life. Students learned about learning disability theories, as well as about the cognitive processes involved in learning, memory, and emotional processing. Students were asked to discuss issues of learning difference, and to write reflectively about their developing self-understanding of their own learning skills. Students learned about brain dominance and the concept of multiple learning styles, and they learned to distinguish their own best learning style, whether it be kinesthetic, visuals/spatial, or social.

The second focus of the course is on student life itself. Many aspects of the course were designed to help students manage the stresses of transitioning into college life. For instance, students were asked to find a favorite spot on campus to call their home, and to write from there every week. At the end of the course, students were asked to combine these journal entries into an essay that reflects on their progress across the semester. This assignment not only aimed to help students find a place on their commuter campus to identify with positive study habits; it also re-enforced those positive habits, like a weekly writing routine to process through class-related stresses and plan the week’s work.
In analyzing Colarossi’s curriculum, we see an example of students co-generating disability knowledge. For the midterm exam, students were required to use their class notes to write their own multiple choice, true/false, and essay questions; these questions were then combined together into the midterm exam. The questions on this exam, therefore, provide an interesting window into the course—what did the students find most important from the course material to include on the test? What kinds of disability knowledge did they find most useful and significant in this skills-building context? While it may not seem progressive to administer such a traditional-looking midterm exam, the document itself exemplifies the kind of student-centered knowledge-making central to Colarossi’s approach. Students decided what of the course materials would be placed on the exam. The concepts re-enforced on the exam, therefore, provide an indication of the kinds of intellectual journeys these students were undertaking in the course, as well as the kinds of information they felt they and their peers could most benefit from learning. As you will see, this exam emerges as a deeply rhetorical communal utterance.

The questions these students chose (and that Colarossi vetted and synthesized, to be clear) show two clear focuses. On the one hand, many of the questions focus on positive re-enforcement of good learning habits. For instance, one multiple-choice question reads “Information is moved from short term to long term memory by…,” with the correct answer being “Rehearsal and creating meaningfulness by attaching it to previously stored information” (*A Course-Based Model*). Relatedly, some questions re-enforce lessons related to motivation and emotional relationships with learning. For example, one question reads as follows:

14. Many college students

a) are anxious that they may not be successful in college.

b) have poor study skills.
c) work full time.

d) feel they do not have the ability to do college work. (Ibid)

Because I only have the exams, and not the student’s answers themselves, I don’t know for sure which of these four options was meant to be the correct answer (all of the above?). But, to me, the rhetoric of this question is clear. Clearly, the question suggests, most students experience levels of stress and self-doubt. For students taking this course because they have been identified as having poor academic skills, this kind of question offers an encouraging counter-narrative. It is a kind of affirmation: and considering that the midterm questions were written by the students themselves, it reads as an affirmation uttered by one student to all the others in the class.

The second important thread throughout this midterm exam—and indeed much of the content of the curriculum—relates to legal and practical matters of accessing disability services at college. As a class meant to serve newly arriving or newly diagnosed disabled students, it is clear that part of the course’s objective is to teach students to be conscientious clients of the disability services center. For that reason, some exam questions reflect lessons, for instance, about the difference between their rights as high school students covered under IDEA and their rights as college students under Section 504 and the ADA. Here is an example of a student-produced question in this vein:

18. In order to receive services at a college a student with a disability must

a) self identity and present current documentation

b) be aware of the nature of their disability and the services and accommodations they require.

c) request reasonable accommodations in a timely manner.

d) All of the above. (Ibid)
This question, again, re-enforces an important lesson from the course: that in college, students need to self advocate, able to explain what they need and follow bureaucratic procedures to get what they’re entitled to.

Whereas the previous question taught a lesson about self-esteem (all students experience work anxiety, not just you), this question turns on a lesson about being a competent user of disability services. Providing a more detailed explanation on this point, Colarossi states:

In the classes, we used to talk [. . .] about hard and soft accommodations. The hard accommodations are the ones that are on your documentation, but the soft accommodations—getting a professor to speak a little more slowly, how do you do that? There’s nothing requiring him to speak slowly or more loudly or more clearly. (2014, 7)

