

Perspective

Confronting Disability Pasts, Constructing Disability Futures: Recommendations for Growing Access, Equity, and Inclusion for Disabled Faculty in Higher Education

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Abstract

Faculty with disabilities are under-represented in institutions of higher education (IHE). Barriers to full inclusion and access have been described in recent syntheses and include issues surrounding in/visibility, disclosure concerns, stigma, denial of access needs, and feelings of isolation, among other concerns. Although IHE in the United States are bound by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and related legislation, accommodations for faculty are often provided slowly, sometimes reluctantly, and through arcane structures that prove difficult to navigate and involve decision-makers with limited training in disability. Creating equitable futures for individuals with disabilities requires a systematic approach that redresses prior harms, acknowledges present challenges and successes, and works toward ameliorating social, cultural, and physical environments to maximize inclusion and access. To better understand the needs of faculty with disabilities and to inform efforts to redress associated harms, we opportunistically analyze data from a survey of faculty with disabilities conducted at a public university in the American Southwest. We provide descriptive statistics of quantitative data and thematic analysis of qualitative findings. Themes address the need to prevent discrimination and stigma experienced by faculty with disabilities, to reduce inconsistencies in the provision of accommodations, and to be proactive and inclusion-oriented (rather than compliance-oriented) when designing and implementing solutions. We conclude with general guidance for institutions seeking to create such cultures.

Keywords: disability; higher education; faculty experiences; accessibility; accommodation; discrimination



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1. Introduction and Motivation

“More than 1 in 4 adults (28.7%) in the United States have some type of disability” (CDC 2024), yet only 7.2% of faculty members identify as disabled according to a recent survey (COACHE 2024).¹ This suggests that there are lapses in recruitment and retention of disabled faculty, depriving institutions of higher education (IHE) from the many contributions offered uniquely by faculty with disabilities (Neca et al. 2022; Beaton et al. 2021). Whereas there is significant research addressing barriers and facilitators for students with disabilities, scholarship focusing on experiences and outcomes of disabled faculty remains relatively sparse, despite recent expansion of research and publication in the field by organizations (for exceptions, see COACHE 2024; Brown and Leigh 2020; Lindsay and Fuentes 2022; Price 2011, 2024; Sarchet 2024). Indeed, efforts to improve workplace conditions for

minoritized faculty routinely overlook disability (Lourens 2020; Shallish 2015), resulting in further exclusions even as institutions attend to issues affecting equity, inclusion, and belonging. Redressing harms perpetuated by IHE for more inclusive and equitable futures requires greater attention to the ways that disability impacts faculty experiences and outcomes. Here, we summarize findings from a mixed-methods survey of disabled faculty at a research-intensive, minority-serving public institution in the American Southwest, which we will refer to as Southwest University (SU), organizing the findings thematically and as a series of recommendations to redress associated harms. We emphasize that this analysis is opportunistic: the survey was crafted for internal use and data were not collected as part of a research study. However, given the continued need for evidence on disabled faculty experiences, even anecdotal evidence opportunistically analyzed may offer important insights (Sarchet 2024; Steinberg et al. 2002).

For readers unfamiliar with the literature on disability and academia, it is helpful to begin with the range of disabilities. Disabilities may be physical, emotional, mental, and/or sensorial; readily, situationally, or barely apparent; chronic or temporary, persistent or intermittent. However, disability is more than a diagnosis. In addition to a discourse of impairment and cure (known as the medical model), modern-day Disability Studies interweaves social, cultural, historical, legal, and political contexts and implications to understand the broader structures that render someone disabled (known as the social model). Connection between medical and social models emerges through disability identity development models that “explain how people with apparent and nonapparent impairments come to understand themselves in relation to the concept of disability” (Evans et al. 2017, p. 145). Intersectionality of disability and other identities is a growing area of Disability Studies, including in the field of higher education, and a pillar of Disability Justice, taking the prominent place of the first of ten principles laid out by Sins Invalid, an influential arts and advocacy movement by and for people with disabilities (Berne et al. 2018).² An intersectional approach to disability makes “room for interrogation of the fact that disabilities are frequently caused by racial and class-based inequalities, including economic injustices, environmental degradation, war, and mass incarceration” (Frederick and Shifrer 2019, p. 204). The present study grew out of institutionally supported efforts to deepen knowledge of disability at SU and is part of ongoing initiatives to advance justice for faculty with disabilities at and beyond SU.

