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Making Assumptions: Faculty Responses to Students with Disabilities.

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According to the ADA a disability “means, with respect to an individual – a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment” (P. L. 101-336; §3). Learning is considered a major life activity. The purpose of accommodation, under Section 504, is to provide students with disabilities an equal opportunity to achieve equal results (Biehl, 1978) with the intent of preventing exclusion based on disability status (Mangrum & Strichert, 1988). Accommodation is “an adjustment to the learning environment that does not compromise the essential elements of a course or curriculum” (Schuck & Kroeger, 1993, p. 63). Individuals have the right to choose to consider themselves disabled. If an individual considers her or himself disabled and in need of accommodations, it is up to the individual to disclose and to request an accommodation. Institutions have the right to verify the disability and discuss reasonable accommodations. This begins the obligation of the post-secondary institution to accommodate the individual with the disability (Jarrow, 1993). In order to access the learning environment certain accommodations may be needed. Such as access to course readings prior to the beginning of the course. The student discloses disability status, requests an accommodation, and the instructor complies with the request.

Method

The purpose of the large study was to explore this question: How does an adult with a disability learn to communicate to an instructor or employer what is needed for “accommodation?” Interview data were analyzed using a constant comparative method to generate grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Three samples were compared; composed of 9 faculty, 8 students with visible disabilities, and 7 students with invisible disabilities. This paper discusses the emergent themes from the faculty sample which were included in the study to provide the view from the other side of the issue of aca-

ademic access. There were nine faculty members and administrators interviewed who also teach and have had students with disabilities in their courses, acted as their advisors, or served on their academic committees. Six men and three women worked for a large Midwestern university, six on the main campus and three on a regional campus. One self-identified as Native American but culturally Caucasian. The remaining members are European American. They ranged in age from 31 to 64 years old. One member had a master’s degree, the other eight had Ph.D.s. Three held administrative posts as well as having teaching responsibilities. The work titles included: associate, assistant, and full professor, instructor, assistant dean, and director. Two of the participants conduct disability-related research. The fields represented include law, education, psychology, rehabilitation, and biological sciences. All have had students with disabilities in class. Some served on the candidacy examination and dissertation committees of students with disabilities or acted as the academic advisor. The questions are in three categories: general context, education, and employment. In an attempt to explore the perspective of the receiver of the accommodation communication, they answered questions about disclosure: comfort level, under what conditions, describing the disability, reactions of others, and types of coaching or advice received. Interviews lasted forty-five to ninety minutes. Transcripts from each sample were checked against the audiotapes, read, and read for coding. Several months went by between work on each sample to allow categories to emerge from each sample independently. Comparisons between samples were made after all samples were completely coded, and the categories were written up into descriptive text (Wolcott, 1994).

Discussion

We all make assumptions. The assumption I made about the group of faculty that I interviewed was that they would view themselves as tolerant of people different from themselves, possibly being more empathetic or understanding of learning differences

than society at large. Additionally, I assumed that faculty who were aware that they believed students with disabilities shouldn't be at college would not agree to participate in this study. As a group, the participants did believe themselves to be more tolerant and student-centered than other faculty; they did not question or realize that some of their attitudes were based on assumptions, not on research.

The data did not support either of my assumptions. The participants were not necessarily understanding of learning differences and some did question some students with disabilities right to or capability of attaining a higher education. Even though some held what might be considered politically incorrect views or assumptions, each participant openly reflected on their experience sharing with me exactly how they felt at the time and changes that occurred in their thinking because of their experiences. Assumptions that participants made included these issues: (a) lowering standards, (b) excusing poor performance, (c) fairness to all students, (d) taking advantage of the educational system, (e) doing good, and (f) stories of grace and grit. Finally, the data indicated a tendency to render amateur diagnoses, including the assumption that poor performance is indicative of a disability.

"Do you lower standards?"