This distinction between hard and soft accommodations is important for getting at the unique nature of invisible, literacy-related disabilities. On the one hand, the students’ impairment is not evident to instructors necessarily, and even if it is noticeable, the students’ specific diagnosis and needs are not necessarily intelligible to instructors not familiar with LDs. Students have to learn what their diagnosis says, but also must learn how to get what they need from their learning environment. Colarossi tells many stories about how students learned to use their social skills to get instructors to slow down, explain things differently, or allow them to engage in class in ways that better fit their learning styles. These kinds of soft accommodations bear close resemblance to the kind of coping strategies people with disabilities routinely develop to get by in poorly accessible environments. This class provided a context for students to examine their difficulties and to workshop with their peers how to achieve the soft accommodations they needed.
Fundamentally, Colarossi’s SD-10 course functioned as a writing class. Students kept journals, created essays and narratives, and demonstrated their new self-understanding through reflective writing. While the course covered matters like note taking and reading comprehension, it did not directly use the study skills themselves as the content focus of the course. In this regard, Colarossi’s curriculum bears some resemblance to a Writing-to-Learn approach, where the writing done in class is in service to the larger intellectual development students are to undergo. Additionally, because much of the self-reflection focuses on students’ perceptions of themselves as learners, much of the curriculum would fit in with the tradition of literacy narrative pedagogy. Through writing about their history as readers, writers, and learners, students get to revisit their past literacy experience as a means and opportunity to chart a new course deliberately.

During the time Colarossi was developing his programs and solidifying his ideas about student support for literacy-related disabilities, compositionists such as Patricia Dunn also drew together models for understanding LD as an issue of college-level instruction. Through the lens of disability studies, we see that compositionists are taking up the same kinds of concerns as Colarossi; however, because composition focuses on matters of curriculum and assessment, the focus of this research points away from what students can do to survive, and toward what teachers can do to create less disabling classrooms.

**LD and Composition Studies**

Two decades after its publication, Patricia A. Dunn’s *Learning Re-Abled: The Learning Disability Controversy and Composition Studies* (1995) remains the most thorough and insightful study of learning disability within the field of composition. By bringing together
decades of debate from fields as diverse as developmental psychology, cognitive neuroscience, special education, critical pedagogy, composition and rhetoric, basic writing, and critical literacy studies, Dunn provides a summative guide for college writing teachers who want to better understand what learning disabilities are and how to best work with students who bear the LD label. This is no small task, for as Learning Re-Abled shows, there are no easy answers about LD, no singular model of pedagogy to fit the population, nor even the most basic consensus among experts about whether the condition exists or what its root causes might be. By drawing together the existing scholarship and laying it next to testimony from actual LD college students about their learning, however, Dunn succeeds in demystifying this topic and providing practical approaches concerned teachers can take to improve their teaching and to educate themselves about their students who might learn differently from the norm.

Dunn limits her inquiry to learning disabilities associated with verbal language processing (specifically dyslexia and dysgraphia), focusing on students who, for whatever reason, have extraordinary difficulty learning through traditional language-centered education. Instead of settling on one model of LD reality, Dunn constructs LD as a continuing controversy. Medical authorities claim LD is caused by innate neurological differences that result in atypical methods of information processing. Explanations have changed over time as clinicians and researchers have offered models for LD based on factors like left/right brain hemisphere dominance, short-term memory capacity, or visual acuity to explain why “otherwise intelligent” children do not keep up with their peers in written language acquisition. As Dunn observes, within this medical model, all learners are held against a normative standard of development with many built in assumptions about what constitutes proper literacy education and how typical students are meant to respond to it.
As Dunn explains, critics like Gerald Coles (The Learning Mystique: A Critical Look at “Learning Disabilities, 1987) find deep flaws in this research, arguing that medical models essentially place the blame on the student for the flaws in a failed one-size-fits-all education system. To explain why some students can’t learn language as efficiently, he points to social factors like economic disadvantages among different schools or cultural differences between households’ literacy habits: essentially, problems of upbringing. Dunn keeps a skeptical distance from both sides of the controversy. On the one hand, she admits that the clinical research remains inconclusive and has failed to definitively prove innate neurological differences exist in LD people. On the other, she points out that Coles’s argument often uncritically blames the parents for “causing” their children’s LD issues, an assertion that also lacks conclusive evidence.

Rather than splitting hairs over whose definition best explains “the cause” of LD, Dunn proceeds through this book with the assumption that there do exist a population of learners in the world (maybe 5% of the population) who have unusual difficulties processing language, and that these students often do poorly in school as a result of the mismatch between institutionalized expectations and their actual capacities. While composition studies has largely ignored the possibility of innate neurological differences (see “Chapter Two: Gaps in Composition Theory and Practice”), Dunn argues that composition teachers must confront the fact that some students do seem to process language differently for reasons that aren’t entirely explained through mainstream composition and Basic Writing research. It is the kind of knowledge that Colarossi and his students explore together—focused both on medical and social understandings of LD—that Dunn believes compositionists need to understand.

