Ability (re)Imagined: An exploration into accessibility, accommodation, and student success at the University of Lethbridge

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Dedication

For all the students with disabilities, complex learning needs, and mental illness at the University

of Lethbridge.

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Introduction

Project Overview

 This honour's thesis grew out of my involvement with the Student Perspective Project (SPP) from 2020-2021, and a subsequent Independent Study during the of spring 2021 running parallel to the SPP. Based out of the University of Lethbridge Teaching Centre, the aim of the SPP was to conduct research to better understand student concerns about the shift to the online emergency schooling model as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Koberinski et al., 2021). Concerns had been voiced by faculty and students regarding quality of education, increased workload, coursework difficulty, decreased retention, and decreased attention of students (Koberinski et al., 2021). Phase One of the project surveyed the University of Lethbridge student body in December of 2020 (n=1651, 18.4% response rate). The preliminary analysis of the survey data provided valuable insight into how students both perceived and experienced the emergency schooling environment. For example, students reported trepidation with online learning.

 What remained unclear, however, was how students with accessibility requirements were specifically affected by the sudden turn to online learning in the Spring 2020 semester. Due to the limited research regarding the impact of COVID-19 on students with accessibility requirements, I decided to pursue institutional specific research as part of an Independent Study that looked at the impacts of online learning on students with accessibility requirements. I discovered that, at that point in time, the bulk of scholarly literature studying the impact of

COVID-19 centred on grade school students with accessibility requirements, with little literature regarding the impact of COVID-19 in the post-secondary sector. Grade school literature indicated that educational resources (e.g., academic support staff, school libraries) were particularly affected by the pandemic as provincial lockdowns and mandatory quarantines disrupted grade school across the globe (Walters 2015). Additionally, home learning environments were not always conducive to a positive learning environment or accessing education (Meyers and Bagnall 2015; Becker et al., 2020; Meleo-Erwin et al., 2021; Summers et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Meticulously established social and "environmental supports", along with stable and expected schedules and rubrics are helpful for the mental health of grade school students with accessibility requirements (Kimble-Hill et al., 2020). Lack of schedules, explicit class expectations, and accommodations (e.g., increased time for assignments, closed captions, recorded lectures) contributed decreased academic performance of grade school students with accessibility requirements (Kimble-Hill et al., 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020). Issues with accessing education and technological resources were linked to geographical location and socioeconomic status (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2020). Post-secondary students reported financial instability connected to employment instability due to COVID-19; likewise post-secondary students with accessibility requirements reported higher levels of isolation, anxiety, and stress (Walters 2015; Meleo-Erwin et al., 2021; Summers er al., 2020; Kimble-Hill et al., 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020).

The initial research from my Independent Study showed that the effects of online learning on students with accessibility requirements indicated several concerns including, but not limited to, inconsistent and inaccessible learning environments, a lack of or denied accommodations, and an overall negative experience with the online learning environment

(Brickley, 2021). Furthermore, students at the University of Lethbridge reported experiences of being denied access to accommodation prior to the move to online learning. University of Lethbridge students with accessibility requirements revealed that many of the problems experienced in the pandemic online learning environment occurred prior to the pandemic. The experiences shared by students led me to conclude that in-person learning environments are not equally accessible to all students.

The purpose of this Honours Thesis, then, is to explore the experiences of students with accessibility requirements at the University of Lethbridge. My research questions are: What are the experiences of students with (disabilities) with accommodation services on campus? What is the relationship between grade point average and academic success? Students with disabilities are often alienated and relegated to being outliers on university campuses (Aubrecht, 2019). In addition, disability, as a defining term, is not consistent across university policies resulting in the exclusion of some students from accessing accommodation services (Aubrecht & Lay, 2016; Brown 2021). Accommodation also takes many different forms. Physical access to buildings, such as a wheelchair ramp, does not guarantee those spaces are equally accessible (Hamarie, 2017). Titchkosky (2011) contends that the "who, what, when, and how" of access matters to both physical spaces and social spaces. How universities define accommodation and disability places restrictions on students, as in which services they can access under the label of accommodation (Dolmage, 2017; Aubrecht, 2012). Mental health, for example, is often a category of exclusion on university campuses. Depression and anxiety are labelled as mental illness, rather than disability, and students with mental illness often do not qualify for accommodation (Aubrecht, 2012).

Employing a critical disability studies theoretical framework, I am interested in examining how students navigate access at the University of Lethbridge, how access takes form in their experiences and what it means to have an accessible University campus. Additionally, using a feminist methodology and intersectional analysis, I am interested in how one's subjective understanding of student success and grade point average affects students.

Students with accessibility requirements are, for the purposes of this thesis, defined as students who have received a diagnosis of disability (e.g., blindness, brain injury, hearing impairment) and/or complex learning needs (e.g., ADHD, ASD, dyslexia). Approximately 660 students enrolled at the University of Lethbridge are registered with the Accommodated Learning Centre (ALC)[1]. The most prevalent categories of diagnosis registered with the ALC are Learning Disabilities[2], Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)[3], and a Mental Health Disability.[4] The Alberta Human Rights Commission defines other possible categories of disability as Developmental (e.g., Autism (ASD), Asperger Disorder (ASD), Physical Disability (e.g., Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment), and Neurological Disability (e.g., Brain Injury, Autoimmune Diseases)[5].To my understanding, the ALC determines who is eligible based on the Alberta Human Rights Act and it's definition of physical and mental disabilities. Roughly 200

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[1] The Accommodated Learning Centre's mission is: "The Accommodated Learning Centre facilitates equitable learning supports in the university environment for students with a wide range of documented disabilities. Students with Disabilities Grant funding, through Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education, enhances our university's capacity to provide timely services, supports, and accommodations for students with disabilities seeking assistance so that they may seamlessly and successfully fully participate in their programs of study. https://www.ulethbridge.ca/ross/accommodated-learning-centre

[2] Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) defines learning disabilities as "disorders affecting data retention, comprehension, and interaction, such as dyslexia and dyspraxia. Dyslexia is defined as a disorder affecting reading, writing and distinguishing words." (LDAC 2021)
[3] Dyspraxia is defined as disorder affecting "language, motor skills, and speech." (LDAC 2021)
[4] The Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada (CADDAC) defines ADHD as complex neurological disorder affecting a variety of functions, such as concentration and emotional regulation (CADDAC 2015)
[5] Mental health disability is wide category encompassing eating disorders, personality disorders, and mood disorders such as anxiety and depression. (Alberta Employment and Immigration Career and Workplace Resources 2010)
[6] The Alberta Human Rights Commission Duty to Accommodate mandate defined disabilities and complex learning needs. https://albertahumanrights.ab.ca/Documents/Bull_Duty_to_accom_students.pdf

students registered with the ALC have a documented secondary diagnosis; the most prevalent

secondary diagnosis are Mental Health disabilities and ADHD (Accommodated Learning Centre

Report 2019-2020).

In what follows, I discuss my methodological approach to answering my two research

questions and then provide a summative overview of my findings.

Methodology

In order to fully investigate my research questions, I employed a critical disability

framework as part of my feminist research methodology. Critical disability studies is a field of

study that has emerged to query the medical definition and conceptualization of disability that is

pervasive in mainstream society. The medicalization of disability posits that disability is the

responsibility of the individual, disability as a personal failure, and the need for disability to be

cured, removed, or exterminated (Campbell 2009; Fritsch 2019). Dolmage (2017) writes that

disability studies fundamentally "disrupts the idea that disabled people should be defined

primarily through their disabilities by others, retaining instead the right for disabled people to

define their own relationships with disability" (5). Critical disability studies attends to how

disability is re/produced by social, economic, and political structures and relations of power. The

social model theorises disability as a product of society, made through exclusionary practices,

language, and physical buildings (5-6). Dolmage (2017) asserts that post-secondary institutions

are both social and physical sites that reinforce the medical model of disability. In fact, critical

disability theorists posit that post-secondary institutions are intrinsically linked to the

discrimination and subjugation of persons with disabilities (6). Institutions, and society, achieve

the marginalization of disability through the use of normalizing certain bodies over others.

Titchkosky (2012) writes that "One power of normalcy lies in its ability to actualise both its inclusions and exclusions as though they are ordained by nature. Regarded as natural, concepts of normalcy organize the shape of daily life even while closing down the sense that things could or should be otherwise" (50). Titchkosky argues that disability is created through the collective social "imagining" of disability in society, a concept that can be extended to post-secondary campus culture (50). There is historical precedent as well. Disability has been historically marginalized, because the term disability itself evokes a certain image or characteristics that institutions use to create an undeniable manifestation of disability outside the norm (51). Language has power. Language breathes life into concepts that exist within in our minds or gives life to the collective image created by a group of people. Disability is a term used to categorize people; it evokes an image which then creates reality.

It is at the intersection between critical disability studies and feminist methodology that I find myself as a researcher. Theorists argue that other disciplines (feminism, crip studies, queer studies) are aligned, stating that "Sharing similar goals, these theoretical perspectives have informed and transformed each other through questioning normalcy and compulsory heterosexuality and ablebodiedness/mindedness (Santinele Martino 2017; as cited in Santinele Martino 2021)". Martino is writing about the intersection of crip studies (critical disability) and queer studies, but I would argue that the same argument can be applied to the intersection between feminist research methodology and critical disability studies. It is through such a critical lens that I hope to understand the experiences of students and disability at the University of Lethbridge.

Feminist research methodology has many definitions, but at its core it queries established ways of knowledge production and ways of research (Buikema et al., 2011). Feminist research practices are also interdisciplinary and often employ an intersectional method of analysis. Hesse-Biber (2014) writes that feminist research "positions gender as the categorical center of inquiry and the research process" (3). Throughout this thesis project, I did ask questions about gender, but it is not central to my analysis, though it does matter. Why does it matter? Gender shapes our experiences and produces certain knowledge that cannot be understood from one standpoint. In this study, students who identified as female made up roughly 47% of the participants. Roughly 27% of the students identified as male, while 27% identified as non binary or preferred to not have their gender labelled. Why does this matter? In my previous research, roughly 75% of students reported having a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), with 58% of those students having a single diagnosis (versus multiple diagnosis). Let us compare the example the three most common diagnoses reported to me over the course of this project. Out of the 27% of male students, 75% reported having diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). Out of the 47% of female students, 43% reported having diagnosis of ADHD, GAD and major depressive disorder (MDD). There were no non binary students who reported having ADHD in this study but 50% of non binary students reported having GAD and MD. Out of those who preferred not to label their gender, 50% reported having GAD, MDD and ADHD. As discussed later on in this section, ADHD was one of the most common diagnosis students reported having. What is significant is that gender can greatly affect *getting a diagnosis* in the first place. According to Slobodin and Davidovitch (2019) boys/males are more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD than other genders. So while gender is not central to my analysis or critique of ableism at the University of Lethbridge, the

fact remains that gender has a significant impact. But that is the subject for a whole other project in and of itself.

Hesse-Biber (2014) also writes that feminist research "centralizes the relationship between the researcher and researched to balance differing levels of power and authority" (3). My research is feminist because I actively acknowledge that I cannot be impartial or unbiased. I also acknowledge that I, as the interviewer, hold a position of power in the interview setting. Throughout this process, I have constantly reminded myself of whose voice is most important to this study – the answer to which is the students. While my analysis is central to this project, without the student voice this thesis would not exist. My position and location as an undergraduate student researcher means that I am in a unique position to understand the student perspective while still critiquing the institution.

Another aspect of my research that makes it feminist is the use of standpoint theory. Standpoint theory is defined as recognizing that knowledge is produced, and that knowledge is heavily influenced by where one is located (Naples and Gurr 2014). I do not mean just physically located, but socially located as well. Historically, research has been done that "privileges a white, middle-class, and heterosexual point of view produces results that are both alienating and colonizing" (19). In order to understand the world fully, other forms of knowledge must be studied. Standpoint theory embraces the experiences and knowledge of people who are marginalized. In my research, I am talking to students with accessibility requirements. Students with disabilities, complex learning needs, or mental illness are often marginalized on university campuses – and by society. By talking to marginalized groups, "knowledge produced from the point of view of subordinated groups may offer stronger objectivity due to increased motivation for them to understand the views or perspectives of those in positions of power" (Naples and

Gurr 2014; 21). My goal as a researcher is to gain a better understanding of what students with accessibility requirements are experiencing at the University of Lethbridge. It would be unhelpful of me to investigate only the University alone, without the perspective of the students attend and are affected by ableism within the institution. My main research method was semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students and with key stakeholders, all at the University of Lethbridge.

    i. *Recruitment*

Interview participants were recruited from the current body of undergraduate students, via an email that was distributed by Institutional Analysis to the whole student population. Student groups such as LPIRG and the Campus Collective also circulated a recruitment email accompanied by a digital poster (see APPENDIX A). The criteria for student participants included being 18 years of age and older, and having accessibility requirements, that is, those students who have received a medical (or professional) diagnosis of disability (e.g., blindness, brain injury, hearing impairment) and/or complex learning needs (e.g., ADHD, ASD, dyslexia). Confirmation of diagnosis, age, and any accessibility requirements (e.g., closed captioning for video calls, a large print copy of the interview questions) were established during initial correspondence between myself and the potential participant. In addition to interviewing students, I also interviewed key University stakeholders. Invitation emails were sent to five key University stakeholders: the ALC manager, the Associate Vice-President (Students), the Executive Director Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI), the manager of Indigenous Student Services and the Director of the Teaching Centre. Unfortunately, only two returned my emails

and agreed to participate in the study. Stakeholder questions are outlined in detail in APPENDIX B.

ii. *Interview Process*

For both student participants and the institutional stakeholders, I employed a semi-structured interview format (see APPENDICES B & C, respectively). Such a format allowed for flexibility in the direction an interview took while maintaining a guided structure. The interviews were conducted in person or using an online/virtual meeting platform (e.g., Zoom), whichever platform best suited the participant. The majority of interviews were performed in-person, accounting for roughly 10 out of the 15 interviews. In-person interviews occurred in a private, room at the University of Lethbridge and adhered to the then-current University COVID-19 protocols.

Interviews ran anywhere between 40 to 90 minutes. Before each interview began, I reviewed the letter of consent with each participant, which included ascertaining anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were reminded that should they wish to withdraw from interview, they could do so at any time without prejudice.

In the case of in-person interviews, audio recordings were conducted during the interview process using my personal phone. All audio recordings (e.g., personal phone, computer) were deleted from my device and transferred to a secure USB device. Audio recordings of the in-person and audio/video recordings of the online interviews (e.g., Zoom) were password protected and stored on a secure USB device in a locked cabinet in my home office. Video recordings were deleted once the audio transcription had been completed. I transcribed the audio recordings of both the in-person and online interviews into a Word document that was also password protected and stored on a secure USB device in a locked cabinet in my home office. Each interview participant was able to request a copy of their transcript for review and were given 30

days to provide feedback from the time of receiving the transcript. All participants who requested a copy of the transcript received a copy of their interview to review. After this, if no feedback was given, the transcript was used in its original form.

iii. Student Participant Demographics

The recruitment email was sent out to the entire undergraduate student population. 24 students responded to the initial recruitment email; out of this, I interviewed 15 students over the course of the Fall 2021 semester. Students varied in age, gender identity, diagnosis, year of study, faculty and level of accommodation. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 64, with the average age being 24. Roughly 47% of recruited participants preferred she/her pronouns and identified as female while 27% identified as male and used he/him pronouns. Approximately 13% of participants did not label their gender identity, and 13% identified as non-binary and used a mix of she/he/and they pronouns. Diagnosis also varied greatly between participants. Approximately 66% of participants reported multiple diagnosis, whereas only 33% participants had a single diagnosis. Roughly 33% of participants reported having a physical disability, with 80% of those participants having multiple diagnosis. The most common reported diagnosis was ADHD, followed by GAD and MDD (see Table 1.0). Other diagnoses include, in no particular order; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); bipolar disorder (BD); attention deficit disorder (ADD) epilepsy; Wurnik's encephalopathy; autism; reading comprehension; lupus; microtia atresia (hearing loss); dyslexia; Tourette's; obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD); dyspraxia; panic disorder; functional neurological disorder; learning disability; math disability; memory disability; chronic pain; arthritis; and complex regional pain syndrome.

Year of study also varied greatly, with 60% of students reporting being in their third year or later. Approximately 20% of participants were in their first year, 20% in their second year, 33%

in their third year, 13% in their 4th year and 13% in their 5th year (see Table 2.0). Roughly 80% of students who participated in this project reported having a single major, with 20% having a double major. Student participants reported being registered in a variety of different faculties; 33% of participants were Psychology majors or double majors such as General Science/Education, English/Education, and Kinesiology/Psychology. The rest varied between Open Studies (heading towards Biology and Chemistry); Philosophy; Music; Neuroscience; Health Sciences; English; Fine Arts; and Biological Sciences (switching to English and Education) (see Table 3.0). At least two students were, academically, in their second or third years but had transferred in from another institution, meaning this was their first year attending the University of Lethbridge.