Unfolding alongside shifts in disability discourse—from medical to social to justice-oriented—are changes in U.S. disability law, including legal requirements for IHE. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and subsequent 2008 amendments protect employees, including faculty, from discrimination and segregation, including loss of employment (Abram 2003; Rothstein 2018). “The purpose of the ADA was to eradicate barriers for the disabled without relieving a disabled employee from the obligation to perform the essential functions of his or her [sic] job” (Abram 2003, p. 3). While American IHE are subject to the same legal requirements as other employers under this body of legislation, there are several challenges to their effective implementation. First, legal requirements may be poorly understood by faculty (Moriña and Carballo 2017), including departmental and divisional leadership and other university administrators (Lombardi and Lalor 2017), and are frequently breached as a result (Evans et al. 2017). Consequently, disabled faculty may encounter resistance or misdirection when they seek redress for discrimination, provision of accommodation, or institutional advancement (see Sarchet 2024 for a recent review). Even when legal requirements are understood, they can be poorly and inconsistently enforced (Abram 2003), leaving both faculty and their institutions in precarious positions with respect to the law. Second, the law operates differently at different stages in a faculty’s career. Disabling conditions can be inherited or acquired

over the course of the lifetime, necessitating dynamic adjustments in accommodations for faculty. This means that some faculty may be passed over during recruitment efforts due to disability (McGunnigle 2023; Herman 2024), whereas others may find themselves managing an already heavy workload under the additional burdens of disability. These burdens range from “masking”—the emotional labor required of neurodivergent and other disabled faculty to “hid[e their] true emotions, cognitions, and behaviors to conform to expectations” (Cruz et al. 2025, p. 1)—to the “accommodations loop”—the institutional delays and cruelties in the accommodation process that come at the literal and figurative “costs” (in time, money, emotion, and energy) of disabled faculty (Price 2021, pp. 263 and 272 and elsewhere). While our study does not extend to academics who were not hired by SU, it considers the trajectories of disabled faculty’s careers, not only retention and promotion but also access to leadership roles and the challenges that faculty with disabilities encounter along these routes, including disclosure and accommodation. Moreover, our study follows scholarly and activist frameworks that privilege people with disabilities and the communities to which they contribute over legal compliance and the institutional dismissal of responsibility that it allows (Brown et al. 2019; Berne et al. 2018). To this end, we are committed to identifying and cultivating opportunities for SU and other IHE to gain fundamental understanding of an overlooked population in order to scrutinize and revise policies and infrastructures holistically to promote the welfare of all constituents.

Among the greatest contradictions to the welfare of faculty with disabilities is discrimination. Discrimination inside (and outside) IHE can arise under either ableism or disablism. Ableism denotes “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” (Campbell 2001, p. 44). In other words, ableism reinforces practices and beliefs that identify a paradigmatic way of being human and difference as *less than*. Ableism is common in IHE, arising, for example, in physical spaces and academic discourse when buildings and policies are inaccessible to disabled users (Titchkosky 2011; Dolmage 2017); at institutional and professional events that make no provision for the needs of disabled faculty (Brown and Ramlackhan 2022); and in professional and social interactions when colleagues either question the competence of a faculty member because the faculty member has a disability or assume hyper-competence for the same reason (Dolan 2023; Lourens 2020). Ableism also emerges as characterizations of accommodations as cheating or charity rather than affordance of equal opportunity (Dolan 2023; Sarchet 2024). Disablism refers to harassment and bullying of people with disabilities, such as when colleagues ask, tacitly or overtly, for disabled faculty to provide evidence of their disabilities to avoid perceptions of “faking it” (Lopez and Xu 2021). Here, we leverage a survey of faculty with disability distributed at SU to understand experiences of ableism and disablism.