To develop a new model of pedagogy more appropriate to serve the needs of this neurological minority population, Dunn draws knowledge from her own case studies and
interviews as well as research from clinical disciplines compositionists would not typically reference. Because of the difficulties they tend to face in some aspects of school life, LD students, even without the aid of specialists or diagnosis, often develop a range of compensatory skills that help them succeed, skills that they bring with them to college. For instance, many of the LD college students Patricia Dunn interviews in Learning Re-Abled report developing complex social systems to support them in their high school course work when reading and writing tasks overwhelmed their abilities to keep up. One student, Nick, who remained undiagnosed until college, made it through high school without reading any assigned books for his English class; instead, he relied entirely on in-class discussion and instructor lectures to memorize important details from the texts that would appear on the exams or essay prompts. Additionally, he used his considerable social skills to arrange study groups with peers, learning from their detailed notes and questioning them about the material he himself had struggled to absorb from the text. In this way, he was able to achieve a reasonable degree of success in high school despite having limited skill at traditional academic literacy tasks like note taking or independent reading (Dunn 102 - 104). These are precisely the kind of coping strategies and soft accommodation skills Colarossi perpetuated in his curriculum.

Accommodations LD students are likely to receive in American colleges represent accommodations designed to make course information accessible, in some ways similar to the kinds of modal accommodations discussed earlier with relation to sensory impairments: since silent reading and independent note-taking prove to be impediments to success for many LD students, the campus disability service provider can offer services such as readers and in-class note takers as a way to remove these impediments. The most common resources available to registered LD students, however, relate to impediments faced not in information access, but in
evaluation of mastery—that is, testing. Under the model of LD as information-processing impairment, the time constraints of in-class testing become a serious impediment. While service providers can’t demand instructors offer more accessible assessment methods—such as oral exams or other alternate exam formats that are better suited to LD students (Garnet and LaPorta 21 - 22)—they are commonly justified in mandating LD students take exams with extended time-usually 50 or 100 percent extensions. The time extension does not actually attend to the aspects of the exam that are impediments to the student; rather, it functions as a rough remedy, giving the LD student extra time to persevere through poorly designed evaluation methods.

Administering exams with extended time requires special arrangements between faculty and the student, and much of the disability service provider’s job involves arranging the logistics of alternate exam environments, alternate testing timelines, or specialized testing proctors who might be trained to help students understand difficult questions and better represent their knowledge.

**Framing Academic Disability through Multimodal Access**

Although all forms of disability that manifest in academic environments fall under the same legal protections, enforcement of the law occurs diversely depending on the context of the student, the classroom, the instructor, and the institution. Important differences between these populations exist, and as a result, access issues for one disabled population tend not to be precisely the same as those for another. As Colarossi and other specialists (including Dunn) have sought to define access for LD, they frequently draw analogies to other disabilities. In the case of LD and other invisible disabilities, the impediments in the classroom might not be as innocuous
as an improperly designed doorway. Instructors themselves, and their established teaching methods, often impose and police the barriers LD students encounter in the college classroom.

It is useful to compare the barriers faced by LD students to those of other populations I’ve discussed so far. In the case of mobility impairment, the primary impediment to inclusion is architectural. Many college campuses were constructed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, before ramp access was common; for this reason, ensuring universal access for people with mobility impairment is largely a matter of architectural change: adding ramps, elevators, and automatic doors to inaccessible buildings. Building the ramps doesn’t change everything, of course. It may take longer to move around campuses in a wheelchair, parking spots might not be available or conveniently placed, and the expectation to get from one class to another on a rigid time frame can be an excessive burden on those who move differently. Also, the social stigma of using a wheelchair is still a powerful force. Still, with the inclusion of ramps and other architectural retrofits, colleges and universities can claim that the impediments to access for these legally protected individuals have been removed, even if the students themselves still feel like second-class citizens on their own campus.

Sensory impairments raise different challenges for college administrators. By adding brailled signs and offering basic spatial orientation training, administrations can ensure blind students are able to navigate campuses with relative ease. Deaf and hard of hearing students can be accommodated in their movements through university space even more easily, with perhaps slight architectural adjustments for safety such as fire alarms that flash as well as sound. Admittance to the space is not the same as access, of course, and thinking about the educational experiences of students with sensory impairments makes this clear.
The dominance of oral communication in traditional college instruction is not the only example of extra-architectural impediments to educational access. Even in the most traditional lecture-hall classrooms, rich visual information supplements the auditory—including visual aids, printed handouts, and information written on the board. Students mark their entrance into conversation visually with a raised hand, and they refer to one another and themselves within the space based on visual relations (as in “yes, you in the back, you had a question?”). Students with limited sight may be able to find and enter the classroom, but they are, in many cases, likewise only able to access a fraction of the learning tools available to non-disabled students during class time.