The majority of students in this study were registered with the ALC. Roughly 67% of students involved in this project reported to be registered with the ALC, meaning that 33% of students in this study were not registered with ALC. Many, if not all, of those not registered with the ALC were in the process of seeking out accommodation or had sought accommodation in the past. All of the participants had a formal medical diagnosis of some kind or were in the process of obtaining a formal diagnosis. Based on the interviews with students I conducted, I learned that the most common accommodations required were, in no particular order: extra time on exams/assignments; recorded lectures; notetakers; learning devices (i.e., text to speech, screen readers), tutors; lecture slides; instructors notes; preferential seating; and leeway with attendance.
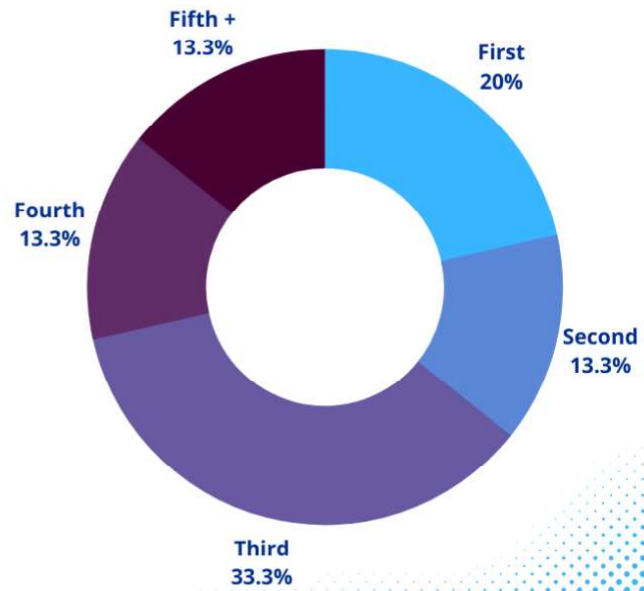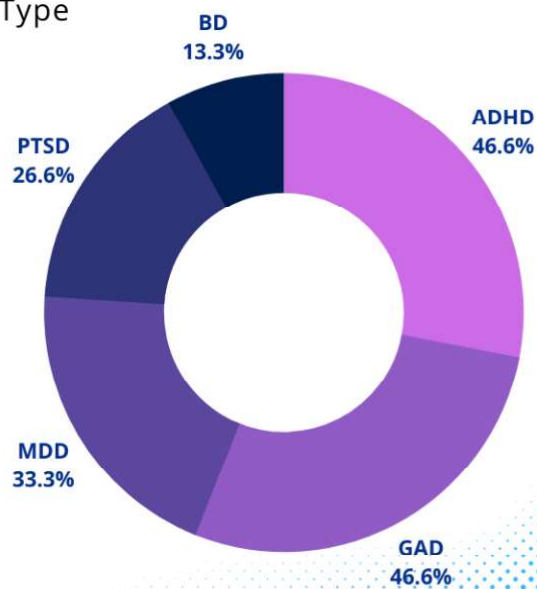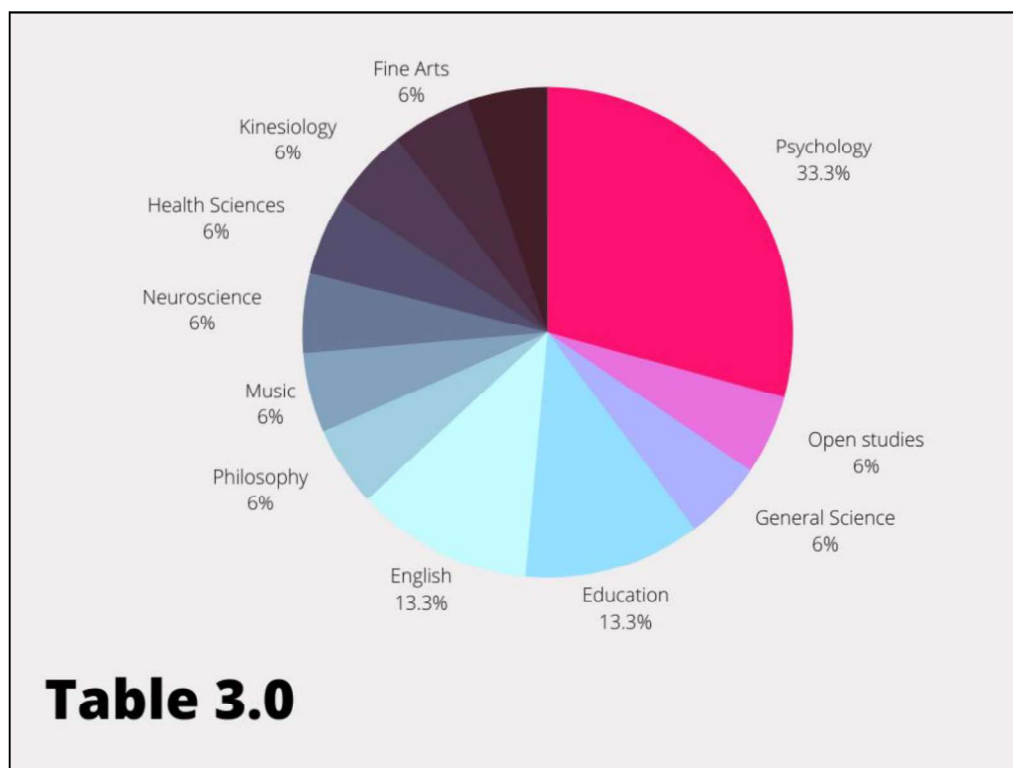
Table 2.0

Year of Study

Fifth +
13.3%

First
20%

Fourth
13.3%

Second
13.3%

Third
33.3%

Table 1.0

Common Diagnosis Type

BD
13.3%

ADHD
46.6%

PTSD
26.6%

MDD
33.3%

GAD
46.6%

Table 3.0

Interview Reflections

There were various aspects of the interviews that went well. Online interviews afforded both the participants and me to meet in the comforts of our own homes, which was particularly beneficial for those students with physical disabilities or having bad mental health days. Interestingly, online interviews were not requested by most participants. In-person interviews made up most of the interviews I conducted, which enabled me to form a rapport with the students. Perhaps one reason for the popularity of in-person interviews is that it provided a form of interpersonal connection missing for many people during the COVID-19 pandemic. While my position as interviewer put me in a position of power, it was extremely important to me that all student participants were comfortable and felt that their experiences were valued.

No two interviews are the same or produce the same results. Throughout each of the interviews I conducted, I learned different things and gained different perspectives. For example, during one of the interviews, I realised how poorly the in-person interview room was suited for those participants with disability aids. The interview room was located in University Hall, which can be physically inaccessible for many students, but it is in a section that is known for having small spaces. Two abled bodied people could sit comfortably in the interview room, however there was little space to accommodate those using disability aids. Had in-person interviews not taken place, I would not have been aware of the difficulties presented to arrive at the room nor how the room design limited who could comfortably use the space. If I had to do the study over again, I would choose an interview space that was more suited for all possible participants. This calls into question *whether* there is such a space at the University of Lethbridge that could be used for in-person interviews that would be accessible to me as a researcher that met the needs of the participants. This also highlights the ableism built into the University's physical architecture, as I will discuss in chapter one. When I had initially thought of a space for interviews, I fully

anticipated using one of the public, rentable, rooms in the library (COVID-19 allowing) or any other rentable room space at the University. When I was offered a room in University Hall, I jumped at the chance to have a private space to use for this project. It was somewhat naïve and ableist of me to not consider the inaccessibility of the room for my participants. This example speaks to how internal ableism works and how ableism is assumed to be the norm. Despite any 'best intentions' or awareness on my part, I still have to face how ableism manifests itself within me. I should have thought more extensively about how the space would work for all bodies, not just mine. If all the interviews were conducted in person, would the location of the meeting room have been a barrier to participants? All I can do is ask myself these questions and become a more prepared researcher. In the future, I can ensure whatever space I use is equally accessible (to the best of my ability) to any potential participant.

One element that was brought to my attention throughout the interview process was the impact year of study had on accommodation. A trend that arose from the interviews was that many first-year students either had limited experiences regarding accessibility or accommodation since they had only been on campus for a short(er) period of time compared to students in their second year or higher. This was due, in part, to COVID-19 and the inability of some students to be on campus for their first year, but also that first year students did not necessarily have accommodations set up with ALC. Nor did first year students have much experience with professors, needing accommodations or going through the process of getting registered with the ALC. This was also true for students who had transferred from other institutions. However, a key difference that I found between recent transfer students and first year students was that many transfer students had prior experience with accessibility or accommodation services at their

previous campus. This created a really interesting variety of perspectives regarding accessibility and accommodation between varying years of study.

Something important that I feel the need to address here is the matter of my participants. To understand the experiences of students on campus, I recruited only those students who had a medical diagnosis of their accessibility requirement which created the likely outcome that some students would be excluded from participating in this project. I acknowledge that students without formal diagnoses of disability or cognitive learning needs were excluded from this project, which admittedly is a potential flaw. Students with suspected diagnoses, or unofficial diagnoses, may have experiences with accessibility and accommodation at the University of Lethbridge that I failed to capture. This is a potential limitation of my project. However, students who are going through the process of seeking out diagnosis *were* included in this study, for various reasons. Firstly, the Alberta medical field is facing a shortage of doctors, which means many students may no longer have access to a doctor to obtain a diagnosis. Secondly, students seeking a diagnosis were also, in many cases, seeking out accommodation with the ALC. Their experiences with accommodation, both positive and negative, contributed greatly to my overall understanding of the structures in place for students with accessibility requirements. If I had only included students with medical diagnosis and registered with ALC, I would have lost a valuable student perspective and excluded even more students from this project.

Summary of Findings & Contributions

Over the course of this thesis, several findings became clear. Overall, at its core, the University of Lethbridge is not an accessible campus - which may not come as a surprise. However, what may be more unexpected is that students described that the University of Lethbridge as *both* physically *and* socially inaccessible.

i.   Physical ableism and accessibility

Physical barriers are built right into the ableist architecture of the University and help produce and reenforce disability as an outlier on campus. While many students described feeling invisible, those with physical disabilities felt hypervisible, often taken to be representative of all disability on campus. Belonging is a critical aspect of campus culture, which students with physical disabilities stated feeling excluded from because of their status as disabled or non-disabled. Similarly, students with accessibility requirements reported that they did not believe students with disabilities were a priority at the University of Lethbridge. This sentiment is linked to how disability is produced on campus, which effectively renders disabled students as a marginal population. This marginalization ties into the dichotomy of visible/invisible disability in relation to the expected and accepted normative student body.

ii.   Social ableism and accessibility

While the physical architecture of the University of Lethbridge is blatant in its re/production of exclusion, social ableism is harder to locate. If the physical structures overtly produce disability as marginalized and invisible, social ableism re-enforces disability or disabled people as disruptive to normative learning environments (e.g., the classroom). Accommodation and accessibility become privileged at the University of Lethbridge. The act of accommodation is seen as a special category, available to those with *proven* need: be it disability, cognitive or

physical, or complex learning needs. Students reported that having accommodations were perceived as having special treatment, despite requiring the accommodation to "level the playing field". Accommodation was/is treated like a privilege rather than a right. Establishing accommodation and accessibly is predicated based on individual need *if* the student meets the threshold requirements and definitions that the ALC and medical professionals adhere to. Additionally, gaining access to the ALC is a complicated, arduous, and expensive process, one which many students lamented over the course of the project. Other examples of social ableism at the University of Lethbridge are but are not limited to: having little to no disability representation on campus, denial of accommodations by professors, denial of diagnosis by professors, and rejection of accommodation based on diagnosis type.

iii.   Grade Point Average and Student Success

Another important aspect of student life on campus is student success. In theory, student success is a pinnacle of university, since it is through student success that the university prospers. And yet, what does it mean to be a successful student? How do students define success? Do students define success differently than the university? How is the concept of student success linked to institutional ableism as expressed by students with accessibility requirements? Unlike the first two sections outlined in this thesis, locating and conceptualizing ableism within the construction of student success, alongside grade point average, is a difficult undertaking. Based on student feedback, success is highly subjective; and yet, success is cultivated by the university in specific ways. Success, like accommodation or need, must be *proven* in order for students to continue with their education. Arguably at the institutional level student success becomes defined through one's grade point average and academic achievements rather than personal goals or accomplishments. Looking at success from the student perspective, it becomes clear that the

universal model, or 'one size fits all', teaching and grade design does not always work. While a universal design may feel like the most advantageous way to set students up for success, students reported feeling unsupported by the University of Lethbridge.

iv.   Contributions

The contributions of this thesis project are many, but I will touch on just a few. First, this thesis contributes to the increased understanding of ableism at the University of Lethbridge, for students, staff, and faculty. By understanding the ways in which ableism is actively working to marginalize certain students brings heightened awareness and the potential for change. Second, this paper could contribute to social change on campus – specifically to the ways in which disability is treated and marginalized at the University of Lethbridge. Ways of teaching, making education accessible, and accommodating could be the subject of discussions that lead to actual, tangible, change on campus. Lastly, this paper indicates a clear need for the student voice to be heard. This is my second project working with students with accessibility requirements, and both times there has been overwhelming stuent interest and support. Students have voices and they want their experiences to be heard. It is very clear that students want there to be change at the University of Lethbridge.

What became clear throughout the course of this project is that ableism is at work at the University of Lethbridge. I mean that ableism is actively chosen, cultivated, and privileged by the institution, which creates barriers for students with accessibility requirements. In the following chapter, I delve into the pervasive ways ableism is at work within physical aspects of the University of Lethbridge.

Chapter One – Ableism at Work

I do not look disabled. Disability often is associated with obvious physical characteristics that distinguish an able-bodied person, or normative body, from a disabled person, or abnormal body. The re/production of the normative body as able-bodied more often than not occurs through architecture such as doors and entryways. Even those spaces 'designed' for disabled bodies are limited and influenced by the ableism of the architecture those spaces are set within. Let me explain. If I were to stand in front of an elevator on the University of Lethbridge campus, waiting to descend or ascend to any level of University Hall, what would people think of me? What would they assume? They would see a person with an able body as I can walk, stand, run, jump and twist like any other person doing those physical activities. Would they judge me for using a space designed for ease of transportation between floors and buildings because my body is not marked in the normative ways we understand 'disability'? Over my nine years as a student at the University of Lethbridge I have heard many students make off handed comments regarding the use of elevators: If the person using an elevator was perceived to be able bodied, it evoked commentary equating the subject as being lazy, out of shape (fatphobic), taking up space for someone 'who needs it' and so forth. When a person is perceived to be visibly disabled, in either a temporary or 'permanent' way, the commentary shifts to one that acknowledges the need of the elevator; that is, one's condition justified the use of an elevator.

Perception, in this case, is crucial to understanding what it is like to be on campus with an invisible disability. I do not look disabled. I look like a white, cisgendered, fat, able-bodied, female student. However, I suffer from chronic conditions, or disabilities, that affect my daily life. I suffer from depression, anxiety, and was diagnosed in 2020 with ADHD. In March of 2021, I suffered a head injury from being hit in the head by a horse that resulted in a severe

concussion, a condition from which I am not totally healed. I also suffer from two conditions that affect me physically. One condition is commonly known as irritable bowel syndrome, or IBS, and the other is referred to as an overactive bladder, or OAB. I have struggled with OAB since I was a teenager but only received a formal diagnosis when I was 19. Both my conditions are such that my body does not have the same kind of neurological and physical control over those organs as people without IBS and/or OAB thus requiring that I be within quick distance of a washroom. Once, when I was 20, I was taking an exam in the University of Lethbridge testing centre. During the exam, my OAB flared up, which meant that I urgently needed access to a bathroom *very* quickly. I had to beg to be let out to use the washroom. Using the washroom once an exam is underway in the testing centre is not allowed. Rather, the expectation is that students are expected to complete their exam before leaving the room. However, as I had to explain, if I was not allowed to seek a bathroom, it would result in a very embarrassing situation for everyone involved – myself, the exam overseer, and no doubt others in the room. Luckily, the exam overseer was kind enough to make an exception for me and I was able to physically get to the nearest bathroom before disaster struck and return to finish my exam.