Less malicious but no less pernicious than discrimination are the inconsistencies and confusions that arise when resources and decisions related to faculty with disabilities are decentralized. In addition to a lack of knowledge about the law, many faculty and administrators may not know where or how to seek out information. For example, the accommodations process can start in different corners within IHE, including human resources offices, equal employment opportunity offices, accommodation resource centers, and through discussions with unit leadership such as chairs and deans. In each case, legislation ostensibly prevents discrimination on the basis of disability and requires that accommodations be offered to present equal opportunity. However, these venues differ in understanding of and compliance with the law. Moreover, *informal* guidance related to disclosures and disability is common and less obviously bound by legislation. Well-meaning colleagues and leaders often advise faculty not to disclose their disabilities, forestalling or

preventing access to critical accommodations (Steinberg et al. 2002; Kerschbaum et al. 2017). Such advice does not appear discriminatory on the surface but can lead faculty to put themselves at increased risk by failing to request legally required supports. Here, we probe issues related to interactions with different corners of SU evaluated in the survey of faculty with disabilities, showing that decentralized and informal decision-making frequently contributes to inconsistencies in how faculty are supported, despite legal protections. Among these issues is the necessity for “leadership of those most impacted,” the second in Sin Invalid’s ten principles (Berne et al. 2018). While this principle poses unique challenges and opportunities for IHE (see Karpicz and Blake 2025), our study adds to the voices calling for institutional leadership that possesses not only sufficient awareness of disability, relevant law, and disability frameworks but also direct experience with disability.

While many IHE have come a long way since Steinberg et al. (2002) wrote, “By unspoken consensus, the word ‘diversity’ has evolved a specific meaning centered around gender, race, and ethnicity” (p. 3147), efforts to remediate harmful practices impacting faculty with disabilities lag behind those impacting other minoritized constituents. This is due in part to the tendency to emphasize compliance and liability, rather than well-being and belonging, in IHE’s management of issues related to disability (Goff-Albritton et al. 2022; Rothstein 2018). Whereas inclusive practices are modeled on reaping the rewards that derive from enhancing belonging among diverse faculty, compliance culture is rooted in skepticism, control, surveillance, and documentation. The impacts of such practices with respect to disability are plausibly far-ranging, as cyclical documentation of individual impairment and needed accommodations significantly increases the burden on individual faculty, the medical system, and decision-makers processing faculty accommodations (Emens 2020). Heavily bureaucratic processes also result in inequities among faculty due to variation in familiarity with medical and bureaucratic practices, and due to variable financial and energetic resources available to secure documentation. Although several outputs address the need to move beyond compliance in relation to disability for students in higher education (Bialka 2025; Saia 2022), the role of compliance culture in shaping experiences and outcomes among faculty with disabilities has yet to be fully investigated. We use the survey of faculty with disabilities to expand the exploration of areas where broader frameworks would facilitate inclusion and access for disabled faculty.

2. Methods and Population

This paper describes results from a Survey of Faculty with Disabilities (SFD) that was administered by SU’s office of empowerment and inclusivity in the fall of 2022.³ The first author developed and implemented the survey to inform internal understanding of workforce climate for faculty with disabilities. The SFD was sent via list-serv to all faculty members across branch campuses, main campus, and professional schools. It was delivered online and available in hard copy and was open for response from 15 August to 1 October 2022. The SFD included questions that yielded both quantitative and qualitative responses as well as image files, and respondents were informed that how they chose to respond to the prompts would determine the time required to complete the survey. Questions addressed a range of topics, including type of disability, disclosure of disability, occupational expectations, experiences of ableism and disablism, awareness of resources, health and well-being, accessibility, and interest in remaining at or departing from SU specifically and academia generally. Given the high visibility and minoritized status of faculty with disabilities, however, the survey expressly did not collect information concerning faculty’s campus, college, or department to avoid unintentional loss of confidentiality. Ethical oversight was sought from SU’s Office of the Institutional Review Board (OIRB) to conduct the internal

climate study from which these data are drawn, which determined that the study did not meet the definition of human subjects research.

Data were compiled and analyzed descriptively for quantitative results and thematically for qualitative results. Specifically, the authors explored qualitative results for themes that emerged from the data that, following prompts from the editor of this issue, would offer insights for redressing harms experienced by faculty with disabilities at SU. Quantitative descriptions (frequencies and percentages of faculty responses) complement qualitative themes, but both must be interpreted with caution given the potential biases inherent to online surveys and the ad hoc nature of data collection intended initially for internal use.

