

ACCESSIBILITY IN THE AGE OF COMPLIANCE: USING FLEXIBLE  
HEURISTICS TO PROMOTE GREATER WRITING PROGRAM ACCESS

By

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*“The push towards “the Universal” is a push towards seeing space as multiple and in-process. The emphasis on ‘design’ allows us to recognize that we are all involved in the continual production of space (and that students should be agents in this negotiation)...I fear that such [check]lists also invite us to believe that Universal Design would stop if the boxes were all checked. I am more interested in places to start thinking, doing, acting, and moving.”*

--Jay Dolmage, “Universal Design: Places to Start”

This dissertation is dedicated to disabled students, graduate teaching assistants, and faculty everywhere. Your stories are valid. Your experiences matter. You deserve to be heard.

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## ABSTRACT

Almost thirty years after the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (1990), writing program administrators (WPAs) still wrestle with what access means and what it entails. Numerous questions, each with serious implications for faculty, students, and administrators, have arisen from this struggle: What does compliance look like? Is institutional compliance the same as accessibility? Who should perform the work of addressing widespread, systemic accessibility issues?

In *Accessibility in the Age of Compliance: Using Flexible Heuristic to Promote Greater Writing Program Access*, I answer these questions in the form of a flexible heuristic, one designed to complement Tennessee's legislatively mandated accessibility audit for public colleges and universities. Unlike these prescribed access efforts, my heuristic centers on how to create accessible classrooms and writing programs for mentally disabled students. Informed by Universal Design for Learning, writing program administration theory, disability theory, and data from interviews with disabled graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), this heuristic contains two domains representing two aspects of writing programs. The first, which focuses on syllabus policies, pushes WPAs to consider how access statements, technology policies, and participation grades can expand or constrict access for mentally disabled students. The second, which covers programmatic and administrative efforts, prompts WPAs to evaluate their institution's ADA policies and procedures for disabled faculty,

GTAs, and students. By examining these policies, WPAs can determine what accommodations students are using in first-year writing courses, to look for ways to redesign, and to create specific spaces where disabled GTAs, faculty, and students can provide authentic feedback. Understanding that every university and writing program is unique, I frame this heuristic not as orthodoxy or as containing all exhaustive possibilities for WPAs, but rather as starting points for further examination and as possible avenues for accessible imagination. By engaging with this heuristic, this project models strategies to gain a deeper awareness of how systemic inaccessibility can exist within a writing program, but a better understanding of how to and how we might view access work as a starting place, rather than a destination.

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## CHAPTER I: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Since gaining protected legal status with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), disability has become an increasingly politicized concept in higher education. Though earlier legislation offered accessibility standards for secondary education, the ADA, with its sweeping mandates that govern both public and private universities, created accessibility benchmarks and standards for higher education where few existed before. The ADA also created a broader, more expansive definition of disability than had previously existed. Nearly thirty years later, colleges, universities, and, increasingly, writing programs are still wrestling with what access means and what it entails. Numerous questions, each with serious implications for instructors, students, and administrators, have arisen from within this struggle: What does compliance look like? Is institutional compliance the same as accessibility? Who should be responsible for addressing widespread accessibility issues?

State legislatures have taken the lead in promoting accessibility in higher education, arguably prioritizing avoiding costly litigation and bad press over creating an equitable learning environment for disabled students. In 2014, with prompting from the Tennessee State Legislature, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) mandated that all public universities should audit their existing educational materials and create new policies governing accessible instructional materials and course documents. The THEC also recommended that all faculty be trained on creating accessible course documents, but did not

provide any specific guidelines or best practices for how universities should conduct said training. Given that this accessibility mandate was unfunded, Tennessee's two university systems opted to create generalized, interdisciplinary trainings over trainings that would concentrate on accessibility within individual academic content areas.

Though this directive contained specific goals—to make technologies and educational materials accessible for all students and to train faculty in ADA compliance—the plan to accomplish this goal was flawed. Rather than presenting accessibility as a nuanced, dynamic, and context-specific educational framing, the Tennessee Board of Regents' Training merely provided faculty with a series of regimented checklists to use and basic information about which document templates were ADA compliant. Disability and composition scholars have long noted the methodological difficulties that checklists can present where accessibility is concerned: the standardization and prevalence of checklists in academic spaces can offer a presumed and unchecked sense of authority (Oswal and Meloncon 61) to uninformed parties. The absence of certain disabilities on a checklist can imply that they are not severe enough to impact the educational environment or, worse, are not legitimate disabilities at all. These same issues of authority are amplified when accessibility checklists are mandated legislatively, which has been the case in Tennessee as well as in a number of other states. Though the intentions behind these instruments—providing general guidelines for constructing accessible documents for

instructors who have not received in-depth training—is a noble one, promoting accessibility is still a problematic enterprise.

The subsequent accessibility training only addressed accessibility as it pertained to students with visual, auditory, motor, and learning disabilities. This means the accessibility focus was only on disabilities where the access issues were the most objectively discernable and, therefore, most prone to litigation. Mental disability<sup>1</sup> access issues, which are often more connected to instructional pedagogies and classroom environments, were not included or even addressed at any point in the accessibility mandate. Part of this could be due to mental disability's nuanced, conditional, and often individualized features—the nature of mental disability makes checklists and training modules less effective forms of access remediation. However, to omit mental disability from accessibility conversations is to provide an incomplete picture of disability as a whole. Any considerations of accessibility must cover more than whether materials are digitally available or if the physical specifications of the learning space are appropriate. Traditional accessibility measures like these that only take into account tangible teaching products and not pedagogy risk painting disability and accessibility into definitive corners; namely, reducing complex and individualized notions of accessibility into overly reductive and neat categories.

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<sup>1</sup> “Mental disability” is an umbrella term that includes learning disabilities and neuroatypicality, including all forms of mental illness and autism spectrum disorder. Generally speaking, it is the preferred term to refer to these forms of invisible disabilities.

Though excluded from legislative treatments of accessibility, mental disability access efforts have been prominently represented in both disability studies and composition and rhetoric scholarship. The access issues that students with mental disabilities face are not addressed via checklists and standardized solutions; mending their access gaps in writing programs requires a more elastic approach to accessibility. This approach to accessibility is more concerned with how pedagogical practices, unquestioned assumptions, and organizational procedures can be inaccessible for both students and faculty. Margaret Price's *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*, arguably the most influential text on mental disability and composition, attributes mental disability inaccessibility to an abundance of kairotic spaces in academic environments. Price defines kairotic spaces as environments where:

1. "Events are synchronous; that is, they unfold in 'real time.'
2. Impromptu communication is required or encouraged.
3. Participants are tele/present. That is, they may be present in person, through a digital interface such as a video chat, or in hybrid form.
4. The situation involves a strong social element.
5. Stakes are high." (Price 5)

Classrooms (along with often ambiguously defined course requirements, such as "participation") are prime examples of these kairotic spaces. Nearly all kinds of courses—whether they operate in face-to-face classrooms or through a web interface—contain spontaneously forming elements, which can cause access

problems. However, many instructors and administrators struggle to understand how these kairotic features are inaccessible, as many of the attributes of kairotic spaces are foundational features of composition, both as a discipline and as a pedagogy. This conceptual gap often makes kairotic spaces harder to quantify in the same way that document-based accessibility issues are. Administrators and legislatures can determine how many syllabi in a department follow objective ADA guidelines. Determining how many classrooms overemphasize impromptu participation is more context specific and less quantifiable.

Considering mental disability within the same context as traditional accessibility audits raises even more questions for educational stakeholders at all levels: How does accessibility differ where mental disabilities are concerned? How does accessibility reinforce—or even question—normate-based expectations about who students and faculty are and should be? How should writing programs (and by extension, universities) assess accessibility? What kind of assessment tools can WPAs use to determine the level of mental accessibility in their writing programs?

In this dissertation project, I address these concerns by theorizing and creating a flexible heuristic for writing program administrators (WPAs) to address pedagogic and programmatic access in writing programs. With this heuristic, I advocate for **a design model of accessibility** over previous models that promote the exclusive use of accommodations or merely retrofit existing classroom materials. This design model relies heavily on Universal Design for Learning principles and contains two primary domains. The first domain looks at



how WPAs can promote more accessible classroom spaces through the use of equitable syllabus policies. In the second domain, I invite WPAs to examine existing policies and procedures regarding access to discover new ways to become more accessible. To illustrate how this domain can work in a university context, I also include a sample assessment using my local context as a guide. Understanding that every university and writing program is unique, I frame this heuristic not as orthodoxy or as containing exhaustive possibilities for WPAs, but rather as starting points for further examination and as possible avenues for accessible imagination. Existing scholarship in disability studies, writing program administration, and rhetoric, composition, and writing studies provide the theoretical framework for this dissertation.

Given that traditional accessibility audits are beneficial for portions of the disabled student population and that associated legislative mandates are unlikely to vanish from higher education, this heuristic is intended to complement, not replace, existing accessibility efforts. However, I have designed this heuristic so that WPAs can address the mental accessibility needs for faculty (including graduate teaching assistants) as well as students. Such an effort has not been attempted before. Most conversations about accessibility in higher education tend to emphasize student and faculty access needs separately. By addressing faculty and student accessibility together, I emphasize the crucial role that WPAs play in creating and facilitating writing programs that are accessible for all localized stakeholders. Also, considering student, GTA, and faculty accessibility together rather than separately provides WPAs and those in the larger writing

studies discipline a clearer picture of how (in)accessibility flourishes within higher education. In this opening chapter, I provide historical and legislative context for accessibility and disability in higher education. I also provide a scholarly review of the disability and composition research most relevant to the project as a whole. This chapter concludes with a brief outline of the subsequent chapters in this dissertation.

### **Disability, Access, and Education: Historical and Legislative Origins**

It is crucial that WPAs and other university stakeholders have a basic understanding of the legal minimums for accessibility before discussing how to implement Universal Design for Learning within a writing program. Most of the current accessibility efforts in writing programs and colleges have their roots in the Americans with Disabilities Act. Passed in July 1990, the ADA has had a profound effect on the ways in which disabled persons interact in all forms of public life, including higher education. Previous pieces of legislation, such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975) provided guidelines for accommodating disability in elementary and secondary educational environments, but the ADA was the first legislative effort to offer guidelines for student accommodation and mandate accessibility minimums for university contexts. Though none of these previous legislative acts provided disability protections for college students and faculty, they laid a foundation for the writers of the ADA to build upon.

One of the unique features of the Americans with Disabilities Act is that disability activist groups played a pivotal role in the ADA's earliest rumblings,

particularly in structuring disability and access discrepancies as civil rights issues rather than as charity cases. This was slow, painstaking work, which required building long-term coalitions inside various activist and political networks before any legislative attempts could be made. Before disability rights activists could lobby Congressional leaders directly, they needed broader and more intersectional grassroots support. In 1981, leaders of the Disability Rights Education Defense Fund (DREDF) invited NAACP leaders, Native American leaders, and the Women's Legal Defense Fund to a series of talks in Berkley, California. The purpose of these meetings was not only to build community amongst marginalized social groups, but to persuade these leaders that disability was a civil rights issue that was worthy of their support. In his *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans With Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority its Rights*, Lennard J. Davis elaborates on the rhetorical moves informing (or—depending on what you want to emphasize--resulting from) this summit:

The plan was clever because, first of all, it got the disability folks to speed up on civil rights and the civil rights people on disability...Everyone realized that if you wanted effective legislation around disability, it could no longer follow the model it had in the past—rehabilitation for war veterans, assistance for disabled people, and jobs programs. Instead, legislation had to be focused on civil rights—a much more inclusive category that would open more doors. (25)

This concerted shift away from “assistance” and towards a civil rights model is crucial, as both disability rights and disability studies groups advocate for accessible solutions that promote autonomy for disabled individuals. The move away from assistance and towards independence certainly has ramifications in educational environments, where pre-ADA education for disabled students consisted largely of disabled students being isolated and excluded from mainstream environments. Additionally, the ADA was modeled after key civil rights regulations and laws, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which allowed the ADA writers to reframe disability as a civil rights issue. This legal structuring created a foothold for adding “disability” as a protected group in anti-discrimination efforts, alongside previous racial and gender equity rulings.

Unlike earlier disability-related regulations, the ADA provided sweeping, large-scale mandates where few, if any, existed before. The ADA’s various titles, which contain provisions on employment and both private and public universities, touch nearly every aspect of being a person in public<sup>2</sup>. Creating access standards under the ADA proved to be difficult, highly nuanced work—how could legislators create universally applicable legal standards when disability issues are often individualized and inextricably linked to a local context? In order to take these considerations into account, the language of the ADA is rather elastic, noting that educational entities should provide “reasonable accommodations” for students, but not specifying the boundary between reasonable and

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<sup>2</sup> Numerous universities, including MTSU, had official offices that served disabled students on their campuses long before 1990, but they were not legally required to do so, and there were little or no legislative regulations to base any access decisions on.

“unreasonable” nor providing examples of what accommodations should look like. Therefore, what constitutes “reasonable accommodations” can vary wildly from university to university. In the years following the ADA’s passage, this same verbal elasticity left the ADA open to numerous legal challenges, which narrowed the scope of the ADA and made it difficult for disabled Americans to challenge inaccessible conditions. One of the most well-known examples of this judicial tightening is *Sutton vs. United Airlines (1999)*, in which two flight attendants who were visually impaired sued the airline for discrimination under the ADA. In this ruling, the Supreme Court found that since the flight attendants wore corrective lenses, their disability no longer “substantially limited” any of their major life activities (“*Sutton vs. United Airlines, INC*”). This ruling, in particular its definition of the phrase “substantially limits,” was used as precedent to argue that disabled persons who took medications (including those with mental illnesses) were no longer considered disabled and were not to be granted ADA protections.

In 2008, after eighteen years of legal precedents had narrowed the ADA’s definitions of access and disability, Congress revisited these judicial limitations and passed the ADA Amendments Act, which expanded and reframed the legal standards for both disability and access. This act also overturned previous rulings like *Sutton vs. United Airlines*, rulings that constricted the legal definitions of disability. Additionally, the ADA Amendments Act clarified exactly what could be classified as a disability, adding provisions that included disabilities with cyclic or intermittent features, like depression, bipolar disorder, and multiple sclerosis. The ADA Amendments Act also contains bolder, more progressive language

about the prevalence of the social model of disability and its hindrance of disabled Americans:

The Congress finds that physical and mental disabilities in no way diminish a person's right to fully participate in all aspects of society, but that people with physical and mental disabilities are frequently precluded from doing so because of prejudice, antiquated attitudes, or the failure to remove societal and institutional barriers. ("ADA of 1990, As Amended")

What makes this wording so pleasantly surprising for those invested in disability issues is that Congress is upholding the social model of disability, which argues that disabled people are more restricted by outside attitudes and barriers toward their disability than by the medical realities of their diagnoses. To see a governmental entity officially acknowledge the extent of this model's ramifications marked a noted shift in disability perception. Additionally, the ADA Amendments Act specifically clarifies that in legal matters regarding disability and access, the burden of proof should not be on individuals to prove their degree of disability, but for public entities to prove their level of accessibility, a move which specifically reversed two Supreme Court cases on disability ("ADA of 1990, As Amended").

### **Literature Review**

This historical fight for access has had its impact on university classrooms, where legislation like the ADA has created space for more disabled students to attend college and learn in more traditional classroom environments. However,

the passage of the ADA and the use of accommodations for disabled students has not ended the fight for access. Though the accommodation model of accessibility has provided access for countless individuals in higher education, it is not without its flaws and limitations. My heuristic, which is focused on access in writing programs, works to address these limitations through its method and its location at the intersections of accessibility, disability, and Universal Design for Learning.

### **Universal Design (for Learning)**

In recent years, disability studies scholarship has been moving away from the accommodation model and towards a design model, where issues of access are remedied and then applied to the environment as a whole, which is then redesigned to benefit all learners. The impetus behind this shift comes from the exigence of access—there is a lag time between when students ask for accommodations and when they receive them. The accommodations do not function retroactively, and the academic environment itself does not change; accommodations are essentially exceptions for individual students on a case-by-case basis.

Under a Universal Design for Learning framework, academic environments are reconfigured in such a way that anticipates the needs of both disabled and nondisabled by including multiple forms of representation, expression, and engagement. Most scholars are quick to point out how Universal Design for Learning (which is frequently shortened to UDL or sometimes even just “Universal Design”) is not a means to an end, but a process of identifying

starting points (Dolmage, 2005, Price, 2011). Critics of UDL within disability studies point out how the broadness of the concept can be used negatively; Jay Dolmage points out that Universal Design for Learning can easily be reduced to a vague, meaningless buzzword or repackaged as a “marketing tool” (139-140). However, this heuristic incorporates UDL not in neoliberal terms, but as an entry point for WPAs to begin thinking about disability rhetorically instead of as something that only exists when a Disability Service Office sends an accommodation letter.

### **Mental Disability and Access**

Popularized by Margaret Price in 2011, “mental disability” has been a prominent subcategory within disability studies, especially in terms of defining the concept of kairotic spaces and how they connect to mentally disabled students and faculty members. For these individuals, the demand to be “on” in academic contexts can cause an incredible amount of mental, emotional, and, in some cases, physical strain. Kairotic spaces largely exist in the eye of the beholder; that is, the perception about whether or not these spaces exist is often uneven between participants. One person may feel as if a space is stressful, inaccessible, and harmful, while another person in the same situation might feel relaxed, comfortable, and able to perform academically. These imbalances are everywhere in writing programs—sometimes students are apprehensive in classrooms (and are highly anxious about appearing to be stupid, careless, or ill prepared), and in others, instructors and even WPAs may bear the burden of the kairotic strain and be paralyzed by nervousness. Effectively addressing these



kairoitic spaces involves creating “ethical infrastructures,” or spaces that have been redesigned rather than merely retrofitted. When instructors and WPAs create more ways for instructors and students to move, more instructors and students are included and have the chance to thrive. Yergeau et. al, in “Multimodality in Motion: Disability and Kairoitic Spaces,” remind us that “if we change our attitudes to expect and welcome disabled people in our institutions, our approach to design will stem from these expectations.”

Within this expansive collection of disability research, Anne-Marie Womack’s “Teaching is Accommodation: Universally Designing Composition Classrooms and Syllabi” is one of the few sources that offer direct implications for the content domains of my heuristic. Focusing on how instructors can improve their syllabus design as a way to create more access for students, Womack uses access statements and other course policies as starting points, while simultaneously pointing out how “‘reasonable accommodation’ is institutionally designed to change the least possible amount” (496). Other sources, such as Orem and Simpkins’s work with trigger warnings on syllabi, point out how other additions to syllabi like trigger warnings function as reverse disclosures, or ways to reclaim assumptions about who is allowed in classroom spaces.

Disability studies in composition is a relatively new and rapidly growing subfield, with dozens of exciting new contributions being added yearly to the collective corpus of knowledge. That being said, there are still many corners of the composition discipline that remain relatively untouched by disability research. Writing program administration research is certainly one. Very few pieces on

WPA work and disability exist; in fact, the most significant contributions are Amy Vidali's "Disabling Writing Program Administration," a 2015 article which focuses on WPA narratives, the presence of disability, and the WPA role, and a disability themed edition of *WPA Journal* from 2017. In designing this heuristic and its two domains specifically for WPAs, I hope to contribute to this small but growing collection of knowledge.