Little did I know at that time, but I qualified for accommodation. At 20 years old, I was far too embarrassed to reveal the details of my condition to anyone, let alone think to ask for help so that this would not to be an issue in the future. Instead, I stayed silent. This made sitting through classes and writing exams very difficult because it was nearly impossible for me to go an hour, let alone more, without my OAB flaring up. My conditions are also effected by movement, meaning that excessive walking was/is problematic, causing me to take the elevator when I need to, sometimes subjecting me to vocal or silent judgement from those passing by. Internally, I have often wondered if I even qualify to call myself disabled or if I was 'disabled enough' to

warrant using the elevator and taking up space that 'should be' reserved for someone more deserving; aka 'more disabled' than I. This is part and parcel of having an invisible disability.

Ableism is ingrained within the fabric of society, it is produced by society and reinforced by the physical and social structures of our lived environments. Often ableism is not even conscious thought, but assumptions and internal thoughts we have that sculpt our views of people around us and what counts as a normative body or a normative space, and who is welcome – and where are they welcome. Ableism has been defined by various authors, but perhaps the most multifaceted definition is that proffered by Campbell (2009), who defines ableism as "[a]network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human" (44). Simply put, ableism is the term used to privilege able (normative) bodies over disabled (non-normative) bodies.

Ableism extends beyond physical bodies and permeates the fabric of society, producing physical buildings that are founded on a normative template based on the "universal body" (Hamraie 2017). Universal bodies are not neutral but represent "a particular white, European, nondisabled, youthful and masculine figure" (20). Such a figure has been used in the creation of architectural designs, which is the foundation for modern architecture (Ibid). Accessibility advocates have had to demand change to existing architecture in order to facilitate different types of bodies instead of building accessible buildings (1). Accommodation, in this fashion, is often an afterthought within the design process leading to buildings that are inaccessible to non able bodied people. The physical space is designed to be a barrier to non able bodied people, preventing physical access to spaces (Titchkosky 2011). This is especially true at the University

of Lethbridge, as within most post-secondary institutions. Dolmage (2017) writes that "disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education" (3). Why is this? In part, the physical design of post-secondary institutions creates an inaccessible physical environment, leading to the exclusion of disabled bodies (Titchkosky 2011). In addition to physical inaccessibility, ableism creates social and intellectual inaccessibility. Intellectual ability (and neurotypicality) is privileged at post-secondary institutions in the same way able bodies are. As Domage (2017) writes, "the ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness" (3).

This brings me back to the issue of who belongs. As long as institutions prioritize and reward ability, defined in very narrow terms, they create a power imbalance. Likewise, if spaces prioritize certain bodies over others, they create an imbalance of belonging. Titchkosky (2011) contends that the normalization of able bodies in academic spaces creates and perpetuates the standard usage of university spaces as inherently ableist (32). This extends beyond the space itself, becoming an indicator of who can and cannot use spaces on campus. Disability, in this mode of thinking, is an outlier that is not the product of one's surroundings, but an individual failing that disrupts the normative structure (Fritsch 2019; Titchkosky 2011; Campbell 2009). Titchkosky (2011) writes that students in post-secondary institutions are viewed as an "economic unit", which reduces all normative students to a monetary amount. This monetary amount, like the physical space on campus, is disordered by disability. In a social system where people are measured and valued, disability can be reduced to issues of funding. What do I mean by this? Titchkosky (2011) writes that able bodies only take up so much space, which the physical buildings and classrooms have been designed for, whereas disabled bodies – especially those

with disability aids – take up more space and therefore cost more than their non-disabled peers (32).

In this chapter, I explore the experiences of students as they navigate campus and classroom in both physical and social spaces. Many of my interview participants raised concern about both social and physical accommodations. The first part of this chapter discusses issues of inaccessibility that arise from the highly ableist architecture of the University of Lethbridge campus. To start, I will explore the inaccessible aspects of campus that result from ableist architecture and physical accommodation. I begin by listing various structures at the University of Lethbridge that are inherently inaccessible and ableist, aptly named Ableist University of Lethbridge Architecture. In this section I outline the various spaces on campus that students found to be the most difficult to navigate, including existing structures like stairs, hallways/entryways and classrooms. Additionally, I outline the physical accommodations that have been made across campus and how students accessible or inaccessible those accommodations were reported to be. I then conclude with a brief overview of the power of physical structures in the creation of ableist culture at the University of Lethbridge, and how they render students with accessibility requirements both visible and invisible.

1.1   *Ableist University of Lethbridge Architecture*

The overall physical campus architecture was not designed to be navigated by people with physical disabilities. Instead, the campus was designed with the assumption that the people accessing university spaces (students, faculty, employees, guests) would be able-bodied. This assumption has had long lasting ramifications. For example, my informants said that the distance between buildings on campus, traversed between classes over the course of five to ten minutes, was to be too great and too laborious for students to navigate. Student participants also reported

that travelling between buildings, such as going from University Hall to the First Choice Savings building, over the course of 30 minutes was laborious, regardless of if one was abled bodied. They found it difficult to travel from one building to the next due to numerous physical barriers, which *also* include those physical accommodations intended to mitigate the exclusionary effects of an ableist campus. It is to this that I now turn.

1.1.1 Stairs

Stairs present a particular challenge at the University of Lethbridge, as they are a foundational element of many of the core buildings on campus. As such, the heavy use of stairs to access the different buildings on campus presents many challenges to students with physical accessibility requirements. Those students who are visibly, and non-visibly, physically disabled reported that the stairs present a challenge for them, as there are times where they are capable of walking around campus without using accessibility services like the elevators. However, deciding whether or not to attend class is often based on the effort required for students to travel across campus, or even, through various departments. For example, Clover described that she struggled to access her classes due to her condition,

> I found it [the university] like a big acreage. Like a lot of walking. The first time I walked there, that was first week I couldn't even walk after I came home and I says "I can't walk anymore" and so I went… I didn't complain, I didn't say anything… I even bought shoes - another pair - 'cause I thought maybe it's my shoes 'cause I really haven't had new shoes since 2013, so I bought good leather shoes and I thought "Well maybe it's the issue" so you know I ended up getting a new pair of good support shoes but it's not too bad with that now. It's a bit better but yeah because of the distance and that you have to get to the class … if you have a back to back appointments class it's really hard with a physical disability to walk that stretch…Oh my goodness like, you really gotta move… like things that I have… this condition is that I'm exhausted for two days after.

This resulted in Clover being unable to walk or move for several days. Clover also details that it was hard to get to classes or appointments if they were scheduled close together, as it required

too much physical effort to quickly get around campus. In Clover's case, as well as other students with physical disabilities, she had to decide if the effort required to walk around on campus (from point A to B) was going to make her condition worse by the end of the day, which could have lasting consequences. While there are existing alternatives to stairs, some elevators are located some distance from each other, requiring students to travel between locations.

1.1.2 Hallway/Entryway Spaces

Entryways and hallways are an integral part of campus, and indeed most buildings. Hallways are used to connect buildings to buildings, gathering spaces to entryways and so forth. Hallways, for all intense and purposes, are a basic part of a buildings structure. There are numerous hallways and entryways at the University of Lethbridge.

When entering classrooms, hallways or other entryway spaces, there is usually a door or open space for students to enter through. Students with accessibility requirements have reported that when using mobility aids, these spaces are too small. Marigold reported an area of accommodation to be improved upon would be "Wider door frames. A lot of door frames, and some areas of campus, are rather small and a little difficult to navigate mobility aids around." Both wheelchair users and students with other mobility aids reported that doorways and entryways across campus were small, barely allowing them enough room to fit through. In the older parts of campus, the spaces are much more narrow than newly constructed buildings on campus. Marigold also reported that

> There are plenty of areas on campus that are not accessible to me as I primarily use crutches to get around, but I am transitioning to a wheelchair. Thinking of places like the recital hall and practice rooms, those are completely inaccessible areas if you use mobility aids.

Entryways that are not equipped with doors are easier to navigate through than areas with doors. Not all doors on campus are automatic, or offer an automatic option, which presents an additional barrier to navigating campus. Some entryways, such as the entrance to the Student's Union Building, are not level, which present challenges for students with disabilities or who use mobility aids. Marigold also reported that a basic accommodation for them was having "level entry ways, you know…. having alternatives to stairs."

Hallways at the University of Lethbridge are extremely varied. Some do not have doors connecting one space to another, such as when students are moving between the First Choice Savings Centre to the Student Union Building. However, other hallways are fitted with doors to connect areas of campus to each other. Doors are their own barriers to students with physical disabilities, or use mobility aids, and will be discussed in a subsequent section. Hallways in older areas of campus are quite narrow, often requiring people to walk single file in order to fit comfortably, for example level 5, 7, and 8 of University Hall. If a student needs to access a classroom on level 7 or the testing centre, they must navigate through smaller, less accessible spaces to reach their destination.

1.1.3 Automatic Doors

Doors, like hallways/entryways, are everywhere on campus. But not all buildings have automatic doors. Many classrooms, labs, and testing spaces don't have automatic doors. Automatic doors are another accommodation designed to increase accessibility between buildings and spaces on campus. However, students reported that the automatic doors on the University of Lethbridge campus do not always increase accessibility. Students reported that the automatic doors often get stuck halfway, start to close before one is through, are only on one side

of flow of traffic and often require a push button to activate. For those students using

accessibility aids, having to push the automatic door button may be challenging. Some students

reported to relying on others to holding the door open or pushing the button for them when they

are unable to reach/push the button. In some cases, wheelchair users have reported being caught

in the doorway of the automatic door when it starts to shut, essentially being stuck in the

doorway. Danelle reported that when the doors do break down, it often takes long periods of time

before the doors are fixed. This leaves students with accessibility requirements without an

accessible way to gain entry to different buildings across campus. Likewise, automatic doors are

often against the flow of traffic or on one side of the hallway, meaning that students are required

to interrupt the flow of traffic to access the automatic door. This creates problems, as during high

traffic times, hundreds of students can be moving from one area of campus to another during in-

person schooling. Another barrier to automatic doors is that they are not located throughout

campus as readily as they could be. For example, University Hall is known for not having many

automatic doors, instead relying mainly on elevators/stairs to connect students to the various

levels. Many of the doors on the said levels of University Hall are not automatic, requiring that

they be manually opened if they are closed in order for students to access the classroom or area.

The First Choice Savings Building was reported to be one of the worst buildings for having

automatic doors that don't work.

1.1.4 Classrooms

Classrooms across campus differ in sizes, shapes and accessibility. Classrooms in

University Hall suffer from small doorways and being physically inaccessible for some students.

Many classrooms are simply not designed for wheelchair access. This includes classrooms where

the desks and chairs are attached to one another or classrooms where accessible seating does not provide good access to the white board. Some students qualify for preferential seating, which enables them to sit in a space that enables them to see, hear and be involved in the classroom in equal measure as their peers. Danelle stated that while she qualifies for preferential seating, the space was often unavailable to her when she arrived to class, "It [the seating area] was never free. Tables and chairs were always put there." Likewise, Danelle reported that while the preferential seating was nice, it often did not meet her visual needs and therefore was not overly accessible to her.

In addition, classrooms are not often designed to be easily navigated once inside. Some of the large classrooms in the First Choice Savings building have seats on multiple levels, forcing those with mobility aids or physical disabilities, to use the front two rows of a classroom. Many of the classrooms in University Hall have seats on different levels, some are sloped, and some don't have space for wheelchair users to easily sit and be engaged in class. Danelle told me how the design of a classroom can affect her learning, "I'm in one of the D block rooms and I can't really participate in class…I am out of her range of sight so hand goes up and she can't see me." Classrooms in the new science building were described to be more accessible, though often needing to take the elevator to move between levels in order to access the classrooms.

1.1.5 *(Accessible) Study Spaces*

There are numerous study areas at the University of Lethbridge, the most notable being the 24 study areas in University Hall, the 24 hour study area at the University Library, the bookable study rooms in Markin Hall, the bookable study rooms in the Library proper, and the open study tables in the Library. However, not all of those areas of accessible to students with

physical accessibility requirements. Many of the bookable rooms have a large, non-automatic door that is the only entry into/out of the space. At the time I am writing this, it is unclear to me if the 24 hour study space in University Hall has an automatic door at the entryway of the space. In Markin Hall, entry into the study area has an automatic button, however, entry into the study rooms themselves do not. This presents a barrier to students who use mobility aids or wheelchairs from gaining easy access to those spaces. One study space that does have accessibility friendly tables is the library proper. Within the library, there are free tables for studying that are open to everyone to use. A select few of those tables are wheelchair friendly. Outside of the library, there are reported to be very little wheelchair accessible tables on campus. Danelle reported that while those tables exist, "I think there are only 4 for wheelchair friendly tables in the whole campus and they are always taken up by two students that want to spread their stuff out." This presents a barrier to accessing those tables and spaces.

1.1.6   Accessible Bathrooms

In some cases, bathrooms are not closely positioned to classrooms, making it hard for those with a physical disability, like myself, to get to if needed. Additionally, having bathrooms positioned away from classrooms does invoke the idea that one must walk from the classroom to the washroom. In some cases, such as mine, the act of walking/moving to simply get to a bathroom can be difficult. For example, in University Hall there are washrooms located in certain places through level 6, however the locations of bathrooms on level 8 are far less clear, are sparse, and are not well marked. This is not just a barrier for students, but professors alike – as level 8 is where the majority of departmental offices for the faculty of arts and sciences are located (for the most part).

Students also reported that accessible bathrooms (while available) were sparsely located throughout campus. For some students, the universal washrooms were also the wheelchair accessible washrooms. There are not very many universal washrooms on campus to my knowledge. If I was asked to name all the locations where universal washrooms are located, I can think of two distinct places: P.E. building (bottom floor) and the library building (by Starbucks). Both areas require the use of stairs to access them easily, though there are elevators nearby to both stalls but are a distance away. There are gendered washrooms that have wheelchair accessible stalls, however, students reported that those areas were often not easily navigable. Likewise, the sinks in many of the bathrooms are not wheelchair friendly.

1.1.7   Elevators

Elevators are electronic methods of transportation that are located in various places throughout the University of Lethbridge campus. Students reported that while elevators do provide increased access to travelling throughout campus, they also act as barriers to accessing campus. For example, Danelle reported that elevator doors often do not stay open long enough, as well as the inside spaces are often too small for her wheelchair to fit comfortably. Likewise, elevators in certain buildings, such as the junction between the Fine Arts building and the Library building, have only one unit that goes to all nine levels. Danelle reported that the only elevator that travels all 9 floors is often full, leaving students with physical disabilities to travel through more than one elevator while trying to get to class. Likewise, Marigold reported that there are several areas on campus that she struggles to access with her disability,

> I can't get around to all of campus using mobility aids, there are plenty of areas on campus that are not accessible to me as I primarily use crutches to get around… I'm thinking of places like the recital hall and practice rooms, those are completely inaccessible areas if you use mobility aids.

Even though there are elevators in specific sections of the campus, those elevators are often far

away from the nearest doors, leaving students to have to travel, in some cases, a fair distance

between elevators in order to reach their destinations. Elevators are not used solely by those who

need mobility aids. Students with 'invisible' disorders, such as gastrointestinal disorders, bladder

disorders, and neurological disorders also may rely on elevators as a mode of conveyance.

Petunia explained that;

> Sometimes I can't …like my batteries go dead and so I lose feeling in my left leg
> sometimes, and my hands… and sometimes like my leg drags and that's when I need
> elevators …. It's kind of especially hard getting from U-Haul to the library… but
> elevators and stuff are tough to navigate… [do you ever suffer from burnout?] My
> functional neurologic disorder does flare up worse when I'm tired, busy, overworked and
> those are the days when my legs burn out.

> Students who are not 'obviously' disabled, reported that they often did not feel as though

they were "disabled enough" to use the elevator. As such, students reported feeling guilty for

using the elevator or avoiding using the elevator to avoid judgement.

What does all of this mean? Simply put, the act of incorporating physical accommodation into

pre-existing ableist structures does not render a structure accessible. While the inclusion of

physical accommodation can increase the accessibility of the structure itself, accommodation

does not negate the inaccessible nature of the building. The fact remains that university buildings

are not designed with disabled bodies in mind. Instead, they are based on inherently ableist

architectural design. The normative body has historically been able bodied, white, and male

(Hamraie 2017). When ability is the norm, disability is conceptualized as abnormal: a disruption

to the normative expectation of students on campus (Titchkosky 2011, 33). Titchkosky writes

that disability is a disruption: "when disability is taken as something that does not belong, it

allows for the management of disability as the exception" (34). This once again provokes the question of *who* is entitled to access university institutions. When the physical architecture itself acts as a barrier, it becomes a deterrent for those outside the norm, allowing for the continued marginalization of disabled people at universities. It allows for the creation of a normative student body - one that is able bodied. It also allows ableism on campus to go unquestioned – allowing for the normative narrative on campus to go unquestioned, and students with disabilities are not considered unless as an afterthought. Disability, therefore, is not included but rather accommodated. Titchkosky (2011) writes that "matters of access and accommodation rely on, and constitute, conceptions of who belongs, and this remains true whether … classrooms are redesigned or not" (37). This reveals a fundamental and persistent problem for the University of Lethbridge. Not only do the existing structures, such as the buildings, on campus produce disability but reinforce disability as a marginalized group due to the limited accommodations made to campus. Disability also is rendered as something that is recognisable – something visible that highlights the person as an outlier from the normative student body.