Positionality Statement: We are two tenured faculty members who have become disabled following years of service to our institutions. Specifically, we have been diagnosed with chronic illnesses that qualify as disabilities under the ADA. When our illnesses are in remission or relatively quiet, our disabilities are less apparent to others. When active, however, our illnesses disrupt routine personal and occupational tasks. The additional time and physical effort required to get to, let alone stay in, a classroom, laboratory, field site, or studio; the mental focus and endurance required of academic research, critical writing, and creative output; the emotional labor necessary for effective mentoring and collaboration—these presumptive, routine aspects of faculty life become difficult or impossible without accommodation. Yet, with accommodations in place (including ones we have had to create for ourselves), we have met and exceeded the expectations of our units, achieving tenure and promotion as well as awards for scholarship, teaching, and service. Both authors work actively to promote the welfare of disabled constituents in and beyond higher education. We leverage these lived experiences to inform this manuscript and include anecdotes from our own experiences in an anonymized fashion among other qualitative results described here. In doing so, we seek to bridge perspectival and analytical approaches to writing about faculty with disabilities, thereby advancing still-nascent efforts to complicate the methodologies and to expand publication venues for research on disability and higher education (see [Ramirez-Stapleton et al. 2025](#), p. 10; [Sarchet 2024](#), p. 174).

3. Results and Discussion

The data used in this article derive from a Survey of Faculty with Disabilities (SFD) that was sent via list-serv to over 2500 faculty across SU. Of these, 179 people started the survey, 142 identified as disabled, and 124 provided consent to participate, all of whom identified as disabled. The percentage of faculty who completed the survey is thus significantly less than the current best guess for the percentage of disabled faculty (7.8%) from a nationally representative survey ([COACHE 2024](#)). This discrepancy suggests a low response rate due to one or more factors, including how the survey was implemented, the choice of faculty with disabilities not to complete the survey (whether due to fear of exposure, survey overload, or another motivating reason), and the likelihood that not all faculty who qualify as disabled identify as such. Of the 124 who did complete the survey, almost 64% of reported being tenure-stream faculty, over 19% lecturers, over 9% each clinical and part-time faculty, and around 2% each research faculty, graduate instructor, post-doc or visiting faculty, or “something else.” Due to a combination of factors, including privacy requirements of ADA as well as voluntary non-disclosure, it is not possible to determine what percentage of SU faculty with disabilities responded to the survey.

Responses to the SFD offered several themes for redressing harms and improving workplaces for faculty with disabilities: (1) mitigating discrimination and stigma; (2) enforcing current policies that aim to improve working conditions for disabled faculty and reduce inconsistencies; and (3) moving beyond cultures of compliance to manage accommodations.

3.1. Experiences of Discrimination and Stigma in the Workforce Must Be Mitigated

The SFD documented significant ableism and disablism at SU. Respondents reported high rates of patronizing language (60%), stigmatizing statements (55%), and exclusionary behaviors (52%), and at all levels of the institutions, including from colleagues (63%), department chairs and program heads (41%), and college deans (29%). For example, one respondent related their colleagues' "sighs, facial expressions, or rolling eyes when having to ask, yet again, for a simple accommodation." Another respondent reported a college dean's casual use of "like idiots" and "crazy" to describe undesirable feelings of incompetence and incomprehension. Respondents also reported expressions of disbelief (e.g., "you don't look disabled") (63%) and depreciation of seriousness of a disability (53%). Overt instances of disablism were less common but still alarming: respondents reported barriers to accessing accommodations including discouragement from availing themselves of protections and resources provided by the ADA (18%) and resistance to implementation of authorized accommodations (19%). Tellingly, qualitative feedback demonstrated that faculty sometimes made decisions about their own accommodations based on perceived institutional discrimination against students with disabilities: "I have avoided requesting accommodations because I see that student accommodation requests are treated as burdensome and unacceptable."

Importantly, discrimination and stigma were experienced in both overt and less obvious ways. For example, faculty in the SFD reported learning from colleagues about illegal disclosures of personal information, including by chairs who are explicitly tasked with maintaining confidentiality. The effects of such discrimination are potentially broad and insidious, as the tone for understanding collegial needs is set in back channels where disabled faculty are not present. Indeed, fear of stigma and reprisals are frequently cited as sources of non-disclosure, an issue we return to below. Stigma and discrimination were also reported by those with both apparent and non-apparent disabilities.⁴ One anecdotal report indicated that the respondent's chair disclosed to the respondent that colleagues suspected that the respondent was "faking it" in order to create conditions that were more desirable in terms of work-life balance; 63% of faculty in the SFD reported similar forms of disbelief. Another respondent described how their chair relayed colleagues' complaints about the respondent receiving "special treatment" and seemed to expect thanks for responding to these complaints without disclosing the respondent's disability status and authorized accommodation. Numerous faculty identified access barriers, including the physical environment (77%), libraries (80%), parking structures (64%), bathrooms (66%), and other areas. Virtual environments were frequently cited as problematic, including SU's websites (79%) and other internal systems (e.g., employee data systems; 74%).