### **Heuristic Methods**

Research on Universal Design and widescale access efforts has mostly focused on defining what practitioners shouldn't do with Universal Design as opposed to providing guidelines or considerations for how to determine the kinds of access issues that may exist within writing programs. These criticisms are valid ones—Universal Design and its counterparts (including Universal Design for Learning) are rhetorical ways of thinking, moving, and being, not a series of criteria that can be distilled down to fit onto checklists (Dolmage, 2005, Oswal and Meloncon, Dolmage, 2017, Wood et al). However, this is precisely how Universal Design for Learning is often used, which Jay Dolmage equates to "hollowing-out [Universal Design for Learning's] activist potential." Well-intending instructors and administrators, looking to provide faculty members with a starting point for access, have distilled complex notions of expression, engagement, and representation down into quick and simple checklists (Brewer et al, Wood et al). These checklists are posted as official resources online (a common example being the University of Washington's CAST project), and other universities, looking for concise tips on being accessible, download, copy, and re-distribute

them. However, there is one major problem with this: disability is rarely simple, and rectifying issues of systemic inaccessibility is never a quick endeavor.

Other Universal Design for Learning scholars point out that resources and checklists like these merely provide cookie-cutter guidelines and fail to consider that all writing classrooms and programs are not the same. Oswal and Meloncon argue that while accessibility checklists are used to provide “faculty a starting place on issues where they may not have a lot of experience...they are often both the starting and ending place for accessible course design” (63). The heuristic I have created, by containing open-ended, discursive prompts, presents starting points for accessibility, not criteria that can be quickly completed, checked off, and forgotten. These prompts serve as nudges more than hard and fast guidelines, as responding to them requires WPAs to do some informational investigation within their programs instead of completing a specified action. In designing a heuristic as opposed to a checklist, my goal is to guide WPAs to start a process of critical inquiry towards disability, one that leads to long-term access efforts instead of quick, momentary “fixes.”

### **Data**

Data used in this dissertation comes from three key sources: interviews conducted with mentally disabled English department GTAs, autoethnographic narrative excerpts, and a survey on accommodations given to General Education English faculty. These IRB approved interviews, conducted during the summer of 2017, consisted of in-person conversations with five graduate teaching assistants in the English Department. These participants include:

- Paige, a fourth-year Ph.D. student with generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder with agoraphobia, and major depressive disorder.
- Josey, a third-year Ph.D. student with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, anxiety, depression, and an unspecified learning disability.
- Jamie, a first-year Ph.D. student with multiple sclerosis and anxiety.
- Ruth, a third-year Ph.D. student with ADHD, major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and an unspecified learning disability.
- Lance, a first-year Ph.D. student with type II bipolar disorder.

Participants were given pseudonyms and were asked a series of questions about their experiences in the GTA programs, whether or not they received accommodations, disclosure, and how disability impacts the liminality they experience as graduate students and first-year writing instructors. A complete list of interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

I have also included first-person narrative excerpts as a form of data in this dissertation. The use and inclusion of first-person narratives are a prominent feature in disability studies scholarship, as they can be used as a way to engage with dominant discourses about disability, especially in situations where disabled persons have been “required to conform to arbitrary norms” (Couser 95.) The prominence of the social model of disability, which “locates disability not in anomalies of individual bodies but in exclusionary features or practices of the social and cultural environment” has led to a rise in first-person narratives being used to emphasize the social features of inaccessibility (Couser 95). Like the data from the GTA interviews, these narrative excerpts pertain to my own

experiences as a disabled GTA at MTSU and are focused on accommodations, inaccessibility, and disclosure and analyzed similarly to the GTA interviews. These excerpts have been formatted similarly to those found in Amy Vidali's "Disabling Writing Program Administration:" they are arranged using italics, single-spacing, and indentation from the main body of text. The purposes of these excerpts are to offer additional information about the depth and variance of experiences mentally disabled GTAs have at MTSU and to add some complexity to the overall analysis.

The use of personal narrative excerpts, interviews from disabled graduate teaching assistants, disability scholarship, and composition scholarship underscores the dissertation's and heuristic's mixed methodological underpinnings. An approach like this is crucial to doing disability effectively. Disability is not a one-size fits all experience, and the rhetorical complexities of accessibility indicate that access grows, shifts, and changes depending on the location, kairos, and individual rhetors present. In order to theorize and develop effective disability-friendly WPA practices, it is crucial to employ a variety of methodological strategies. The use of interviews and personal narrative excerpts is a particularly strategic choice, one designed to help anchor this dissertation and heuristic squarely within the experiences of disabled GTAs. This centering is intended to better align the disability and access work with the central axiom of the disability rights' movement, which can also serve as a check for access work: "Nothing about us without us."

The final selection of data comes in the form of responses from an online survey of General Education English faculty and GTAs, specifically those who taught ENGL 1010, ENGL 1020, or both during the Fall 2018 semester. These responses are almost entirely quantitative and serve as the basis for addressing a specific heuristic prompt. This data will be analyzed more in Chapter Three, which focuses on the second domain of my writing program access heuristic.

### **Chapter Summaries**

#### *Chapter 2: Accessible Policies as Pedagogies in First-Year Writing Courses*

My second chapter centers on the first domain of my heuristic, which concentrates on how the syllabus policies that instructors include in first-year writing courses can expand or constrict accessibility for students. In this chapter, I analyze how accessibility statements, equitable technology policies, and well-defined participation expectations can be used to dramatically expand access for students in first-year writing courses while promoting best practices for instruction. Drawing upon Anne-Marie Womack's work with syllabus design, current debates on technology use in classrooms, and Yergeau et al's research on disability, I detail how WPAs and instructors alike can rearticulate these policies in ways that create more spaces for students to move through Universal Design for Learning.

In addition grounding this work in disability and composition scholarship, I draw on data from my interviews with disabled GTAs as well as narrative excerpts to demonstrate the heuristic's use. Subheadings for this chapter include the three prompts contained in this first domain: "How does your writing program

promote the use of access statements in courses?”, “How are technology policies constructed in order to promote equity for disabled students?”, and “How are abstract concepts like “participation” defined and quantified?”. These prompts provide the chapter’s organizational structure.

### *Chapter 3: Access in Programmatic Writing Program Spaces*

The third chapter focuses on the second half of the accessibility heuristic, which centers on writing program accessibility outside of the classroom. Several of the prompts in this domain pertain to a WPA’s level of awareness about the localized procedures and protocols behind current accessibility efforts, namely, the range of accommodations granted to students and the process by which these procedures are made known and available for faculty. To demonstrate how irregular and scattered the accommodation process for faculty members is, I include information about how MTSU; the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga; Volunteer State Community College; and Lipscomb University approach access differently. I reference accommodations throughout this chapter not as an ideal model of access, but as a legal reality and a common starting point for a sustained discussion about access. Given that accommodations are a permanent legal standard in higher education, I argue that WPAs should have an in-depth awareness of their processes for securing accommodations and what accommodations are being used in their programs before embarking on any greater access efforts.

Data from my disabled graduate teaching assistant interviews, personal narrative excerpts, current disability and composition scholarship, and various

information sources about accommodations are crucial to illustrating the concepts covered in this chapter. My goal for this chapter is that WPAs will have a greater understanding of the institutional forces that can impede faculty, student, and GTA access and be better equipped to devise some new, targeted strategies for increasing access within their local contexts.

*Chapter 4: Heuristic in Action at Middle Tennessee State University: A Case Study*

The fourth chapter is a case study designed to demonstrate how my accessibility heuristic can be used within the context of a specific writing program by using my local context as an example. Information about the heuristic's design as well as a brief profile of MTSU's General Education English Office precede the completed heuristic. In completing this heuristic, I draw upon my previous experience as a graduate writing program administrator as well as publicly available documents (including website resources and information) in forming these responses. By using the heuristic as a discursive and reflective tool, I illustrate how writing programs can respond to these concerns with a greater level of nuance and detail than could possibly be contained in a mere checklist. This idea of nuance is critical to these findings, as some of the prompts reveal responses that are much more complicated than their initial questions might suggest. Ultimately, these responses illustrate the complex, often interconnected, ways that inaccessibility can flourish in academic environments.

In the second half of the chapter, I provide a short selection of access strategies devised during my time at MTSU that correspond with the findings in



the case study. These access strategies relate exclusively to the first domain of the heuristic.

### Writing Program Accessibility Heuristic

Domain I: Policies and/as Pedagogy
How does your writing program promote the use of access statements in courses?
How are technology policies constructed in order to promote equity for disabled students?
How are abstract concepts like “participation” defined and quantified?
Domain II: Programmatic Issues of Access
How knowledgeable are faculty, GTAs, and WPAs about the range of accommodations their Disability Services Office offers?
How knowledgeable are GTAs, faculty, and WPAs about the process for securing faculty accommodations?
What kinds of accommodations are commonly used in your first-year writing courses?
What access gaps and opportunities for redesign do these accommodations reveal?
Where in your program do you have spaces for authentic feedback from disabled GTAs, students, and faculty?

*Chapter 5: “What Do We Do Now?”: Professional Development as a Next Step for WPAs”*

The final chapter of my dissertation examines the overall effects of working with this heuristic. I use the word “effects” neutrally, as I detail some of the immediate challenges that may arise from trying to rectify some of these access gaps. One universal recommendation I provide is that WPAs strategically increase their professional development opportunities on access and disability in order to address these concerns. I also detail the various ways to increase disability-themed professional development opportunities while holding to accessible best practices. By following through with their heuristic results, WPAs can address the praxis-based accessibility issues in their program through a theoretically informed framework. Numerically quantifying the pedagogical and programmatic impact of using this heuristic may not be possible, but addressing these access issues has the potential to boost student retention, increase student engagement, and promote disability as a form of diversity.

WPAs have an opportunity to change the culture of their programs through engaging with this heuristic, centering disability within their programs, and looking for ways to universally design their pedagogical and administrative practices. When accessibility becomes standard, it becomes expected, which then creates more ways for students, GTAs, faculty to move within classrooms, programs, and the larger discipline of composition. In this way, WPAs can view access work in their programs as places to start rather than as a means to an end.

*Epilogue: Disability 2.5 in Composition Studies and Whispering Disability*

The final portion of this dissertation is a brief epilogue, where I expand on how rethinking the ways in which we do disability in writing programs has the potential to change how disability and access issues are addressed in the larger rhetoric, composition, and writing studies discipline. Such ideological shifts have the potential to spread into larger academic spaces, creating greater equity for disabled students, GTAs, and faculty, and other disabled academics<sup>3</sup> as well. I use the framework found in Tara Wood, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson's "Moving Beyond Disability 2.0 in Composition Studies" as a jumping off point and inspiration for the first half of the epilogue's title.

In the second half of the epilogue, I chart my own place in disability studies, detailing where I am now in regard to disability and access work and how this connects to the larger discipline. I use the metaphor of the "Disability Whisperer" and its inverse, whispering disability, as a metaphor marking this shift in professional identity.

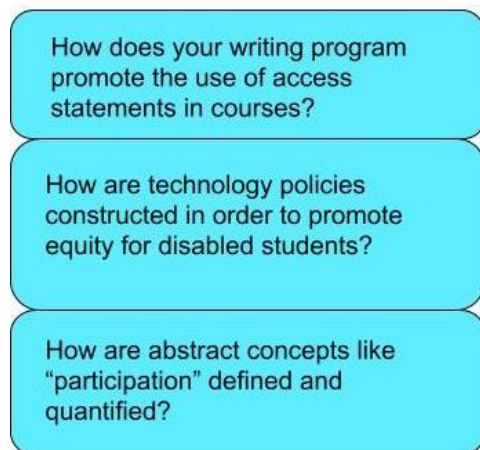
Disability research in composition studies is a robust, vibrant specialty, one with new and exciting contributions emerging almost daily. However, the field simply has not developed enough as of this writing to directly address mental disability accessibility at a programmatic level, nor how student, graduate teaching assistant, and instructor accessibility issues connect and contribute to one another. This newness simply means that not enough knowledge has been

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<sup>3</sup> By "disabled academics," I refer to independent academics and even those who have had to leave academic work due to disability and chronic inaccessibility.

produced to account for many of the possible gaps, both practical and theoretical, where disability in writing programs is concerned. In spite of these gaps, this literature review illustrates that enough key pieces have been produced to consider new theoretical configurations, new ways of moving within writing programs. To consider these access issues within the realities of writing program administration theory and praxis is a daunting and nuanced prospect, but one worth pursuing. In subsequent chapters, I balance the theoretical and activist-tinged aspects of mental disability theory within the realities and research of composition studies, with the ultimate goal of producing a heuristic conducive to improving access for all.

## CHAPTER II: ACCESSIBLE POLICIES AS PEDAGOGIES IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING COURSES



*Figure 1: Policies and Pedagogies Domain*

In this chapter, I discuss the first domain of my access heuristic, which is focused on various course policies (access statements, technology policies, and participation grades) and the way that they are demonstrations of classroom pedagogies and accessibility. This chapter’s purpose is to provide the theoretical underpinnings and rationale for the domain, using the heuristic as well as autoethnography and interviews as methods. Data for this chapter includes interviews with disabled GTAs about their teaching strategies, their liminal identity as students and instructors, and their experiences with accessibility and inaccessibility in higher education. Though the primary audience for the heuristic as a whole is WPAs, this domain’s exclusive focus on syllabus statements effectively expands the audience to include writing instructors as well.

A course's policies—the policies we include on our syllabi, the policies that are often covered during the first week of the semester—are the backbone of our pedagogies and serve as “entry points” for students who enter our classes for the first time (Neaderhiser). Classroom syllabi and, by extension, the policies contained in them, “act metatemporally to assert the teacher's ethos by way of expressed authority, past experience, and planning, while providing students a view of future expectations—not only what will be expected of them but also what they can expect of the class and their teacher” (Neaderhiser). Course policies are rhetorical contributions to our syllabi: the existence and wording of these policies reveal who and what instructors, departments, and universities value, and these value estimations are discernable from the first day of class for our students. These policies and syllabi serve administrative purposes as well. Policies are what students, instructors, and WPAs often return to when disagreements and concerns arise—what does the syllabus say? These documents serve as our anchors, our stabilizing forces for the global and local classroom concerns that comprise a semester of teaching. Simply put, policies matter, and the wording and intent of these policies have real consequences for students and faculty alike.

Given the importance and power of classroom policies, it is imperative that these policies are, in keeping with Universal Design for Learning, flexibly constructed, anticipatory of disabled students' needs, and responsive to feedback. The very idea of flexible course policies may seem either unorthodox, oxymoronic, administratively troublesome, or a combination of the three, but

creating course policies that lack rigidity and contain enough space for students to move is critical to promoting access. However, implementing Universal Design for Learning does not mean making a list of disabilities and then brainstorming policies that could work for all of them. Adopting what Shannon Walters calls an “impairment-specific” approach to policies and pedagogy is dangerous, as this approach envisions disabilities as fixed and unchanging and “may limit students and teachers to consider specific disabilities and specific solutions instead of encouraging more comprehensive understandings of disability and ability as contingent bodily states affected by time, space, and a range of fluid contexts” (429). Accessibility is highly rhetorical, and individuals’ access needs are constantly in flux; additionally, two people who share the same disability may have differing access needs. WPAs can bolster accessible pedagogies within their writing programs by encouraging faculty to include syllabus access statements, promoting equitable technology policies in courses, and by better quantifying and defining abstract concepts like “participation.” The ultimate goal of this heuristic domain is not to abandon course policies, but rather to create equitable policies that create more ways for students to move within first year writing courses.

**Prompt 1: How Does Your Writing Program Promote the Use of Access Statements in Courses?**

All higher education institutions, whether public or private, are required to provide disability accommodations to students, and in the years following the



ADA's passage, best practices for providing accommodations has morphed into Disability Services Offices popping up on every American college campus. Legally speaking, instructors are not required to accommodate students who have not been granted official student accommodations from their campus's Disability Service Office<sup>4</sup>. However, the process of obtaining student accommodations can be stigmatized, convoluted, lengthy, and cost-prohibitive, all of which prevent students from obtaining these academic safeguards.

Even though the ADA lacks a specific protocol for providing accommodations, the accommodation registration process is fairly standard from institution to institution. In order to obtain student accommodations, a student first must contact the Disability Service Office and register. Then, a student must provide medical documentation as to the disability in question. This step alone can be cost and resource prohibitive—many students, especially low-income students, lack the necessary health insurance to ensure a proper diagnosis and treatment. Even if they do possess health insurance, students must see a specialist, not a general practitioner, to secure an adequate diagnosis to satisfy most Disability Services Offices. Most university health centers do not provide this level of medical care for students, so this often means finding a doctor outside of existing university resources. The cost of a visit to a general practitioner to obtain a specialist referral and the cost of visiting a medical specialist, coupled with the necessary time to make and attend an appointment,

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<sup>4</sup> The exact name of the office varies wildly from institution to institution; "Disability Service Office" is merely a generalized title for the office that grants student accommodations under the ADA.

can be too much for many students to bear financially. This seemingly small step in the process is itself an example of tremendous financial privilege.

Once a disabled student meets with a medical professional and receives an official diagnosis, the professional must provide some kind of written documentation for the Disability Services Office. However, this step alone can be riddled with procedural hurdles, including HIPAA waivers. Providing documentation for a Disability Services Office can be as simple as a medical specialist writing a letter detailing the student's diagnosis and its impact on their well-being and education. Some professionals opt to send the Disability Services Office the student's medical records instead<sup>5</sup>, a move which seems ethically questionable. Depending on the medical professional, this step could take days or even weeks to complete. While the Disability Services Office waits on this documentation and determines what accommodations to grant, the student remains unaccommodated and must wait in institutional limbo. Because of this lag, a student who registers with a Disability Services Office at the start of the semester might not receive an official accommodation letter to provide for an instructor until midterms, if not later, should there be even a small hiccup to any step of this process. These gaps and delays in the accommodation process underscore the importance of implementing Universal Design for Learning within courses, with access statements being a prime example. Encountering an access statement on a syllabus can be a lifeline for disabled students, especially

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<sup>5</sup> This is what happened with me when I first registered with MTSU's Disability and Access Center (then called Disabled Student Services) in early 2012.

those who are waiting for accommodations or who cannot bear the financial and social requirements to register in the first place.

Depending on the institution's required language and syllabus statements, an access statement can take many different forms. Many institutions (including MTSU) require instructors to include an informational statement about the campus's Disability Services Office for legal reasons. In contexts like these, creating an access statement often requires instructors to blend the legally approved statement together with their own original language, which provides an opportunity for instructors to invent a policy whose tone better aligns with the rest of their syllabus. The other alternative is to create an inclusive learning statement and to group all university policies together in a separate portion of the syllabus. Regardless of the strategy, writing an access statement for a course can be a delicate rhetorical balancing act, one that necessitates carefully chosen language. In their "Suggested Practices for Syllabus Accessibility Statements," Shannon Madden and Tara Wood suggest that "naming the statement an 'Accommodation Statement,' 'Inclusion Statement,' or 'Statement of Commitment to Universal Design for Learning' resists the potentially disparaging rhetorical positioning of 'Disability Statement'" (2). Though some of these names for statements might require additional explanation—most students are unfamiliar with Universal Design for Learning—the positioning away from a "disability" statement is key, according to Madden and Wood. Disability is not a common topic in classrooms, and with the added stigma, many students in need of greater access and accommodations may not view themselves as "disabled." By framing

accessibility as inclusion and not strictly as disability, instructors and WPAs can increase the chances of meeting students' need without asking them to disclose their disability status.

### **Disability Disclosure as a Pedagogical Practice**

Additionally, access statements provide opportunities for disabled faculty to discuss their own access needs and how they connect to classroom spaces. When and if a disabled instructor chooses to disclose their needs in the classroom, it can make access and disability syllabus statements seem less abstract and more comprehensible for students. These voluntary disclosures can be valuable, as most students (especially nondisabled students) in first-year writing classes may be unfamiliar with disability and how it can impact their classroom experience. Price elaborates on the pedagogical opportunities of disclosure in *Mad at School*, detailing her own experience of disclosing her access needs to her students on the first day of class, when going over her syllabus:

My practice is to read aloud and then elaborate on my syllabus's accommodation statement, giving examples of my own needs as a learner in order to emphasize that such needs are not a question of needing "more" support, but needing different kinds of support. One of the first things I tell students is that I have difficulty processing aural information; therefore, a question I can't respond to

immediately should be written in a note, communicated via email, or they should make sure I write it down. (91)

By discussing her own access needs and the ways that she has self-accommodated within the classroom, Price not only destigmatizes the idea of needing different learning support, but she also provides concrete examples of what this support looks like. In this example, Price also provides a range of strategies for students to meet her access needs: students wanting an answer to a non-immediate question should preserve their question in a visual format for her to return to later. These strategies are also context transferrable, meaning that students can adopt them for use in other classroom environments. Providing access strategies like this shows students that it's okay—and even encourages them—to be reflective and creative about their own learning needs and processes.