Throughout the interviews I conducted, a major theme that arose was of disability as invisible/visible. Danelle explained that "I feel like we're not looked at …we are not a priority." Students frequently reported feeling like outliers on campus, rendered invisible unless they were visible physically disabled. Students with physical disabilities described feeling like there was a spotlight on them whenever they were on campus because of the lack of diversity and representation of disability. Disability was often reported to be represented *only* when visible disabled students could be physically seen on campus. Clover explained to me how shocked she was to *not* see any diversity in the student population:

>Well, the thing that I didn't see was wheelchairs. I only saw one maybe... and it made me question "Geez what's going on here" like in the departments I've been to...I've been in the science building and the fine arts building.

Representation matters. When there is no representation, students feel further marginalized from the whole student body. Additionally, this results in students with physical disabilities become the sole representatives for *all* those with disabilities on campus. The few represent the many – those who are both visibly and invisible disabled. Firus explained that representation starts as early as your first week on campus:

>I don't know exactly how you could do it [increased representation], that could be part of like the new student orientation - a little like symposium or whatever for mental health and always I know that they do like the career drive and they have all these different careers opportunities they could do something similar for mental health. I've always wondered what if they had all these billboards up like you know autism, ADHD, schizophrenia, paranoia. And you can go to all these different little brackets and learn something and I think that's something that we would be able to at the university, would be able to host in all like the atrium out here something that is like open to everyone and for a lot of people. So you're going to be getting some knowledge, you're going to be going through and you're getting your conversation do you like "Oh this is one of the symptoms of this" or "Whatever it's like totally normal" and like I'm not sure that can ….could be a thing you know? They hosted the career thing in the gym which is good but that's still that kind of tucked into a corner. I feel like that's what most into institutions do, but even like careers and outside the world as they tuck anything that is abnormal in the corner. For example most people don't know where ALC is. The only people know where ALC is the people who actually go there would.

Firus touches on an important point here. There are services and awareness raised for other things on campus. In my time as a student, I have seen career fairs and health fairs, but never any sort of event that is aimed at increasing representation of disability on campus. Many topics have been covered, like mental health or physical health, yet as Firus mentioned, disability is often tucked away and unknown by the many; known by the few. This lack of visibility and representation creates a vicious cycle that is extremely detrimental to the lives of students with disabilities. Marigold explained that,

I think it's kind of this…this cycle of we make up - especially visibly disabled students - such a small percentage of the university population. That they [the university] think it's not necessary to you know make things accessible for us because I mean, how many people really would benefit from that? Which then leads us to becoming a smaller percentage of the population because I mean,…I know several people personally who have left the university because of accessibility requirements that just weren't being met so then that disabled population becomes smaller.

The question of "Who belongs?" is an extremely important consideration when thinking about how disability is conceptualized on campus. As outlined above, the physical architecture of the University of Lethbridge campus re/produces a certain image which manifests into a undeniable reality of who the normative student is – *who* belongs. Outliers from the norm are rendered both visible and invisible as a result. Those with visible physical disabilities become representatives for all those on campus with disabilities, in spite of and despite the number of disabled people there actually are on campus. Those with invisible disabilities and accessibility requirements are assumed to be part of the normative, and acceptable, student population rendering them invisible. However, such as in my case, to have their needs accommodated students must choose to reveal their disability or suffer in silence – and suffer the consequences of remaining silent. Revealing one's disability, diagnosis or learning need is intimidating for several reasons. Firstly, because it involves leaving the safety of one's normative and accepted student status. Secondly, revealing one's accessibility needs involves *proving* one's needs to the institution, the ALC, doctors, and professors. *Who* belongs can be created and enforced through the physical structures on campus, yet it is a fundamental social component which is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2 – Pervasive Social Ableism at Work

What does a learning need look like? Does it have form? Can you imagine someone with a complex learning need or disability without picturing someone with a physical or cognitive disability? As I stated in Chapter 1, I do not look disabled. Similarly, I am not someone with a visibly identifiable complex learning need or accessibility requirement and yet, I have a diagnosis of ADHD, depression, and anxiety. Like many women, I did not receive a diagnosis of ADHD until I was well into adulthood. Upon returning to school at 27, and up until I turned 28 in 2020, I was experiencing classic symptoms of ADHD that greatly affected my ability to learn and contribute meaningfully to my classes. Contrary to the struggle I was having, my grades did not reflect my inability to focus. At the same time as my diagnosis, I also suffered from post-concussive syndrome, a condition that was exacerbating my ADHD. During the initial period after my diagnosis, I struggled to find the right medication to help me focus – at which time my studies suffered. During a period of particularly bad ADHD paralysis, I reached out for advice to one of my professors and a teaching assistant (TA) for assistance. When I revealed that I was struggling with my recent diagnosis, the professor *and* the TA revealed that they had ADHD too. At the time it was such a shock to me that both of them had adult ADHD. This shock was, and is, an excellent example of internalized ableism.

I was grateful for their advice and suggestions as to how to cope with this new diagnosis, and surprised when they suggested that I reach out to the ALC for accommodation. I had never considered that I needed accommodation, or that I qualified for accommodation. For those who are not familiar with ADHD, it is a complex diagnosis that can involve attention deficit, hyperactivity, and impulsivity – but it is more complex than that. People with ADHD can suffer from executive dysfunction leading to ADHD paralysis, which can hinder one's ability to

perform tasks or meet deadlines (VeryWellmind, 2022). According to the Centre for ADHD

Awareness, Canada (CADDAC) (2015) ADHD is misunderstood both socially and medically.

Additionally, ADHD is poorly accommodated by post-secondary institutions across Canada

(CADDAC 2015; 3). The CADDAC published a paper that highlights how ADHD can affect

students in post-secondary:

> Post-secondary students with ADHD will exhibit marked functional impairments in organizational and time management skills, note taking; reading comprehension; written expression; and keeping track of materials…these impairments often result in incomplete and late assignments, which in turn frequently leads to students with ADHD becoming easily overwhelmed and anxious. While students with ADHD may be present with significant difficulties in executive function, memory, learning, and speed of information processing, ADHD is not medically categorized or recognised as a learning disability. (3).

Interestingly, the 47% of students who participated in this honour's thesis research had a

diagnosis of ADHD. Other complex learning needs diagnoses included attention deficit disorder

(ADD), autism, dyspraxia, and other learning, reading and math disorders. However, it is

important to note that 47% of students who participated in this project reported having general

anxiety disorder (GAD), while 33% reported having depression, and 27% reported having post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These diagnoses are important because despite having

diagnosis for these mental health conditions, like generalized anxiety, the ALC does not offer

accommodation to students for mental health conditions – to my knowledge. The only exception

to this rule is a diagnosis of test anxiety, which also must be proven with a formal diagnosis.

So why was I so shocked to have a professor and TA reveal their own diagnosis to me?

Perhaps this can be best understood by going back to the concept of belonging; the question of

"Who Belongs"? If the normative student body is able bodied, then we can also assume that the

normative student is also neurotypical. Neurodivergent people include those with ADHD,

autism, dyslexia and other diagnoses and it can be common for neurodivergent people to "mask

their neurodivergent characteristics in order to fit into society's standards of neurotypical behaviour; this is called neuronormative" (this sentence seems highlighted??) (University of Glasgow 2022). As stated earlier, 47% of students who participated in this project had diagnosis of ADHD. This is curious because students with ADHD make up roughly 27% of the ALC's student population, surpassed only by students with learning disabilities (roughly 32%) (ALC Statistics 2019-2020). Both of these diagnoses are not easily identifiable by looking at a person. Trying to determine who belongs based on physicality alone can be challenging if not inaccurate, yet those who appear 'normative' benefit from masking their neurodivergency. Masking affords those students protection from being outed as disabled, needing help or being identified as non-normative.

As I argued in the previous chapter, students who participated in this project reported feeling hypervisible if physically disabled, yet invisible otherwise. Petunia, for example, explained the ways in which she has been judged at the university:

> Professors say "You don't need that., you're fine" or "You don't need to audio record" and a lot of professors look at me and assume I'm fine. And it can also go the other way which is super frustrating. Or they get the letter [of accommodation] that said says like "these are what she needs" and I think I get a lot of eyes from that…in terms of my grades like… I don't think they understand…. I would hate to person someone to think that I'm using my disability as a scapegoat. I think some professors get the notion that "She looks fine, she acts fine for the hour or two half hours I see her in a week, she must be fine" and are not as accommodating and I mean, I kinda touched on this before, I think some get the profs have a bias that I'm not as mentally competent as everyone else yeah.

Petunia was not the only student to have this kind of experience on campus. Other students found that assumptions were made regarding their ability/capacity based on their physical appearance. In some cases, professors rejected accommodations based on the assumption that students were neurotypical and able bodied. Green explained how this impacted him:

> I've had certain professors who have been very resistant to wanting to give me my accommodations and, of course, like at the university level, I'm entitled to those because I have certain diagnoses, but I have had professors who have been like… "that's not really a problem" and like "you're not going to need that"….I want my accommodations because they helped me and they can [make me] feel less anxious. And there's a lot that can be a lot of resistance to that and that's really, really difficult.

Assuming someone is neurotypical based on physical appearance is dangerous. It has clearly led to resistance to believing students when they do reveal they have a diagnosis or reach out for help. Being told that you don't need help, or that your assumed to be neurotypical based on your grades, erases disability from the classroom and the student body. This effectively relegates disability to the margins of the classroom/student body, reenforcing the idea that the neurotypical student is the normative student.

These examples are indicative of several things. First, that there is a pervasive social ableism on the University of Lethbridge campus that has resulted in the denial of disability and accommodation for students. Second, it is indicative of the omnipresent influence of ableism on individuals, resulting in internalized ableism. Third, social ableism continues to push disability and complex learning needs to the margins of university society, leaving students feeling unsupported and invisible. All these points, including specific examples of social ableism at the University of Lethbridge, are included in this chapter. To begin, I will explore what social ableism is and how social ableism demands that disability or accessibility requirements must be proven in order to for a student to receive the accommodations they need. I will then explore how social ableism has resulted in the denial of accommodation, rejection of diagnoses, and marginalization of students on campus. Lastly, I will explore how the lack of representation and University support continues to render students with accessibility requirements as invisible.

2.1 *Social Ableism*

What is social ableism? Unlike physical ableism, which is arguably more obvious and defined by the physicality of spaces, social ableism is invisible because ableism is compulsory. McRuer (2006) writes that "Able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things" (1). What McRuer does is define able-bodiedness as "compulsory", which renders a certain body (normative) natural and other bodies (non-normative) unnatural. As I touched on earlier, those who are not visibly physically disabled can often mask their differences or divergencies and be afforded the protection given to those with able bodied status. Let me explain.

As I established in chapter 1 and described in the opening of this chapter, one does not have to look disabled to have an accessibility requirement; it is the systems that *surround* the individual that produce disability. These systems do not have to be physical; instead the very construction of societal norms produces and reinforces that which we call "disability", "complex learning needs", "mental health" or other diagnosis *as abnormal*, and marginalizes them. University institutions are no exception. As I discussed in chapter 1, physical buildings can produce disability merely by failing to make a space open and accessible to every person that could be using that space. Social ableism is more focused on the social, or culture, and in this case: the social ableism at this institution that results in the production of disability as negative and as outside the social norm on campus.

Language is a key factor in creating social norms. Titchkosky (2011) writes that the way in which we use language to describe "access or accommodation has something to teach us regarding who we are" (37). Words matter, they have *weight*. Words construct culture and frame societal norms. McRuer (2006) draws on previous studies that found that language is a

""discourse of measurement" that is, especially in the exclusionary institutional forms it usually takes within the academy" (Cintron cited in McRuer 2006, 147). Words are very important, as words actively define 'Who Belongs'. In my time as a student at the university, I have heard a variety of people (student and professor alike) use an assortment of words to describe mundane things – like the weather or an event - using terms that reference mental health and disability in a derogatory way. Words such as crazy, moron, and stupid. The way in which those words are used could be very simple, such as "The weather is crazy today", which sounds harmless enough, until you look at the definition of the word crazy. According to Merriam-Webster (2022) crazy means "full of cracks or flaws" or "not mentally sound: marked by thought or action that lacks reason". Arguably that is the modern definition. Looking at the history of the word itself, it is much older and holds a much more insidious meaning. According to the Online Etymology Dictionary (2022), the word crazy can be dated back to the 1500s, where it meant "diseased, sickly" and "deranged, demented, of unsound mind or behaving as so" (2022). Understanding the history behind the meaning of a word is important because the continued use of the word to describe mundane or everyday things as negative *means something*. Using crazy to describe a person, weather, or the actions of other people reenforces that 'crazy' is a negative thing: that people shouldn't be crazy or act in a way that renders them 'of unsound mind'. I wouldn't like to be thought of as crazy or of unsound mind, would you?

What has this to with social ableism, you ask? To reemphasize, words matter. How we describe people *matters*. If a room full of students uses the term 'crazy' in passing language, what sort of culture does this create? Arguably, it creates a culture where someone with mental health issues would prefer to remain silent than reveal something about themselves which would render them as "unstable" or "abnormal" from the rest of the room. The action

of masking (to come back to this term) then becomes an act of safety. Perhaps now you might have a better understanding of the question, "Who Belongs?" We shape who belongs by our choice and use of words. What constitutes something or someone as having a disability and/or learning needs is shaped by the language we use to define them. Simply, words have power. How we use language to construct accessibility requirements can have a substantial impact on people, in this case, has an impact on university students.

Students in this project reported several instances of how social ableism has impacted their lives. This took many forms, but there were a few common themes that arose from the interviews. It is to these that I now turn.

2.1.0   Defining Access/Accommodation

Within the question of "Who Belongs?" is another, very important question: "Who gets access?" During the creation stage of this study, I had to come up with questions that asked, What is accessibility? What is accommodation? How do we define these terms? I posed those questions, located in APPENDIX C, to students. Their answers are as follows. *Access/accessibility* was defined as:

- The supports in place

- How easily students can access resources

- Ability to be equally mobile and equally seen

- Ability to reach for resources and ease of accessing those resources in multiple formats

- Equal opportunity for disability – no disparity in who qualifies

- Increased physical access to spaces for individuals

- Interacting easily with the learning environment

- Convenience – how convenient is it to get to class, access school

- Creating equal opportunities, level the playing field

- Lack of physical/social barrier that levels the playing field but also providing supports

- Equitability for all disorders/people

- Creating something equal to all students and recognizing individual needs

- Not having unnecessary barriers that prevent an individual from accessing because of ability

- Ease of access to services and the process of getting access to those services

Students with accessibility requirements are acutely aware that access is something, physical or social, that enables an individual or group to gain entry to certain spaces at the same level as their peers. For students, as clearly indicated above, accessibility is the ease in which accommodations and resources can be used easily. *Accommodation* was defined by my research participants as:

- Help for those who need it (elevators, accessible classrooms)

- Tweaks to an existing system to meet an individual's/group's needs

- To be on equal grounds when it comes to learning and mobility

- Having supports that are appropriate and interactions that are positive

- Doing what you are able to 'help me' as level of accessibility varies

- Taking care of the needs of the individual

- Giving student/individual what they need to succeed

- Changing the accessibility of somethings for certain circumstances

- Action of providing opportunities for equal playing field

- Support for students; any measure designed to assist a student to obtain the baseline expectations of students so they can obtain same level of academic success

- Services to meet individual/group needs

- Finding ways a student can be as successful/comfortable as peers

- Provide supports to those who need it

- Acknowledging barriers that are based on ability – giving individual resources to navigate barriers

- Something that helps you learn to the best of your ability

Accommodation, as clearly indicated, is categorized as aid to help achieve equitability and succeed *at the same level as their peers*. This suggests that students with accessibility requirements are keenly aware of educational and social barriers at the University of Lethbridge that prevent them from achieving at the same level as students without accessibility requirements. Yet, as mentioned previously, not all the students who participated in this project had access to ALC supports. Some students reported that they wouldn't need the ALC or accommodations if everyone was given the same considerations – suggesting that accommodations are only needed because the current system places limitations on students which impacts their ability to succeed.