We must emphasize that experiences of discrimination were described in ways that suggest they were highly consequential, including being frequently cited as reasons that respondents offered when considering leaving SU (37% "frequently" and 31% "sometimes" thought of leaving). "I love [SU's home state] and many of my colleagues and students," explained one respondent, "but the years of discrimination and bullying have been taxing and very difficult to recover from." Others reported that their health and well-being had suffered as a result of discrimination, including 63% of respondents feeling isolated as a result of stigma, 86% experiencing anxiety, and 74% experiencing fatigue. The additional emotional and financial costs in terms of faculty health and healthcare implied by these results are not trivial. So too faculty departures represent a significant loss of investment in human capital in the institution. The loss of "disability gain"—that is, the concept that being disabled can be beneficial for individuals and organizations—can impede higher education's missions of humanist inquiry, scientific discovery, and creative expression (Garland-Thompson 2005). Such loss also carries ramifications for students, who are

deprived of disabled faculty's instructional insights and representational leadership and who may feel excluded from the same activities impacting their supervisors (Chouinard 2010).⁵

Faculty who responded to the SFD reported turning most frequently to SU's compliance, ethics, and equal employment office following experiences of ableism and disablism (42.5%), followed by faculty, colleagues, and administrators (31%) and counseling assistance and referrals (31%). The provision of such resources therefore offers critical supports for faculty experiencing negative workplace cultures. At the same time, these processes can be time- and energy-consuming, resulting in deleterious effects on job performance and physical and mental well-being (Bailey 2021; Emens 2020; Inckle 2018). Thus, prevention through trainings, such as Moriña and Carballo (2017) outline, and other efforts to prevent discrimination and stigma, including intersectional bias (see Evans et al. 2017; Peña et al. 2016; Piepzna-Samarasinha and Milbern n.d.), are necessary to complement resources that exist to address transgressions. "Educate people to be less ableist," as one respondent to the SFD succinctly put it. Other respondents called for "aggressive training," both university-wide and "specific . . . to supervisors," not only "to attempt to destigmatize perceptions of disabled" but also to increase recognition of faculty with disabilities "as capable, independent, and valuable to the organization." Still more respondents noted that this training would supplement extant training in the provisions of Title IX and ensure equitable emphasis on disability as a protected status that may impact the need for protection. In the current political climate of governmental intervention in institutional failures to interrupt certain kinds of bias, confronting anti-disability discrimination and stigma is a commonsense way to pursue and augment IHE's standard compliance-oriented frameworks.

3.2. Mitigate Inconsistencies in Provision of Accommodations

Respondents to the SFD reported inconsistent provision of accommodations and associated processes, barriers, and supports. Importantly, data from the SFD suggest that a significantly higher percentage of SU faculty with disabilities report disclosing to department chairs and program heads (62.5%) as opposed to the compliance, ethics, and equal employment office (26%), with obvious implications for such variation given the difference in training and familiarity with disability law. For some faculty, this route of disclosure has positive results. One respondent to the SFD wrote:

I work in a dept/college that I feel treats most everyone with dignity. I don't know what the culture is like in other departs [*sic*—but the culture of my department is very supportive, so I did not even feel afraid to disclose my chronic illness.

This same respondent noted, "I think if others see how faculty and staff with disabilities are treated in a department, they will make decisions to disclose or not based on that."

Many also reported more negative interactions with department-level accommodations. "Support of my accommodation that has gone through OEO [which office has been] wonderful. It's the department that doesn't seem to 'get it,'" explained one respondent. Institutional leadership also elicited some negative responses: "[SU] administration and administrators," wrote a respondent, "seems [*sic*] to pay lip service to disability, but do not actually care about it." Other responses indicated more pervasive problems:

I feel excluded and marginalized and then, when I try to explain why I need a simple accommodation, it's a hassle and folks don't want to listen. I feel like I have to try to prove that I actually do [have] a disability and am not just complaining over and over and over.