The disabled GTAs I interviewed all shared this spirit of self-disclosing in some way to students, with the ultimate goal of doing so to promote and demonstrate what access within a class can look like. A few even disclosed to their classes in a wholesale manner, similarly to Price, in efforts they intended to be informational for students and to destigmatize disability. Though these GTAs expressed a level of comfort in disclosing to their students, their approaches for doing so varied. Josey, a Ph.D. student with autism spectrum disorder and ADHD, spoke of how she discloses her disability status to her students on the first day of the class, as her disabilities intersect with much of the social, interpersonal aspect of teaching. She noted that since she “doesn't people well,”

these disclosures are intended to help her students understand the various ways she moves rhetorically in the classroom. “I like people to know *why* I’m weird,” she said. “There’s a reason behind it.” Her disclosure is also a practical measure, as she explains to her students that because of her ADHD, “it’s really easy to get me off task, so try not to.” However, Josey also acknowledged how this information could be used negatively, as she pointed out how occasionally her classes contain “that one student who enjoys getting [me] off track...I tend to fall for that.”

Like Price, Josey advises her students how to react in instances where her rapid speech and ADHD impact the classroom environment. However, her advice lacks the context transference that Price’s has. In instances like these, Josey prefers that her students interrupt and politely notify her about her speech during class (“if you need to stop me, stop me!”), which allows her to correct her course in the moment. Though this frank and direct approach could work, this strategy is slightly worrying, as Josey asks her students to do the work of accommodating instead of her sharing what specific strategies she uses to monitor her pacing and speech patterns in university environments. Her directive to students to openly interrupt a lesson in progress also contains some hiccups, especially given her concern about students who might distract her intentionally. Other concerns exist as well. Given the somewhat inescapable power dynamics of the student/teacher relationship, many students may not feel comfortable interrupting their instructor in this way, regardless of the reason or intentions behind it.

In another interview, Jamie, a Ph.D. student with multiple sclerosis, spoke of using the required disability language as an opportunity to teach her students—disabled or not—about the value and importance of self-advocacy. When speaking to her students at the start of each semester, she explains:

“I try and identify with my students, so I tell them, ‘I’ve been doing this longer than you have, so I know more than you do, but I’m willing to share it with you and give you the same tools that I have, so that your experience in college is easier than what I was going through.’”

She approaches these conversations from a wellness perspective, including discussions about stress and best practices for speaking to instructors about these issues. For Jamie, speaking about the self-accommodation skills she has learned firsthand has two intersecting purposes. By speaking to her own experiences as a disabled undergraduate and graduate student, Jamie hopes to humanize herself as an instructor while providing her students with additional support as they transition from high school to college. Though Jamie’s disclosure efforts are very well-intentioned, they could easily be perceived differently by her students. Jamie’s disclosure strategy, though intended to bridge a gap between herself and her students, could easily have the opposite effect. Her strategy for establishing herself as a credible figure on disability and self-advocacy—“I’ve been doing this longer than you have, so I know more than you do”—can easily be interpreted as her erecting an additional barrier between her and her students, or as her offering guidance, but doing so conditionally.

I do not want to vilify Josey, Jamie, or their experiences in disclosing to their students. Certainly there is no perfect way to discuss disability, especially an instructor's personal connections to it, in a classroom environment. Disclosure is, like all communicative acts, something that we are not born doing, but learn, and learning to do so effectively becomes even more difficult when what is being disclosed is not something that is openly discussed in academic environments. For many, it is an anxiety-riddled prospect, one fraught with many negative possible implications. But the thorniness of their disclosures underscores the importance of listening and speaking to disabled experiences, both in university environments and classroom spaces. In the autoethnographic excerpt below, I describe my experience disclosing disability in the classroom for the first time:

*It's my second year teaching as a Ph.D. GTA, and I ask my students to complete a writing to learn exercise on goal setting. I walk them through CWPA's "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing" and the eight habits of mind, asking them to pick one habit they already possess and one they want to work on over the course of the semester. To illustrate this, I use myself as an example. I tell my students how my goal is to become more flexible as a writer and researcher, but I know I have persistence. I explain my choices, telling them how I struggled with my mental health during my M.A. program, got registered with the Disability and Access Center and received accommodations, stabilized my mental health, and still managed to graduate on schedule.*

I was incredibly strategic and selective about what and how I would disclose my disability status to students, and for good reason—I rehearsed the precise wording over and over again in my mind in the days leading up to it. I was also secretly terrified about how, in theory, a student could use my disability status as the basis for a grade challenge. Though I was incredibly nervous, I knew exactly



what I intended for this disclosure to accomplish. I wanted to provide students with a fitting example for the writing exercise I had them complete. I also wanted to, like Price, provide an example of difference, to demonstrate how having a mental illness does not mean it is impossible to graduate from college or graduate school, or to be successful and (eventually) stable. Most importantly, I wanted this classroom disclosure to be a brief moment in time and not a point to dwell upon. This one disclosure led a student in my class who had struggled with depression to ask me about the specific strategies I used to succeed as a student and how to get registered for student accommodations.

Access statements and strategic instructional disclosures present a great opportunity for instructors, disabled and nondisabled, to increase and clarify what access can look like for all of their students. In keeping with Universal Design for Learning, these statements are intended to move disability away from the margins in courses, an idea which can be beneficial to disabled faculty as well. These statements create opportunities for disabled faculty (if they choose to do so) to call upon their experiences and access strategies as pedagogical assets, not as liabilities. With these statements and the spirit that fosters them, disabled faculty become valuable assets within writing programs and classrooms, humanizing and personalizing the experiences behind the policies. Approaching access and disability policies this way can have a compounding effect in writing programs and classrooms, especially if this same approach is applied to other policies, such as technology statements.

## **Prompt 2: How Are Technology Policies Constructed in Order to Provide Equity for Disabled Students?**

Technology policies and how students should use technology in classrooms are increasingly (and hotly) debated in conversations about higher education. At least once an academic year, an op-ed article gets published about the merits of banning technology from the classroom. For many academics, this idea of an archaic classroom devoid of laptops and cellphones feels nostalgically idyllic. For disabled students and faculty, this nostalgia conjures a dangerous, even hostile, longing for a college landscape and accompanying ideologies that, at best, tolerated the existence of disabled faculty and students. At worst, these nonadaptive, inaccessible spaces prevent disabled students and faculty from entering altogether. Inevitably, the article gets shared rapidly thanks to social media, with many people chiming in to agree with the premise without examining the research contained in the article or the piece's ramifications for disabled faculty and students.

A recent article in this never-ending technology debate is Susan Dynarski's "Laptops are Great. But Not During a Lecture or a Meeting," a piece published in *The New York Times* in November 2017. Dynarski, an education and economics professor, advocates banning technology in college classrooms, arguing that students' technology use (taking notes on laptops, specifically) pales in comparison to the analog handwritten notes method and merely serves to distract fellow students' ability to focus and concentrate in the classroom. It is crucial to note that the studies Dynarski relies on to reach her conclusions on

technology use do not mention or include disabled students in their research, methods, analysis, or metrics. Near the end of her article, Dynarski makes a small, yet extremely problematic concession where disabled students are concerns. She states:

I do make one major exception. Students with learning disabilities may use electronics in order to participate in class. This does reveal that any student using electronics has a learning disability. That is a loss of privacy for those students, which also occurs when they are given more time to complete a test. Those negatives must be weighed against the learning losses of other students when laptops are used in class.

Dynarski does not mention ADA accommodations specifically in her piece, but given that the ability to use a laptop in class is a common accommodation, my assumption is that this is the context for her brief mention of disability. Student accommodations are built upon the idea of making individualized exceptions, not making environments more accessible for everyone. By making technology use in a classroom an exception for disabled students, instructors place these students in an extremely precarious position. If a student elects to use their legal right for accommodations in a classroom with a restrictive technology policy, they are effectively disclosing their medical status to a room of strangers, a burden that no other group of students has to bear. Given the lack of conversations on college campuses about accommodations, other students may see the disabled

student with a laptop and feel resentful that the student is receiving “unfair” treatment.

Dynarski’s justification for forcing her students to disclose to receive accommodations is also very troubling. She is not only aware that her policy has the effect of outing disabled students, but she is unbothered by this effect. Her rationale is that, well, such disclosures are going to happen regardless, because many disabled students receive additional testing time. This thinking is extremely flawed for a few different reasons that are worth discussing, especially given that WPAs may encounter similar arguments in faculty and student conversations about access. First, this argument assumes that a student having additional testing time, which often means starting a test early or having additional time that extends past the allotted class time, is equal in visibility to typing on a laptop in a non-testing classroom environment. This is, frankly, not true at all.

This assumption that all accommodations are equally visible and noticeable reveals a lack of knowledge about commonly offered testing accommodations and accommodations in general. The ADA does not provide a list of sanctioned accommodations that all colleges and universities must follow; in order to cover all educational environments, it only states that schools are to provide “reasonable accommodations.” Each school’s Disability Services Office creates said accommodations and a framework for what accommodations are offered for specific disabilities. This essentially means that accommodations can vary wildly from campus to campus. At many campuses, students who receive additional testing time also receive an accommodation allowing them to take

tests in a low-distraction environment, away from the rest of the class or testing group. This can vary from taking major tests at the Disability Services Office to taking tests in an empty office or conference room. In this common scenario, forcing a disabled student to defacto disclose by opting to use their technology accommodation is their only visible disclosure, one that could be completely avoided.

Reducing concerns over student privacy to a single sentence neglects the tensions, stress, and anguish disabled students face in moments when they are forced to openly identify as disabled in order to exercise their legal right to accommodations. This very situation arose in my case study of disabled GTAs with Ruth, a Ph.D. candidate with ADHD who uses her laptop in graduate courses. Ruth refers to her laptop as a “focusing device,” as the steadiness and rhythm of typing helps her channel her energy and focus in graduate seminars. Given that using a laptop in classes greatly enhances Ruth’s ability to learn and process information after class ends, using a laptop in class is listed as one of her official Disability and Access Center accommodations.

When I interviewed Ruth about her experiences as a disabled graduate student, she spoke of a classroom experience where, on the first day of class, she had her laptop open and ready to take notes. Her professor entered the classroom a few minutes later, spied her open laptop, and told her to put it away, as he was a self-described “Luddite” who did not want his students using technology in his classroom. The professor’s attitude toward student technology use suggests that his classroom is designed around his own preferences rather

than the needs of his students. Constructing classroom spaces in this way can put students, especially disabled ones, in difficult positions. For Ruth, “it seemed easier to go ahead and not make waves,” so she quickly put her laptop away. She had planned to provide this professor with her accommodation letter at the end of the first class, but after this interaction, she changed her mind. Giving a professor her accommodation letter is not a given for Ruth, as she “ha[s] to feel a professor out” before feeling comfortable enough to give them her notice. Additionally, Ruth didn’t want her “contentious” professor to view her as confrontational, especially since she was very interested in the course’s content and thought she might need a recommendation letter from the professor in the future. The risk was just too great. During that first day of class, Ruth said she felt torn between asking for the accommodations she needed to succeed in the course and the resources she might need in the future. Given how beneficial quality graduate mentors can be for aspiring academics like Ruth, it is completely understandable that she would feel forced to not use her accommodations—no matter how beneficial and necessary—to prevent potentially angering a prospective recommender.

These technology policies matter, and the solution to these inaccessible technology policies isn’t to abandon technology policies altogether. A third way exists between the two extremes of banning technology and eschewing order and procedures. Technology policies are worth having and including on a syllabus, especially in first-year writing courses where most students are navigating the transition from a more restrictive secondary school environment to

the comparatively open nature of college. Policies like these can ease the transition and help define social expectations within the classroom for students. It is important that all classroom stakeholders—instructors, students, and WPAs—have a similar level of understanding about how poorly constructed technology policies can negatively impact disabled students.

The challenge becomes how to universally design a technology policy based on equity rather than equality. Under an equality-based policy model, all students are judged via the same metric, or receive the same allotment or allowance of a certain service. In academic spaces, the basis for this equality has often been nondisabled students. The idea of creating a classroom where no students can use technology follows an equality-based model, as all students are subject to the same policy and are treated the same, regardless of how the policy affects them. However, under an equity-based policy model, all students are able to receive what they *need*, even if those needs differ from those of other students. Ideally, an equitable technology policy is flexible and expansive enough to account for a variety of technological needs in the classroom. By centering the needs of disabled students within the policy itself, equitable technology policies increase the chances of devising a technology policy that will work for all students, disabled or not. A sample equitable technology policy, along with the procedures I have used in creating said policy, is included at the end of Chapter Four.

### **Prompt 3: How Are Abstract Concepts Like “Participation” Defined and Quantified?**

Participation grades (which I consider to be a form of behavioral policy) are common fixtures in first-year writing classes, and, like strict technology policies, are often created to protect or enhance the in-class experience. The goal for a participation grade or policy is often to help ensure that class time runs smoothly, to designate a portion of the final grade for in-process writing, or, in many cases, a frantic, compulsive attempt to safe guard that an instructor does not face a silent classroom for fifty-five or more minutes. In most cases, what it means to “participate” in a writing class is rarely defined. Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow touch on this in “A Unilateral Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching,” where they propose using a contract grading format based on students’ ability to meet a pre-set list of criteria. Students are guaranteed a minimum of a “B” grade in the course if they meet a list of requirements, including that they “participate in all in-class exercises and activities” (246). This listing ends with a somewhat explanatory paragraph that mentions that students earn their grades for the course based on “conscientious effort and participation,” which still does not clarify just what participation *is* (246). Danielewicz and Elbow address this later in the article, admitting that “fuzzy” criteria like participation are tough to define and adding that they would only accuse a student of not conscientiously participating or providing “consistent effort” if the offense were “grossly flagrant (for example, drafts far short of the desired length)” (251). If students were to complain, Danielewicz and Elbow would take them at their



word. However, this still does not define what it means to participate, but only concedes that doing so is fraught with problems.

When it comes to policies, words and definitions matter. What is participation? What does it mean to participate, to be present in a classroom space? Does participation mean speaking up in class and being the first to ask or answer questions? This is often what instructors default to or have in mind when including participation grades and policies in their syllabi, but even then this expectation is fraught with problems. In my interviews with disabled GTAs, the kairotic strain of participation was a common experience for many participants. Lance, one of my interview participants, spoke of how his disabilities intersect with prescriptive participation expectations: “You’re forced to share in an environment that may be okay for others, but if you’re dealing with emotional issues, certain vulnerabilities, certain triggers, that’s not taken into account.” Lance’s description of kairotic strain aligns with the idea that many common practices in composition classrooms (such as participation grades) were not designed to take disabled students’ experiences into account. Though the composition field has accepted that student populations are not homogenous, many of our accepted classroom methods do not take these differences into account. Defining what it means to be engaged in the classroom in such limited terms can also have serious ramifications in regard to how certain behaviors, such as speaking up in class, are perceived. Margaret Price raises this point in *Mad at School*, where she points out, “what an instructor experiences as an ‘annoyance’ or ‘rudeness’ *might in fact be a student participating* in a way that

performs, or attempts to accommodate, her mental disability” (3). A student who sits quietly in a course, but does not take notes may not be disengaged, but could find that taking notes distracts him from paying attention to the lesson and its content. Likewise, a student constantly typing on her laptop might just be taking notes to review later, not working on assignments for other classes. Ill-defined notions of participation only serve to unnecessarily complicate and code acceptable, even helpful, classroom behaviors.

For disabled students, not having a clear definition of required “participation” can lead to a whole host of problems, including unnecessary stress, anxiety, and inaccessibility. This is especially true in classroom environments that emphasize spoken speech as the sole determination for participation. In the “Reason” section of “Multimodality in Motion,” Melanie Yergeau speaks to the frustration and shame she felt as a disabled student trying to participate in an inaccessible classroom:

Because of my difficulties with nonverbals and auditory processing, one of my accommodation requests was a more orderly face-to-face system for class discussions, one in which I might raise my hand or type something on my laptop and show it to another person. But this particular request was not always well received. For example, in one class I took, a professor refused to call on raised hands because he felt it interrupted the *natural* flow of conversation.

Yergeau's professor's reason for denying her accommodation, that it ran afoul of "natural" conversation practices, is especially telling. By defining one set of actions as natural, any action running against this established norm is, by default, considered unnatural, out of place, and inappropriate. This framing places disabled students and their needs as incompatible with established expectations for higher education, a damning form of ableism. Yergeau's experience is a perfect example of why participation grades, policies, and the expectations contained in participation can be so problematic. When participation is ill-defined or corralled to a tiny range of human communication, the likelihood that all students can, in fact, participate is significantly reduced. Likewise, the single biggest problem with Danielewicz and Elbow's idea (and participation grades and policies in general) is that it does not consider what happens *if* a student cannot participate, if the participation expectations set by the instructor are even accessible to them.

## **Conclusions**

This domain's prompts and subsequent data underscore the need for new ways of thinking when it comes to syllabus statements and their pedagogical implications. The accompanying interview data helps provide evidence for why the prompts exist, and, in effect, shape them. Perhaps the biggest benefits from access statements, equitable technology policies and collaborative notes, aside from the primary goals of increased access for classroom stakeholders, is that these policy redesigns reinforce the ideas of interdependence and community

within the classroom. With regard to access, the idea of interdependence lies in a shared responsibility for accessibility. This idea is fairly radical in the context of colleges and universities and exists in reaction to the dominant view of access that has existed since the passage of the ADA in 1990. Most colleges and universities are held to a legal concept of access that places the burden of proof and impetus for access upon disabled students and faculty, one that tells them, “prove you’re disabled and really need this exception, and maybe we’ll provide it.”

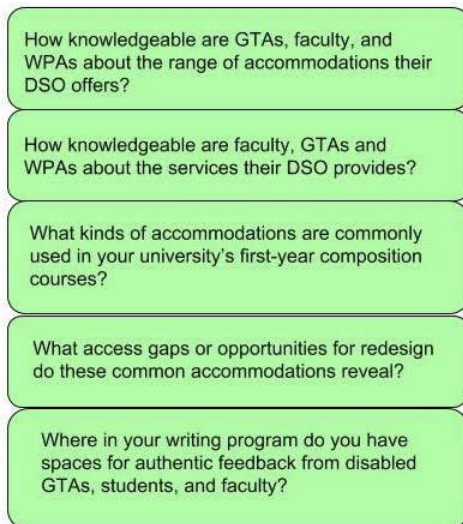
The goal of these redesigned policies and the accompanying heuristic is to breathe the social model of disability into the classroom, to transform educational spaces into environments where accessibility is something that everyone should be concerned with, not just those who are disabled. In essence, it is whispering disability into our classrooms. This is, admittedly, painstaking work, work to shift the culture of departments to a place where access is expected and not simply added on to existing ideologies, frameworks, and even physical spaces. Given the current political efforts to undermine the basic rights and dignities of disabled Americans<sup>6</sup>, coupled with the fact that we are all, at best, temporarily able bodied, pushing for equitable and just policies within

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<sup>6</sup> Though there are, unfortunately, many different initiatives I could be referencing here, I am specifically referring to H.R. 620, the ADA Education and Reform Act of 2017, which has been passed by the U.S. House of Representatives and is waiting to be debated in the Senate. This bill aims to erode Title III of the ADA, removing incentives for business (including tax credits, which currently exist under the ADA) to meet basic accessibility standards, placing the burden of reporting inaccessible environments on disabled persons, all the while basing these changes on stopping “frivolous” ADA lawsuits. (“Overview of Concerns With H.R. 620, the ADA Education and Reform Act of 2017, and Similar Bills”)

writing classroom is assuredly work worth doing. It can be tempting to frame these efforts as best practices that happen to be accessible, but the truth these attributes show is that accessibility *is* best practice for first year writing instruction in and of itself. In subsequent chapters (particularly Chapter 5), I will illustrate how WPAs can reinforce these ideas—access statements, equitable technology policies, and participation grades—within their programs.