More challenging for students with limited sight are the considerable impediments to learning outside the classroom, where visual modes of communication dominate in the forms of reading and writing. Certainly, there is no reason why, using brailled texts and screen readers, visually impaired students cannot keep up with the reading load of their peers; and services do exist on many campuses to provide students with these resources. In addition, academic libraries (the quintessential space of independent learning in academia) often contain some of the best technological innovations for access, including specialized computer stations that allow for text-to-speech reading and magnified screen reading. However, because of the expense of these tools, they are often accessible only during library operating hours, meaning that blind students have time restrictions on their independent studying that sighted students do not. And in cases where brailled and digital texts must be processed on campus by service providers, there can often be difficult lag times in getting access to assigned readings that can put disabled students at a disadvantage.
Multi-modal Privilege

In cases of sensory impairment such as these, the legal mandate that the academy be accessible raises serious issues that go beyond matters of physical access and begin to touch on issues of information access and multi-modal privilege. When one mode of information transmission is privileged over another (whether it be the auditory in the classroom or the visual in the library), academic spaces become inaccessible to those without full access to the privileged modality regardless of whether that’s due to sensory differences or learning disabilities. This is an issue taken up by a number of disability scholars in a webtext “Multimodality in Motion: Disability & Kairotic Spaces” published the fall 2013 issue of the journal *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*. The webtext argues that when the needs of disabled people in academic spaces are left as a secondary, specialist concern, disabled students and faculty are often forced to improvise with poorly designed retrofits imposed upon the academic environment as an afterthought. While people with sensory impairments might be allowed through the door, they are often expected to use spaces in the same ways as everyone else, despite their different capacities, rendering them, as Margaret Price puts it, functionally absent (“*Toward an Ethical Infrastructure*”).

This conversation about modality and academic access draws our attention to the recalcitrance of disability as an institutional force that goes beyond simple architectural fixes and gets to the very heart of academic culture, which if left to its own devices would ignore disability

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12 In his webtext “*Ableism*,” Sushil K. Oswal illustrates a useful example of the way retrofit mentalities can hurt faculty and students with disabilities. Oswal, a junior faculty member serving on his curriculum committee, was required to teach using a new online course management system that his department had voted in and purchased at great expense. When he complained that the system was not accessible on his screen reader, he was told that developers were aware of the problem, and that the developers would be producing a fully accessible follow-up version of the system if the original version proved successful. In the meantime, Oswal was required to use a tool designed without his needs in mind in his own teaching because his needs were seen as specialist, and not worthy of voting down the otherwise functional system. ("*Technologies*"
issues. Leaving aside the difficulty of participating fully in academic environments replete with disability stigma, we see that decisions about how information is delivered and produced, how participation is accommodated, and what tools should be made available all have impact on the types of bodies that are able to smoothly make use of academic spaces. These factors—which ostensibly are not individual decisions but rather matters of academic custom and departmental policy—have material effects on matters such as student retention and student success. That is to say, when we start to think about information access, we recognize the complexity and the stakes of disability in academic spaces.

“Think half of the class is deaf and the other half is blind”

During his time directing the LD center, Colarossi gave many such workshops for faculty from many disciplines. These workshops allowed him to frame LD access as a teaching issue, and to help faculty understand their role in classroom access. Much of the curriculum in these workshops aligned with the kinds of lessons Colarossi included in his SD-10 courses. Faculty learned about the learning differences, diagnoses, and reasonable accommodations. The aim of Colarossi’s workshops was not, however, to teach faculty to diagnose their students. Rather, he emphasized that all students, regardless of diagnosis process information in a diverse range of ways. Lecture-based teaching works best, he argued, for only a small subset of students. Colarossi recounted to me the way he tried to hammer this lesson home with faculty:

Keep your syllabus, keep everything exactly the way it is; only when you go and teach, think half of the class is deaf and the other half is blind. Now teach the material. Just organize it thinking half of the class can’t see this, the other half can’t hear me. How am I going to present it? (2014)
I was surprised by Colarossi’s analogy between LD and sensory impairments. I should mention at this point that Colarossi himself is legally blind; during his days teaching these classes and administering disability services, he was provided with a secretary who helped manage the reading load in the age of carbon paper. Colarossi draws upon the faculty’s expectations that blind or deaf students won’t be able to follow the course content as they usually present it. These conditions are easy for faculty to understand in broad strokes. However, they are also distinctive because the sensory impairment analogy draws attention to the modality used in teaching in general. Students with a wide range of learning differences would benefit from having redundant means of content presentation.