This university is so unwelcoming to individuals with disabilities (faculty, staff or students) it is really depressing.

The SFD suggests that consequences of failed accommodations are as severe as those related to discrimination. Just as institutional failures to provide accommodations negatively impact retention and graduation rates for students with disabilities (Blasey et al. 2023), so too they can drive faculty with disabilities—and, as the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, without disabilities (Smith et al. 2023)—from IHE. “I don’t want to stay,” explained one respondent to the SFD, “because my accommodation request doesn’t seem to mean anything to anyone and I’d rather not stay in that environment.”

Respondents to the SFD also identified solutions that are reflected in the literature on disability and academia. In addition to calls for the creation of a disability resource center and support for a nascent taskforce (see Saia 2022), respondents point to centralization as a way to help to alleviate burdens associated with misunderstandings and lingering biases in institutional structures. “Centralize services so faculty and staff do not have to beg or feel like they are asking for resources at the department or college level,” one respondent recommends. Streamlining formal routes to accommodations may offer more consistent, if potentially more bureaucratic, support for faculty with disabilities. Respondents suggest that, in addition to resources themselves, information about resources might be centralized. In response to a question about how SU could create a safe space for disclosure, one respondent wrote: “We should have training on this every year just as we do for active shooters and other workplace training. It felt like I had to discover everything on my own—how to navigate, etc.” Greater consistency could facilitate not only administrative efficiency—respondents note the amount of time required to request, arrange, and implement accommodations, for example—but also overall satisfaction: “making default policies, procedures, and environments flexible and inclusive would be helpful,” offers one respondent.

This last idea—revising institutional policies, procedures, and environments to be inherently accommodating—is a counterpart to the implementation of Universal Design (UD), which has been shown to support students and faculty, with and without disabilities, alike (e.g., Burgstahler 2009; Hamraie 2013; Silverman 2022). We heed the warning of Price et al. (2017) that “The notion of universal or participatory design—in which ‘access is conceived not as attaching to a disabled person but to the broad physical, social, and intellectual environment of the university’ (Kerschbaum et al. 2013, n.p.)—is difficult to find in practice, despite its long-standing theoretical recognition across multiple disciplines.” In other words, UD frameworks offer important starting points for creating accessible environments; full inclusion will still require modifications for individuals whose needs are not met by UD. These modifications, like the most commonly sought accommodations for faculty—scheduling flexibility, enhancing physical access to spaces, hybrid and remote work, provision of mobility assistance, altered timelines for completion of tasks—promise to benefit disabled and non-disabled faculty alike. It behooves leadership to advocate for consistent, even proactive, provision of these accommodations to faculty. Tapping leaders with disabilities, as recommended by Sins Invalid, would constitute meaningful action toward this larger goal.

3.3. Enforce Compliance, but Move Beyond It to Create Inclusive and Accessible Environments for Faculty with Disabilities

In theory, whether a disability is present at the time of hiring or acquired later, institutional policies and procedures support the provision of accommodations that enable faculty to perform their essential functions. In practice, however, the power dynamics of accommodation tend to disempower faculty who are best positioned to understand the

nature of the need for accommodations. Indeed, SU's compliance, ethics, and equal employment office describes the accommodations request process as an interactive dialogue between the University and the employee. Yet, in line with other scholarship, anecdotal reports indicate compliance mentalities that reinforce what is perceived to be a much more onerous, hierarchical, Department/College/University-knows-best product rather than a collaborative process.

Responses to the SFD revealed that faculty who requested accommodations were often met with resistance, skepticism, or assumptions that disabled faculty lack sufficient understanding and self-management to determine conditions of their employment. Whether this treatment was due to assumptions about impairment, institutional self-interest, or both differed from case to case, but the result was the same: faculty were denied expertise in the lived experience of their own disabilities (Hartblay 2020) and thereby disempowered in negotiations that determined whether they can perform the duties they were hired to perform. For example, one respondent described ableist resistance to a popular accommodation—online teaching—at all levels of SU:

My program director, the dean and provost all seemed to be unable to recognize cases when online teaching is a benefit to student and faculty health and welfare. I frequently felt belittled and even bullied for voicing a preference for an online option. Many colleagues voiced complaints of eye fatigue or other irritations with literal or no recognition of what it is like to teach in person with physical, emotional, and psychological limitations[—]it strikes me as very hypocritical.