## CHAPTER III: ACCESS IN PROGRAMMATIC WRITING PROGRAM SPACES



*Figure 2: Programmatic Access Domain*

The second domain of this heuristic looks at ways that writing programs can become more accessible in programmatic and professional spaces, spaces that exist outside of the classroom. In accomplishing this, this domain of the heuristic has a strong focus on accommodations and the accommodation process. Even though a design model of access works to integrate many accommodations and access features into how spaces are constructed, there will always be situations where individual accommodations are needed (Womack 500). Implementing UDL strategies within classroom pedagogies and program design does not render accommodations irrelevant. In fact, given that many accessible design choices have their origins in accommodations (providing scripts for presentations, for example), one could argue that understanding the

processes and procedures behind accommodations is a critical step in access work, one not to be overlooked.

This domain's examination of accommodations has other conceptual advantages. In order to improve mentally disabled student and faculty access and move towards an access model, it is crucial to understand the existing mechanisms for how disability is dealt with in higher education. I use the phrase "dealt with" intentionally, as the accommodation model, whether intentionally or not, presents disability as an individual problem that needs solving rather than an attribute which is relevant and beneficial to multiple stakeholders.

Accommodations often represent the bare minimum when it comes to access, partly by design and partly by how universities determine them. This philosophy towards disability often extends towards the idea of university compliance as well. Few, if any, universities have required (or even optional) training about the ADA or their local Disability Service Office. And even in cases like the TBR/THEC accessibility audit, these training measures are implemented as forms of corrective action, not to rethink how those working in universities can act more accessibly and knowledgably where disability is concerned.

In this chapter, I focus on the second domain of my accessibility heuristic, which provides an initial evaluation of the professional and programmatic aspects of writing program spaces. Whereas the first domain zooms in on the classroom and how an instructor's policies increase or impede access; this domain takes a step back to evaluate access within writing programs more holistically. My research methods and scholarship for this chapter include disability and

composition scholars, disability studies scholarship, and autoethnography. Additionally, I will be incorporating data from interviews with disabled graduate teaching assistants into the theoretical framing of these domain prompts.

**Prompt 1: How Knowledgeable Are Faculty, GTAs, and WPAs About the Range of Accommodations Their Disability Services Office Offers?**

The first prompt in this domain centers around faculty, GTA, and WPA knowledge about accommodations and the kinds of services that their local Disability Service Office provides. Many, if not most, universities do not provide trainings or resources for faculty members on best practices for working with disabled students. In some environments, like at MTSU, limited resources and assistance from the Disability and Access Center do exist, but only if faculty and administrators initiate requests for them. Faculty and administrative support for working with disabled students should not be reactively provided; it should be something available for everyone who teaches in university environments. However, the unfortunate truth is that not all Disability Services Offices are created equal, and some offices have frosty relationships with faculty members and WPAs who may reach out for additional information and guidance.

This informational gap in regard to disability can be significant for faculty members and can also include misinformation about the nature of accommodations, the process of registering for services, or even the kinds of services the local Disability Services Office provides. In a 2015 research study, researchers found that faculty members often assumed that their Disability



Services Offices offered a much larger range of services than they actually did (Sniatecki et. al 264). This same study, along with studies from 2009 and 2018, found that many faculty members felt unprepared for how to accommodate disabled students, and a sizable number of faculty members questioned whether or not providing accommodations for disabled students was a fair practice (263, Cook et al. 85, Stevens et al. 34). These findings are far from isolated sets of data but are representative of a much larger problem of what happens when we don't talk enough about disability and why accommodations exist.

Feeling misunderstood by professors over accommodations was a topic that arose during one my interviews with disabled GTAs. Jamie, a GTA with generalized anxiety disorder and multiple sclerosis, has the ability to record classroom lectures and discussions as one of her official ADA accommodations. She spoke of how she meets with her professors at the start of each semester to explain how she will be following this accommodation, as a courtesy to them. Jamie voiced her frustration and the occasional embarrassment she feels when explaining this accommodation to her professors, especially ones who joke about the situation: "They say things like, 'Oh, you're going to record me? I'm going to have to be on my game!'...I'm not doing this to judge you!" This frustration does not come from the accommodation itself, but in the range of reactions to it. Jamie's need for the accommodation, she explains, stems from her first multiple sclerosis acerbation. Her initial flare up was so mentally severe that she has no memory of being hospitalized for it. Should she have another acerbation during the semester and not be able to record her classes, it would be unlikely she

would be able to stay in the course. Like many disabilities, Jamie's multiple sclerosis is sporadically episodic, and so she diligently records each lecture just in case the worst were to suddenly happen. The recordings she makes of her graduate classes are not raw material for pranks or revenge against her professors, but a necessary failsafe against the realities of her bodymind.<sup>7</sup> Faculty need more information about the ADA and support with student accommodations in order to meet their legal obligations, but also so they can be informed advocates for students.

Most students enter college knowing very little about their campus's Disability Services Office and what it can offer students<sup>8</sup>. Disabled students are often included in this, as the secondary school process for accommodation is radically different from the process in higher education. In secondary school environments, the process for student access in classrooms involves the creation of an Individualized Education Plan, commonly known as IEPs. With an IEP plan, parents, various administrators, and specialists meet yearly to set the student's goals for the following year and determine the necessary services and accommodations the student might need to complete them (U.S. Department of Education). The student's IEP team revisits the plan yearly, and goals and accommodations are added and revised as the student progresses through school. Older students can be included as a part of an IEP team, but there is no

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<sup>7</sup> A common term often used in health and wellness contexts, Margaret Price redefined the concept for disability studies contexts. Within this context, bodymind refers to the interconnected nature between the body and mind in regard to disability, pain, and bodily processes (Price 269).

<sup>8</sup> This is certainly true at MTSU, where the Disability and Access Center is omitted from information on the website for CUSTOMS, MTSU's new student orientation program.

regular process for determining whether a student should be included or not. Once a student graduates from high school, the IEP ends; any accommodations or support outlined in an IEP cannot carry over into college. If a student is excluded from the IEP process and self-determination skills are not included as a part of the plan, coming to college and having to self-advocate for the first time can bring a whole host of challenges. Regardless of whether or not a disabled student has been prepared or not, shifting from an education environment with a great deal of direct support to the model found in higher education can be a tremendous challenge.

Nondisabled students can benefit from faculty, WPAs, and GTAs having a better understanding of the student accommodation process as well. A person may become disabled at any point in time due to a variety of circumstances<sup>9</sup>, and so having this knowledge on hand can be especially beneficial for students who find themselves in need of accommodation for the very first time. Since the onset of many mental health disorders corresponds with the average age of college students, it is particularly important for faculty, GTAs, and WPAs to have this knowledge at the ready (Kessler et. al). According to the World Health Organization, mentally disabled adults often first experience symptoms of their disorders in late childhood or as teenagers, but do not seek treatment until much later in life. Most studies note that nearly half of those with mental illnesses first experience symptoms by their mid-teens, and nearly three-fourths do by their

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<sup>9</sup> Disability scholars often refer to the lack of disability as people being “temporarily able bodied.”

early twenties (Kessler et. al). Statistically speaking, faculty, GTAs, and WPAs should not be surprised when students struggling with mental health disabilities appear in their classes; in fact, they should expect them to be there. This information about the average onset age also means that many of our mentally disabled students may not be accustomed to accommodations, disability advocacy, or even seeing themselves as disabled.

**Prompt #2: How Knowledgeable Are GTAs, Faculty, and WPAs About the Process for Securing Faculty Accommodations?**

This second prompt of this domain asks WPAs how knowledgeable writing program faculty and GTAs are about the process for securing faculty accommodations. Since a person can become disabled at any time for a litany of reasons, every single faculty member and graduate teaching assistant stands to benefit from an increased knowledge of how to secure accommodations for themselves. However, the process for securing working accommodations lacks any sense of regularity. Whereas most college campuses have a designated office that facilitates the process for students needing accommodations, no such system exists for faculty. The offices and procedures that grant accommodations are whatever the individual university chooses, and the path to securing accommodations for faculty work is often clouded in mystery or kept hidden altogether.

The mystery behind faculty accommodation poses unique problems for disabled graduate students, especially those who may have student

accommodations but are uncertain about asking for working accommodations. In my case studies with disabled graduate teaching assistants, some participants reported feeling immense pressure to not seek accommodations, to not appear as “less than.” It is important to note that none of these participants felt this way because of any particular action or comment made by their WPAs; rather, they reported that the impression-based culture of higher education and the unspeaking of anything regarding disability often informed this assumption. In her interview, Paige described how her chronic, persistent anxiety impacts her teaching, to the point where she occasionally depersonalizes and needs to sit while teaching. Paige described these moments of depersonalization as “feel[ing] like [she’s] behind a pane of glass and...not really there with people.” Despite her great need for it, she felt guilty over needing an extremely basic accommodation—a chair—while teaching:

I felt that way most days [while] teaching for like a month or two at a time. And so I sat. And I felt really guilty about that, because I thought, ‘Oh, what if some of our supervisors walk by and see me just sitting in this rolling chair?’ And I made sure everyone could see me. I’d get up and walk around when I did feel better, but I felt guilty about taking advantage of something—of something that would help me—because it felt like it was in opposition to what we’re taught to do as teachers, and so that was a kind of a source of shame.

For Paige, taking advantage of a basic accommodation like a chair was a risk, as something that had the potential to damage her credibility as an instructor and her position as a respected GTA in the English department. Similarly, using a chair while teaching felt like displaying a weakness, as best practices for teaching composition include instructors moving around the classroom space. But what happens when you cannot move around the classroom? These best practices, as Paige viewed them, did not contain enough elasticity to account for her needs as an instructor. Instead of second-guessing the limitations of the accepted practice, she felt ashamed for having to prioritize her own wellbeing in the moment. What is interesting here in Paige's interview is how the culture of graduate school contributed to her fears about her teaching, not her WPAs, who she described as "incredibly supportive." Even though she had support from her supervisors, she still felt worried about how she could be viewed. The larger culture of graduate school, which often emphasizes independence and work ethic and does not leave room for disability, made her feel as if she were in the wrong for needing additional, different forms of support. WPAs seeking to learn more about how their local context accommodates faculty should also consider how the university's culture could impede paths to access, especially where graduate teaching assistants are concerned.

Even if an institution's culture is welcoming of faculty and GTAs using accommodations, the procedures and information involved in obtaining them may form another barrier. Understanding the depth and range of the possible variances is crucial for WPAs to know, especially when some of the faculty

members under their supervision (in particular, GTAs and adjuncts who teach at multiple schools) may face more difficult paths to securing access than others. To best illustrate how this faculty accommodation process can vary drastically from college to college, I investigated the faculty and staff accommodation process at my own university as well as three types of higher education environments in Tennessee: a community college, a four-year university, and a small liberal arts university.

Two of these institutions—Volunteer State Community College and the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga—were chosen because, as public colleges and universities in Tennessee, they are subject to the same accessible materials audit as MTSU. I chose Lipscomb University as an example of a small liberal arts university in part because of its enrollment, which is less than five thousand students, and in part due to the school's location, which is in the same geographical area as the other chosen schools. Additionally, I was curious at how the faculty accessibility procedures for a university outside of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission's jurisdiction would compare to those within it.

At MTSU, accommodation requests for faculty and staff can be made online through the ADA Compliance Office. Though MTSU's home page does not contain a direct link to the office's webpage, a link can be found under the "Important Disclosure Information" section of the "Quick Links" tab. The office's webpage contains information about eligibility, disclosure, access strategies, emergency procedures, and how disabled employees can report discrimination.

The “Eligibility” page provides a brief list of sample accommodations that faculty and staff can request, including:

- “Providing or modifying equipment or devices”
- “Modifying work schedules”
- “Adjusting or modifying training materials or policies”
- “Providing readers and interpreters, and”
- “Making the workplace readily accessible to and useable by people with disabilities” (“Eligibility”).

Employees may register for ADA accommodations online, through the same digital program the Disability and Access Center uses for student accommodations. In addition to these sample accommodations, the “Eligibility” page also contains information on how MTSU offers “Personal Assistance Services” to employees who qualify. The ADA Compliance Office defines these services as:

Activities of daily living that an individual would typically perform if he or she did not have a disability...including but not limited to assistance with removing and putting on clothing, eating, using the restroom, pushing a wheelchair, and assistance getting into and out of a vehicle in the workplace.

This listing of “Personal Assistive Services” suggests a university focus on hiring and retaining physically disabled employees, which the ADA Compliance Office makes clear that though these assistive services are often left off formal accommodations, MTSU still considers them adaptive services and beneficial for



employees. Though the website contains a solid variety of resources for employees, it contains no information pertaining to GTA eligibility for working accommodations, a sizable omission.

Out of the three other colleges and universities I investigated, one stood out as having an outstanding sense of unity and interconnectedness. The faculty and staff accommodation process at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga appears to be the gold standard in terms of openness and organizational clarity. Instead of relegating faculty and student accommodation requests to separate offices, UTC's Disability Resource Center has both kinds of accommodations organized within a single office. This kind of cohesion stands to be particularly valuable for disabled graduate teaching assistants, who may need accommodations for both their student and instructional roles.

The Disability Resource Center, along with the university's Accessible Technology Initiative, can be found via a link on the bottom of UTC's homepage. Additionally, this office oversees guest accommodations for students and other visitors to campus and the accessibility components of graduation exercises ("Disability Resource Center"). Their website offers a wealth of informational resources for faculty, students, and visitors wanting more information about accommodations and access, including a "Report a Barrier" feature where anyone can complete an online form in order to have said barrier rectified as soon as possible. This type of streamlined, clear communication, aside a commitment to promoting a culture of access, appears to be a great model for other universities in Tennessee to strive to reach.

However, this transparent and streamlined approach to access appears to be the exception and not the norm. At Volunteer State, a community college whose flagship campus is located just north of Nashville, determining the process that faculty and staff must complete to secure access is much more difficult. When navigating the Vol State website, it is unclear at first glance where to find faculty and staff accommodations requests, or to determine which office would oversee them. An “Accessibility” link is prominently displayed near the bottom of the homepage, but clicking on it reveals a page dedicated to student accommodations and definitions of access. Though this is a useful resource for faculty in their instructional roles, it does little to answer the question of where they should turn to secure access for themselves. After several minutes searching other pages, I Googled “Volunteer State faculty disability requests,” which generated a link to Vol State’s “Equal Opportunity Employer” page. This page, despite the generalized nature of its name, was mostly dedicated to information about the ADA and definitions of disability. The bottom of the page contained a brief notice on how faculty and staff members could begin requesting official accommodations. Faculty and staff were to “initiate the interactive process by contacting the institution’s Manager of Employee Relations” at a listed phone number or email address (“Equal Opportunity Employer”). Nothing else—no timeline, paperwork, or information about what staff and faculty could expect from this process—was provided.

In some university environments, staff and faculty disability is not mentioned whatsoever. Lipscomb University, a Church of Christ affiliated

university in Nashville, is an example of this. I spent several minutes navigating through the website, trying to find where I should go to find something about faculty accommodations. Even though Lipscomb is a private, religiously-affiliated university, it is still subject to the accommodation standards outlined in the Americans With Disabilities Act. Surely *something* would be there, as the university's ACCESS page for disabled students was quite detailed. A visit to the university's Human Resources page, which at most universities generated at least a cursory mention of ADA compliance procedures, only produced contact information for the office's employees and a listing of current job openings. Several searches (both within Lipscomb's website and via Google) only returned information about accommodating disabled students. On a hunch, I searched for a Lipscomb Faculty Handbook, and located one. Sure enough, the handbook contained information about disabled staff and faculty. After a brief paragraph detailing university compliance in regard to disability, the handbook mentions some information about accommodations:

“Decisions about accommodations or undue hardship must be made on an individual basis. Hiring supervisors should contact the Human Resources Office for assistance whenever a job applicant or employee with a disability requests accommodations.” (11)

Nothing else is mentioned; in fact, the information listed here isn't written for the disabled faculty or staff member. The implied audience for this information is their supervisor. Even with this small handbook addition, many questions remain about this process. Does the supervisor have to contact the Human Resources

Office to start the accommodation process, or can the faculty member initiate it? How long does the process of securing accommodations usually take? What if the faculty member and supervisor disagree about the need for accommodations? When communication regarding access and accommodations is unclear, the disabled persons are the ones who feel the pain of inaccessibility.

As these brief examples illustrate, the accommodation process for faculty and staff in universities is anything but regular. In many cases, it is nearly certain that the path to access for faculty is much more difficult and less certain than it is for students. These localized findings are corroborated by Price et al.'s 2017 large-scale study of disabled faculty. Price et al. found that nearly seventy percent of surveyed faculty were either slightly familiar or entirely unfamiliar with the range of accommodations due to them under the ADA. For those faculty who were able to secure accommodations, the authors list the wide range of university offices that granted them, including "Human Resources, variously-named equity and/or diversity offices, ADA Coordinators, and department chairs." Nearly all of these entities match up with how access is performed in the four Tennessee colleges mentioned in this dissertation.

The larger point behind the struggle that disabled faculty often face to get access is this: on the whole, universities are far more comfortable with student disability than they are with faculty disability (Price et. al). Disability Service Offices expect to have disabled students cross their doorways and request accommodations; the same cannot be consistently said for how university offices treat disabled faculty. The message this sends is that colleges and universities

may expect disabled students to be on campus, but there is little to no expectation that the same disabled students could return and become faculty members someday. For colleges and universities to lack clear pathways for disabled faculty members to secure access, self-advocate, and request accommodations is to place limited expectations and glass ceilings disabled students who may hope to work there someday.

Even if the pathways to disabled faculty accommodation are clear, there is no guarantee that accommodations will be granted, especially where mental disability is concerned. Margaret Price writes extensively about this in “The Essential Functions of the Position,” where she outlines the delicate balancing act mentally disabled faculty members must enact when requesting official accommodations. Under the ADA’s guidelines, accommodations must not only be “reasonable” in nature, but they must also not alter “the essential functions of the position” (Price 105). Therefore, in order to secure working accommodations, mentally disabled faculty must prove that they are disabled enough to necessitate accommodations, but are still able to complete the key components of faculty work. As a result of this tension, most faculty legal challenges for working accommodations fail—a 2003 study by Suzanne Abram places the percentage of failed faculty ADA challenges as high as ninety-three percent (5). The importance of WPAs understanding the access challenges and specific accommodation procedures of their local environments cannot be understated—this knowledge is crucial, both in terms of being an effective writing program administrator and in working towards being allies for their disabled faculty

members and colleagues. WPAs cannot hope to build more accessible writing programs without first understanding the limitations of existing systems of access.

### **Prompt 3: What Kinds of Accommodations Are Commonly Used in Your First-Year Writing Courses?**

The third prompt in this domain asks WPAs about what accommodations students are using in their writing program courses in order to determine a starting point for future access efforts. WPAs can acquire this information in several ways, depending on their campus resources and relationships with other disability offices on campus. Should a collaboration with the Disability Services Office be viable, WPAs could solicit this information directly from registered students, as many Disability Services Offices have internal listservs used to contact all registered students. Should such a collaboration not be a possibility, other options exist within the writing program itself. Given that some instructors are willing to accommodate disabled students without them providing official documentation, creating a survey for all students enrolled in first-year writing courses and asking how they were accommodated is another option. Surveying first-year writing faculty, an option further detailed in Chapter Four, is a third option. Undoubtedly, there are others, and each of these research options has its share of merits and drawbacks. In keeping with disability theory's emphasis on the rhetorical nature of both disability and access, WPAs should consider the

characteristics, resources, and institutional politics of their local environments in deciding what research methods would be most fruitful for them.