As I move into the final section of this chapter, I want to think further about the way both Colarossi and the DS composition scholars I have been discussing have come to balance the distinction between medicalized and social/cultural views of invisible disabilities. Colarossi draws much of his ethos from his long career as a psychologist and LD specialist. He devoted himself to propagating the lessons of the Learning Disability field and putting them to use in CUNY. However, when working with faculty, Colarossi used the medical definitions of these conditions only as an entry point. Faculty were not trained to diagnose students, necessarily, but to understand the role their own teaching practice can play in producing barriers for these students’ learning.

Part 3. Resisting Medicalized Models of Student Difference

Dunn’s work demonstrates the balancing act inherent in thinking about disability as an aspect of student difference. On one hand, by citing the scientific findings of the learning disability field, Dunn is able to effectively dispel faculty misconceptions about LD students. The consensus of an established and robust academic discipline like the learning disability field
carries much weight. However, as we’ve seen, caution is required in utilizing frameworks derived from fields that study only the impairment aspects of disability. If we limit our understanding of disabled students merely to the impairment models forwarded by these fields, we risk designing pedagogies that (though well intentioned) reproduce negative stereotypes about the abilities and deficits of disabled students.

A clear example of the dangers of applying impairment models to teaching practice was played out in the pages of *College English* around the topic of students with a different sort of embodied difference, autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In 2007, Ann Jurecic published an article titled “Neurodiversity,” which argued for the urgent need of composition teachers to better understand ASD. In many ways, the impetus for Jurecic’s study mirrors closely Dunn’s: Jurecic claims that the numbers of autistic students are on the rise and that instructors need to be prepared to accommodate them into the classroom (421-2). Unlike Dunn, Jurecic draws continually from medicalized definitions of student difference. In her article’s initial definition of ASD, she repeatedly cites the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual*, which primarily defines ASD as a complex of cognitive and affective impairments. Further, in defining the challenges autistic students face in the writing classroom, Jurecic relies on a concept known as “theory of mind,” a notion forwarded by neuroscientists that autistic people are impaired in the function of their mirror neurons, special cells that allow people to imagine the mental states of others. Based on this theory of hard-wired brain difference, Jurecic argues, “because of the nature of their differences, these students will raise urgent questions about how to teach them. Writing, which is a social practice, will be a particular challenge for some students on the spectrum because it does not tap into their typical strengths” (423). Jurecic goes on to draw heavily from published fiction and memoir to characterize the writing-related deficiencies of autistic people, which she
describes as akin to being stuck in the stage of producing “writer-based prose.” (using Flower and Hayes’s famous model, where texts that fail to acknowledge the needs and knowledge of readers) (432-33). While framing the central “problem” with teaching autistic students as the fact that “substantial neurological difference in college-age students cannot be ‘remediated’” (423), Jerecic concludes by advocating that instructors engage in a process of structured one-on-one guidance to help students on the spectrum gain metacognitive awareness of audience needs.

Jurecic’s piece came under fire from members of the Disability Rhetoric community for precisely the kinds of epistemological problems Linton and others raised with the applied fields. In their response article, “Two Comments on ‘Neurodiversity,’” Cynthia Leweiki-Wilson, Jay Dolmage, and Paul Heilker argue that Jurecic’s argument relies too heavily on a medicalized, diagnosis-focused understanding of autistic difference in the classroom, fundamentally ignoring the disability studies understanding of disability as socially constructed. As Leweiki-Wilson and Dolmage write, “Jurecic urges compositionists to consider ‘medical frameworks’ (434) and cognitive theories of inherent differences when creating a pedagogy for autistic students. This move essentially leaves behind the critical approaches of disability studies, in fact, flying against the very ethos of disability rights, pushing for an even more comprehensive labeling and deficit-based compartmentalization of autistic writing and writers and the assumption of a determinist view of difference” (317). This understanding of autism as a fundamentally medical form of difference, they argue, leads Jurecic to advocate pedagogical practices that focus on normalizing autistic students, that is, to teach them to perform as non-autistic people in the standard writing genres of the university.