This sort of qualitative data likely reflects biases at IHE about the source of the problem that compliance is designed to address. Rather than identifying the problem in ableist structures and cultures, in line with outdated models of disability (Brown et al. 2019), the individual requiring accommodation is identified as the problem.

Fears and anxieties related to disclosure are, ironically, another result of an emphasis on compliance. The quantitative responses to the SFD yield data that echoes recent scholarship. When asked about the reasons behind their decision to disclose or not to SU, respondents indicated fear of stigmatization (51.8%), privacy and confidentiality concerns (42.4%), and internalized bias about disability in academia (42.4%), although the question did not make clear if the referenced bias is internalized by the respondent or by colleagues and leadership. Qualitative data suggests something less often noted: how a compliance-oriented culture undermines actual compliance. Two illustrative responses are:

I am reluctant to seek formal accommodations, both because I fear it would affect future hiring decisions if my disability is “on file” and because often organizations’ “reasonable accommodations” are a menu of rigid options that satisfy the needs of the institution to follow the law, but don’t necessarily align with what the disabled person knows will best help them to succeed.

One time I asked for flexibility in my work schedule, I went through all the necessary and legal steps. The University HR office responded with a nasty letter that included a message something like this: “Why should we allow you more flexibility? Everyone has challenges, so why you and not everyone else?”

These responses suggest that when the IHE's only reason to accommodate faculty with disabilities is avoidance of legal action, rather than modifications that will holistically benefit the faculty member, faculty with disabilities are less likely to disclose.

How can IHE create a culture in which decision-makers augment a compliance-oriented framework with models that emphasize trust, well-being, and celebration of faculty with disabilities? One answer is a change in who is making decisions to include people with a range of disabilities. Over 44% of respondents to the SFD indicated that their

disabilities impact their institutional service, in particular, their exclusion from leadership roles (almost 50%). Yet, amplifying Sin Invalid's second principle of disability justice, faculty at SU observe that, in order to create a safe space for disclosure, there needs to be "more people with disabilities in leadership that are open about their challenges" and "representation of disabled faculty at the highest ranks and in visible positions [...], as people behind them would follow their example."

4. Limitations

This article was initially drafted as a perspective piece but reframed as a research report following review. We caution again that we are reporting on a survey that was conducted for internal uses, even if it provides important insights regarding how disabled faculty experience workplace conditions in academia. This involves well-described limitations in terms of representativeness, given biases associated with who chooses to respond to optional surveys. Answers reported here may be more extreme than those supplied to randomly selected participants. Similarly, the quantitative data must be interpreted cautiously, as they apply only to the individuals who completed the survey. These are likely only a fraction of the total number of disabled faculty at SU. We also did not directly address the intersectional concerns that may disproportionately affect faculty and students at a minority-serving public institution. These are all issues that could and should be systematically addressed via a prospective research study.

5. Conclusions

This article presents archived data from a recent institutional survey to understand the climate affecting faculty with disabilities at a public IHE in the American Southwest. These responses and related scholarship suggest a number of systemic weaknesses in current institutional structures and policies but also strategies that can be used to create equitable and accessible environments for faculty members with disabilities, including surveying existing policies, procedures, and faculty experiences; moving beyond compliance frameworks; proactively identifying gaps in policies; enforcing policies and procedures that protect disabled faculty; and continually reviewing and predicting strategies for even greater future success (see also [Mattison et al. 2022](#)). The SFD revealed overwhelmingly negative experiences from faculty respondents; however, the scholarship cited here also suggests that remediation can be successful when thoughtfully and optimistically implemented. Following others, "we are encouraging institutions to do the hard work of reconsidering their norms, values, and practices, questioning who they benefit and who they marginalize" ([Griffin et al. 2020](#), p. 16). This reconsideration can be done with optimism, as inclusion has widely been shown to benefit populations far beyond those initially targeted by inclusion efforts.