This idea of accommodations providing signals for redesign has its roots in disability and composition scholarship, namely Anne-Marie Womack's work with Universal Design, composition pedagogy, and syllabi. In illustrating this concept, Womack describes how a student in one of her courses had an accommodation request that involved granting additional test taking time for quizzes. She notes how receiving this student request led her to question "whether there was a good rationale for stricter timing in my context and removed the requirement for all" (498). Sometimes implementing UDL can mean extending the accommodation for all students, not simply those who have registered with their Disability Services Office, an action that not only promotes access, but can make accessibility simpler for the instructor.

Aside from commonly used accommodations providing hints for universal design, having a baseline of information about the accommodations students use in first-year writing courses can help WPAs keep track of any changes made to these accommodations over time. In some cases, a student's accommodations can wax and wane without their knowledge or consent, based on a variety of institutional factors. This was certainly true for me:

*It's my second semester in graduate school, and I've finally broken down and registered with Disabled Student Services<sup>10</sup>. As a part of the registration process, I meet with the Director to discuss my accommodations. Since I cannot predict when I will be symptomatic and when I won't, I ask for an extra day to complete my*

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<sup>10</sup> This office is now called the Disability and Access Center at MTSU.

*assignments, which is granted. I'm also told I'll receive the option of a designated notetaker and "flexible attendance," which the Director defines as double the number of absences listed on the syllabus. I leave feeling hope for the first time in several months. When I receive my letter, I read that I am to receive an additional day "for assignments not listed on the syllabus." I go back to the office to try and fix the mistake and am told the accommodation is correct as written.*

*Two semesters later, I return to the DSS office to request my accommodation letters for the upcoming semester. A student worker doublechecks my printed accommodation letter with the new system, and discovers that several accommodations, including ones for testing, have been left off my form. I'm stunned to learn this.*

*Two years later, I've returned to MTSU to start the Ph.D. program, and I email the DAC Office to receive a copy of my accommodations to give my new professors. Upon receiving the letter, I notice a new change in the wording. Flexible attendance is no longer listed as an accommodation for faculty to follow, but merely a "statement of support." I'm angry that this was changed without my knowledge or input, but know from previous experience that questioning the office is wasted effort. The wording does not change during my tenure in the Ph.D. program.*

In his book *Academic Ableism*, Jay Dolmage observes that "disability is so overdetermined by the accommodation process in higher education, and these accommodations can be so efficiently stripped of their effectiveness, that the university is a machine for qualifying (and portioning out only minimal) access and rights" (138-9). This proved to be true for me. My accommodations changed almost immediately after I requested them, with no record that I had ever requested anything different. Instead of receiving an extra day to complete my course assignments, I was granted an extra day only for "assignments not listed on the syllabus." What possible assignments would not be listed on a syllabus in graduate school? This situation underscores the powerlessness students can



feel during the accommodation process. As a student, what recourse did I have to rectify the situation? What knowledge did I have about the kinds of accommodations I was entitled to?

These feelings of helplessness are often coupled with the additional mental and social strain of having to explain accommodations to professors. Some of my accommodations, particularly the one about flexible attendance, proved to be slightly contentious with professors. I soon learned that none of my professors had ever heard of the definition for “flexible attendance” that I was given, and I found myself constantly having to explain what the accommodation meant and referring my graduate professors to the DSS office if they complained. In this way, disabled students have to be instructors as well as students, showing their instructors how to interpret the resources given to them. These students hold expertise, even though they often have no significant power within this relationship.

In this way, Disability Services Offices can create new access barriers and sow seeds of distrust while simultaneously working to dismantle other access barriers. Having new accommodations suddenly appear proved to be very helpful in my graduate career, but it did not instill much confidence in the Disabled Student Services office. Did I always have the right to these accommodations, or was there some change? What caused them to show up in the system when no one noticed them before? The system had ruled in my favor this one time, but it did not make me feel confident that I would have better interactions with this office in the future. A student is not in a position of power, especially at the

Disability Service Office, a fact that was emphasized once that office watered down my flexible attendance accommodation to a mere “statement of support” without my knowledge, input, or consent. This non-accommodation points out that a need and a problem exists, but fails to provide any sort of directive to faculty. In theory, a faculty member could choose to ignore the non-accommodation, with no consequences to them. These institutional memories, I’m sure, are far from unusual, but this aspect of the disabled student experience is something that most nondisabled WPAs and faculty members know little about.

**Prompt #4: What Access Gaps and Opportunities for Redesign Do These Common Accommodations Reveal?**

This fourth prompt in the domain asks WPAs to take the information gleaned from the third prompt and use it to look critically at their program for ways to redesign. To be fair, transferring accommodations into a design model is not always accomplished as quickly or easily as in Womack’s example. Granting certain accommodations wholesale, such as providing low-distraction testing environments for all students in a course, is vastly more complicated to implement. In some writing program environments, the second half of this heuristic prompt is a question without a simple and direct answer. It is entirely possible that a WPA may discover what accommodations students are using and simply not know how they can be converted into accessible program designs. However, not having a clear answer for this question is not a failure. In fact, a

development like this can open the door to deeper, perhaps unexpected, avenues of accessible inquiry, such as the nature of the accommodations themselves. While it could be tempting to blame this level of inaction on ignorance or inexperience where access and disability are concerned, part of the blame, at least where mental disability is concerned, may fall upon the nature of the accommodations themselves. In deciding what accommodations should be given to mentally disabled students who register, many Disability Services Offices copy the same list of accommodations that are given to physically or sensory-disabled students.

Multiple, likely intertwining, reasons exist for this. To start, an unknown number of Disability Services Offices draw upon recommendations from professional scientific organizations when devising their list of accommodations. This is not a bad thing in and of itself if the suggestions are good, theoretically sound, and beneficial for students. But that does not seem to be the case with this example. When preparing for a recent Skype interview with a college, I went to the school's Disability Service Office's website. Given my research focus, I anticipated the possibility of being asked a disability-related question, and I wanted to learn if and how my research aligned with the school's existing policies on accessibility. I soon discovered that this university had copied its approved list of reasonable accommodations directly from a list found on the American Psychological Association's website, with no substitutions.

The APA is a well-known and respected international organization, which is comprised of "more than 115,700 researchers, educators, clinicians, and

students.” Educators and students are included in the APA’s work and mission, not just researchers. The APA’s website even contains a bevy of disability-related resources and data for researchers and educators alike to consult, including five different themed “DisABILITY Toolkits” with distilled information about the ADA and reasonable accommodations. However, a quick look at a dropdown menu labeled “examples of accommodation by disability type” revealed a serious problem. The listed disability type categories included: low vision, blindness, hearing loss, learning disability, mobility/motor impairment, speech impairment, and chronic health conditions (“Reasonable Accommodations Explained”). This extensive list of accommodations made no mention of mental disability, a glaring omission from an organization with “psychological” in its very name.

Neglecting to include psychological or mental disabilities on an extensive list of disabilities is a notable omission, but the negative impact of this omission is compounded when one considers the source. The American Psychological Association is a brand, a respected intellectual collective, and its presence lends credence in the same way that an accessibility checklist does, if not more so. Leaving psychological disabilities out of a list like this communicates one of two things, or perhaps even both. First, leaving mental disabilities off resources like these, which include suggested accommodations for each disability category, implies that accessible options for psychologically or mentally disabled students don’t exist or aren’t worth mentioning. Secondly, the APA not including mental disabilities in a list like this connotes that mental health issues aren’t all that

disabling for students, that anxiety and depression (to say nothing of other diagnoses) aren't that much of a concern for educators at all levels. Moreover, this specific implication is often tied to a common mental disability myth—that mental disability vanishes with the regular use of medication and/or therapy. These connections may seem like a stretch, but a frequently cited disability court case (*Sutton vs. United Airlines*, 2001) ruled that disabled persons whose disabilities were aided by medication, assistive technology, and the like could not receive accommodations under the ADA. Most mental disabilities and mental health conditions are treated with a variety of approaches, the most common being some form of medication. Though this court case was eventually overturned by legislation in 2008, the attitude lurking behind it has not.

Out of all the prompts contained in this heuristic, perhaps this one is meant to spur an increase of thought as opposed to a directive action. This difference does not mean this prompt is unsuccessful, but rather, that it works differently to encourage **an increase in the thought-work of access**, a crucial contribution to the overall effort. Another, perhaps more helpful way to think about this prompt is to ask, “what integral parts of succeeding in a composition course aren't covered in the accommodations students are using?” This reframed question can easily tie back to several of the concepts covered in the first domain, especially when it comes to defining participation and determining what it means to be engaged and present in academic spaces. The lack of a direct answer can be in and of itself a benefit, because it forces WPAs and stakeholders to rethink what we think we know.

**Prompt #5: Where in Your Program Do You Have Spaces for Authentic Feedback from Disabled GTAs, Students, and Faculty?**

The final prompt of this heuristic asks WPAs to consider where space exists in their program for disabled GTAs, faculty, and students to provide authentic feedback. The idea of feedback is a prominent feature in disability studies and disability and composition research, and for good reason—disabled people giving input on the policies that affect us has its roots in the disability rights' motto, "Nothing about us without us." This phrase, which is still held onto tightly by those of us who live and breathe disability, originally comes from anti-institutionalization efforts in the 1970s and 80s. This phrase can be of particular use to nondisabled WPAs wanting to become better allies as administrators, as it can serve as a check for future access efforts. No matter the initiative, disabled stakeholders deserve to have an active role in the policies and protocols that impact them the most.

This notion of feedback is a prominent feature in Price's "The Essential Functions of the Position," where she argues for a universally designed interpretation's place in academic spaces. With UDL, one of the central ideas is that instructors create multiple pathways for students, in the same way that interstate highways are comprised of multiple traffic lanes. By creating multiple paths for expression, engagement, and representation, instructors increase the likelihood that more students will be able to traverse through the course. Price suggests that feedback can and should work similarly, as this not only makes the process more accessible, but increases the chances of receiving quality

feedback (130). Many disabled GTAs, students, and faculty have difficulty navigating the intense kairos of face-to-face feedback requests from supervisors. However, the answer isn't to abandon these on-the-spot forms of critical response altogether, but to diversify them. Instead of creating feedback situations that are time response dependent (Price uses the example of completing a printed evaluation at the end of a workshop), WPAs should look to create multiple, diverse ways for faculty, GTAs, and students to suggest ideas and program improvements.

That being said, nondisabled WPAs should be aware that disclosing disability and providing feedback on or requests for access can be abjectly terrifying for disabled faculty and students. It may take time to build a necessary level of trust, especially with mentally disabled faculty and GTAs, as most mentally disabled persons have had at least one negative experience with disclosing their disability. These negative experiences are often recursive, with the reaction from one disclosure informing the level of comfort and willingness behind the next (Kershbaum, 2014). Lance, one of the GTAs I interviewed, described his level of fear in talking to his GTA Coordinators about his experiences with disability:

“I’ve intentionally avoided it, because it’s way too stressful for me....Depending on who I’m speaking with, if it’s someone I’m comfortable with, if I’m having a moment, it doesn’t bother me that much. If it’s someone I feel is in a position of authority or who may not understand...if I feel like they’re going to look down on me or

I'm going to get judged harshly or whatever, then I will just have to avoid it altogether. So it really depends on the person."

In the rest of his interview, Lance expressed some concern over being viewed as unfriendly or antisocial in moments like these. Being present in social and professional spaces where expectations for engagement are unclear, he explained, were often exhausting and a source of near constant anxiety. Nevertheless, Lance expressed hope that he could grow more comfortable with his supervisors as his time in the GTA program unfolded.

Though many expressed varying levels of fear in providing feedback to their supervisors, multiple GTAs noted their willingness and excitement at the thought of contributing to a greater spirit of access in their local environment. For Ruth, the opportunity to provide input was a way to validate the depth of her own experiences. Disabled students like her "have a lot to offer the world," she observed. "And sometimes I think, not because of our disabilities but the way in which we've had to compensate for things, we actually work harder and have some insights that other people would not. Ruth's perspective on the value of disabled knowledge mirrors that of Corbett Jean O'Toole, who argues that public disclosures, though they might be terrifying, are opportunities for disabled and nondisabled people alike to gain knowledge. For disabled people, these disclosures often enrich existing communities and knowledge schemas, but the true benefit is for those outside these groups:

Certain, and often very important information resides within networks of people with shared relationships to disabilities, such as



strategies for successfully handling discrimination barriers; locating disability-positive support services; identifying effective resources; finding support; and sharing culture. The depth of these resources is rarely apparent to people outside the community but are openly shared with people who identify their relationships with that impairment community. Publicly-identified members of these communities are the bridges from the nondisabled world.

The key to promoting an increase in feedback from disabled students, faculty, and GTA lies in being explicit. Instead of creating generalized space that disabled students could possibly disclose in, WPAs need to create dedicated spaces (whether on paper, electronic, in person, or all three) for disabled stakeholders to provide feedback. Demonstrating a genuine desire to learn more from these students, faculty, and GTAs can be instrumental to not only building a lasting sense of trust, but to learning more about the kinds of access needed in their writing programs.

## **Conclusions**

While not all writing program administrators may be familiar with Universal Design, it is almost certain they are at least familiar with the concept of accommodations. Taking a closer look at both accommodations and the official processes that generate them is not only a starting point for access that works in multiple college environments, but it can serve as a way to effectively scaffold towards a design model for teaching and administrating. This second domain's

emphasis on programmatic access should in no way be viewed as exhaustive, as the prompts included in this domain were constructed so as to be applicable to the widest range of writing program environments.

The problems and intricacies of the student and faculty accommodation processes reveal a deep institutional discomfort and uncertainty with disability. This makes sense, as disability is a disruptive force, one that actively rubs against perceived expectations about who people in academic spaces are expected to be. Disability is all too often reacted to instead of expected. Near the end of “Disabling Writing Program Administration,” Amy Vidali encourages WPAs to “disable” their administrative practices, to reconsider disability not as something to be lived with or overcome, but as an experience and embodied way of being that enhances and enriches research and WPA work in ways that change over time (46). Though Vidali is speaking primarily of how disability intersects with the experience of being a WPA, her idea of “disabling” is the ultimate goal of this domain. My hope is by sifting through the institutional details and red tape, by zooming in to examine individual accommodations and zooming out to see the larger picture, WPAs can not only gain a greater perspective, but move towards “disabling” as a sustained practice.

## CHAPTER IV: HEURISTIC IN ACTION AT MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY

Identifying and fixing inaccessible areas in higher education and writing programs can feel like an overwhelming undertaking. WPAs may be aware that their programs could be more accessible for mentally disabled students, GTAs, and faculty, but deciding where to start in rectifying these gaps can be a challenge. The primary goal of this heuristic as a singular tool is to provide that starting place, but not to define any sort of destination where access is concerned. It is entirely realistic that one WPA could complete this heuristic and find that it addresses their primary access problems, where another WPA might discover, by working through the various prompts, more pressing concerns than what is contained in two domains. This difference in responses is expected, and is part of the reason this tool is designed as a heuristic for long-form responses rather than a series of directive checklists. Accessibility is rarely a uniform or linear process, and such deviations can be beneficial, even welcomed. Given that mental disability and accessibility issues are closely linked to individual contexts and physical and social environments, this is a crucial point to raise in any discussion on creating a singular heuristic tool that can be employed in a wide variety of environments.

Examining a writing program for any access challenges requires that WPAs consider the concept of assessment from a fresh perspective. In more traditional forms of assessment (namely, forms related to assessing student

writing), a primary goal is often to determine whether or not a student is learning. As Cindy Moore, Beth O'Neill, and Brian Huot observe, writing assessments also “have the power to influence curriculum and pedagogy, to categorize teachers and writers, and, ultimately, to define ‘good writing’” (108). However, the sort of **access self-assessment I advocate for here is more akin to data collection and information gathering** than creating and scoring a formalistic measurement. The goal of access assessment is to uncover and learn more about the ways in which faculty, students, and graduate teaching assistants can or can't move within programmatic and pedagogical spaces in a writing program. In this chapter, I detail the design behind the accessibility heuristic and its two domains, examining and defining the heuristic as whole. In the second half of this chapter, I use my local university as a case study for this heuristic and illustrate how it can work within the context of one writing program. At the end of this case study, I offer some praxis-based access strategies for addressing some of the access gaps the heuristic illuminates. This chapter's purpose is to not only clarify the rationale behind the heuristic's design, but to apply the heuristic to a localized context and to extract some initial recommendations.

### **Heuristic Design**

Creating a theoretically sound accessibility heuristic, one that could be effective for multiple writing programs, requires a delicate balance between determining specific criteria and offering enough to account for institutional individualities. The initial intent for this heuristic was to construct a self-

assessment tool for WPAs that was not only complementary to the legislative mandate that sparked it, but also to the range of higher educational environments found within Tennessee and other states. When searching for writing program commonalities amongst these wildly different environments, I also had to consider what numerous disability scholars have written about accessibility: namely, that both disability and access are highly rhetorical concepts and are intrinsically tied to their environments (Kershbaum (2014), Wood et al., Brewer et al., Price (2011)).

Ultimately, the key to marrying specificity and flexibility lay in addressing tried and true methodological concerns about integrating accessibility efforts into educational environments. A common feature in many existing accessibility efforts is the use of checklists, and several checklists for implementing UDL features exist as well. This is certainly true of Tennessee Board of Regents/Tennessee Higher Education Commission's accessibility audit, whose current faculty trainings consist of a series of learning management system modules and corresponding checklists. Multiple disability scholars, including Jay Dolmage, note how the simplification involved in creating and using checklists runs against the rhetorical and reciprocal purposes contained in UDL ("Universal Design: Ways to Move"). The distilled nature of checklists can also inadvertently communicate the essentialist nature of what's included in the checklist—if something's not included on the checklist, it must not be a major concern. This can be disastrous where accessibility is concerned.

Though UDL emphasizes multiple forms of representation, engagement, and expression, it does so with the understanding that merely creating multiple ways to move does not mean that access work is finished, only that it has been started. To borrow from Dolmage, “the strategy we use to make engagement more accessible for one student could be experienced as profoundly limiting for another” (“Universal Design: Places to Start”). When integrated properly, UDL is heavily reciprocal and relies on feedback and revision, with re-designed environments and spaces being regularly examined to determine if access is still working, if anything needs to be changed.

The idea of a checklist, where items are crossed off as they are completed, works fine to mark the start of access work, but it fails to capture UDL’s spirit of continual action. Some disability scholars argue that accessibility checklists (even those that integrate UDL characteristics) can still be useful, but with some important caveats and clarifications included alongside them. Sushil K. Oswal and Lisa Meloncon note that “using any checklist without critical engagement and awareness of strategies to address multiple types of disabilities from our perspective only means that courses will have the patina of accessibility without true engagement and implementation” (68). Oswal and Meloncon’s concerns have been integrated into the finalized version of this access heuristic. Whereas Tennessee’s mandated accessibility audit consists of a series of modules with numerous checklists attached, this heuristic encourages long-form responses and reflection (“Tennessee Board of Regents”). In order for programmatic access efforts to be successful in the long term, faculty and WPAs

alike must engage with both access and disability in ways that are reflective, constructive, inclusive, and conscious of the various rhetorical situations present in writing programs.

