

# Collegiality and Disability

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By tradition, faculty refer to each other as “colleagues,” not “coworkers,” and value a collegial environment where they share responsibility for a common mission. I would argue that a collegial environment is also one where colleagues share responsibility for one another. But these days, it seems, the solitary, competitive, and even cutthroat nature of academic culture makes it unusually hard for that form of collegiality to manifest.



Academia has become a [zero-sum game](#)— which makes it more likely that faculty will feel slighted, even cheated, when they believe someone else is getting something extra without merit. And who can blame them? The structure of higher education today makes everyone feel cheated.

Sometimes that ire is turned on academics with disabilities who request accommodations. Rather than sharing responsibility for one another, some abled academics gossip and feel resentful toward their disabled colleagues. After all, if someone else is getting “more,” then that means we must be getting “less,” right? (Such resentment reveals itself outside the academy as well, of course. Anderson Cooper, of all people, just reported a segment for *60 Minutes* on [how wasteful accommodations can be for businesses](#). A business owner, however, does not profess to be the colleague of a person who wishes to purchase a widget.)

But that’s not how disability accommodations work. Accommodations are not a zero-sum game. Accessibility — [the word I prefer to use](#)— doesn’t mean a disabled person is getting more. It means that our shared environment has become one that is welcoming to all people, regardless of their ability.

**Bad culture starts with training.** Why do some academics resent colleagues with disabilities who seek accommodations? Some of that resentment can be attributed to the fact that [we live in an ableist society](#). Some, however, can be attributed to the nature of doctoral training: We teach graduate students to suck it up and get by with less — and that those who can’t suck it up aren’t good enough to be academics. Later, when graduate students

become the faculty members, they carry those lessons with them.

I interviewed “Jeri” (a pseudonym), a doctoral student in the social sciences, who shared stories of how poorly she was treated as a graduate student with a disability by faculty in her department. I’ve [interviewed many other graduate students](#) and former graduate students over the years, and their stories have much in common with Jeri’s. In other words, she is not an outlier.

Some of the ableism Jeri encountered was passive. For example, after a conference or a guest speaker on the campus, students and faculty would gather in a local bar or restaurant to talk, but those “drinking events” were not accessible or planned well. There was “no way to travel to get there,” she said, and they were located off campus, making it hard for her to attend. It is difficult to form strong relationships with your colleagues when you are passively excluded from get-togethers and other professional events.

Some ableism Jeri encountered from faculty was more direct and insidious. For example, when working as a teaching assistant, she requested a chair in the classroom for her to sit in. That request “was seen as an insurmountable obstacle at first. Where would it come from? Who would pay?”

We’re talking about a chair, here. A chair shouldn’t be a big deal. When departments make things like chairs a big deal, we make our graduate students with disabilities feel distinctly unwelcome.

She was made to feel even more unwelcome by another faculty member who — despite the fact that Jeri already had experience as a teaching assistant — presumed that she “would be unable to TA because of her disability.”

Her negative experiences were not limited to run-ins with faculty. In one instance, she tried to explain to her fellow students why a software platform they were thinking about using for a project was not accessible. They had trouble believing her, despite her explanations, presuming that she was just uninformed because the platform “was certified by some association for the blind.”

The message Jeri was sent repeatedly by these interactions: She was a burden. “When I needed to ask for something new — i.e., a chair — the response ... was, well, we’ve already done so much for you, above and beyond what we do for the other students.”

And that’s the key here. She was made to feel that she got more than she deserved. She was getting “above and beyond” what other students got. She was getting unmerited “special treatment.” But those words reveal the problem with how academic culture approaches accessibility.

**Accommodating disabilities is not “special treatment.”** Making sure that a classroom, a platform, or a department function is accessible is not special treatment. And yet Jeri’s faculty mentors either passively or actively made her feel like she didn’t deserve any of the accommodations she needed to simply be on an equal footing with her fellow students.

That kind of treatment alienates students with disabilities. It also makes students who might need extra help — those who are facing crises, even — [keep those challenges to themselves](#). As I explained in [a previous column](#), that’s a risk we do not want to take. Those of us with disabilities aren’t asking for more than we deserve; we are simply asking for what we need.

As colleagues, we should want to take responsibility for one another. Doing so would make our departments healthier, happier places to work. I know I sound pollyannaish, but I’m also right.

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