The first issue is captured in this question posed by one participant "how much do you adjust and how much do you accommodate?" "strikes at the core of the issue of lowering standards. Rod said, "To the outside world the Ph.D. means that people can meet a fairly high level and write at a fairly high level and so I still – the jury is still out for me in terms of how extensive the accommodations can be. In a field like engineering if you can't read and write there's some examples of people that are very successful. That may be one thing. It seems to me that sometimes there [are] moral dilemmas in terms of how much do you adjust and how much do you accommodate." If one believes an accommodation simply provides an alternative format for learning, the answer is simple. If you believe accommodations somehow are like cheat sheets--an attempt to make up for a lack of studying or inability to learn--then all accommodations are suspect. Speaking of a student whose work he thought was very good, a participant was relieved to say, "So, I didn't have to lie to her. I didn't have to build her up. I didn't have to go through the moral struggle of what does it

mean. Do you lower standards?" (Rod). Lying and building a student up under false pretenses seems to be contrary to what an educator should do. A policy of dishonesty about the work a student produces, in an effort to protect the student, is based on the assumption that students with disabilities are not capable of the same level of work as students without disabilities.

"It's Not Necessarily an Excuse"

The second issue concludes that students use a disability or a claim of disability as a convenient excuse for not completing assignments or for substandard work. Once a professor becomes skeptical of the student's commitment to the work, this skepticism can affect the graduate school experience. Skepticism is increased when disclosure and requests for accommodation occur late in the quarter, as Rod explained,

But this person was sort of like using it as an excuse for – suddenly there was all the answers why things weren't working for her and why you know. Maybe I could understand that up to a point because she was having some problems getting things done and so suddenly she sort of had a label or a reason but its as I've always said to my oldest son that might be an explanation but it's not necessarily an excuse. What you have to do is find ways to compensate. I didn't say any of this to her because it was the end of the quarter.

Rod permitted incomplete grades to any student requesting an extension. This student was a graduate student who had been known as a good student. She was diagnosed during the quarter with Attention Deficient Disorder (ADD). Rod questioned ADD as valid disability because someone once suggested he may have ADD. As Rod reflected "I must admit I have some questions about [it] because supposedly I have it too." He had difficulty comprehending that ADD could pose much of a problem for others if it poses no processing problems for him. Rod was judging this disability based on cocktail conversation not on self-directed study. He finds proof that his viewpoint is correct in stories he has heard,

Since Albert Einstein and John Kennedy supposedly have [ADD], one does wonder whether in fact it's a disorder or whether it's just a human variation which could be functional or dysfunctional depending on the environment that one is

in. But this person was sort of like using it as an excuse.

Making amateur diagnoses was not confined to faculty. In another case, a student told Bud during their first discussion of her accommodation needs, “I think you’re ADD. And that’s going to present a problem to us’ and that shocked me because she is diagnosing me.” Bud was challenged by his shock to find books on the subject. Viewing disclosure of a disability as an excuse for poor performance is certainly a stigma most students dread, causing some hesitation on the part of students to disclose.

Being Fair to Everybody

The third issue was being fair to everybody. The word, “everybody,” applies to three groups, (a) students with disabilities, (b) students without disabilities and (c) faculty. “Fair” implies that none of the three groups receives an advantage over the other two groups. Given the vast misunderstandings about the nature of disability and its impact on human performance, it is easy to understand how faculty would be concerned that accommodating a “normal looking” student by providing more time to take a test or setting aside space for a distraction free environment was somehow not fair to other students. Underneath is the nagging concern about cheating. Tom spoke of this the nagging concern about cheating and questioning the integrity of students in this way,

What really bothers me is the distrust. All these students [with disabilities]... were all so concerned that I would think that they were cheating. It’s like they’re apologizing to me for having to do this. It’s okay. It wasn’t an issue for me but it was a big issue for them so somewhere along the line they’re getting that feedback that they’re taking advantage of this disability.