### **Designing the Two Domains**

The two domains for this heuristic, “Policies and/as Pedagogy” and “Programmatic Access,” reflect common places to start for access work in most, if not all, writing program environments. This choice was both strategic and intentional. Choosing “pedagogy” and “programmatic” as the themes for this heuristic’s domains further emphasizes how access work involves/requires determining places to start and return to, not marking competition points. Using these concepts as domain labels also provides some conceptual scaffolding for WPAs who are new to access work, as these labels create space for WPAs to draw parallels to other aspects of the profession. An instructor’s pedagogy is not a static set of personal beliefs and classroom activities, but a living, reflective, evolving, and rhetorically determined set of characteristics. Writing program administration development is not a static characteristic either. The history of writing program administration scholarship is filled with attempts to grow and bend with new disciplinary beliefs, the development of best practices, and the increasing inclusion of diverse student populations. Using these terms as domain labels helps reiterate how, like pedagogy development and writing program work, accessibility is long term, complex work, no matter how instantaneous and simplistic we wish it could be.

## **Case Study Demographics: Middle Tennessee State University's General Education English Office**

Middle Tennessee State University's current iteration of the first-year writing program launched during the Fall 2016 semester, after a series of lengthy faculty deliberations led to the Lower Division English Department being restructured as the General Education English Office. This restructuring also led to the installation of two composition and rhetoric faculty members to serve as WPAs and co-directors of General Education English<sup>11</sup>. Two graduate teaching assistants also serve as Graduate Student Writing Program Administrators. At present, General Education English directly oversees six courses:

- ENGL 1008: Writing for English as Second Language (ESL) Students
- ENGL 1009: Introduction to University Writing
- ENGL 1010: Expository Writing, the first course in MTSU's two semester first-year writing sequence
- ENGL 1020: Research and Argumentative Writing, the second course in the first-year writing sequence
- ENGL 2020: Themes in Literature and Culture, a literature course with specialized topics
- ENGL 2030: The Experience of Literature, a nonspecialized literature appreciation course.

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<sup>11</sup> Before the creation of the joint WPA position, the director of the Lower Division English Office was a rotating position between various tenured faculty members. Faculty specialization in rhetoric and composition was not a requirement to fulfill this role.



To satisfy general education requirements, students at MTSU are required to complete both courses in the first-year composition sequence as well as one literature course of their choosing. During the Fall 2018 semester, fifty-four instructors taught 136 total sections<sup>12</sup> of ENGL 1010 and thirteen instructors taught forty-one sections of ENGL 1020. Instructors for these courses include GTAs, adjuncts, lecturers, tenure-track, and tenured faculty.

### **Domain One: Policies and/as Pedagogy**

*How does your writing program promote the use of access statements in its courses?*

*How does your writing program encourage instructors to adopt equitable technology policies?*

*How does your writing program encourage instructors to quantify and define “participation” in their courses?<sup>13</sup>*

Current work on promoting the use of access statements, equitable technology policies, and concrete definitions of participation exists within various resources and mechanisms in the General Education English Program. During each Fall Semester, the office conducts a review of syllabi used in the courses it oversees. Participation in the syllabus review is required for all GTAs and is optional for other faculty. During the syllabus review, participating instructors are

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<sup>12</sup> These numbers include standard, honors, K sections (ENGL 1010 sections that contain additional writing support), dual enrollment, online, and Raider Learning Community sections.

<sup>13</sup> In other writing program environments, these prompts can (and should) be responded to individually. However, in the case of MTSU’s writing program, they share a common answer, and so addressing them individually would be unnecessarily repetitive and tedious to read.

divided into smaller discussion groups led by a group facilitator. Groups swap copies of their syllabi with their other group members and then have a group meeting where they offer feedback on their syllabi design, course design, and listed policies. Additionally, resources supporting these accessible syllabi policies are posted on the General Education English Office's website. The General Education English Office has also used Google Docs to create a curriculum map for first-year writing at MTSU. Based on program and course objectives, this curriculum map contains suggested readings, sample course projects, and space for instructors to offer advice and examples of their own syllabus policies.

Some professional development supporting access statements, equitable technology policies, and participation grades exists, but in limited capacities. In the past three years, several pedagogy workshops on these attributes have been created and given at the Fall and Spring Curriculum Meetings<sup>14</sup> and the GTA Orientation. GTAs are required to attend all of these events, and faculty members of all rankings are encouraged to attend these events. In the past two years, GTA Orientation has been rebranded as General Education English Orientation in order to encourage more participation and attendance from faculty members of all levels. As a result of these offerings, more GTAs and faculty have

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<sup>14</sup> The Fall and Spring Curriculum meetings are all-day workshops held at the start of the Fall and Spring Semesters. The Fall Semester's meeting often includes a guest speaker, someone external to the university. In both the Fall and Spring Curriculum Meetings, faculty members and GTAs submit proposals on sessions they would like to lead. These sessions, lasting roughly forty-five minutes each, are often grouped around central topics. For the most recent curriculum meeting, the organizers requested that session presenters' sessions be focused on assignments, multimodality in the classroom, or pedagogy.

included access statements and redesigned their technology and participation policies in order to be more accessible.

However, I have designed and presented these workshops as a part of my GTA and Graduate Writing Program Administrator roles. Given that I have active teaching and research interests in disability studies and writing program administration, such presentations are not a surprise. I have since completed my assistantship and transitioned out of the program and my previous role as Graduate WPA. Before I exited the program, I uploaded copies of all her presentation materials and accompanying scripts to the GTA course shell on Desire2Learn, MTSU's course management software, as a way to preserve these resources for future GTAs and faculty. As of this writing, only GTAs have access to this course shell. Though these efforts have been successful in the short term, it is unclear if or how this emphasis on access will continue in the future, as there are no formal mechanisms or practices for ensuring this kind of professional development continues.

## **Domain Two: Programmatic Issues**

*How knowledgeable are faculty, GTAs, and WPAs about the range of accommodations their Disability Services Office offers?*

It is unclear how knowledgeable WPAs and first-year writing GTAs and faculty are about current accommodations at MTSU. Perhaps some faculty are knowledgeable about accommodation possibilities through their previous experiences with or as disabled students, but the full extent of this is unclear. This topic was featured in one of my interviews with disabled GTAs at MTSU. In one question in this interview, I asked participants if they were registered with MTSU's Disability and Access Center, and if they were, what accommodations they have been granted. Lance responded that he secured testing accommodations in order to prepare for his graduate exams, but "didn't know what options would be available" for him as a disabled student. After I shared my list of accommodations with him, he was stunned: "I didn't even know we had a range [of accommodations]!" Information about MTSU's Disability and Access Center is not included in any part of the College of Graduate Studies' New Student Orientation, so it is understandable how Lance would not be aware of the ways he could receive additional support as a disabled graduate student.

New faculty members have some ADA training as a part of their orientation, but this training does not include new graduate teaching assistants. MTSU does not mandate any kind of ADA or accommodation refresher training for faculty; the only required trainings for faculty are yearly refresher courses on Title IX and Title VI. Limited information on MTSU's approach to accommodations exists in

public digital spaces. MTSU's Disability and Access Center does list some "Commonly Requested Accommodations" on its website, including:

- "Testing accommodations—extra time, a reduced distraction environment, a reader/scribe
- Notetaking—provision of note taking technologies such as digital recorders and Livescribe pens
- Textbooks and other text in alternate formats like Braille and audio
- Priority Seating
- Sign Language Interpreting/CART"

Though this brief list is included on the website, it is listed on a page under the "Students" dropdown menu and therefore may not be noticed by many faculty members. There are no similar pages on the DAC website that are directed to faculty members; faculty members who have questions or concerns about accommodations are simply directed to contact the Disability and Access Center.

*How knowledgeable are GTAs, faculty, and WPAs about the process for securing faculty accommodations?*

At MTSU, the Disability and Access Center, the biggest campus office devoted to disability concerns, oversees accommodations, adaptive recreation programs, and various other programs and initiatives designed to promote disability self-advocacy and culture. The DAC also maintains a listserv of all registered students and sends out regular updates, reminders, and informational notices when access on campus (such as closed sidewalks due to construction

or which buildings on campus have faulty elevators) is impeded. However, the Disability and Access Center exclusively serves students; faculty and staff are excluded from these notifications and resources. Many faculty members may be unaware that these services exist for registered students. Up until at least 2016, MTSU faculty and staff requesting any form of official accommodations for their campus work were directed to file paperwork and submit documentation through human resources. There is a pronounced difference between requesting accommodations through an office like the Disability and Access Center, whose sole purpose is to provide inclusive access, and filing the same request through human resources, an institutional office that may or may not have the employee's best interest in mind.

However, as a result of the TBR/THEC audit, MTSU now has a full-time coordinator to oversee ADA issues and accommodation requests ("MTSU Information Accessibility Plan"). This change was included as a part of MTSU's long term access efforts. Additionally, the ADA coordinator no longer operates as an extension of Human Resources, but instead functions as a branch of MTSU's Office for Institutional Equity and Compliance. This is a marked improvement over the previous accommodation requesting process. It is unclear how many faculty members are aware of this relatively recent change in procedure, reporting, and staff. It is even more unclear how GTAs fit into this divide between faculty and student accommodations—the nuances and changes in how graduate teaching assistants are defined and funded (are their monthly stipends considered awarded scholarships or payment for academic work?) are constantly

changing and can impede their path to access. Under MTSU's model, if an employee is seeking accommodations, they are to file electronic paperwork and visit the ADA Coordinator, not their supervisor. For GTAs, the process is entirely unclear and possibly never considered. The website for the College of Graduate Studies, an extensive resource that contains all of the forms and information about applying and receiving graduate assistantships, makes no mention of disability or accommodations whatsoever. The handbook for the English Graduate Program is somewhat better, as it provides information about the Disability and Access Center, but it makes no mention of how GTAs could apply for accommodations related to their GTA roles.

When I asked Lance and Josey if they had ever requested any accommodations for their on-campus work, whether formally or informally, they were unaware that they had a legal right to do so. Such an option seemed unfathomable to them—Lance claimed he “would never imagine [working] accommodations would even exist,” and Josey was stunned, noting she “did not know that is available.” After I explained to Josey that legally, she had the right to ask for working accommodations, she responded, “If you don't know it's available, you don't know to ask for it.” There is no public information that would indicate to disabled graduate teaching assistants that they would have the right to accommodations for their on-campus work. In fact, information about accommodations or the Disability and Access Center is excluded from the College of Graduate Studies' “Student Resources” and “FAQ” pages. As a result, it is highly likely that MTSU's College of Graduate Studies has never considered

that graduate assistants may be in need of ADA accommodations for their on-campus work, a potential assumption that is woefully mistaken.



*What kinds of accommodations are commonly used in your first-year writing courses?*

In order to use data to answer this question, I created an IRB approved survey<sup>15</sup> for MTSU faculty (including GTAs) who taught either ENGL 1010 or ENGL 1020 during the Fall 2018 semester. The survey, which was distributed via email, contained ten questions, including one question containing the informed consent documentation. Two of the questions asked faculty members to list the DAC granted accommodations that students had requested. As of 2017, MTSU's Disability and Access Center has adopted an electronic distribution platform for delivering accommodation notices to instructors. At the start of each semester, registered students can log into the system, select a course, decide which of their approved accommodations they would like to use for the course, and then send the final letter to their instructors via email. This online system allows students a level of customization in the accommodation process and is more accessible than previous accommodation request systems, which required students to make their requests in person at the DAC Office. Faculty members who elected to participate in this research study would only need to briefly search their email by keyword in order to locate the accommodation letters and relevant information.

Eleven total faculty members participated in this survey<sup>16</sup>: four GTAs, four lecturers, and three tenured or tenure-track instructors. Three out of the eleven respondents (27%) had students provide official DAC accommodation in their

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<sup>15</sup> IRB ID #19-1049

<sup>16</sup> For full charts and a more detailed breakdown of the ensuing data, please see Appendix A.

ENGL 1010 courses for the Fall 2018 semester. Accommodations requested for these ENGL 1010 courses included deadline extensions for all major projects and assignments (2), reduced distraction environment for tests and quizzes (1), flexible attendance (1), extra time for tests and quizzes (1), and captioning or transcribing classroom media (1). Three out of eleven respondents (27%) had students provide official documentation for their ENGL 1020 courses during the Fall 2018 semester. Official accommodations requested for ENGL 1020 courses include deadline extensions for major projects and papers (3), reduced distraction environment for tests and quizzes (2), flexible attendance (3), and extra time on tests and quizzes (1).

*What access gaps and opportunities for redesign do these accommodations reveal?*

Though the data set contained in the previous prompt represents a small fraction of all the instructors who teach ENGL 1010 and ENGL 1020 at MTSU<sup>17</sup>, it is still revealing as to which accommodations students are electing to use in their first-year writing courses. Some of the accommodations listed—especially “captioning/transcribing classroom media”—had been addressed in the scope of the TBR/THEC course materials audit and therefore do not fall under the heuristic’s purview. Two of the listed accommodations (reduced distraction environment<sup>18</sup> and additional time for tests and quizzes) can be implemented

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<sup>18</sup> MTSU faculty are not required to send students who have the “additional time for testing” accommodation to the DAC office to take their exams; this protocol merely ensures that students

through the DAC, which also conducts test proctoring. Instructions for the procedures and protocols involved are displayed on the Disability and Access Center website, but it is unclear how many faculty members are aware of this. Faculty members at MTSU also have the option of finding or creating a low-distraction environment for students if such resources are unavailable. Moreover, given that first-year composition courses at MTSU are oriented around students producing writing projects as opposed to taking quizzes, tests, and exams, analyzing the presence of this accommodation did not seem necessary or particularly beneficial.

That being said, it is certainly worthwhile to further examine “flexible attendance” in greater detail. On official accommodation documents, “flexible attendance” is listed under the “Classroom Access” subheading, with a caveat reading, “Instructors must apply classroom accommodations as long as they do not fundamentally alter an essential element of the course/assignment. If you have any questions or feel that an accommodation would alter an essential element, contact the DAC as soon as possible” (Disability and Access Center). Flexible attendance is referred to as an “academic consideration,” one that is a “statement of support” and “not a required accommodation.” The Disability and Access Center does not offer a definition on what it means for faculty to provide “flexible attendance” to these students. This language is incredibly ambiguous and a great contrast from other listed accommodations, which are legal

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granted this accommodation have the resources to use the accommodation. Students are granted additional testing time in terms of percentages. For example, a student may have “50% additional testing time” specified on their accommodation letter.

requirements for faculty to follow. It is quite likely that this nonspecific-yet-specific language is a tripping point for instructors who are unsure how to implement such a suggestion or are curious about whether they should address it at all.

*Where in your program do you have spaces for authentic feedback from disabled GTAs, students, and faculty?*

General Education English instructors have opportunities to provide authentic feedback to WPAs, but in limited capacities. By “authentic feedback,” I am referring to feedback about the writing program that can be provided to administrators in such a way that minimizes the amount of risk for those providing it. The most common way that authentic feedback is gathered in the General Education English Office is electronically, often through Google Forms. These Google Forms are usually circulated after the office has conducted some form of professional development event series, such as the General Education English Orientation, which is held at the start of the Fall semester. The 2017 iteration of this Google Form, “GTA Orientation 2017: How Did it Go?”, contained two prompts that could feasibly be used to indirectly solicit feedback from the disabled GTAs and faculty who attended. These two prompts—“What could improve GTA Orientation in the future?” and “What questions do you still have?”—are open-ended enough to allow for disabled GTAs and faculty to provide input, but no specific disability-themed responses were provided. Additionally, GTAs are required to meet with one of the General Education English co-Directors once a semester to discuss their long-term goals for the

GTA program and after graduate school. GTAs also submit one-page, written reflections each semester about their experiences. These reflections are saved in their departmental file.

It is important to note that none of these avenues are directly soliciting feedback from *disabled* faculty and GTAs. These efforts are soliciting feedback from all faculty and GTAs, and disabled faculty could feasibly voice their concerns as a part of these efforts if they chose to do so. However, in my interviews with disabled graduate students in MTSU's English GTA program, some participants noted their reluctance to speak to their experiences in this way. Lance spoke of what would need to situationally transpire in order to elicit his participation: "If I'm going to air a grievance, for example...I want to be assured the person or persons I'm going to share with are going to be respectful, are going to understand that I don't have it all figured out." The risk that disabled faculty and GTAs face in speaking to their experiences in academic space is greater and more nuanced than the risk nondisabled GTAs and faculty face.

When asked about if she had spoken to her supervisors about her disability experiences, Paige noted that her GTA supervisors had been "incredibly supportive," but she still felt very reluctant to talk to them about her own experiences as a disabled GTA. Later in the same conversation, Paige commented on how witnessing some graduate faculty members' negative treatment and unprofessional behavior towards a previous GTA with mental health issues strongly influenced her decision to stay quiet about her own disabilities. This GTA, Paige added, eventually dropped out of MTSU's GTA and

graduate programs due to their mental health issues and the department's negative reactions. For Paige, this GTA's treatment sent a clear warning sign: "Well, if that's how we feel about people who are suffering from depression and self-harm, then how do I know how they will feel about my anxiety disorder?"

Lance's and Paige's comments and experiences align with a common theme in disability scholarship: disclosure is always a risky action for disabled persons to make, as it places social and informational power in the hands of those who receive the disclosure (Kershbaum, 2014). In Paige's and Lance's case, this risk is magnified even further when the disclosure recipient is both a graduate professor and an immediate supervisor. Even though Paige was quick to mention how her supervisors were positive, "incredibly supportive" people, she still feared how her disability status could possibly be used against her by others in the department. When disability isn't named for what it is—a natural variance of the human experience—that silence can, regardless of intention, reinforce ableist beliefs about who we expect to be in academic spaces.

A survey or Google Form designed to collect feedback from disabled faculty and GTAs and explicitly geared towards them could generate the authentic feedback called for in this prompt. There are no current spaces for disabled students to voice authentic feedback directly or indirectly to the General Education English Office. MTSU's current system of course evaluations does not allow for this either—the evaluation questions have standardized, multiple choice answers that are the same across departments. The course evaluation process has shifted recently, moving from paper-and-pencil versions completed in class

to an online version that is optional for students. In this new evaluation system, instructors have the option of creating custom questions to add to the evaluation. It is unclear how many instructors have elected to do so, or if any of the added questions pertained to the course's accessibility. Limited opportunities for disabled student feedback do exist outside of the General Education English Office. According to MTSU's Information Accessibility plan, MTSU's Information Accessibility Team began using focus groups comprised of disabled students starting in 2017; however, the process of how these students were identified and recruited is unknown.

### **A Non-Exhaustive List of Praxis Based Access Strategies**

During my eight years as a GTA and gWPA at MTSU, I have created and adapted some access strategies related to the first domain of the heuristic, which focuses on policies and pedagogies. A secondary goal of this dissertation is to provide some accessible strategies and examples for WPAs and instructors to consider in regard to access statements, technology policies, and participation grades. These strategies are ones I use regularly in teaching first-year writing and have been created and used exclusively at MTSU. However, these practical ideas can be adapted and reconfigured to work in other educational environments.

## Access Statements

### Access and Veterans Statement

As your instructor, I am committed to helping everyone in this class be successful, confident writers. Everyone learns differently, and this means we all need some kind of learning accommodations. If there are elements of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude your participation, please let me know as soon as possible. I will be glad to work with you to create a plan that helps you learn and meets the requirements of the course. If you are a veteran, please let me know so that I can make sure your classroom needs are met as well.

If you need official accommodations, you have a right to have these met. Middle Tennessee State University is committed to campus access in accordance with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Any student interested in reasonable accommodations can consult the Disability & Access Center (DAC) website [www.mtsu.edu/dac](http://www.mtsu.edu/dac) and/or contact the DAC for assistance at 615-898-2783 or [dacemail@mtsu.edu](mailto:dacemail@mtsu.edu). If you have any questions about the DAC registration process or concerns about what steps this entails, feel free to make an appointment with me.