Compellingly, this critique intersects with a common thread throughout the literature on disability as an aspect of student difference in the writing classroom. Jurecic, who wrote her own
reply to the “Two Comments” piece, argues that the pedagogy she advocates follows many of the best practices of diversity-minded composition teaching, and that her approach to working with identified autistic students is both “flexible” and “inclusive” (323). Her approach is not, she notes, “multimodal,” a point of contention that indicates that she and the Disability Rhetoric scholars “[f]undamentally [. . .] disagree about the curricular goals of our writing classes” (ibid). Jurecic sees her role as composition instructor to be determined by the established course goals of her home institution, that is, “for students to learn to write college essays” in a clear, coherent manner (ibid). While she admits this can be seen as a “normative” practice, she also accepts it as the essential function of first-year composition classes.

**Invisible Disability as Value Added for Composition**

While Jurecic claims to accept and even welcome the diversity of autistic students in her writing classroom, she never thoroughly questions the role normative curricula and genre constraints play in establishing the writing classroom as a cultural location of disability. We can turn to Patricia Dunn’s later monograph, *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing* (2001) for an example of a more critical curricular focus. Dunn—who, as we’ve seen, is willing to take seriously medical understandings of cognitive difference—presents a thorough model for expanding writing pedagogy beyond its traditional focus on text-based information synthesis and argumentation. Dunn argues that these modes of text-based learning, which are the bread and butter of current traditional writing instruction, provide easy success for students with high degrees of textual/linguistic processing ability. Dunn’s alternative curriculum provides models for designing in-class writing activities that use oral processing, interpersonal dialogue, and multi-media composing tasks—strategies that offer students with a wide range of
disabilities multiple ways to demonstrate their capacities as students, even if they don’t quite fit the current traditional teaching objectives.

The fact that normative curricular expectations sit at the center of university-approved composition courses demonstrates that literacy curricula are calibrated primarily to the inclusion of non-disabled student participation, suited to standards set by non-disabled faculty and administrators. It is this understanding that leads queer and crip theorist Robert McRuer to classify freshman composition courses as mechanisms for enforcing a university-wide program of “compulsory ablebodiedness,” whereby students who do not conform with the writing and study habits of the ideal student body are either disciplined into conformity or excluded from participation. Seen in this way, the “problem” of disabled students in the writing classroom is not that they are poorly suited to succeed with the traditional work of first-year composition; it is, rather, that the traditional curriculum of first-year composition is poorly suited to incorporate students with a wide diversity of abilities.

The alternatives forwarded by compositionists invested in disability studies focus not exclusively on reducing the level of impairment disabled students experience in traditional writing classes; rather, they argue for adjusting the nature of the writing curriculum to include a wider range of tasks and a more capacious set of assessment standards. For instance, McRuer’s practice, which he refers to as “de-composition,” privileges informal student writing, encouraging them to conduct writing experiments that do not terminate as formal college essays (McRuer 66). In this way, he imposes a composition curriculum that encourages students to see learning as a shared experience, one that can be enhanced and communicated through writing. A nuanced and non-pathological acceptance of invisible disability as a category of student
difference naturally leads to dramatic re-framings of both the content and methods of literacy skills instruction at the college level.

Educational reformers who are knowledgeable about LD and other invisible disabilities offer visions a future for higher education that would go beyond the accommodation mentality that currently reigns in American colleges and universities. Dunn, for instance, believes that universities have organized assessment standards around modes of literacy that work for NT students while ignoring the usefulness of oral communication for demonstrating content mastery (201). She imagines instructors building into their courses multiple avenues for examination, thus removing the need for forced accommodation mandates from service providers and also removing the stigma associated with granting special treatment to select students. While this vision focuses only on one model of learning disability--the discrepancy model that identifies LD with high spoken capacities and weak reading and writing abilities--it offers one vision of the future, one where oracity takes an equal position to literacy in academic work.

Cathy N. Davidson goes substantially further in her vision of an accessible university. She imagines a university system that recognizes the potential of digital literacy, an academic environment that would learn from the current milieu of knowledge creation exemplified by social networks and sites like Wikipedia.org. Rather than insisting that students develop uniform literacy abilities or master standardized curricular benchmarks, Davidson’s model of accessible higher education operates under the principle of “collaboration by difference” in which individuals work together to compensate for one another’s weaknesses and learn from one another’s strengths in the pursuit of innovative solutions to real problems in the world (see particularly the second part of her 2011 book Now You See It: How Technology and Brain Science will Transform Schools and Business for the 21st Century). Within her vision, disability
would represent not an individual impairment, but instead a potential for curricular innovation as
the range of valued student capacities expands beyond those most easily assessed on
standardized curriculum of pen and paper literacy.