What do I mean by this? A number of students explained how built-in accommodations, like exam times, could really impact their studies. Firus explained that despite not having been accepted into ALC yet, professors could still make an impact on his studies:

> But even my calculus teacher, which is online, he actually kind of did …he made the time for doing the test much longer so that way anyone…if they had troubles with [the exam]

could do it because it's online and even if they need accommodated learning it just sort of fits everyone, which I think is actually super helpful for me since I haven't gotten that [ALC paperwork] in…that bit of extra time on tests is very helpful.

The provision of longer exam times was echoed in my independent study in the spring of 2021, where students reported that the more accessible exams were the exams (or assignments) that professors extended the time for all. This does not negate the need for accommodation; however, it was repeatedly reported that longer exam times made exams less stressful for those with accessibility requirements. This is important to note, as not all students with accessibility requirements at the University of Lethbridge (like myself) are registered with ALC. Those who have yet to apply for support, don't qualify for support, or don't have official diagnosis would all benefit from a system that gives everyone equal, ample, time on exams. This act of accommodation does not require students to out their diagnosis to professors, it is simply built into the exam/class structure.

2.1.1   Who Belongs – Accessing the Accommodated Learning Centre

One aspect of accessibility that students identified early on was access to services. One such service is the ALC. Yet students reported that accessing the ALC was not always easy. Some students who had diagnoses in high school found it relatively easy to get into ALC. However, many students described the process of getting into the ALC as hard and laborious. Tee explained,

> So, to even be registered with the ALC, you have to have a grant through the government which in order to get this grant, you have to pay $2000 to get a learning record report from a psychologist. So, you pay $2000 out of pocket right away.

Learning reports, as recounted to me by my research participants, can cost upwards of $1500 to $4000. The government will reimburse *if* an individual receives a diagnosis of a learning

disability. One student told me that this learning report is free if you are under 18 years of age. I could not confirm or deny this statement, but I have no reason to believe that it is untrue. This assessment must be done by a psychologist, which can be limiting given the current medical situation in Alberta. However, students also informed me that this was not the only barrier to accessing the ALC. Briar explained a bit more of the process.

> In getting into it [ALC], there were a couple of barriers right up front. I mean …you had to have a pretty, I wouldn't say a 'significant diagnosis', I mean …yeah you would have to have some sort of significant diagnosis which is an initial barrier. It's not really open to the more mild side of any condition really, and like the tutoring and strategy services are not open to anyone who is not a member. Also I had to pay to join and that was that was a barrier that surprised me. [You had to pay to join?] Which apparently didn't used to be a thing but I think it was one the new federal government came into power that saying something and so that I had to pay like 40 bucks…It was only 40 bucks but… still, you know, that could be a preventative for a lot of people and that was just to join - just to access things like the tutoring services. Just to even have the ALC on my team, this is before they even had a conversation with me, I had to pay.

This presents a very important and exclusionary image, and reality, of the ALC. Being able to afford a learning report to *prove* your accommodation need is problematic, as not all students can afford to pay $1500 or more out of pocket for an exam that you may, or may not, get reimbursed for. When asked what made the university inaccessible, Briar clarified,

> [Finances make the university inaccessible?] Uh yeah its finances I think obviously. Most of us are pretty broke, if not broke, and so I would like to say opportunities should be a focus and opportunities to make some money …opportunities for some like part time work or whatever. Obviously, I don't know what the stats are but people with disability, basically, regardless of what it is, are on average going to be earning less throughout their careers.

Students who did not need a learning report still had to prove their accessibility requirement to the ALC before admission. Before any accommodations were made for students, or entry into the ALC was granted, students must have provided written documentation that prove their *need* for the service. Daisy was able to articulate her experiences to me:

[Were there different expectations for students with accessibility requirements, do you think?] I guess so yeah, with paperwork and making sure of that you're getting it… but there was actually when I was registering with the ALC - they are aware that I said that I had autism but I had to like get a letter from my psychologist to say that I had autism which I felt …you know… if they were aware of it … they should say that I have that but I felt like I had to give them extra documentation for that which… I felt maybe in some sense was unnecessary.

In some cases, the act of needing to prove one's diagnosis and provide the correct paperwork can be extremely lengthy process and be extremely traumatic. One student, Rose, agreed to share her experiences with me, of trying to gain access into ALC. This required specific documentation, as Rose explains in response to my question about whether she had been denied accommodation at the University:

Rose: Yes so I do. This is kind of my own fault. So I went to them and they give you these papers which I'm sure you've seen before if you're doing this. [presents ALC intake document list] Well, they give you like a list of these things that just tells you how to do it everything right… so I did and they said that you needed a note from your doctor so I didn't really specify and I went to my family doctor instead of my psychiatrist, who knows nothing about my mental health, and they said in this letter… he says "is well medicated" or something along those lines or "well controlled" which is not true but I think this is letter has kind of been… not held over my head but like not helped me away because like it says here that I'm well controlled and it is from my family doctor so they said like you don't qualify and I was like well, I still have ADHD so technically by definition I do qualify. So, then I was like scratch that and then I got them to do another piece of paper … where [the doctor] said "she is not well managed, she struggles, she's gotten an extension in the past because she been having meltdowns and she can't do anything". And they [ALC] sad that it wasn't proper because I needed to have… like I need to have like this list of things… so then I collected them on my own because my doctor said that I had to do that part on my own, so I did. And then I handed it to [ALC] and they were like "No the doctor has to do it". So, then I went to him again and I went with this piece of paper and I said, "I need like all of these" and then I had even looked up the DSM codes beforehand so he couldn't say no to me because I had them beforehand and it was quite a few hours of preparation. There are books full of stuff of written about like my behaviors and stuff just because I was like "I need them to help me" … My doctor said that I needed to get paperwork from the university but if you read up here the university says that "they do not provide paperwork" so then I did email ALC and I said my doctor requires paperwork and they said that I wasn't asking the right doctor then so then I asked my psychologist, I mean my psychiatrist, and my psychiatrist said that he only deals with the medication so he'll need to get me set up with a therapist …but my therapist doesn't know what to do with the bipolar disorder so I don't see her

anymore so … I have a set up meeting to meet a psychologist but they haven't met me at so how did they know?

V: Uh huh a lot of hoops

Rose: Exactly. So then that's why I went to the ALC and asked… and then I left in tears. And then if we're telling this in a chronological story which I think makes it easier… I went to academic advising and they told me to report it. But I didn't. And I didn't because I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to get the help I needed in the end because I feel as a vulnerable student…I'm an easy target and I'm aware that [reporting] this I could take power back and bring down the system or create change but I could also just shoot myself in the foot.

Gaining access to accommodation supports is not easy, clearly. It can be extremely frustrating and lengthy process that could deter students from pursuing getting the help they need, because the amount of work and effort is too great – or the fear of being dismissed or rejected is a substantial threat to their peace of mind and mental health.

The process of getting into ALC is also highly individualized, meaning that the amount of time, emotional output, and physical labour involved in proving one's accommodations is highly variable. When asked if the process of getting into the ALC was easy, Danelle replied "Oh yeah". For some students with more than one diagnosis, the ALC only provides accommodations for select diagnosis. When asked Red which of her diagnosis were accommodated by the ALC, Red explained,

R: ADHD. Yeah, even my brain lesion or tumor or whatever didn't get any accommodation.

V: Did they give you a reason why?

R: Oh no they just said "Hey we see you have ADHD here are some options." Depression… if I could pick one other, I said it was all, I could only pick one mental illness to be recognized in the next year it would be depression.

The experience of getting into ALC is, arguably, arduous for some. The amount of paperwork, time spent with doctors, potential specialist visits and length of time spent tracking down the

mandatory paperwork is – overall – a laborious process. But for those who do manage to succeed

in gaining entry into the ALC, whose responsibility is it to provide accommodations? Is it the

individuals? Is it the ALC?

2.1.2   Who's Responsible – Individual Responsibility and Accommodation

Another theme that arose over the course of the interviews was that of (personal)

responsibility. It was clear early on into the interview process that students were using

specific style of language to describe accommodations given to them. The most frequent

accommodation students reported needing was extra time on assignments and exams. Students

described the process to me: at the start of the semester the ALC sends a Letter of

Accommodation to the professor(s) of the class(es) a student is enrolled in. The Letter

outlines the accommodations required by the student. The professor is, in theory, responsible

for providing the accommodations to the student(s) over the course of the semester. Though,

as Green explains, the expectation is on the student to be in control of and responsible for

their accommodations:

> Yeah, there's a lot there's a lot of onus on you, which I kind of understand. I get the
> commitments… that [the ALC] has a lot of students that they have to like keep track of
> so I appreciate that that's difficult and this might be a good system for them. But when
> you have like the anxiety of school and those things it's like ..you know? Like you are
> going to bed and you're like "oh my God like did I book that test?" and you have to like
> get up and go check, because you have anxiety and…Like it there is a lot of onus on you
> and there's a lot of onus to talk for yourself and talk to the accommodated learning center
> and book your tests and it's yeah it's …it's pretty much on you to be your own advocate
> for yourself as well. Which luckily like I have done that, for a lot of my life, just because
> I have had my diagnosis for a long time, and I did this in high school and middle school
> as well, so …I'm quite experienced with those things, but I know a lot of people who like
> just kind of got accommodations in university now, and I think that's pretty difficult for
> them.

This sentiment was echoed in several interviews, where students explained how their diagnosis made it difficult to remember to book their exam times, and if they missed (or forgot) to register for their exam, they would not receive their accommodations for that exam. The expectation for students with accessibility requirements to be responsible for their own accommodations is an example of ableism at the University of Lethbridge. Tests at the university can be distributed in several ways, the most common way is through the testing centre. The professor sets up an exam period (one day, three days, a week), and the student is expected to show up and write the test during the allowed time frame available (one hour, two hours, etc.). All a student who does not require ALC services must do is show up to the testing centre before the exam window closes and write the exam. Students who need accommodations must have the ALC reach out, via letter, to state this student needs extra time. Then, the student must book their exam in advance to ensure that they get their specific accommodation. Students with accessibility requirements are expected to do extra work in order to obtain the accommodation they need in order to achieve the same opportunities for success as their peers.

Once again, I return to the idea of "who belongs?". Titchkosky (2011) writes that "'Who?' is a question of knowledge tied to the power of division, since to know something of who you are dealing with is to make distinctions, to sort, and to draw lines…Who we are taken to be and who we are positioned with also provide different forms of the power of sorting" (39). There are clear lines between the role of undergraduate student and that of a teaching assistant, or even a professor. For one, a professor has power over students. Professors are paid to teach and they have authority over student grades. Students pay to learn and rely on professors to treat every student equally. Additionally, students with accessibility requirements rely on instructors, and on the ALC, to have their needs met. There is a division of power here: the act of

accommodation is one of power. When one person, or group of people, have the power to determine or shape another's life it renders the subject vulnerable. If the normative student is already in a vulnerable position, then students with accessibility requirements are more vulnerable than their peers. Why? They are already not included in the image of the normative student, they are outsiders. Students with accessibility requirements must fight (i.e., getting registered with ALC) to be included so they can succeed at the same level as their peers. Green took the time to explain to me how power dynamics can affect students with accessibility requirements,

> I mean you know advocacy is hard by itself, but then, when you have resistance, especially from someone who has authority over you it can be really difficult to keep pushing because it does feel like it's like there's a power complex there, right? One prof can take advantage of that it can be very…it can be hard to be like "No I need this and I need you to give it to me". It can be… can be hard. Which is also, I think, why I appreciate so much when profs are just like "Yeah, no problem".

Titchkosky (2011) writes that "In this way, assertions of inclusion help to normalize conceptions of those who are *essentially excludable*. Essentially excludable – this is a dominant conception of disability that operates in everyday life" (39). What does it mean to be included? Ahmed (2012) writes that "those benevolent acts of giving are *not what they seem:* being included can be a lesson in "being not" as much as "being in"." (163). The act of accommodation is one of *inclusion* predicated on disability being excluded by default. Perhaps that is why when confronted with the act of accommodation (some) professors reject it.

2.1.3   *Denial of Accommodation and Rejection of Diagnosis*

Echoing sentiments and experiences from my independent study in the spring of 2021, I asked students if they had ever been denied accommodations at the University of Lethbridge. In fact, roughly 40% of students reported that they had not had their accommodations denied at the

University of Lethbridge. Of the 40% (n=6/15), 33% (n=2/6) were first year students, 33% (n=2/6) were 5th year students, 16% were 4th year and/or a transfer student. Roughly 53% of all participants had experienced a denial of accommodations, and 13% of participants were unsure if a denial had outright occurred. The 53% of students who had experienced some measure of denial at the University of Lethbridge, experienced denials with or without the support of ALC. Sunflower, who is not registered with the ALC, was asked if they had ever been denied accommodation at the University of Lethbridge and they explained how complicated seeking accommodation can be:

> I haven't met their [the ALC's] requirements for accessing accommodations which I personally don't consider a form of denial, but some people might. I mean that's something… that's been difficult just trying to navigate the healthcare system and having to use those self-advocacy skills, you know… I remember, the health centre had requested some information, so I gave them that information and I asked them, you know if I needed to reach out to the specific professional to make an appointment and they said "No, no, no they'll contact you" and so you know I believed that, I'm like "Oh yeah, okay they'll contact me." And [I] waited you know, two weeks later, and I still haven't heard anything so and I sent them a message and I said "Hey you know I gave someone this information and they haven't contacted me for an appointment" and they are like "Oh yeah, you can have an appointment with them on this day," and you know I you know I felt kind of bad because I had specifically, worked with them… like I specifically asked if I needed to reach out to that person or if they would reach out to me, and they said that person would reach out to me so. You know that just navigating the medical side of the University has been difficult that way, and you know it around in a roundabout way you know difficulty accessing the health care. I need to get a diagnosis which has been what has definitely… what's caused me to be unable to get accommodations. And you know I started working on things with the accommodated learning Center way back in August, before I even started my semester at the university trying to work things out. So to kind of summarize what my answers to that question, I would say, no I haven't been denied accommodation, because I don't need the prerequisites. But at the same time there definitely are barriers in place that are making accommodation difficult to obtain.

This is, as Sunflower described, is not an overt denial of accommodation. Yet, at the same time, barriers to getting a diagnosis means that students often cannot get the accommodation they need. This is an *institutional* barrier that results in denial of accommodation by *default.*

Rejection of disability and denial of accommodation is not just at an institutional level. It can be found on a more personal level, in the classroom by professors. Red took the time to explain one of her experiences with a professor:

> It was before I figured out how to go through accommodated learning and I explained my situation to the professor she didn't tell me how to get accommodation she just said to "Go to accommodated learning" and so she was no help. And I explained to her that like these kinds of situations are tough for me where I have to be in person; it's difficult for me to focus, I likely won't get all the information I need to….. I guess in that situation it actually would have been nice to have a note taker but I prefer to write my own notes after class at my own pace but yeah she I asked her if she would be willing to be a little bit more lenient with deadlines and she just said "No, go to accommodated learning", didn't tell me how to get there, didn't include a link to a website or anything just said go.

In other situations, the denial of accommodation occurred even with the student being registered with the ALC. Professors still must agree to and provide the accommodations for students. When asked Tee if she had ever been denied accommodations by a professor, Tee explained:

> I do have one prof that's pretty impatient … so she's kinda hard to talk to about things like I guess she did deny me something of my accommodation - she denied giving me lecture slides which is why I then had to get another accommodation letter that stating that I needed lecture slides because she wasn't willing to give them to me she's like "you don't need them, you can just read the textbook"… "I'm like I understand I can read the textbook but I like to go back and forth between what you're talking about and what's in the textbooks". So yeah, I guess she had denied me that.

In some cases, the denial of accommodation does go hand in hand with a rejection of diagnosis. Students with accessibility requirements reported that professors make judgements of their ability based on their physicality and their perceived ability. Petunia agreed to give me an example of a time when professors denied her accommodation:

> Yes professors like say "You don't need that, you're fine" or "You don't need to audio record" and the a lot of professor's look at me and assume I'm fine. And it can also go the other way which is super frustrating. Or they get the letter that said says like "these are what she needs" and I think I get a lot of eyes from that…in terms of my grades I don't think they understand…Being denied audio recording ….when I have had to be absent I give the prof advance warning like "I have a medical procedure this day, I know that there is going to be a quiz that day on the readings, can I do it at home please, send it

to me, can you send me something alternate?" and they say "No you get a zero" ... And I understand in some senses. I don't miss unless that absolutely essential.