Figure 3: Rachel Donegan's Access Statement

The language contained in an access statement can accomplish many things, but a common goal for these kinds of statements includes expanding the boundaries of our disability conversations beyond where to acquire accommodations. Inspired by Anne-Marie Womack's work with accessible syllabi, Figure 3 shows the most recent version of the Access and Veterans<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Middle Tennessee State University has a high population of military veterans and is a Military Friendly Institution, and I added the veterans sentence in my statement at the suggestion of Dr. Hilary Miller, the director of MTSU's Military and Veterans Center.



Statement I have included in my syllabi for first-year writing courses. At MTSU, instructors can create their own access statements, as long as the required verbatim language about the Disability and Access Center is included in the syllabus. My impetus for writing this statement comes from my own commitment to access and to creating syllabus policies consistent with my teaching philosophy that sounded more human and less boilerplate. Disability is not something many instructors talk about in their classrooms, aside from reading a required legal statement that is often tacked on to the last page of a syllabus.

Many students come to college for the first time with little knowledge about access, disability, and accommodations, and I intentionally worded this language to be more inclusive and informative. Such language additions are crucial, as Amy Vidali has argued that the formalistic language used in mandated disability statements “refuse engagement with the ambiguity at the heart of...disability accommodations, and they not only beckon students to adopt overly simplified notions but encourage teachers to do the same” (261). By including more personal language and a more inclusive classroom philosophy, we can not only begin to expand upon students’ concepts of disability but also reframe composition classrooms as reflexive spaces that respond to student and faculty access needs.

*Creating Technology Policies with Students: An Equitable and Accessible Alternative to Abrasive Tech Policies*

One possible solution to the issue of equitable technology policies is to devise a technology policy collaboratively with students during the first week of classes. This is a strategy that I have used as an instructor, one that has been considerably successful with students in my first-year writing courses. Like many classroom strategies that use Universal Design for Learning, involving students in the policy creation process serves multiple purposes: making policies with students improves transparency, increases student investment in the course, and reinforces that students in this course will be treated as adults, not as children. Constructing policies under a collaborative UDL framework contains instructional benefits as well: by devising technology policies that do not require disclosure, faculty and WPAs are no longer placed in the awkward position of having to suss out who is disabled and who is not. Most importantly where accessibility is concerned, creating classroom technology policies with students helps ensure that students do not need to disclose their disability status in order to use laptops or other technology in the classroom. When policies and pedagogies are constructed with access in mind from the start, the need for accommodations diminishes or even disappears.

The protocol for having students help create a classroom technology policy is relatively straightforward. First, I explain why technology policies exist in college courses. For many students, this is the first time that the reasons behind a syllabus policy have ever been articulated—policies are so often presented as

fact, as unchangeable, permanent absolutes that a student is to accept without further thought or question. Often, technology policies (including earlier versions I used as a less experienced instructor) are harshly worded and read as condescending and paternalistic towards students. In many cases, strict technology policies are born out of a desire to protect the instructional space from any possible detour or distraction, a noble if completely impossible endeavor. But how often is this desire explained or even communicated to students?

Designing a policy together with students is more democratic than merely creating a new policy for them, and, if constructed effectively, can eliminate the need for students to disclose in order to use technology. A strategy like this also has the added benefits of fostering productive discussions with students about these policies' purpose. After providing students with some context for why technology policies exist, I'll divide them into smaller groups, with instructions to devise with some technology guidelines that they would like to see in our classroom that semester. These instructions sometimes bring slightly baffled looks from a few students, as this is the first time they have been asked to help shape how a class is designed. The last instructions I give the groups before leaving them to work are these: Be honest. Come up with guidelines you think are fair and realistic, not simply ones you think I might expect or want to hear.

Once these groups have had a chance to work, I'll reconvene the class and serve as scribe as each group provides the guidelines they created.

Interestingly, each class nearly always arrives at the same set of technology guidelines:

- We will use technology for academic purposes in this class: taking notes, scheduling assignment reminders, writing, researching, taking pictures of the whiteboard, and the like.
- We will not use technology in a way that is intentionally distracting to others.
- If a situation arises where we need to make or receive a phone call, we will quietly step outside of the classroom to do so.
- We will keep our phones on silent during class time.
- We will only use headphones during individual work times. (Donegan)

For a guideline to become official, a clear majority of the class must agree, although in the semesters since adopting this practice, I have yet to have a guideline not be approved unanimously. Though the final technology guidelines for my course typically do not vary significantly from those listed above, it is crucial to continue this exercise semester after semester. Receiving feedback and input from students is essential to maintaining and promoting access within classroom spaces, as the rhetorical nature of accessibility means that access needs grow and change depending on time, space, and people.

During my tenure as a Graduate WPA, I presented a workshop on this idea to graduate teaching assistants, non-tenured faculty, and tenured faculty. A common (and understandable) concern often arises: what about students who

are still off-task? I explain that this is an issue I discuss with students on the very day when we create our technology guidelines. They are adults, and one of my goals as an instructor is to facilitate an environment that treats them as such. Growing as a student is as much about making productive mistakes as it is mastering a course's material. Plus, in the words of Catherine Prendergast, our job as instructors is to attract our students' attention in our courses, not to compel it. If a student is off task in a way that could be detrimental or distracting to others' learning, I will step in and correct it, but as of this writing such an incident has not happened<sup>20</sup>. The ultimate goal of policies like this one is to create, in the words of Margaret Price, more ways for students, whether disabled or not, to move, stretch, and learn during a course. The additional benefits of including students in the policy-making process—increased classroom community, more investment, clarity of expectations—are simply icing on the cake.

### *Collaborative Notes: Defining Participative Roles*

As illustrated in Chapter Two, participation grades are an extremely common feature on first-year writing syllabi, one that can cause access issues for disabled students. A possible solution is to replace the participation policy or grade with something else, an activity or course requirement that necessitates

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<sup>20</sup> I've only had to remind students about our classroom technology guidelines twice, and in both instances it was a case of the student using headphones during group work or collective class time. With both students I had intended to talk to each briefly after class, but both left before I had a chance. I didn't want to embarrass either student, so I sent each an email saying that I noticed that they were using headphones during collective class time and asked them to remember the guidelines we agreed to as a group. After sending the emails, neither student used headphones (except during individual work time) again.

some kind of student effort but also has clearly defined protocol and expectations. One possible solution is to adopt collaborative note taking in a course. Popularized by Allison Hitt, collaborative note taking serves not only to replace and better quantify participation, but it also builds another common accommodation—that of having a designated note taker—into the fabric of the course itself. In the version of this exercise I use in my course, students are to sign up for two class periods where they will serve as a designated note taker. Each class session has two slots for students to sign up for note taking responsibilities. In a class of twenty students, there are enough opportunities for everyone to sign up twice with a few days left over, which are often used for make-up note taking days.

The procedure for introducing collaborative note taking is fairly simple. I explain to students why I am using this kind of exercise—everyone interprets class information differently based upon their previous education experiences, which is not a bad thing. This difference creates the opportunity for everyone in the class to be resources and help each other succeed in the course. I have the collaborative note taking guidelines included in an addendum to the syllabus and schedule, primarily for the ease of students having all the documents in the same place<sup>21</sup>. The guidelines also contain the nuts-and-bolts aspects of executing this protocol over the course of the semester:

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<sup>21</sup> I also have digital and accessible versions of these same documents available on D2L, MTSU's online classroom platform, for any students who need them or prefer digital copies.

- “There isn’t a set length for these notes, as the content and format for each class session will vary from day to day. The biggest question to consider when taking notes is, “What would someone really need to know if they were absent?” This might mean including any beginning and end of class announcements as well.
- You may handwrite your notes or type them—either way is fine. Take notes in the format that is most comfortable for you, as this will make it easier for you to take quality notes.
- Class notes should be posted to the D2L Discussion boards—I’ll have a thread set up for each class session. You can either upload a typed copy of your notes (please use .doc, .docx, or .pdf to ensure everyone can read them) or you may take a photo of handwritten notes and upload that.
- Notes should be submitted in the 24 hours after each class meeting. When you select your days to serve as note taker, make a reminder for yourself (either in your phone or in a calendar) to upload them in time. (Donegan, “Collaborative Note Taking”)

Like implementing equitable technology policies, using collaborative notes in writing classrooms contains other accessibility bonuses. Many students come to college without knowing how to take notes, so the collaborative notes requirement facilitates students developing better study skills. To help them complete this course requirement, I usually provide several links on our course shell to web pages that discuss note taking strategies; additionally, I bring some

of the notes I've taken in graduate courses to class as an example of what note taking can look like. Additionally, having students take notes for each session and post them on the course shell greatly reduces instructors having to answer the eternal question of "What did I miss last class?" Instead of instructors having to answer this question, they can simply direct the student to the resources online.

These sample access statements, technology policies, and participation grades demonstrate how creating accessible policies often means adopting a clear, flexible, and transparent approach. Making these policies more accessible for students does not mean abandoning standards or expectations, but rather rearticulating them so as to be more inclusive. My goal in providing these resources is that WPAs (and by extension, their GTAs and faculty) can better understand what access can look like within the context of the first-year writing classroom.

## Conclusions

As the case study illustrates, the discursive nature of these prompts allows for WPAs to uncover and investigate serious access problems that either reside in or affect their writing programs. **The College of Graduate Studies' complete absence of support or protocol for disabled GTAs in their student and worker roles, arguably the most egregious access gap uncovered by this heuristic, is a discovery that is quite relevant to WPA work at MTSU and the wellbeing of disabled GTAs.** In several instances, direct answers to the



heuristic's prompts were either unclear or unknown, but the absence of a direct answer allowed for a further analysis of existing institutional structures. For example, the prompt about determining faculty and GTA awareness of the range of student accommodations garnered an unclear response. However, the process of fully answering the prompt revealed that the Disability and Access Center has not been forthcoming with faculty members about accommodations. Given the public nature of this dissertation, I adopted a more formal tone in completing this sample heuristic, but should this heuristic be adopted by a WPA or a small group of administrators, a less formal tone could be just as beneficial, if not more so.

If anything, this heuristic sample reveals that this instrument cannot be all things about access to all writing programs, but every writing program should be able to glean something valuable from it. A key aspect of this heuristic's design is that is intended to complement, not replace, more technical forms of accessibility. This design element makes it more compatible with current accessibility efforts at every public university in Tennessee. However, that does not mean that it cannot be a boon to colleges and universities in differing contexts, only that the results may look dramatically different. However, I am of the opinion that seeking/advocating for incremental improvements in accessibility is still work worth doing and pursuing. In keeping with the spirit of Universal Design for Learning, this heuristic is providing more and different places to start.

CHAPTER V: "WHAT DO WE DO NOW?": PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
AS NEXT STEPS FOR WPAs

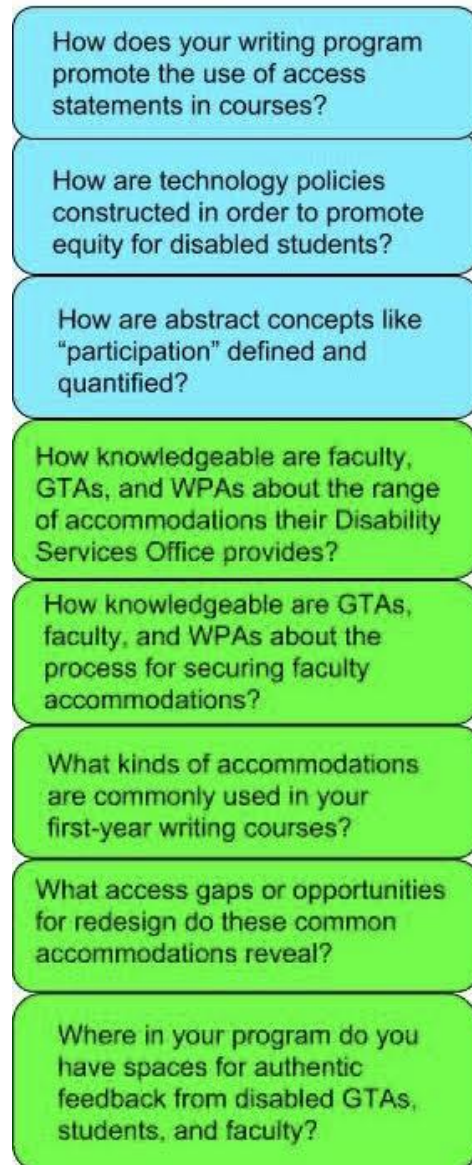


Figure 4: Full Accessibility Heuristic

At the very least, interacting with this heuristic and its prompts will provide WPAs with a wealth of new information about their programs and the students and faculty that comprise them. Through this heuristic, disability ceases to be a theoretical, impersonal concept, but a reality that can be measured in human experiences and connected to the program as a whole. This development is of great importance, as disability in higher education is often framed as something not directly relevant to the group, something that really only pertains to “those people over there” (Price, “Space”). Likewise, it can be tempting to perceive disability and inaccessibility as large, abstract entities rather than concepts based in personal experiences whose roots and grievances may lie in everyday circumstances. Having more concrete data about what accommodations students use in our programs and hearing more frequently from disabled students, GTAs, and faculty reinforces the truth that writing programs are often theorized, made, and run without disabled people or their experiences in mind. But as Cynthia Selfe and Franny Howes note, the disabled experience matters in writing programs:

Re-thinking composition from a disability studies perspective reminds us that we too often design writing instruction for individuals who type on a keyboard and too easily forget those who use blow tubes, that we have a habit of forgetting those who read through their fingertips, that we too often privilege students who speak up in class and too often forget those who participate most thoughtfully via email.

It is the last group of students Selfe and Howes mention—those who may spend their time in first year writing courses white-knuckling their way through kairotic instructional spaces—that this heuristic is specifically designed to reach.

Perhaps it is more accurate to state that this heuristic, with its pedagogical and programmatic domains, offers not just more information, but a greater sense of clarity into how accessibility relates to their specific university context and what next steps WPAs can take. After viewing their writing programs through the heuristic's lens, WPAs will know not only what accommodations students are using in their courses, but the process through which disabled faculty members can use to secure accommodations for themselves. But this heuristic also offers WPAs a lot to consider, especially where faculty development and feedback are concerned. The first domain, which focuses exclusively on pedagogy through reforming course policies, pushes WPAs and faculty to consider how attendance policies, technology guidelines, and participation grades—all staples of the composition classroom—can contain serious, detrimental consequences for disabled students. Domain One, through its inclusion of access statements, also reframes collegiate conversations on disability around creating a greater sense of course access rather than meeting a list of accommodations. In this final chapter, I detail the rewards, challenges, and possible long-term ramifications of implementing the results from this accessibility heuristic in programmatic spaces. The big question after completing the heuristic is a practical and logistic one: How should WPAs best push for these pedagogical and policy-based changes within their writing programs? One natural next step for WPAs post-heuristic is to

increase professional development offerings where access is concerned.

Providing more professional development for faculty offers a concrete answer for the inevitable “Now what?” question that can arise after completing the access heuristic. Adding disability related professional development opportunities is an administrative move that nearly every writing program, regardless of school size or demographics, can benefit from.

### **Changing the Perception of Disability: More Than Just Accommodations**

Since the passage of the ADA, the number of disabled students in colleges and universities has risen dramatically, but faculty trainings on disability pedagogy and their legal obligations have not kept up with the increase of disabled students in the classroom. Few, if any, universities require faculty to receive any ADA specific trainings<sup>22</sup>. This is an unfortunate reality, especially given changing student demographics. Allison R. Lombardi and Adam R. Lalor note this inconsistency, adding that “even though more faculty are directly supporting students with disabilities, at most universities there is no professional

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<sup>22</sup> Even though the Tennessee Higher Education Commission mandated that Tennessee public colleges and universities make their print and digital materials accessible, the trainings provided were extremely minimal. Since this mandate was unfunded, the Tennessee Board of Regents took a bare-bones approach to educating faculty about the technical aspects of access. Originally, the plan was to designate course auditors for the most commonly enrolled courses in each universities, train them on creating accessible course documents in a day-long seminar, and then have these faculty members create professional development opportunities for their departments. These faculty members were selected and trained during the Fall 2015 semester. At MTSU, this plan was quickly abandoned in favor of creating online trainings made available through Desire2Learn, the university’s course management system. Three years since the start of the audit, the university’s focus has drifted away from this emphasis on accessible course materials, and efforts seem to be largely abandoned. A key reason for this abandonment seems to be a large-scale staff turnover at the university’s ADA Compliance Office and the Disability and Access Center. This turnover has involved existing staff either electing to retire or taking on new administrative roles within the university.

development or training to ensure faculty are aware of their legal obligations” (108). Indeed, many faculty members are either unaware of the extent of their obligations under the ADA, uninformed about what specific services their campus’s Disability Services Office offers, or both.

Given the direct impact faculty have on students, it is crucial that they are provided with professional development opportunities and resources to better understand how their pedagogies and classroom practices can positively and negatively affect disabled students. In “Measuring University Faculty Attitudes Towards Disability: Willingness to Accommodate and Adopt Universal Design Principles,” Allison Lombardi and Christopher Murray surveyed both disabled students and the faculty who teach them to better explore this idea. Lombardi and Murray found, unsurprisingly, that the negative reactions of faculty toward disabled students’ accommodations “adversely affects their experience in postsecondary classrooms” (44). Similarly, the data from my interviews with disabled graduate teaching assistants corroborates this idea.

However, it is crucial to communicate to faculty that students’ need for access reaches far beyond securing accommodations, that access is much more than students providing a letter from the Disability Services Office. Given that accommodations operate as pedagogical exceptions and that many students face significant financial and healthcare related barriers to formally registering for them, any disability related trainings should emphasize the importance of creating accessible pedagogies and policies. Lombardi and Murray point out that for disabled students, securing student accommodations does not eliminate the

access problems they face in the classroom: “When asked, students report their barriers to learning are directly attributable to instructional practices of faculty members rather than their willingness to provide specific accommodations” (44). For many faculty, especially those who are new to conversations on disability, learning that accommodations are not enough for most, if not all, disabled students may be a new and surprising revelation.

This idea that access should stretch beyond following accommodations has great implications for writing programs, where many common accommodations, such as extended testing time, do not apply as written to the composition classroom (Wood). Stephanie K. Wheeler highlights this tension between prescribed accommodations and accessible praxis in her program profile of the University of Central Florida. Wheeler observes that often faculty did not ask for support when they received accommodation letters from students, as “many of the accommodations did not apply to our courses...As a result, many faculty with whom I spoke revealed that oftentimes they skimmed the letters and waited for students to reach out to them if there were any problems.” However, this passive approach to disability in the classroom is both too common and is a strategy that ultimately harms disabled students even more, as it puts pressure on the student to challenge the inaccessible environment. To this end, Christina Yuknis and Eric R. Bernstein add:

When faculty choose not to comply with the university accommodations policy...or wait for students to approach them regarding needed accommodations, it sets up an environment

where students perceive that accommodations are unavailable while also putting the onus on the student for disclosing. This does not encourage students to disclose, and thus students would rather wait until they are on the brink of failing before asking for [additional] accommodations.” (6)

Given the power dynamics of the classroom and the secrecy surrounding what accommodations are granted to students, it is understandable how students would be unaware that they could ask for accommodations or even approach an instructor about the subject.

Not only is professional development beneficial for faculty from a practical, pedagogical standpoint, but implementing disability themed professional development could be instrumental in shaping faculty perceptions towards disabled students as well. Numerous research studies have linked faculty perception of disabled students to their long-term academic success. In their study of faculty attitudes about working with disabled students, Jessica Sniatecki, Holly Perry, and Linda Snell found that “negative faculty attitudes and lack of awareness were the major barriers to success for students with disabilities” (260). Similarly, Sandra Becker and John Palladino noted that many students who have negative faculty interactions regarding accommodations are less likely to request them from instructors in the future, which in turn can damage their long term academic and professional success (65).