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My aim in this chapter has been to draw attention to the unique interrelation between
invisible disabilities and literacy in higher education. In CUNY, Anthony Colarossi and other LD
specialists were developing approaches to disability accommodation that mixed elements of
academic skills instruction and self-advocacy training into the traditional model of “reasonable
accommodation.” This approach aimed to increase the accessibility of CUNY classes by
increasing the diversity of teaching methods, training instructors to incorporate teaching
practices that would work well for a wide range of learning styles. During this same period
composition teachers and theorists began incorporating ideas the LD field into our definitions of
who students are and how they might learn. In the process of advocating for the unique value of
LD students to our field, Disability Rhetoric scholars have similarly come to embrace a universal
design approach. Rather than seeing invisible, literacy-related disabilities purely as medical
matters by focusing on impairment, Disability Rhetoric scholars have called for pedagogies that
welcome diversity.

In my final chapter, I will take up this approach to disability-inspired literacy instruction
and carry it forward as I consider future developments for this research project. Seen in its
historical context, we can recognize that this movement toward more accessible classroom
practice in fact sits at one end of a long evolutionary process. I will consider how this history has
hinted at productive applications in my work as a junior writing program administrator and
writing curriculum developer.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have sought to demonstrate an approach to understanding disability as an aspect of academic life in the 20th century. One way to tell the story of CUNY in the 20th century is to focus on the way it has dealt with disability and ability. This history reveals a compelling transformation as the institutional vision of disabled students morphed over time. So too did the philosophies about ability and disability change, transforming the tenor of the programs themselves. My hope is that this investigation will serve as a starting place for further work in this area. In what follows, I will return to my findings from each of my chapters and discuss the further directions I see for this work.

In Chapter 2, my historical literature review, I investigated the approaches disability studies has taken to critiquing the practices and infrastructure of American higher education. The most canonical histories of the field of disability studies all trace its origins back to the disability rights movement, and to campus-based disability activism in particular. Within the DS lore, college campuses are battlegrounds for disability politics. Indeed, some disability studies scholars have called for DS to actively critique the status quo of the university, particularly the ways medical professionals are trained to think about disability. This call to reform higher education has subsequently been taken up by disability studies specialists within the field of composition/rhetoric. These Disability Rhetoric scholars have helped to identify places where our own practices and beliefs as compositionists re-enforce biased systems that disadvantage disabled students and faculty.
As disability studies continues to evolve as an academic discipline, it will doubtless continue to turn its critical attention to colleges and universities as institutions. We are still far from a goal of universally accessible higher education, and DS scholars continue to see it as their jobs to do something about it. Disability Rhetoric scholars have recently begun turning their attention to disabled faculty. For example, a small group of Disability Rhetoric scholars have recently begun a national survey of faculty disability self-disclosure—how and when faculty reveal their disability at their workplace, and how these disclosure affect their professional trajectory. This is a promising area for future research in the state of disability in higher education.

I hope that this dissertation has demonstrated that historical methods can provide another useful lens for understanding how disability operates in American higher education. In Chapter 3, I focused on a possible originary moment for when disability first entered the institutional landscape at City College. CCNY was at the forefront of the early 20th century Social Hygiene movement in higher education. The college’s investments in student health and hygiene motivated a dramatic expansion of what counted as “academic ability” in the first half of the 20th century. The infrastructure of medical supervision and remedial physical rehabilitation provided the blueprint that was followed when the first disability services programs were formalized in the late 1940s.

I compiled much of this historical narrative from a small clutch of primary materials maintained at the CCNY archives. I hope that the materials featured in this chapter will prove compelling to other CUNY historians and as frameworks for historical researchers at other institutions. With so few well-provisioned archives remaining in the CUNY system, it is especially important at this moment that we make use of what remains. I hope more so, however,
that this work will motivate further comparison studies at other institutions where I suspect archival materials about disabilities also might be scarce. While the University of California system continually came up in my research as a comparison model for CUNY, its pre-Section-504 disability programs have likewise gone unexamined. CCNY provides a fascinating case study for examining views about ability and disability in early 20th century colleges and universities, but the case will grow more significant as I am able to compare it with other institutions.

Within CUNY, only one other college retains materials that reflect programming before the 1970s: Hunter College. Based on provisional assessment of their collections, it seems that programs at what was then CUNY’s women’s college specifically were developed to address psychiatric and emotional disabilities, long before this was commonplace elsewhere in the country or in CUNY. Hunter’s archival collections remain unprocessed, however, and I have only recently received access to them. It’s possible, as my research develops, I will be able to draw a more nuanced portrait of this period in CUNY disability history, including the role gender may have played in the overall story of disability access in higher education.