By assuming a student is neurotypical and able bodied, professors reinforce that disability and neurodiversity, in any form, is negative and disruptive. It forces students with accessibility requirements to hide their diagnosis or have to fight back against stigma and assumptions in order to receive the help they need, and arguable deserve. Another student, Green had experiences with his accommodations being denied.

> I've been denied recordings of lectures before -which I understand academic integrity and property and things like that-, but I have been denied that before. I have also been denied my accommodations straight out one time because I had a problem with the professor and I couldn't book my exam and I reached out to accommodated learning too late they told me that it wasn't possible and then I just didn't get my conditions, so I had to write the test without accommodations that was very frustrating.

Other students experienced outright rejection of their disability by professors, just based on what the diagnosis was – and based on personal opinion. This was especially true of students who had similar experiences with the psychology department on campus. Multiple students reported having their accommodations denied and diagnosis queried by professors in the psychology department. Some students reported that accommodations were difficult to obtain throughout most of the 'hard sciences', specifically in chemistry, biology, neuroscience and psychology. Azlyn gave an example of this in her interview with me:

> A: Well it is a debate in this psych community right now that ADHD is overdiagnosed …which maybe it is… maybe it can be but I had teachers and parents and everybody giving me references before I got my diagnosis and you know like it took like 5 days of my being tested to get diagnosed, it wasn't like I was just walked into a doctor's office and prescribed a medication and it was quite a process so and it's different…. this the pysch departments everyone's got their opinions on what's real and what's not

> V: So would you say that's the perception of ADHD then in the psych department?

> A: I guess is pretty negative yeah… almost thinking about like it's a good thing that I also have a diagnosis of completely deaf on one side of my head and anxiety because it

kind of seems like some professors weren't or haven't been accepting [of the ADHD diagnosis]. And you know I get some professors who see things like…. "oh anxiety… ADHD you have it forever" and other professors "so you can grow out of it" and so like everybody's opinion on what ADHD is completely different so it is a little stigmatized in the psych department.

Not only are students with a diagnosis having to prove their need in order to become registered with ALC, but they continually have to prove their need for accommodation to certain professors. It is important to note that not all professors have a history of denying accommodations at the University of Lethbridge. As stated earlier, 40% of students who participated in this project reported having excellent experiences with professors on campus. Professors that included extra time on exams without prompting were seen as more accessible and approachable. Some professors made the classroom environment such that students did not feel unsafe asking for help or accommodations, with or without ALC registration. This, once again, is an example of how the act of accommodation – the act of inclusion - is an example of power. Ahmed (2012) writes that "The promise of diversity *is* the promise of happiness: as if in becoming happy or in wanting "just happiness" we can put racism behind us" (165). The same principle can be applied to inclusion and disability. The act of accommodation is an act of inclusion – involving the marginalized body with the normalized body. Those who have the power to include also have the power to reject, further marginalizing students with accessibility requirements on campus.

2.1.4 Expectations of Students

The University of Lethbridge is not unique in its treatment of disability. As an institution, the University of Lethbridge promotes and produces a kind of social culture for its students, sets expectations, and expects students to meet those expectations. Expectations, as reported by students, include not cheating; getting good grades; volunteering; working hard/ being

productive; and being on campus. What is missing from all the descriptors to describe the expectations for students were terms like "do your very best", or "come away with good understanding". It should be noted that many students did not feel as though there were any differences between the university's expectations of students with or without accessibility requirements. However, some students described the expectations as being different for students with accessibility requirements. Roxy explained to me what they feel as a first-year student and the expectations that are placed on them:

> I think that, realistically, the expectations might be lower. However, I do…even if it's like ignorant or whatever, I do hope and believe that the university doesn't give anyone like special treatment, unless like it is really needed, I guess. [What makes you say you think there'll be lower expectations.] Um I guess it's kind of like encoded … like teachers knew that mental health is going to be kind of down the drain and not everybody would be thriving and so they kind of like eased up the course load and they checked in more often and stuff like that, so I guess that's what I mean: lower expectations, I think it's more resources to counterbalance whatever's happening.

Other students lamented similar things regarding student expectations. When asked if she believed that the university had different expectations for students with accessibility requirements, Tee explained that she believed that the expectation was "To not succeed as much as somebody else." When asked the same question, Firus explained to me that,

> I think there is a bit of an expectation….Which also makes sense for disability? You have you know… the disability… that you need help for so it's kind of up to you if you need help. It's up to you to reach out to get the ALC to set it up for yourself.

And yet, within most of these descriptors of expectation is the idea that accommodation, or aid of any kind, should only be given because the person has a requirement or need for it. Once again, having to *prove* need, *prove* diagnosis presents a serious deterrent for students. It opens students up to judgement about their accessibility requirements, as well as puts students in a vulnerable position.

A theme that is prevalent throughout this thesis project is that of personal responsibility. Students described many instances where the onus is put onto students to be responsible for their accommodations and to be their own self advocate. Student success and expectations are no different. When asked if the university had different expectations of students with accessibility requirements, Rose explained:

> Yes I think that the university that requires them to be much more 'on' all the time because like… you have to give like a week notice or something before you write a test or anything and I have ADHD - I forget things all the time! And sometimes I'm like "Oh my God I have a test tomorrow" and if I was supposed to give notice a week in advance I am not going to have help I need.
>
> V: Would be fair to say that that those students have to be more responsible?
>
> R: Mhm.

Once again, as Rose explains, the expectation and onus is placed on the individual. This brings me back to the expectations placed on students by the institution. Not all students can advocate for themselves nor have access to the ALC to get the accommodations they need; and sometimes even then students are required to bear the burden of accommodation. In some cases, students reported that the expectation of the institution by professors was to not succeed in the same way as non-disabled peers. Green was willing to explain this to me:

> I think the expectation is… I think that they want you to shoot the same thing, and I think that… [thinks] that's like the value… so I think like the application of us the same, but like they don't expect you, I guess, to do as well. Once again that's prof dependent I'd say for sure, like I like I've had tons of profs you like, I went to the exact opposite.
>
> V: Mm hmm. So, you would say like overall it's that we're succeed regardless, but they don't expect you to.
>
> G: Overall, in the science department yeah… I would yeah.

If, as Green suggests, that within the science department there is the expectation that students with accessibility requirements will not succeed at the same level as their peers then there is

clearly a bias against those with disabilities, mental illness, or complex learning needs. It is

ableism at work within the University of Lethbridge. While it is not all professors, even one is

too many. One experience is enough to make a student feel unwanted and unsafe. When asked to

describe an experience of expectation, Briar was kind enough to share an example of this with

me during our interview:

> B: I think in most of the class classrooms and most teachers that I've experienced the expectation is for you to sit, for you to be quiet, for you to sit still. Most teachers are honestly not welcoming of questions. I think most teachers that I've experienced, I mean obviously like thy are good teachers and those that I kind of vibe with more and I relate to more - they're more welcoming of disruption and change of pace. But many professors I have had experiences…[thinks] they wanted [class] to go their way and if it doesn't go their way that their upset … there's a lot of expectations for the students to show up show up on time, understand it [the material] pass and do well like I don't know I think ….that's I think that's expecting a lot.
>
> V: With your ADHD do you fidget a lot?
>
> B: [nods]

This experience for Briar is not the only occurrence he has had. The experience Briar describes is

one that I think many students would share. Professors, and the institution, as a whole, have

certain expectations of student. A large part of that expectation is to; come to class, online or in

person, and sit still; focus solely on the professor; be quiet; complete assignments on time; and to

be productive while on campus. However, Briar touches on an important point about being

disruptive within a classroom setting. Not all expectations have to be verbal. Some professors, in

my experience, will tell you on the first day of classes what is and what is not allowed within

their classroom – or during class time. Some professors verbally restrict eating; drinking; cell

phone usage; laptop usage; and so forth. Nonverbally, other expectations are clearly established

in the classroom. When asked if he thought there were different expectations for students with

accessibility requirements, Briar explained to me:

It should be however, how can you….. are you going to be singling out every single person with a disability, you know? If every person who's on ALC in the class … the professor may know about every single person who exists and who has different needs but like the students don't. So, even if the professor is able to adjust and do so well like the students may not…. it's almost like this should be a method of either shifting - not just like their expectations but their teaching style without outing the person or people. Yeah. I think in some sense is like for me, I'm comfortable with being outed 'cause I out myself and so I would be OK if I was -you know –that I was going to be doing that was weird and they were just like ok with that. Then that might open up the door for other people to do their weird tics and it is not a disruption or if it is a disruption deal with it. Something like "Oh you know he's gotta stretch right now, OK cool. I'm still taking notes". There should be some adaptation, there should be a shift in expectations. What that will look like I'm not entirely sure but there, I think… I think the door should be open for people too to do what they need to do and for not to be a big deal.

Clearly expectations, verbal or non-verbal, have an impact on students. Whether it be an expectation to sit still or to not succeed/achieve, that expectation is impactful. Students feel the weight of those expectations, they carry it with them. Even the expectations listed by students are all examples of ableism. It may be more accurate to say that ableism permeates into everything we do: all aspects of the University of Lethbridge. This is not limited to undergraduate students alone, in fact I would argue that it extends to graduate and postgraduate students, professors, and staff. The classroom cannot be the only place that ableism lives and thrives. But that is the subject for another study.

Over the course of this chapter, certain issues and themes have clearly been outlined by the students. Their words speak for themselves, highlighting social ableism at work at the University of Lethbridge. While it may be harder to locate compared to the physical structures of the university, social ableism is pervasive. Social ableism, arguably, profoundly impacts *who* belongs just as much as physical ableism does – perhaps more insidiously. What is clear is that ableism functions at all levels within society and within the university culture. I am certainly not

arguing that the university is alone in its construction or enforcement of disability or learning needs; quite the opposite. I would wager that this phenomenon is occurring across other Canadian post-secondary institutions. Brown (2021) writes "Academia always had the reputation of privilege, with those working in higher education contexts considering themselves lucky to have the autonomy and flexibility that research and teaching afford" (2). This autonomy is steeped in the assumption that one is able minded, or neurotypical, and able-bodied. Post-secondary education is not a location that disability or neurodivergence are seen to exist naturally. For both professors and students, disability or any accessibility requirement, is pushed to the margins of campus society. Dolmage (2017) explains that "In relegating disability to the margins, retrofits serve as what might be called abeyance structures – perhaps allowing for access but disallowing the possibility of action for change" (77). What Dolmage is saying is that when disability is pushed away from the norm, relegated to being the outsider on campus, it permits accommodation to occur without actual transformation to the culture creating and marginalizing disability. This can be seen in the examples given by students who have been denied accommodations on campus, even when those students have the support and backing of the ALC. While accommodation exists, the culture around disability and need doesn't support the equitable treatment of *all* students, leading to inclusion/accommodation by some, and rejection/denial by others.

It is not enough to identify the instances of ableism. At the core of the instances of social ableism I have presented here is the issue of power. Words have power. Expectations have power. Denying or providing someone accommodation is an act of power. Having the authority to reject or accept an application for accommodation is power. The institution wields power. All

the examples outlined in this chapter, at their core, are linked to power. Ableism works only if

one group of people is privileged – or elevated – above another. Fritsch (2019) writes that:

> The neoliberalization of disability relations functions to create legitimate individualized
> bodies and subjects that can be both capacities and enhanced through and within
> neoliberal capitalism while at the same time functioning to position other individualized
> bodies and subjects as illegitimately disabled or as debilitated disabled bodies left to
> wither. (40)

The idea that there is an acceptable – excludable – body is rooted in power. As clearly

highlighted throughout the interviews given by students over the course of this project, students

with accessibility requirements feel alienated from their peers. Certain students – disabled or

neurodivergent – are marginalized because *they can be*. Fritsch (2019) writes that by making

certain bodies normative, it requires disabled people to work harder to become acknowledged

and accepted by society. Working hard or becoming "legitimate" is *essential* because otherwise

the disabled person would be completely omitted from society (41). This phenomenon of

working to become 'legitimate' is exactly what the students who participated in this project are

describing. Students have to *prove* their disability in order to receive the accommodation(s) they

need to succeed at the University of Lethbridge. The institution, in this situation, is in complete

control. The University sets the standard for inclusion, and by extension – exclusion as well.

Sothern (2007) writes that:

> The space of the disabled body must also be thought of as a space of the contradictions of
> neoliberalism – it is at once privileged as a site of inclusion, but that inclusion is also the
> promise of its exclusion (146).

The University of Lethbridge is a location in which being included, by the way of the ALC, is

excluding anyone with accessibility requirements that do not meet the minimum requirement for

proving one's disability. Every student who has an accessibility requirement, but is denied access

to the ALC; hears stories of being denied access to the ALC; experiences a denial of

accommodation from professors; or experiences problems obtaining a 'formal' diagnosis is excluded from the one place on campus that is *designed* to *help* disabled students. As I have established, students with disabilities or accessibility requirements are marginalized by society including university society/culture. Not only is the disabled body and the neurodivergent brain marginalized, but they are also conceptualized as dangerous and disruptive (Titchkosky 2011; Dolmage 2017; Krafer 2013). Dolmage (2017) writes that "The ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical) weakness" (3). Dangerous (disabled) bodies are, historically, as dangerous as non-able minds. Foucault (1978) writes that "The social "body" ceased to be a simple juridico-political metaphor (like the one in the Leviathan) and became, instead, a biological reality and a field for medical intervention" (184). While Foucault was writing about the creation of the "dangerous individual" within the justice system, where psychiatry cited insanity as being a crime – I would argue that the same principal apples to disability. Disability is often contextualized as a "biological reality", as both a personal responsibility and personal failing. The social model of disability argues that disability is produced by both the physical and social structures in place (Titchkosky 2011; Titchkosky 2007; Dolmage 2017; Aubrecht 2012; Campbell 2009). What I mean is this: disability is relegated to the side-lines by institutions because post-secondary institutions rely on, and actively use, the medical model of disability as justification to keep disability marginalized. The institution has power over individuals, disabled or not, because of the existing structures in place. By the University of Lethbridge relying on, and actively using, the medical model of disability as its reference point, students with accessibility requirements are going to be vulnerable to, and rely on, the institution to include them.

As I have established through this chapter, disabled students, or their accommodations, are contextualised as disruptive. Foucault (1978) writes that "The real problem, the one in effect throughout, was the problem of the dangerous individual. Are there individuals who are intrinsically dangerous? By what signs can they be recognised, and how can one react to their presence?" (198). By contextualizing disability as a problem, the institution merely has to *solve* it in order to achieve equality. The act of accommodation becomes a solution to the problem of disability. Instead of a addressing the structures, either physical or social, and how they produce disability on campus, the University of Lethbridge merely offers a single solution to the problem of disability. For invisible diagnoses, this presents a challenge. Does one reveal their diagnosis and become part of the problem, or does one mask their symptoms in order to avoid judgement?

Social ableism is clearly not as simple as the physical structures that re/produce ableism. Social ableism is deeply rooted and those complexities are rooted in neoliberal methods of thinking, contextualisation, and being. As established throughout this chapter, there is clearly social ableism at work in the cultural structure at the University of Lethbridge. It is pervasive. It exists within the context of the classroom and beyond. It is clearly affecting students. Regardless of *why* accommodations may have been rejected or denied, the fact is that they are being denied; and that is a problem. Denial of accommodation and rejection of diagnoses is a symptom of a deeper systemic issue. The University of Lethbridge is, arguably, a neoliberal university – it certainly operates within a neoliberal society and treats disability according to the societal standard. Throughout this chapter, however, it is clear that students do take issue with the university's and professors' treatment of disability. It is through their experiences that the prevalence of these matters becomes clear.

This brings me to an aspect of social ableism that continues to be difficult to locate. Throughout my previous research project, students described a phenomenon surrounding perceptions of ability, grade point average (GPA) and the idea of student success. The intersection between expectations of students and the perception of students is a thin line, one that is often measured by GPA alone. Social ableism is not just present through the rejection and denial of accommodations, but through the expectations of an institution that set up students for success. A student's success is often heavily linked to one's academic success, which is often equated with GPA. In the next chapter, I attempt to locate examples of social ableism within the intersection of GPA and success.

Chapter 3 – Student Success and GPA

I believe that success is highly personal and yet is teachable. What do I mean by that? I mean that my whole life I have felt as though there is a certain level of success communicated to me. When I was in middle school, success was making the honour roll *while* being in the school band or play – or both. For others, success was making the honour roll while being on a sports team and achieving success by representing the school. In high school, academic success was emphasized by putting students into different classrooms based on intellectual (academic) ability. Some students went into higher levels of math, social studies, science, and English based on grades from middle school. Likewise, while in high school being on the honour role was the goal - while also being in extracurricular activities like sports, band and/or drama. What does this have to do with success, you may be asking? Fundamentally, I am arguing that academic success is taught - by both social institutions like schools themselves and families – to students as being critical to their own personal success. I was told by my family that if I wanted to go to university, which I did, that I needed to have good grades. I was expected to be on the honour roll all through middle school and high school because I was *capable* of achieving the necessary grades. Additionally, in high school being on the honour role meant that I had a good chance of being accepted by the university of my choice. Choosing a post-secondary institution was a challenge. In my house we went over all the possible institutions that I might want to attend based on university ranking across Canada, prestige of the university, price of tuition, location of the university and so forth. I chose the University of Lethbridge and I was accepted.

