

# ACCESSIBILITY (@AU?)

*A CTRL Student Partner Inquiry  
and Investment into the  
undermined struggle of  
inaccessibility*

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# Note from the Author

This is a project that will explore accessibility and disability at AU. I chose not to solely rely on the term disabled, as many are unable to acquire the official recognition of this identity due to systemic obstacles. I also believe accessibility should be perceived as general classroom practice, as it pertains to the ethical accommodating and validation of individual circumstances.

The reputable progressive AU culture implies it has seemingly 'met' its moral quota for accessibility. Our university and its claimed continued commitment to "diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusive excellence" must surely be aware of its fallibility, as an ultimately exclusive private higher education institution. I urge the AU community to question if we are truly ever at the forefront or peak of accessibility. This is a matter of the well-being of our students and faculty, as well as the prized inclusive reputation of AU at stake. These concerns do not solely fall upon the laboring self-advocacy of students, nor the reenvisioned teaching practices of professors. We must be collectively backed by the support of the administration, in order to truly ensure dedicated accessible praxis and resources.

# DISCLAIMER:

I have often been presumed as an indignant student when I voice my grievances with certain education practices. Such perceptions should not interfere with the urgency of the advocacy I pursue, not only my peers but the staff at AU who are also affected by such ableist institutions. I urge you to read with an open mind and the understanding that I do not intend to solely criticize the shortcomings of your role in the classroom. I would especially not want to discourage those who commit time in the classroom and to the AU community in an effort to practice inclusivity to the best of their ability. (That would be pretty hypocritical of me to do, wouldn't it? ;)

I urge you to acknowledge the importance of student voice and experience. I also push you to question where potential insecurities or negative reactions to such 'criticism' may stem from.

I would also like to clarify, I do not claim to be an expert or the ultimate representative for the student perspective. So let me present the reminder to AU to listen to your students, your staff, and those advocating for authentic accessibility.

# ***Another Friendly Reminder :)***

Higher education is a system of education esteemed for its prestige and provision of academic capital to its students who are meant to consider it a privilege to be able to attend such institutions. While it is essential to acknowledge this sphere of access to academia as a privilege, we would be remiss to not investigate the 'cost' of such privilege and who is deliberately left vulnerable to such expenses.

***\*\*No hate to  
Clawed Z. Eagle or  
this 'Ask Me!'  
staff member!***



***The AU Eagles are not exempt from this  
reality and its detriments.***

# A Learned Burden

The aggressive maintenance of a specific perception of success and the strategic conditions under which this success must occur are complicit in the production of inaccessible and harmful classroom environments.

This creates blatant structural inequities for certain students, as they must confront the various -isms and -ists, ranging from racism, ableism, classism, etc. in their classrooms and on campus. Students, whose education and ultimately professional careers are at stake, must often simply tolerate such environments. While there is the option of self-advocating, this can be a risky approach (dangering your relationship with your professor) or it is another burdensome task deemed not worthy of the labor it would take to actually have a complaint followed through on.

Faculty are also left vulnerable to the same cornering circumstances as they are not able to always advocate or speak on injustices, as it may put their jobs or professional reputations at risk.

***After all, it is so very difficult to make your case.***

# Accommodation Requests: *'To believe or...to probably not be believed'*

The process of receiving accommodations is considerably inaccessible in itself. This in addition to the known reputation of ASAC and Student Health Services among students to consistently be backed up.

You must provide substantial evidence that your situation is agreeable with what constitutes a need for 'reasonable accommodations'. Such processes can often include but are not limited to: disclosure of medical records, housing status, and pressing enough and usually expensive disability test results. While this information is necessary to gauge what supports should be supplied, we must consider just how out of reach this criteria may be.