Implementing universal training for faculty, staff, and administrators represents an important first step toward reducing stigma and discrimination and inconsistent provision of accommodations ([Moriña and Carballo 2017](#)). The SFD revealed a lack of training in disability that extends across faculty and creates important knowledge gaps as faculty negotiate questions surrounding if, when, and to whom to disclose disability. Universal training is important because, even when faculty begin formally with the IHE's compliance office or HR, supervisors and administrators hold considerable sway over the outcome of accommodation requests. Further, a key axis of variation within institutional routes involves continuity: department chairs and program heads, as well as deans and provosts, occupy impermanent positions and may (re)turn to faculty status at any time, complicating already intricate institutional dynamics. Similarly, general differences in emphases on lab-, field-, bench-, and desk-work can serve as a rationale for flexibility in departmental

and unit-level policy- and decision-making (see [Sheremet et al. 2024](#)). This flexibility can bolster academic freedom and creativity as individuals adjust their teaching and scholarship to pursue evolving interests over the course of their careers. For disabled faculty, however, this flexibility can create significant uncertainty and alter the nature of day-to-day work, particularly as chairs, vice-chairs, and executive committee members move in and out of their agenda-setting positions. Training and greater involvement of centralized, knowledgeable administrators would do much to lessen such uncertainties.

Ultimately, many difficulties faced by disabled faculty are rooted in structures that are produced and reproduced by non-disabled individuals. Overcoming such structures involves a mixture of (1) enforcing extant policies and (2) re-visiting policies, structures, and cultures to identify changes most likely to positively impact the ability of disabled faculty to contribute their unique expertise to higher education. While these sorts of top-down efforts are necessary, they are likely to be most successful with buy-in from every level. Numerous guides to inform inclusion efforts, including for faculty from under-represented groups, may assist in related efforts. Adapting such practices for disabled faculty should be done thoughtfully to avoid “change trap[s]” ([Griffin et al. 2020](#), p. 3), and could involve several actions. Leaders can work explicitly to foster positive relationships with faculty with disabilities at all career stages. Indeed, democratizing knowledge, exposing the “hidden curriculum” ([Giroux and Purpel 1983](#)), and ensuring that faculty are onboarded in ways that provide access to the tools they need to succeed, including information on accommodations and accountability structures, are obvious first tasks toward improving outcomes for faculty with disabilities. Faculty with disabilities could be sought to serve in visible leadership roles, offering representative, even disruptive leadership to effect positive culture change ([National Academies 2020](#); [Simmons and Yawson 2022](#)).

More generally, this paper contributes to the scholarship promoting evidence-based practices for including faculty with disabilities in higher education. Other contributions to this Special Issue of *Social Sciences* demonstrate how minority-serving institutions, like SU, are ideal homes for research that brings together the epistemologies of diverse faculty. As researchers consider intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation with one another and other positionalities in complex ways ([Frederick and Shifrer 2019](#); [Cepeda 2021](#)), disability must be part of the inquiry ([Berne et al. 2018](#)). Future analysis of the SFD and more systematic research promise to contribute to our awareness and comprehension of the current barriers to accommodation, to help us imagine and build routes to meaningful institutional change, and to cultivate academic cultures that recognize and celebrate disability gain ([Bennett et al. 2020](#); [Felder 2021](#)).

All faculty may face disability at any point in their careers. It is important to raise awareness and improve environments so that faculty can thrive if and when they do face disability. Ultimately, IHE must move beyond compliance frameworks to incorporate disability into broader efforts to promote equity and inclusion, including celebrating rather than marginalizing disabled faculty for their unique insights, contributions, and innovations, working toward culture change, beyond integration, and toward true inclusion and belonging to allow all faculty to make their distinctive contributions to higher education.

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Notes

- ¹ Some people in the disability community prefer person-first language (“person with a disability”); others prefer identity-based descriptors (“disabled person”) (see [Wong 2019/2021](#) and [Brown 2020](#), pp. 59–60). We use these interchangeably in this article.
- ² For a fuller introduction to these and other models of disability, see [Evans et al. \(2017\)](#), esp. ch. 2. Among the most influential definitions and explications of the disability justice model is Berne et al. 2018.
- ³ Like Southwest University (SU), the office of empowerment and inclusivity is a pseudonym.
- ⁴ We prefer the language of apparent and non-apparent, as used by [Evans et al. \(2017\)](#), p. 145 and elsewhere), because it avoids the implications of intentional subterfuge of “hidden” and the assumption of sightedness of “invisible.”
- ⁵ While faculty disclosure of their disability status to students may contribute to disabled students’ sense of belonging in higher education, it may have negative impacts on faculty themselves when students bring “normative standards” to their evaluations of faculty, such as many IHE use for retention and promotion reviews ([Saltes 2020](#), p. 19).

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