When I became an undergraduate student for the first time in 2010, I learned that I had to define success based on everything in my life, not just my grades. I believed that in order to be a successful student I had to be 'well rounded', and that meant doing the same things I was

expected to do in high school: volunteering, participating in an extra-curricular activity, being on the honour role, and so forth. Yet that was not as easily obtainable as it had been in high school. I did volunteer on campus, joined a club, worked out before classes started every day, studied another language, and spent hours studying to achieve high grades. Additionally, I worked at least one or more jobs during my undergraduate career. By the time I was in my third year, I was tired. I no longer cared about my grades being the highest – in fact trying to achieve Dean's List status seemed like a near impossibility. So, success, at that time, meant getting the best grades I could and graduating with my peers. Fast forward to 2019 when I started my second-degree program. My academic record was still important to being accepted into a new degree program, but my goals were very different. If you were to ask me what student success means to me now, I would have to say that student success can only be measured in totality, by one's personal dreams and goals. My goals with this second degree are to achieve a high level of academic success in order to gain entry into graduate studies. Once again, much like high school, my grades would determine if I can move on to the next chapter of my academic career. My success is not solely tied to my academic performance or grade point average, but it is influenced heavily by it. My current success as a student is more directly connected to my academic achievement than in my previous degree.

What has all this to do with this thesis project? In the spring of 2021, I conducted an independent study that was investigating at the impact of COVID-19 on students with accessibility requirements. One resounding theme was that grade point average (GPA) was not, and should not, be a measure of student success. While academic success should be celebrated, and is a significant achievement, it does not always reflect the amount of work, effort and

mental/physical toll it takes on students to obtain those achievements (Brickley 2021). Since that project, I have asked myself: "Can GPA be a measure of student success?"

What does it mean to be successful at an academic institution such as the University of Lethbridge? What does the University determine to be success? How do students determine academic success? In some respects, academic success is one of the most easily recognisable way in which universities determine success. According to the University of Lethbridge Faculty of Arts and Science Advising (2021), a student is considered to "be in good standing" if they have a GPA of 1.70 relative to the number of courses they have taken. A student who has taken more than 20 courses is required to have a GPA of 2.00 or more to be in good standing (University of Lethbridge Faculty of Arts and Science Advising 2021). If a student is found to be under the requirement, they are placed on academic probation. If the student cannot improve their grades to the required standard, they are then asked to withdraw. Students from the University of Lethbridge who wish to graduate must succeed in having a 2.00 or be in good standing.

Grade requirements can also be used in other ways, such as a marker for advancement. In order to partake in an Honour's Thesis or enter into Masters and Graduate studies, a certain GPA is required. According to the Graduate Studies Admission Guide (2016) requirement for either a master's program requires a bachelor's degree from a recognised university, and a minimum GPA of 3.00 at the University of Lethbridge. A doctoral candidate must obtain their master's degree and must have a GPA of 3.50 or better. Why is GPA relevant to the idea of student success? During the course of this study, I asked specific questions related to success and grade point average. The reason behind this was to demonstrate what, if any, differences there may be between academic success as defined by students, and how students perceived success as being

defined by the institution. In my previous research, students indicated that GPA was not an accurate measure of student success (Brickley 2021). This led me to wonder if other students would agree or disagree with that statement, based on their own experiences. Additionally, success, in and of itself, is highly subjective. When asked to define success, students reported that success was more complex than simply GPA. Firus felt that GPA was "trying to be symbol of success". Overall, students reported that success was more a measure of understanding and application outside a classroom setting. Marigold reported that "Success is a very…it's a very personal thing." Success was defined in a variety of ways, that will be outlined later in this chapter, but the overall message regarding student success reflects Marigold's point of view. Firus emphasized that

> [success]…is more internalised from person to person. Some people can feel like their accomplishments are downplayed or it's not good to have help with their own accomplishments whereas others would feel fine with just getting help with tutoring with someone.

Other students saw success as a mix between grade point average and personal achievement, where GPA is the measure of academic achievement and personal achievement is measured by the individual.

Over the course of this chapter, I hope to address several aspects of student success. First, I will outline how students define success compared to how they perceive success to be defined by the University of Lethbridge. Second, I will explore if student success is measurable, based on student reports. Lastly, I will inquire if students believe the University of Lethbridge sets students with accessibility requirements up for success.

3.1.0 Defining Student Success – Student vs Institutional Definitions

Over the course of this project, I asked several questions pertaining to success at the University of Lethbridge (see APPENDIX C) to ascertain what students perceived success to be.

When asked to define academic success, students conveyed that it is: a combination of good grades and keeping oneself healthy; understanding to any degree; one's ability to confidently apply knowledge; GPA; comprehension and effort while having good mental health; and academic success based on effort. When asked how students believe the University of Lethbridge determines or defines success, they reported that academic success was defined by good grades; scholarships; joining clubs/sports teams; and, resoundingly, GPA.

A few key differences emerge when looking at both definitions of academic success as perceived by students. The first is that students perceive the University of Lethbridge as solely measuring academic success as by grades or GPA. Second, comparatively students felt as though academic success was more complex than GPA alone. Clearly GPA matters to students, yet, there is still something more that students are including in their descriptions of academic success. Themes of understanding, applying what they have learned, effort, and good mental health are present. Academic success is not merely, as suggest above, only the totality of one's efforts in the classroom. When asked about academic success, Firus explained to me:

> I would say definitely being able to … of course keep your grades up though, I think that is sort of foundational to it. As well as but being able to still keep yourself healthy. I think I think if you have like a 4.0 GPA but you're not eating or sleeping and your mental health is going terribly I don't think that counts as success.

Other students echoed this sentiment through the interviews. Another student, Red, explained what academic success meant to her:

> [It means] getting the best possible grade you can…. if that means you're getting C's - good for you. If that means you're getting straight A's, good for you. That means you're just passing, good for you, you're passing.

Likewise, when asked to define academic success, students found that it was more complicated than just GPA. Sunflower took the time to explain to me what academic success means to them:

> V: How do you define academic success?

S: This is interesting because I am quite…like a student who's quite driven to achieve, so I guess kind of my ideal academic successes is an A in every class but that's not necessarily realistic….Academic success [thinks] …I would say generally being able to have academic potential and to be able to learn what you want from your classes in addition to learning what you need. I would say academic success isn't just the things that you do to get your degree, it's the things that will set you up for success in the future. And you probably know more about this than me in terms of you know, "Does academic success in university predict success in the field?" but on a basic level if you don't know what you need to know going into certain professions, you're not going to be successful. So academic success is very important for life success and there's a lot of …you know, personal and societal things riding on academic success… the fact that we even have this whole category in society of college dropout. Like that could be a whole conversation in itself, how you know academic success in our society is tied strongly to personal success and we look at people differently. Whether they you know graduated university with honors or whether they barely scraped by and just passed their class we don't see those two outcomes as being equally successful.

Success, even academic, is highly subjective. Each student had a very different, although overlapping, idea of what academic success is. For some, academic success is fundamentally rooted in GPA. Clover explained to me why that would be the case for her:

V: So, would you say that academic success should be measurable in a way to represent people's knowledge?

C: Could you put it another way maybe?

V: I'm just wondering if you think that academic success should be - if it's going to be measured be… more a measure of one's individual knowledge level and understanding versus a GPA where you don't know if someone's actually understood the topics, or they've just memorized them.

C: I think… I think that… that's right …so I guess it comes down to that GPA doesn't really get the full picture. It would have to be whether or not a prof is giving multiple choice that probably doesn't give the full picture. It would have to be more of a written a test [or essay]. I'm not too sure if you could really teach a textbook based on exams like that and a textbook [holds up a book] from September to the beginning of December and give written exams… I'm not too sure if …. multiple choice is almost so 'Oh it rings a bell it must be that'… it's a lot of information a short time and … the 4 month semester-based system is kinda of crappy right. I think if you had six months then you could have more extensive exams that are written out and you're really more showing that knowledge more.

> V: So then in my previous research students reported that GPA is not a measure of student success. What do you think of that statement?

> C: Well for me it is! [laughs]. If I can manage to get two A's, my goodness - that was a shock last semester. [smiles]

There is a sense of personal satisfaction and achievement that comes with attaining academic success. I, too, have felt proud of my academic accomplishments the past three years. Clover – like some of her peers- expressed pleasure at achieving such high marks in her course, which was hard earned and well deserved. I believe that academic success should be celebrated in any form that it may be achieved. If a student is achieving their best, then that success should be achieved – including not comparing one person's achievement to another's. This, then, brings me to the next question posed to the student participants.

3.1.2   Quantifying Success – Is Student Success Measurable?

Students clearly described academic success as being more complex than simply grades alone. For many students' academic success was only contingent on having good mental health or also having good understanding of the material one is studying. When asked if students believed that academic success was measurable, 53% of students answered no, 27% answered both yes and no, and 6% of students said yes. When asked to explain why, in some detail, Bones explained to me that:

> Academic success is like charisma. It's something that people know that you have - you just can't measure it you can't put a number on how charismatic someone is, you can't put a number on how tough someone is and you can't put a number on how smart someone.

Like Bones, other students felt similarly when asked if academic success is measurable. While there were some students who felt as though success was measurable through grades, at previously stated, the majority of students did not feel as though success was a metric that could be measured. Green elaborated on this topic for me during our interview:

I don't think it's measurable, but a GPA is. I guess… I don't know…. it would be very difficult to measure [success] because I mean everyone's different. If we go off my definition academic success, like the amount of time I understand something that's very difficult to obtain right. Especially with testing I feel like that doesn't really…it isn't very conducive to understanding someone's actual understanding of a concept. Or you know, like their willingness to learn, I think, is also very important it's not reflected in GPA.

Success, once again, is highly subjective. Some students didn't feel as though GPA accurately reflected academic success. But that is *academic* success, not student success. Are the two different? Should there be a delineation between academic success and student success? To answer this question, I posed the following question to my participants: "In my previous research students reported that GPA is not a measure of student success what do you think of that statement?" When asked this question, Azlyn explained to me,

I agree because I can't count how many times my GPA changed over the past four years. Every semester it's either up two points or down two points and the university doesn't take into account things like stress or Covid for a lower GPA… I don't know just taking a bad class that you don't wanna be in, they don't look at that, they just look at the number.

Azlyn was not the only student to express such a sentiment. Roughly 73% of students agreed with the posed statement. When the question was posed to Sunflower, they offered this reason as to why they agreed:

I agree with that statement - that GPA is not a good predictor of academic success- and you know if you think about the different behaviors that students engaged in to achieve a higher GPA that aren't conducive to learning… you think about you know…The staying up all night to write papers. Okay, you may be able to write the paper and turn it in but you're not going to be able to retain the information it took to write that paper because you're so sleep deprived. And I think that there's so much more to academic success than GPA.

Grade point average and student success are seen as different measures. One is tied to the university and their method of measuring success. Marigold explained the difference between GPA and success very articulately in their answer to this question:

I would agree. I think success and achievement are two different things. I would say, maybe it's a measure of achievement like "Hey you got a high grade, you answered a lot

of questions on the test right" but I mean success is a very…it's a very personal thing. I think… what someone feels is a measure of success for them, and I say measure, not in like a quantifiable measure, but just more of them like "Hey do I feel like I'm learning, am I attending my classes, do [I] understand what the prof's talking about?" whatever it is.

Success is not as straight forward as one might imagine it to be. Not only do students report that it is highly subjective, but it is also hard to describe and measure. Academic success *can* be measured by GPA, however, as stated previously, students agreed that academic success was not something that could be measured. But the drive to succeed, in whatever form that takes, is still present for students. Green explained how success, expectation and GPA are connected in his interview with me:

> G: I think that the expectation is to succeed. And kind of regardless of what you're facing in your life, the expectation is to succeed, and I don't know that that's necessarily….a product of like individual profs being like can "You just succeed" the like …you know? I don't know your life right and so like when you walk on campus like I said, like it's if your GPA isn't reading high enough, then you're not valuable.

> V: Would it be fair to say that GPA is a value measure, like a worth?.

> G: It certainly can be. Yeah it certainly can be. I don't think it is to everyone. For instance, like I in the sciences, the answer is 100% yes. Okay I've taken humanities classes and I have a nice relationship with one of the anthropology professors and like certainly that has been my experience in those departments. But in sciences for sure yeah. If you're not a 4.0, like if you're a 3.5 in comparison to a 4.0 you are certain less valuable to that professor and in turn to the university as well.

Green touches on an important point here. Success, or achievement, is often a token used to measure one's value to the institution. And yet, as previously established in earlier chapters, students with accessibility requirements are marginalized on campus. How does that speak to the value or worth of a student when they are relegated to the sidelines? If a student with accessibility requirements does achieve academic success, does that render them as valuable as their peers? Or does the institution render students with accessibility to be the sum of their

diagnosis regardless of academic achievement? Perhaps the answer lies in how the University of Lethbridge supports its students.

3.1.3   Setting Students up for Success – Institutional Support

Success, as established, is highly variable and not easy to define. A part of university is obtaining and maintain 'good' grades, that is, keeping one's GPA above the minimum university mandated requirement. Keeping in mind the student definitions of success, I delved into the subject of support and success with my participants. The university advertises that they set up their students for success (see Figure 1.0). When asked if students believe that the University of Lethbridge set students with accessibility requirements up for success, students had mixed responses. Roughly 47% of students answered both yes and no, 20% answered no; 20% were unsure, and 13% answered yes. Delving more into the why students answered both yes and no, I tried to ask about the positive and negatives experiences. When discussing some of the things that the University does well, Green explained:

> I mean some of the best ways [the university is accessible] are…Some of the best ways I think are at like the individual level. Certain people at the accommodated learning center have been so supportive and super helpful and like that is like the most valuable part….or like certain professors being really, really super like awesome about it [accommodation] and …a combination of both being important, like "I'm gonna make sure that this is good for you" and, like….Like having that supportive network of people, I think, is that that's is the best way.

Figure 1.0

When I asked if students if they believed the university was setting students with accessibility up for success, students had less positive things to say. Green explained to me how, while there are very supportive people in the system, the system itself does not feel as though it sets students up for success:

> I feel supported by the ALC. I don't feel supported by the institution. I wouldn't say I feel quite distant from the institution as a whole. Like …some profs I click with - are very supportive, and than there's a lot of profs I have, who I feel like I could have support from and there's a lot of profs like would…Come and go anyway so yeah.

Other students echoed this sentiment. When asked if the University sets students up for success, Danelle answered "No." I asked Danelle to described to why she felt this way, and she agreed, explaining that:

> The university does one style type of teaching. So, I have a daughter with ADHD and dyslexia and she learns differently than I do. Though I'm fine with sitting there listening to an hour long lecture and during the reading material she's more of a kinesthetic learner

The 'one-size fits all' style of education the university employs does not work for all students.

When I asked Danelle to if she felt supported by the University of Lethbridge, she explained to

me that while she did feel supported by individual staff and faculty, overall, she felt the

institution did not support her:

> I kinda feel like we're not looked at …we are not a priority. So we have… we do, you know, … acknowledge the aboriginal community, black community, that there is no acknowledging the disabled community and that's not just the university that is society…. And you know … also just by not paying attention to things like the doors. Even like the cleaning staff even mentioned - there was one one lady I don't know she still works here … said that "You know we've talked to the Dean about getting automatic doors here because you need the automatic doors here and so do we" but they needed it for their equipment and so… I have staff advocating for me but still if you're higher up and not seeing those things …

Some participants felt that students with accessibility requirements were often left out or

forgotten by the systems in place at the university that were supposed to further their success.

When I posed the question of setting student up for success to Firus, he answered:

> I just… I think the school system is poorly constructed to an individual you know? It's tailored towards the majority right, but the majority isn't everyone.

Support and success are linked. Students who did not feel supported often reported that they did

not feel set up for success. Success is often contingent on being set up with the ALC. While most

of the students who participated in the study were registered with ALC, there were some students

who were not. Those students felt as though they did not have the same set up for success as

those already registered with ALC, because students without ALC support did not have access to

accommodations. Even students with ALC support felt as through the institution did not set them

up for success for a variety of reasons, related to issues of stigma, accessibility and

accommodation. When asked if she thought that the university sets students with accessibility

requirements up for success, Rose explained that:

> I think some of them. I think if you can't even set them [accommodations] up that's an issue, but I think like from what I've heard from like my friends if you have accommodated learning they seem to be set up pretty well as long as they [students] can remember to book their appointments.