Cheating concerns also include the notion that the student with a disability will intentionally or unintentionally divulge the contents of the exam to other students. This becomes a particular concern when the student with a disability is scheduled to take the exam before the class. Mark’s colleagues brought this possibility to his attention when a student with a disability was scheduled to take an exam before the regular class sections. Mark said, “there’s the potential that someone could benefit by hearing through the grapevine the things on the exam or something like that. So I presume an advantage going on there” (Mark). He was not par-

ticularly concerned but began to note scheduling of such exams, anyway. Frequently, the scheduling and taking of exams in a distraction free environment or with extended time occurs at disability services making the instructor’s desire only one factor in the scheduling process.

For Rod, disability seemed to be a relative and subjective matter. It didn’t seem to him important or necessary to inquire of experts about necessary accommodations or to examine documentation. Rod felt perfectly comfortable saying, “Obviously, I reserve the right to say I can’t do that. That isn’t fair to other people or whatever.” To Jeb “fairness to everybody” was “a matter of their rights. It would be more bothersome if somebody had the legal right and it was not recognized than the fact that a person with disabilities is given reasonable accommodation.” This points to difficulties with participants’ perceptions of fairness, when the perceptions are based on assumptions rather than knowledge. These perceptions combined with no attempt to work with a professional in the area of accommodation, can place the institution at risk. After all, as Jeb pointed out there exists a legal right to reasonable accommodation. The legal right does not include taking advantage of the system which is discussed next.

Taking Advantage of the Educational System

The fourth issue was taking advantage of the system. When an extreme violation of the principle of fairness occurs, it is viewed as “taking advantage of the system.” Tom described a student in a wheelchair as “using it a little bit” when he was student teaching. According to Tom, the student was angry and defiant, trying to get whatever he could from the system, whether he needed it or not. Tom continued, “He really did have a bad attitude. He was running people down, literally running them down.” Figuratively, the student was trying to run down the system to get every service he could from the university. Tom thought the student’s attitude and behavior inappropriate even though it seemed to Tom that the school was doing everything it could to make the student teacher’s tenure miserable.

Two other professors spoke of students using the system. Mark reflected, “the perception that from an instructor’s standpoint someone might be trying to get away with something or take advantage of the situation in some means” could present serious difficulties to students with disabilities. When Mark made this observation it was as if suddenly he had

become aware of the attitudes of peers and the difficulties these attitudes would present to students. Susan stated, "I think on rare occasions there are students who are here to use the system in some way or the other and to take advantage of [the system]. Maybe they have learned, maybe that's their adaptation." Susan went on to say, "I will not tolerate a student that I think is taking advantage of me or of education in some way or other." From the concern that students might be gaining an unfair advantage, we move to a discussion of participants' feelings when helping a student in need of moral support.

Some Small Good in the World

A common assumption about individuals with disabilities is that "they need our help." Many of us would not presume to speak for another adult or to offer unrequested assistance on behalf of an adult. Well-meaning people offer unrequested assistance to those with disabilities regularly. Jim said,

I have one fellow with a spinal chord injury and I always give him notes even though he can take notes in class. It just makes it easier for him to concentrate in lectures if he doesn't have to bother with that because he writes very slowly.

Jim intended to be helpful. Yet his actions are based on assumptions about the way the student learns and encouraged dependent behavior. Other participants viewed their role as ranging from making sure someone with "a sight impairment ...has a spot in the front of the room" (Rod) to "going easier" (Bud) on someone with a learning disability. Placing the student with a sight impairment in the front of the room brings attention and that the student may not want and the location may not help the student see. "Going easier" on the student with a learning disability might make the instructor feel better about doing a good deed, but of what value is this action to the student's learning experience?

A student who is blind had tried to call Bud before the quarter to discuss accommodations without success. Bud said, "I might have tried to counsel her to do an independent study. In fact I know I would have encouraged her." He went on to explain that he considered her disability to be similar to the difficulty American English presents to international students. The class is concerned with body language and educational politics which may not translate well. He was trying to help her.