These demands are not cognizant of systemic barriers that may hinder one from the promised accommodating and smooth processing of documentation. Financial and interpersonal barriers may prevent one's ability to meet all these requirements. We must also acknowledge that many people may experience(d) invalidation of their struggles. Such sentiments undermine the historical and present-day instances of medical racism and violence against low-income BIPOC individuals. This makes it impossible for this university to lay a valid claim over an 'equitable' education when such individuals' experiences are not taken into account. Delayed diagnosis and treatment, or simply no diagnosis at all, is especially prevalent for already collegiately precarious individuals, like BIPOC and/or low-income students.

It is not the collegiate protocol to compassionately accommodate AU students and staff unable to meet qualifications for official accommodations.

# Institutionalized Inaccessibility

**Profit-making oriented institutions have historically and presently been inaccessible to those who do not fit into the role of the white straight “neurotypical” man or some version of the commercialized adjacent productive student. These standards of productivity hide under the guise of the rigor of higher education and have created unambiguous images of a successful student.**

Normalizing inherently inaccessible policies is ingrained into and justified by ideals of professionalism, the rigor of higher education, and standards of expectations dictated as ‘fair’.

We can see such sentiments reflected in intertwined praxes of...

1. Participation
2. Grading
3. ‘Hidden curriculum’ standards

# The Un/Valuable Participant

Specified standards of participation and penalization of those who do meet these ideals are extremely discriminatory. It is also a dynamic that reinforces unequal or tense power dynamics as a student and educator must interact through stagnant roles. This may require performative effort from both to adhere to the standardized classroom expectations (hidden curriculum).

These policies grade one's ability to perform in a certain 'pleasing' academic manner and are often very narrow in its recognized acts of participation (graded dependent verbal/class participation). Verbal participation involves a projected voice, the use of academic jargon, and clear sentences. This strict criterion for valued presence in the classroom actively works to drive the academic subjects into a position of targeted suppression in which they either 'measure up' or are penalized.





# Inclusive Participation Policies

- Eliminate cold-calling
- Ungrading (non-punitive participation grade)
- Discussion Boards
- Setting up Zoom chats for students to comment during in person lectures
- Offering the option of sending comments for class the professor directly
- Group work/Turn and talk activities
- Have an open dialogue with the class about expectations (for both student and professor) for how to 'show up' or 'participate' in the class
- Understanding of both students and professors not being able to 'show up' in a 'valuable' way everyday

**Higher education settings rooted in capitalist sentiments situate students in competitive spheres in which they must prove their value and work to be an identified capital body in the classroom. Participation grades are another method of targeted classroom practice that often discriminates against the neuroqueer individual.**

# Graded Identities

Subjects affected by unaddressed inaccessibility must perform additional labor to attempt to comply with the fixed expectations and guidelines of a participant in higher education; as well as give credence to the system that is monetizing off their erasure and repression.

*no protection from the harsh grader*

Grading allows for the placement of teachers above their students and provides means for penalization of work that is not in exact compliance with university expectations. These expectations can often be unclear as professors often do not provide clear directions or offer any additional support to students. Neuroqueer students often simply overlook or mistakenly disregard frivolous aspects of proper protocol resulting in lowered grades (such as points taken off for grammatical errors, paper format, etc.) This is especially detrimental and exclusive to students who not only do not have recognized accommodations but have not received such supportive measures to help them attempt at this expected 'perfection'.

# Failed by the Hidden Curriculum

This 'inadequate' subject is liable to punishment for failure to adhere to classroom policies that work to monitor and control the embodiment of students in the classroom.

One orthodox principle is the etiquette of stillness in higher education classes. Oftentimes there is an expected behavior/'hidden curriculum', in which students know to sit still and 'appropriately' in their seats. This can also be a classroom practice that reinforces a culture of silence until called on by your teacher. (Ever get too scared to open up a bag of chips in class because of the noise it will make.. yeah.)

Some other examples of ableist norms are having to keep your eyes on in the front of class, professors being expected to make eye contact with students, professors being expected to stand and lecture for an entire class period and students having to listen.

Such practices dictate the ways of embodiment considered acceptable in academic settings. This dogmatic interpretation of 'professionalism' reinforces the idealized obedience of bodies as they are valued for their conformity to the capitalist structure. We also limit the classroom to conventional exchanges of knowledge.