In Chapter 4, I turned to the tumultuous 1970s in CUNY, when the institutional stance toward disability underwent important transformations. Disabled students, energized by the politics of the Open Admissions struggle, asserted their collective identity as an identity group; by reframing disability access as a matter of social justice and civic entitlement, these students compelled Brooklyn College to pay to make the campus more welcoming to disabled students. By the end of the decade, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation act would push the rest of CUNY to catch up by instituting formalized systems for disability accommodation. As my narrative demonstrated, the anti-discrimination mandate imposed by Section 504 motivated its own kind
of institutional investment in disability. Whereas the investment examined in Chapter 3 centered on medical definitions of disability, by the 1970s, the social model of disability took precedence.

As I examined developments in the 1970s, I turned primarily to oral history for my primary data. With the exception of a few photographs and flyers maintained at Kingsborough Community College, student disability organizations have been almost entirely omitted from archival collections. Oral history has been particularly important to understanding the history of CUNY. Since its records have not been kept by any archive, I had to rely entirely on a small number of first-generation COSDI members to fill in my knowledge. In both cases—student organizing and administrative organizing—I relied as well on materials collected by informants themselves. These unofficial archives provide access to a history that would otherwise have been lost in the dustbin of CUNY history.

My research for chapter 4 has already begun providing inroads to further work. I recently began work on an online archive project devoted to the history of COSDI. This project will eventually include oral history videos featuring multiple first-generation COSDI members. In addition, the website will provide an accessible repository for the materials COSDI members have retained that demonstrate their organization’s rich history. It is my hope that the infrastructure laid out in this project will also expand to include student disability history, and thus will serve as a useful legacy-building tool for the campus-based disabled student coalitions still active today.

My final area of primary research in this dissertation focused on the final quarter of the 20th century, in which learning disabilities and other invisible, psycho-social disabilities came to dominate the disability landscape of higher education. I examined two developments that demonstrate the unique connection between these kinds of disabilities and literacy pedagogy. In
CUNY, Anthony Colarossi and other LD specialists were developing approaches to disability accommodation that mixed elements of academic skills instruction and self-advocacy training into the traditional model of “reasonable accommodation.” During this same period composition teacher/theorists began incorporating ideas the LD field into our definitions of who students are and how they might learn. These scholars come, in our present moment, to many of the practices Colarossi piloted in his SD-10 course: the acceptance of student neurodiversity, and the multi-modal teaching practices most welcoming to neurodiversity.
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

**Section 1: Who are Disability Service Providers?**

1. When did you begin working with disability services at CUNY?
2. What drew you to this work?
3. What was your professional training at the time you began working with disability services at CUNY?
4. Were there aspects of this work that you found particularly challenging? Was there any aspect of on-the-job training that was required for you to work?
5. What makes someone a good college or university disability service provider?
6. What role did collaboration with other disability service providers play in your work (either collaborators in CUNY or outside)?

**Section 2: What is the role of Disability Service systems in CUNY**

1. How would you describe the roles disability service providers play on college campuses?
2. Does the university administration have different or perhaps multiple motivations for establishing disability accommodation?
3. How did the administration express the importance of disability services?
4. Do you consider yourself a disability activist? Or do you have any particular feelings about the role of activism in campus disability services?
Section 3: What is the work of disability service provision?

1. What were your initial priorities in your work as a disability service provider? Were there first projects or initial goals you focused on as you took on the role?

2. What were the major hurdles you faced in establishing disability service policies and programs?

3. What effect did material matters like funding, staffing, and access to campus space play in your ability to provide accommodations?

4. Did you experience resistance from faculty or other branches of the administration in the course of your work? If so, how did you deal with this resistance?

5. What kinds of attitudes or beliefs lead faculty or other administrators to resist your work to provide accommodation for disabled students?

Section 4: Who are the students receiving accommodation in CUNY?

1. What do you see as the biggest obstacles to success for students with disabilities at the college level?

2. Have you noticed substantial changes in the demographics of students you worked with over the years you provided disability services in CUNY?

3. Have students' beliefs about disability changed? Do they have different attitudes about accommodation now than they did in the past?
4. How important are other academic support systems for students with disabilities—things like counseling or health centers, academic skills support centers (writing centers, tutoring)? Do you find that these services are well equipped to help students with disabilities?

Section 5: What role do faculty play in your work with disability accommodation?

1. Have typical faculty perspectives about disability and accommodation changed in any way since you've been working in disability services?
2. Are there particular kinds of courses or styles of teaching that students with disabilities have the most trouble with?
3. Are there practical changes you advise faculty to employ to make their teaching more accessible to students with disabilities?
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