In a very different situation, Susan had a student with cancer in her class. The chemotherapy had caused the woman to lose her hair. Her missing hair combined with an unusual way of dressing, made the student the recipient of ridicule and nasty remarks from the other students. One day when the student wasn't in class, Susan,

Really let them [the class] have it. It was a point when I felt it appropriate to discuss courage and it had some good affect because at a later date I'd seen her in the mall...and she said you know two of the people who were in that class had stopped by and she'd passed them in the mall and they had come up to her and said how much they enjoyed having her in class or something. I think it was those two nasty girls that had made fun of her. But anyhow I felt I had accomplished some small good in the world.

Her moral outrage shamed the students into acknowledging the student with cancer by including her in future conversations. These actions may be viewed by some as advocacy on behalf of students with disabilities and by others as paternalism or maternalism. The interpretation of simple acts of assistance as advocacy, paternalism, or maternalism is predetermined by one's attitude toward disability and whether or not the adult with the disability welcomes the action.

Stories of Grace and Grit

The last assumption focuses on the emotional reactions of temporarily able bodied people towards disability: awe at the courage of the individual with the disability to live, empathy for the individual, and pity. Faculty remarks encompassed a range of emotions from "sad case" (Pat) to "courageous...incredible" (Susan). The student described as courageous had brain tumors, while the sad case has a traumatic brain injury. Bud felt his teaching style had been transformed as a result of having students with disabilities in his class. He found these students to be remarkable for "not blaming the world for their condition. And actually finding a blessing in their condition."

Bud asked these students if they could erase the disability would they, surprising him was the response that what he considered adversity instead opened them up to a "self-awareness" which he felt added "grace and grit about their lives." Tom was very attuned to the gritty aspect of the students' experience. He told me,

You can just look them in the eyes and I can see where they're coming from. They're saying he thinks I want to do this just so I can have it easy or something. You can just read it. That's unfortunate.

Students with invisible disabilities seemed “easier to handle” (Pat) than students with visible disabilities. The desire to nurture is not stimulated by a learning disability as it is by a woman who has lost all of her hair due to chemotherapy. Pat reflected on her past behavior, “I would hope I wouldn’t react that way any longer but that has been through a process of education and learning and understanding and repeated experience.” The reaction she was referring to is to be suspect of a student with an invisible disability instead of nurturing. However, sometimes education and experience are not enough. As when the same participant had a student in the back of the room hiccuping throughout the class. When at the end of the class Pat commented,

My goodness, you sure have a case of the hiccups. She said not really, its a reaction I can't always control and when I'm nervous like in the first day of class it's more pronounced. I'll try not to bother anyone. (Pat)

This perplexed Pat and she wondered how she would handle the situation. The student “was a little embarrassed by it which made me more sympathetic.” The student never disclosed. It was during a conversation with a colleague when it occurred to Pat, the disability was probably Tourette’s Syndrome.

Implications

These findings have implications for the teacher-learner dynamic. Examining the assumptions faculty make towards some of their students is a step towards creating a critical consciousness of the meaning of disability in a student’s life. Our actions stem from the assumptions we make and teach by when our privilege and power are never critically examined. Hopefully, we will reflect on the assumptions we make about students and realize that these assumptions affect learning. Teachers who are challenged to provide access to adults who learn differently because of legal mandates may reflect on their practice finding innovative ways to reach learners who learn differently who aren’t classified as having disabilities. Tennant and Pogson (1995, p. 160) suggest that educators use “lived (rather than

created) experience as the primary source for learning... aiming at social justice and/or personal transformation.” They suggest getting “people to talk about their experiences” then they can “analyze those experiences” for the purpose of “identify[ing] and act[ing] on the implications of what is revealed” (Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 160). Ross-Gordon (1996) “feels it is essential that various professionals responsible for intervention have the benefit of staff developmental opportunities to increase their understanding of multiculturalism and of the needs and characteristics of adults with learning disabilities.”

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