# Insight from AU students

“Disability is rarely brought up in classes where intersections are the focus. For example, in classes where we talk about the problems with the legal system as it relates to marginalized communities, disability is rarely addressed. This means that Disabled students must always be the ones to bring up the subject, which is fine for me but it should not be an after-thought. “

-Anonymous Student

Even with ASAC accommodations, I still am 100% responsible for advocating for myself and receive little support from AU’s disability support systems. I wish AU knew more about the difficulty around communicating with professors and how far it goes to have a supporting voice when articulating course/semester difficulties that may arise to professors.

-Anonymous Female,  
Class of 2025

# the reimagined classroom

This semester I had the pleasure of taking the course AMST-285 (Disability, Health, and Normality) with Dr. Tanja Aho, where my experience has been so vastly different from a majority of my own and my peers' classroom experiences. Dr. Aho opens every class by reminding their students that they are welcome to occupy the space in whatever way is comfortable and helpful to them. Aho's classic dialogue of encouraging us to "sit on the floor, knit, stim, flap, or cuddle our favorite stuffed animal" has acted as a great comfort and provision of hope to me in a seemingly stagnant and rigid system. They are a professor who asks their students how they are doing and is not hesitant to address troubling matters that may be contributing to the student struggle. Their course content adheres to their practiced classroom structure, a refreshing juxtaposition from performative AU culture. The class is unapologetically rigorous and Aho wishes for us to engage deeply with the material. This being said, Aho makes it clear to students that they will work to the best of their ability to be understanding of student's individual situations that may impede performance and learning.



## *Aho's Teaching Philosophy*

“My teaching philosophy centers radical access, compassion, and care. Access intimacy, as explained by Mia Mingus, guides the way I structure all learning environments that I participate in shaping. I start from a place that believes all students are invested in their learning to the extent they can in any particular moment, and I try to remain mindful of all the barriers that keep students from being fully present. I try to model openness, honesty, and flexibility for my students and work from the assumption that they will extend the same to me. Since access is about communication, cooperation, and compromise, I try to offer students as many ways of working with me and the class materials as is doable for me in a sustainable way.”

## When navigating a restrictive institution...

“Radical access can oftentimes clash with the more restrictive policies of an institution. I remain mindful of power hierarchies, privilege and access to resources, as well as my own position within the institutional hierarchy. Within that matrix I attempt to carve out as much space as possible for radical access. Let's take flexibility as an example: I can't be completely flexible with deadlines because AU forces me to turn in grades at a certain point in the semester, but I can use Incompletes to extend those deadlines. During the semester I can be much more flexible with students but have to remain mindful that for some students such flexibility can lead to piled up work and an overwhelming backlog of assignments. This is why communication is so important: as long as I can keep in touch with students about their progress (which is hard when you have sixty students a semester), we can continuously negotiate deadlines that meet their needs. This is, however, a resource-intensive way of showing up for students, and I often run into my own limits while trying to create as much radical access as possible. Which is why I continue to advocate for more access training across campus, reduced teaching loads for instructors, and more resources for everyone.”

**-Dr. Aho**

# Literature Recommendations on Teaching, Accessibility, Disability

- Mad at School (Margaret Price)
- Loving Our Own Bones (Julia Watts Belser)
- Using Disability Critical Race Theory in American Special Education Classrooms (Christopher Keith Johnson)
- Subini Annamma on "Excavating Possibilities: Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) in Education"
- Not Another All White Study: Challenging Color-Evasiveness Ideology in Disability Scholarship (Lissa Stapleton and Liam James)
- Compassionate pedagogy for neurodiversity in higher education: A conceptual analysis (Lorna G. Hamilton and Stephanie Petty)





# *Campus Involvement!*

--> Disabled Students Union

--> Disability+ Faculty & Staff Affinity Group

--> Disability, Health, and Bodies Certificate