> V: So in your opinion how supported do you feel as a student at the U of L?

> R: Very minimum.

It seems very clear that students perceive the institution as not setting students with accessibility

requirements up for success or providing much in the way of support. While ALC is an

institutional program, many students view ALC as a separate entity. Perhaps this is because ALC

relies on students *proving* their needs before gaining entry into the centre and the supports the

centre offers. Even with the support of the ALC students still have their accommodations denied.

When I asked Marigold if they believed the university set students with accessibility

requirements up for success, they told me:

> I'm not entirely sure how to answer that. I think… for the most part, if that makes sense. You know they do try to offer kind of the tools and supports that they can …. there's still some things of, you know, profs just kind of straight up choosing to deny accommodations. Issues like that, where…I mean they can only do so much to move around a barrier, while that barrier is still in place.

Marigold raises an important point. Even if the institution does try to set students with

accessibilities up for success, the institution themselves create barriers for students. Those

barriers, which are actively shaped by ableism within both physical and social structures, are not

removed by the institution. Accommodations are enacted to help students navigate around the

barriers but chooses not to remove the barrier itself. How can an institution set a student up for

success without addressing or removing the barriers in place? Barriers hinder students with

accessibility requirements by denying them the opportunity to learn and achieve at the same level as their peers.

This brings me to an interesting question that I asked the participants of this study to answer. Early in the interview process I asked students if they believe that the University of Lethbridge offers an equitable learning environment for all students. Roughly 47% of students answered yes, 33% of students answered no, and 20% answered both yes and no. One of the reasons why students answered yes to this question was due to being registered with ALC, as Red explained to me:

> R: Once you know how to get accommodation yes, but I feel like that process they should find some way to make it easier.

> V: Would you say that that equitable learning experience only occurred for you after you received accommodation?

> R: 100% minus, select one or two professors that didn't have time limits [on exams] or anything like that.

For some students like Marigold, the question was hard for them to answer. While they had not experienced outright denial of accommodations like some of their peers, Marigold goes on to explain that:

> No, no….yeah I think …just …there are many profs who will kind of refuse to offer accommodations. While I haven't had that experience, personally, I do know of some friends of mine who had the accommodation of having audio recordings of lectures and there were professors that just straight up denied that, so … not very equitable if accommodations aren't being listened to. Also just the fact that you have to pay the ALC to get accommodations is an issue. I mean the documentation, at least when I did that it cost um…I believe it was $80 to like to get the paperwork for my doctor on campus so even just I mean that financial barrier to get accommodations, I think, by default, makes it not equitable, as you have to you know pay extra for equal access.

For many students the answer was not obviously yes or no. Some students reported that the University offered an equitable learning experience with the support of ALC, making equity (and success) something that is contingent on gaining entry to the specific centre that aids students

with accessibility requirements. Reasons why students believed that the University of Lethbridge

was not an equitable campus were vast. Green elaborated on this topic during our interview;

> I think it's… hard. I think that's hard because I also think that they're trying their best so. yeah I like I guess like kinda…. is kinda an option? I think that the University has policies in place, but I don't know that each individual professor necessarily wants that to be the case.

Green response begs the question – is the *university* creating an equitable campus environment if

they have policies in place but the professors do not follow said policies? Arguably no because

professors are an integral part of the university. For other students, like Rose, the answer to the

question of equity was a straight "No." When I asked her to explain her perspective a bit more,

she explained;

> R: So I can't give any names so I'm not able to like confirm anything but in my first year I hung out with some boys and their parents paid for them to not be kicked out because of cheating. I don't want to say their names because I am friends with some of them but that was a really big thing because I know I couldn't afford to pay if I ever got caught cheating. … my parents couldn't workout 10 grand to keep me in school. And that's not very equitable …But another thing is like I have been trying to get help with the mental health side and like not academic counseling but ah like where they work with like ADHD and stuff

> V: The accommodated learning center?

> R: Yeah I've been trying to get into accommodated learning and… like for example I've left their office crying before they've been so mean to me. It's funny because they literally have a sign that says 'vulnerable people are welcome here' and I came to them as a very vulnerable person because I've been denied before. And part of both of my disorders is I don't accept rejection well so I went there with people with me because I knew sometimes I think I'm being 'crazy' because I do live with these disorders and I'm aware that I do act a little crazy sometimes. So I brought my like friends with me and like even they were like "what the heck?". It was just …she referred to me as like "sweetie", but not in a kind way …in a condescending and then she was all "I just can't help you right now." She's like "we are doing appointment's over email" and I'm like "Well I did email you", and then she's like "we're not doing in person helping" and I'm like "Well you helped somebody else yesterday in-person" and "I'm only coming to in person because I've emailed you multiple times and I've yet to get a response". And I'm coming in person because I respond better in-person I understand things better in person because I can see it and it's visibly there like when things go online it escapes my realm of "This is here

and it's something I have to do". So, I've spoken to ALC on like several occasions and every time there's just like another reason to why they can't help me and it's like no matter what they do in a matter what professionals I talked to nobody is able to get me the paperwork I need. But I've talked into family doctors, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists and like no one can get me the paperwork.

Experiences, such as the one above, or those of trying to get into the ALC, were one of the reasons students believed the University was not an equitable campus. Other reasons included the physical barriers students had to navigate, lack of resources for students and the feeling of being unsupported by the instituton. When I asked Tee if she believed that the University created an equitable environment, her answer was, "No, not for students with disabilities". A clear pattern of denial leads students to perceiving the campus as a hostile and unequitable environment.

Support, equity, and success are all linked. How can a student succeed if there are significant barriers in place that prevent students with disabilities, cognitive learning needs, or other diagnosis from achieving equally with their peers? The answer is – they can't. Students did perceive that the University of Lethbridge uses GPA as the primary, if not sole, measure of success yet they also report that GPA as a measure of success was limiting. As documented through this chapter, students found that success is more than just their academic achievements. Having a personal life that was fulfilling, comprehending the learning material, and having good mental health were all a part of student success, not just the sole measure of grade point average. However, if students do not feel as though the learning environment is equitable, then how are students to succeed? When asked if students feel supported by the University of Lethbridge, 60% of students reported that they did not feel supported. Only 13% of students answered yes to this question, and another 20% felt as though they were somewhat supported. This is significant.

Although the University of Lethbridge may be perceived as offering an equitable learning environment to some, the majority of participants did not feel support (overall) by the institution. When asked if students believed that the University of Lethbridge sets students up for success, 47% answered both yes and no. Most students who answered yes and no believed that success was dependent on being registered with the ALC and how individual professors act and react. This comes back to how ableism is at work within our institution. If success is contingent on having the support of the ALC, but the ALC is something that students struggle to get into, then how is the University of Lethbridge providing an equitable learning environment to their students? The answer is clearly that students with accessibility requirements are not a priority at the University of Lethbridge, and it perfectly content to continually marginalize students with accessibility requirements as long as the majority of the student population is succeeding to the University Standard.

This brings me to an interesting point. The ALC is a specialized service that students must pay to be a part of; however there are services offered to the majority of students that do not cost any extra money. Services like the Academic Writing Centre (AWC) and the Student Success Centre (SSC) are all free to use services on campus that do not require additional payment or specialized entry into. Why can the University offer these services to students freely, yet require students with accessibility requirements to pay for help and support? This, arguably, is the work of ableism at the University of Lethbridge.

Conclusion

To end this thesis, I would like to go back to the concept of "Who Belongs?" As I have clearly showcased throughout the various chapters, there is a clear normative student body that is assumed to be the norm at the University of Lethbridge. These architectural and social norms leave students with accessibility requirements on the margins. The picture painted by students is that disability is invisible on campus until there is a visible disabled person on campus who then becomes the sole representative of disability on campus. The 'who' does not include those who are different from the able bodied, neurotypical norm. Would you want to attend an institution that made you feel invisible and unaccepted? I cannot say that I do. And yet, despite all the ableism I (and my participants) have been witnessed to, I do believe the university can achieve more.

Dare we reimagine what disability and accessibility look like on campus? What would that mean for students? What would that mean for professors? What would that mean for all those who are neurodivergent and non able-bodied? Over the course of this thesis project, I have presented how ableism is at work at the University of Lethbridge campus, in classrooms and within the university culture itself. But where do we go from here? It is not enough to address the instances of ableism without critically looking at the future. My study does not, and cannot, reflect the views of every student with accessibility requirements. I acknowledged that early on. However, I think the experiences and opinions expressed throughout this project are powerful. There is clearly a problem with accessibility and accommodation on campus. So, what can be done? First, acknowledging the barriers – both physically and socially – is a beginning. If the university would acknowledge the ableism at work, then perhaps that would lead to greater representation of disability on campus. Representation, while a start, is not enough to make the

campus inclusive or accessible. Having the leaders of the university, such as the President, Provost's Office, Vice-Presidents, and Deans take the time to sit and listen to students and acknowledge the problems they face would be *amazing*. This would create a much richer and more vibrant student culture, one where age, class, racial background, family and marital status, neurodivergency, ability, academic achievement and sport achievement are all accepted with equal measure. Second, I believe that the University of Lethbridge has the capacity to offer an equitable learning experience and be an equitable campus. Yes, there have been accommodations made, yet when accommodations are incorporated into the classroom *without* having to be *prompted* makes the student learning experience more accessible. Students respond positively to professors who actively include measures of access and accommodation without needing to be asked. And yet that is not enough. Even if a professor is open to accommodation, a student must prove their need via the ALC and provide a letter of accommodation. What if there was a way of making exams or papers more accessible without students needing to *prove* need? I believe that the University of Lethbridge can get there, if they listen to students and take an active role in reimagining what disability looks like on campus. The University could be a front runner for a change, creating a future where ableism is no longer as normalized on university campuses.

There is still much work to be done. As stated earlier in this thesis, there is a large group of students that I was unable to include in this study. Those student voices may offer additional insight into the state of accessibility and accommodation at the University of Lethbridge. Likewise, there is also the question of stakeholder and professor viewpoints. While I did interview two stakeholders for this project, I was not able to include their perspectives (meaningfully) given the time constraints of this semester. But that could be the subject of

another study. In fact, an institutional study analysing both stakeholder and instructor standpoints regarding the accessibility of the University of Lethbridge would be *extremely* valuable.

Another subject that I was unable to cover was that of GPA as a measure of eugenics. This is a rich topic that I barely scratched the surface of, yet is connected to the subject of student success, academic success and perceptions of ability. As touched upon in this study, success is highly subjective to students, but perceived to be less variable for the university. A study looking into the links between success, GPA, and eugenics would also be very valuable.

We have the power to create a truly accessible and inclusive campus. Students, like myself, doing research projects and thesis should be encouraged to give student voices priority. Through the experiences of others we can learn and make meaningful change. Students with accessibility requirements have so much to say, and their voices deserve to be heard. Just like they deserve to have their accommodations needs met without strife. Everyone deserves to have an education. Everyone deserves to be seen and heard equally. Right now, however, as a university, we still have a long way to go.

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APPENDIX A

-Ability (re)Imagined: An exploration into accessibility, accommodation, and student success at the University of Lethbridge-

Student Interview Email Recruitment:

Subject: Share Your Experiences – Interview Participation

How accessible is the University of Lethbridge based on your experiences? Have you ever struggled with accessing the University of Lethbridge campus or services? Have you sought out or needed accommodation? The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of students with accessibility requirements and accessibility at the University of Lethbridge.

Students with accessibility requirements, for the purpose of this study, are defined as any student who has received a diagnosis of disability (e.g., blindness, brain injury, hearing impediment) and/or complex learning needs (e.g., ADHD, ASD, Dyslexia). Diagnosis can be from a medical professional (e.g., family doctor) or other health care professional (e.g., psychologist). All students with accessibility requirements are welcome to participate. Participation is voluntary.

The format for the study is interviews, roughly 60 – 90 minutes of your time, done via an online platform (e.g., Zoom, Teams) or in person, following the current COVID-19 policies and regulations. Student email will be used for communication purposes (e.g., schedule the interview) and will remain confidential. Participants can choose a pseudonym prior to the start of the interview. You may leave the study at any point (e.g., prior, during or after the interview process).

If you would like to participate, please feel free to reach out to the researcher directly via email (vr.brickley@uleth.ca) or phone (403-394-4591).

If you have any questions or concerns about this research study please feel free to contact Ms. Virginia R. Brickley (Women and Gender Studies undergraduate student) via email at vr.brickley@uleth.ca or phone (403-394-4591). You may also contact me for a summary of the research findings should you choose. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge via email at research.services@uleth.ca or by phone at 403-329-2747.

I appreciate your participation and good luck with the semester.

Virginia

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HAVE YOU EVER NEEDED OR WANTED ACCOMMODATION ON CAMPUS?

What are your experiences as an undergraduate student with accessibility requirements at the University of Lethbridge?

How does the University support you as a student with disabilities or a cognitive learning need?

I am conducting research on the perspectives of students with accessibility requirements at the University of Lethbridge for an honours thesis. If you are interested and are a student with a disability (e.g., blindness, deafness, brain injury) or complex learning need (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia) I want to hear your story! This interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes of your time.

For more information please contact Virginia Brickley at vr.brickley@uleth.ca

Research supervisor: Dr. Suzanne Lenon email: suzanne.lenon@uleth.ca

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions: Stakeholder

Do you have students with accessibility requirements approach you for assistance (counselling, academic advising, other service support) who identify themselves as such?

Are you aware of any services specifically designed to support students with accessibility requirements at the University of Lethbridge?

Is there/what is the difference between writing supports, tutoring or other student supports that aren't labelled as 'accommodated learning'?

Are you aware of past institutional support for students with accessibility requirements?

Are you aware of past and present institutional barriers for students with accessibility requirements?

What are some gaps that you perceive exist in helping students with accessibility requirements?

How well does the U of L do in terms of support provision?

What would the ideal be for supporting students with accessibility requirements if financial and personnel resources were not a barrier?

What resources do you see that are needed for students with accessibility requirements?

Are you aware of resources off campus to support students with accessibility requirements and do you refer students to such supports?

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions: Student

Demographics/Opening Questions
What is your age?
How do you identify? (male or man/female or woman/nonbinary/transgender/two spirited)
What pronouns do you prefer?
What diagnosis have you received? [Alternate: Tell me about your diagnosis/diagnoses]
  ➢ When were you diagnosed?
[if not already disclosed] Are you registered with the Accommodated Learning Center?
  ➢ If yes, how long have you been registered?
What is your year of study?
What faculty is your degree program in? [e.g., Arts and Science, Dhillon School of Business]

Accommodation/Accessibility
How would you describe your student experience at the University of Lethbridge overall?
[in your opinion] Do you believe that the University of Lethbridge offers an equitable learning experience to all students?
How do you define accessibility?
How do you define accommodation?
Is the University of Lethbridge accessible?
[in your opinion] What are some of the best ways the University of Lethbridge creates an accessible campus?
In your experience, what is the most challenging part accessing the University of Lethbridge?
Do you require accommodation?
What accommodations do you require?
Have you ever been denied accommodation at the University of Lethbridge?
  ➢ Please elaborate
Have you ever been denied access [ex, services, course extension] at the University of Lethbridge?
  ➢ Please elaborate
[in your experience] Do you think accessibility/accommodation has changed with the return to campus?
Which learning environment did you find to be the most accessible? Why?
  ➢ Please elaborate
[In your opinion] Whose responsibility is it to create, and maintain, an accessible learning experience?

Health, Academic Success and GPA
Health
[in your opinion] In your experience, what is the perception of disability and mental health on campus/classrooms?
Do you think student mental health is a priority at the University of Lethbridge?

Do you think students with accessibility requirements are a priority at the University of Lethbridge?

Have you ever experienced physical or mental burnout as a result of your course load/studies?

➢ Please explain

Have you ever felt overwhelmed as a result of your course load or diagnosis?

➢ [if yes] Did you reach out for help during that time?
➢ Have you ever had an instructor reach out to you when you were struggling?

Success

[in your opinion] How do you define academic success?

How do you think the University of Lethbridge defines academic success?

➢ Do you think academic success is measurable?

In my previous research, student reported that GPA is not a measure of student success. What do think of that statement?

[in your opinion] In your experience, what are the expectations of students on campus?

➢ In your experience, are their different expectations of students with accessibility requirements?

[in your opinion] Do you believe the university sets students with accessibility requirements up for success?

[in your opinion] How supported do you feel as a student at the University of Lethbridge?