To make matters worse, Sniatecki, Perry, and Snell found that faculty perception for students with mental health disabilities were significantly more



negative than their perceptions for students with physical disabilities (266). Their findings should not surprise those familiar with disability studies or mental health issues. This disdain for mentally disabled students often surfaces in conversations over whether or not faculty members should include trigger warnings in their course documents for topics and readings that can potentially cause mental and emotional harm for students. For many faculty, “trigger warnings” have become synonymous with watering down course content, whining, excuse-seeking students, and losing academic freedom. These content advisories “call attention to the emotional pain of students...tap[ping] into longstanding assumptions about mental illness—namely, that mentally ill persons are merely malingering, dwelling unnecessarily with emotional pain, and in need of toughening up” (Orem and Simpkins). The invisible nature of mental disability, paired with the difficulty many students have with securing accommodations, almost certainly contributes to this misconception.

### **The Value and Importance of Disability-Themed Professional Development**

Though Lombardi and Murray and Sniatecki et al. offered grim revelations about how faculty perceive mentally disabled students, both studies contained glimmers of hope in regard to the potential for professional development to change these biases. In Sniatecki et al’s study, nearly two-thirds of respondents “reported interest in attending a panel presentation where students with disabilities would share personal information about their experiences in college” (266). These respondents showed a pointed interest in panels and workshops on

best practices for teaching students with mental health and learning disabilities” (266) Aside from both studies showing that faculty have a desire to learn more about working with disabled students, additional research shows the long term benefits of professional development. Lombardi and Murray’s study of faculty and disability found that faculty who had received disability related trainings were significantly more likely to know about existing campus resources for students, meet their legal responsibilities for implementing accommodations, and, most importantly, minimize access barriers in their instructional styles. These three studies all conclude by reiterating the value and potential for disability themed trainings for faculty development and disabled student success.

When devising disability themed professional development, it is crucial that WPAs carefully and strategically organize such trainings in a way that promotes faculty development and builds lasting partnerships. Faculty attitudes, when mixed with an academic culture that resists significant changes, can be detrimental to these efforts. Some faculty members take exception to lower-level administrators from outside their department dictating student accommodations, or, in their view, intrusions to their course design without having any knowledge of the subject matter or pedagogical conventions (Wolanin and Steele). The invisibility of mental disabilities, when paired with a distrust of institutional bodies outside of the department, can make collaboration tricky.

That being said, collaboration with Disability Service Offices is not impossible. Sniatecki et al. recommend that departmental administrators (like WPAs) collaborate with disability service offices on providing targeted trainings

instead of merely inviting them to speak generally to faculty about access. By partnering with disability service offices in these efforts, WPAs can include a greater rhetorical context for this work and are more likely to sway reluctant faculty; without WPA support, “implementation will be challenging, particularly in getting faculty to take advantage of these offerings” (267). WPA collaboration also opens the door for better, more focused trainings, ones where writing faculty can ask questions and learn about how access can work within classroom spaces that are not lecture based.

Depending on the campus and its resources, implementing professional development could mean creating a workshop with the Disability Services Office on access and accommodations or even creating a formalized, long term partnership. In her program profile of the University of Central Florida, Stephanie K. Wheeler outlines an access effort done by the University’s Student Accessibility Services (SAS) office. The SAS Office launched a faculty liaison program, where faculty members served as bridges between their individual departments and SAS. Departments with the highest number of accommodation requests were selected to participate; also, departments could volunteer to join this effort. The ultimate goal of this partnership was to blend the context-dependent aspects of accessibility with discipline-specific knowledge. An approach like this allowed the SAS office to situate itself:

Not as an expert of accommodation, but rather a facilitator of it; faculty, then, are the experts of their subject matter and can turn to SAS to make their courses accessible as appropriate. Thus the

liaison program would ensure that instead of responding to accommodation requests as directives, faculty would see these requests as opportunities for flexibility and growth in regard to their pedagogies.

Wheeler notes that after a few preliminary trainings on protocols, the faculty liaison had the freedom to structure access efforts as best fit the needs and rhetorical situation of the department. As the designated point person for access in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing, Wheeler received notification about which faculty members had received accommodation letters and met with them over the course of the semester. Through her designated role as a SAS liaison, Wheeler was able to create new professional development initiatives for the department, including an “undergraduate curriculum working group, teaching cohorts, and a curriculum resource site where faculty of all ranks shared their materials.” These measures not only fostered a sense of community within the writing program, but they also actively promoted interdependence between WPAs and faculty, a foundational value of access work that actively challenges the independence-centric nature of higher education.

Unfortunately, not all universities have the same level of resources as UCF, and at many schools, a longstanding partnership with the Disability Services Office is not possible due to bureaucracy or campus politics. This does not mean that implementing a more structured approach to access is impossible, but it does mean that WPAs will need to take the lead in making accessibility a more consistent presence in their programs.

### **Making Disability-Themed Professional Development Accessible**

Though much of the emphasis so far has been on WPAs creating disability and access themed professional development opportunities for faculty, it is important to add that such trainings should aim to be as functionally accessible as possible, for the direct benefit of disabled faculty and indirect benefit of nondisabled faculty<sup>23</sup>. It can be quite easy to focus on the topic of such trainings to the detriment of the modalities involved. This is a major detractor in the previously mentioned studies on faculty development, disability, and professional development—none of these research studies considered whether or not the faculty members surveyed were disabled themselves. In fact, these studies never mentioned the likelihood that disabled faculty members exist.

This omission is significant, as it frames disability as an experience limited to students and not one that affects faculty as well. Disability is not a “one size fits all” identity, and the breadth and depth of experiences it contains means that faculty who are physically disabled, for example, may need additional support on best practices for working with students with mental disabilities<sup>24</sup>. Additionally, considering that disability is an unspoken reality within higher education, and that

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<sup>23</sup> This is an extremely important distinction to make, as a criticism of Universal Design within disability communities is that it is often oversold and simplified as a framework that “benefits everyone,” which negates the primary intent of this way of thinking. The purpose of Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning is to center the needs of disabled persons within social, rhetorical, and physical spaces, which, in turn, benefits all participants. Presenting Universal Design for Learning and Universal Design exclusively as philosophies that benefit everyone often leads to the erasure of disabled people from the conversation.

<sup>24</sup> Likewise, it is worth noting that it is entirely possible for disabled persons to be ableist towards other disabled persons. This term is referred to as lateral ableism.

a person can become disabled at any given time, it is entirely possible that disabled faculty on campus may not be aware of what resources and due process they and their students are entitled to under the ADA. As I mention in Chapter Three, policies and procedures for disabled faculty requesting support range wildly from contacting a dedicated faculty disability support office to filing a request through human resources.

Another advantage to accessibility in professional development is that it creates the option of turning experiences into lasting resources. By electing to video record seminars and workshops, even as excerpts, WPAs can create opportunities for disabled faculty and GTAs to experience professional development digitally. Video recording workshops and seminars may require some additional labor in terms of captioning and transcribing. However, it also allows these one-time experiences to be preserved on departmental websites or internally via course management systems as lasting resources for faculty and GTA to turn to for years to come. Though designed to benefit disabled faculty and GTAs, creating accessible professional development materials has additional benefits not directly tied to access. One of the simplest ways to quickly and simply distribute digital workshop materials is via social media, which also contains the option of having posts shared or retweeted. This tactic can increase the audience for workshop materials and can help new scholars (especially GTAs) connect with others in the discipline, including established scholars.

The inaccessibility of professional development opportunities was a common theme with many of the disabled graduate teaching assistants I

interviewed. Professional development at MTSU, whether created or hosted inside or out of the English department, consists of a group of faculty sitting in a classroom listening to a presentation and possibly participating in some kind of small group activity. This is fairly standard for professional development at most universities and at academic conferences. For most nondisabled faculty, the challenge of attending professional development is often connected to time—alotting additional time for continuing education can be difficult to schedule within a week packed with meetings, classes, grading, and research, to say nothing of familial and personal obligations. However, for disabled graduate students and faculty, there is an additional challenge to attending or leading professional development, that of protecting their physical and mental health and personal wellbeing.

Many of the disabled GTAs I interviewed described their experiences attending or leading professional development sessions in inaccessible environments. Though some interviewees mentioned the physical strain of being present in these spaces, the biggest forms of inaccessibility had to do with how the common structure of professional development detrimentally affected their mental health and mental illness. In her interview, Paige, a GTA with depression and generalized anxiety disorder, spoke about attending and presenting at professional development opportunities, including one experience where she experienced a panic attack in the middle of leading a workshop for GTAs. Since her disabilities can become symptomatic without much warning, attending and

presenting at in-person professional development opportunities is often a tremendous struggle:

I'm always afraid to overcommit to things...what that means is that I just haven't done as much as I could to beef up my CV over the last few years. What if I get too tired? What if I get into it and I'm no good at what they're asking me to do? What if I want to back out and then that looks worse than if I hadn't signed up to begin with?....Am I going to be able to sit, even if I'm stuck standing outside in a crowd, waiting for the session to open? I can get really panicked and flustered; I also find it almost impossible to really absorb what's happening in other events until I'm done.

For Paige, being able to attend professional development workshops is an issue of time, but also an issue of how the time in the workshop connects to her overall mental health. If her mental health conditions are good, then attending the workshop (time permitting) is not an issue. If one of the factors she lists does happen, then she must determine in the moment which is more important—preserving her mental health, or staying and attending the workshop. What if the format of the workshop isn't something she's planned for? Listening to a presentation and quietly taking notes does not require the same level of social and emotional energy that working with a small group of fellow faculty members does. Is the kairotic strain of being there unbearable, or can she tough it out? Will she have to leave early? Paige also pointed out how some of the tangential, indirect effects of professional development workshops—noise, in particular—



can exacerbate her anxiety to the point where she must leave, find a quiet space, and recover. This often makes the social aspects of workshops and orientations impossible to navigate in the same way that nondisabled GTAs can, which can make other aspects of professionalization, like networking, challenging.

Jamie, a GTA with multiple sclerosis, also spoke in her interview about the challenges attending professional development can pose for her. For Jamie, being able to attend in-person professional development opportunities has more to do with planning and energy than with merely having enough time to attend. On days where her GTA work and graduate classes overlap, she often goes home in the middle of the day to rest, to ensure that she will be in good physical and mental condition to drive home after class. She spoke about the difficult choices she often has to make with professional development, saying:

If something comes up that sounds really cool, but I have class later on that night, I have to make that decision, and it's usually my health over other things....How do I drive on the road [going home], consciously knowing my reaction time is half of what it should be?

For Jamie, making choices that keep herself healthy is not merely about maintaining personal health, but also about keeping herself healthy so that the effects of her multiple sclerosis do not impede her ability to operate a car and cause damage to others. Having enough time to attend professional development is not measured in hours and minutes for Jamie, but in energy, stamina, and maintenance, all of which are carefully weighed against how much they either hurt or help her overall health. Any variances from her carefully

crafted schedule, like professional development opportunities or departmental social events, can be enough to tip the scales too far in one direction or another. Time is rarely measured in seconds and minutes for disabled GTAs, but in energy and accounting for any number of potential worst-case scenarios that can shift on any given day.

Both Paige and Jamie illustrate the ways in which crip time can intersect with professional development opportunities. “Crip time,” a common term in disability studies scholarship, refers to the ways in which disabled people experience time, or, “recognizing how expectations of how long things should take account for types of minds and bodies” (Kafer). In the context of professional development, disabled GTAs may not have the same amount of opportunities to attend workshops as nondisabled GTAs do as a result of crip time. Additionally, the time spent in sitting in a one-hour workshop may have different, possibly negative, effects on disabled GTAs that nondisabled GTAs do not experience. Crip time can speed up and slow down based on a variety of factors based in the environment or in the realities of the individual’s bodymind.

Like Paige and Jamie, I have also had experiences with professional development where changes in the environment caused significant physical and mental strain, where crip time sped up against my will:

*It's my last semester in my M.A. program, and I'm presenting at CompExpo, a GTA composition and rhetoric workshop series. I'm the last scheduled presenter, and everyone who presented before me has gone over their allotted time. I now have five minutes to give a fifteen-minute presentation. To compensate, I speak very quickly to fit my presentation into this sliver of time. While giving my presentation, I feel an all too familiar surge of adrenaline—having to*

*Speak so quickly has pushed me straight into a hypomanic episode. My hands tremble terribly, but I finish the presentation. I have a graduate class to attend right after CompExpo, but this is now a disastrous choice in my current state. I don't trust my ability to send a coherent email in my current state, so I ask a classmate to tell the professor I won't be in class. I slowly, carefully drive my car back to my apartment. I spend the next several hours waiting for the episode to pass and angrily crying, furious at how my symptoms have sprung to life so easily, so severely.*

Something that would have merely been annoying for a nondisabled person—having little to no presentation time due to others' inconsiderate professional behavior—can quickly cause harmful and dangerous effects in the face of disability. When my presentation time was abruptly cut short, I experienced the shortened timeframe as crip time, which in turn kickstarted my hypomania. Having a hypomanic episode so suddenly, so publicly, would be at the top of any worst case scenario list, but in fact things could have gone much, much worse than they did. I could have said or done something embarrassing that could have damaged my standing in the department, or tried to tough it out and attend class while hypomanic, or crashed my car driving home, or a whole host of dangerous things. Instead, I made it home safely, but missed a graduate class and lost my weekend due to the episode and its physical effects. That was the best-case scenario for having an episode in front of my peers and the best result I could have hoped for.

All three of these stories illustrate how a common kairotic space—the professional development workshop—can affect disabled persons differently when crip time is factored in. Aside from limiting disabled GTAs and faculty's ability to participate, these inaccessible spaces can have negative consequences

in terms of professionalization as well. It can be easy for nondisabled persons to dismiss the worst-case scenario fears that disabled GTAs may have when trying to determine whether or not they should or could attend professional development opportunities, but they're often based in some form of previous personal experience. Given the highly competitive nature of the academic job market, it is critical for graduate students to take advantage of as many professionalizing experiences as possible. This includes creating departmental workshops for GTAs and faculty. Having professional development opportunities that do not consider the possibility of crip time does more than disenfranchise disabled attendees; it can rob budding professionals in our discipline of key opportunities to build their CVs for future career opportunities.

## **Conclusions**

For many WPAs, addressing inaccessibility may feel like an overwhelming, endlessly nuanced task that is guaranteed to anger some faculty and disrupt normal writing program work. To be honest, this is occasionally true. Access work in writing programs *is* disruptive, but in ways that create more spaces for new and diverse voices to enter and succeed in classrooms and in the profession. This work, however, is a long journey of reshaping expectations and ways of thinking instead of creating a quick checklist of "Dos and Don'ts." WPAs must resist the temptation to simplify or shorten the journey with well-intentioned, yet misguided efforts, such as brainstorming a list of common mental disabilities

and then creating access efforts that might fit those restrictions. As ways of thinking, Universal Design and UDL aim to expand ways of engaging, representing, and demonstrating and reject “impairment-specific approaches that create individual solutions for individual disabilities, which can flatten and overgeneralize the needs” of disabled faculty, students, and GTAs (Hitt 55). A more productive approach involves using key aspects of the discipline—rhetorical situation and multimodality, for example—to envision multiple ways that people can participate and engage within writing program ideas and spaces.

Those who are new to access work may be susceptible to falling into the perfectionist’s access trap—thinking that access efforts must be perfect before they are ready to implement, or that an access effort that is only partially successful is a failure. Not only is this perspective unhelpful and discouraging, but it flies in the face of what Universal Design and UDL are: recursive, messy processes that look different for every context and situation. It may be helpful for WPAs to think of accessibility efforts as something akin to the writing process: something that is never really “finished,” per se, but an action that works best with time, patience, and great amounts of feedback. Access work is not a problem-solving exercise, as disabled students, GTAs, and faculty are not problems, something Margaret Price argues in *Mad at School*:

“To presume that one can achieve a perfect classroom design that will turn out perfect learning outcomes is not only unrealistic, it is demeaning to our students. We must try, think, query, flex, observe, listen, and try again. And when we are too tired, we must be willing

to let it go for a while. Access is not going to happen overnight.”

(101)

The willingness to embark on the journey of access is the most important thing here. The access heuristic and its two domains are merely places to start asking more questions and to wrestle with the answers. Unlike a checklist that can easily and systematically be completed and forgotten, access work is much more recursive and is often filled with sputtering stops and starts. Instead of imagining access work as functioning akin to checklists, WPAs ought to consider how the journey of access work can mirror the writing process. Price’s directives to think, move, and listen could easily be given within the context of writing instead of access work. Like writing, access efforts often require brainstorming, prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing too. Perhaps this metaphor, along with the heuristic, can provide a necessary stepping stone for WPAs who are wanting to make their programs more accessible. This is what disabled students, faculty, and GTAs have been eagerly waiting for—for our WPAs, our disabled and nondisabled allies, to join with us to find new places to begin. Let’s get started together

## EPILOGUE: DISABILITY 2.5 IN COMPOSITION STUDIES AND WHISPERING DISABILITY

In 2014, Tara Wood, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson posed an important question—what should access and disability work look like now that disability has become a more familiar presence in colleges and universities? Labeling this moment “Disability 2.0,” the authors discuss how, when leading disability workshops on their home campuses, they often field requests for helpful checklists and disability do’s and don’ts, requests that they eschew in favor of presenting disability as a rhetorical presence in writing classrooms. Though the authors’ comments on checklists certainly fit in with this dissertation’s bent, I’m more interested in the idea of Disability 2.0, the benchmark outlined at the start of their article. The heuristic I’ve created, with its focus on policies and programmatic access, fits into Disability 2.0, and I am content with that. My bigger hope is that by WPAs engaging with this heuristic and thinking more critically and rhetorically about disability, the larger rhetoric, composition, and writing studies discipline can move beyond Disability 2.0, perhaps even to Disability 2.5. In this epilogue, I detail this idea of Disability 2.5, connecting it to my experiences being the Disability Whisperer and learning to whisper disability instead, to push others to embark on disability and access work instead of taking on more of this work myself.

## **Access in Professional Spaces: Disability 2.5**

I think it's fair to assume that the discipline has already reached its own Disability 2.0 moment, as many, if not most academic conferences contain a modicum of accessibility features. When I attend a conference, I can almost always find a quiet room where I can decompress from the noise around me. Communication Access Real-Time Translation (CART) services and American Sign Language (ASL) translators exist at larger conferences, like CCCC, and, increasingly, keynote speakers are providing scripts for those of us who use them regularly. Accessibility tables are becoming more present in conference spaces, and these are good things.

That's where most access efforts in professional spaces stop, unfortunately. Accessibility efforts within composition and rhetoric do exist, but these efforts have yet to be adopted as standard practices—most conferences have accessibility guides, but many presenters fail to address access issues within their presentations. For years now I've wondered why access efforts have stagnated at this point. Do our peers struggle with making their presentations accessible? Is this a technical know-how problem? Is it concern over how scripts will be used after the conference ends? Do our peers think access does not matter? Is it a lack of understanding how scripts help many of us participate and feel seen at conferences? Worst of all, is it because people don't care? These questions are less about assigning blame or shaming people, but a genuine desire to understand this resistance better. There are far too many questions to answer here, but I suppose there are varying levels of truth in each one.



All of these questions came to a head for me in 2018, when I attended a major rhetoric and composition conference and excitedly decided to attend a panel presentation on feminism's role in our current American political era. I was drawn to this presentation not only by the title, but by the list of presenters and panel chair. All five of the presenters were Big Names in composition, names that are instantly recognizable by most in our field, names who have had large, public leadership roles in our discipline. I knew this session would fill up quickly, so I arrived early and got a seat. Then I did what I had been doing throughout the conference—I looked for a script. This conference provided lots of information for attendees for how they could be accessible in their presenting, and even added special functionality to the conference app so that presenters could attach their scripts to the panel descriptions themselves. I'd been to several panels so far that had scripts either available at the session, uploaded to the app, or both.

None of the Big Names at the panel had provided any form of scripts, outlines, or accessibility to their sessions. I felt massively let down—not only did the lack of scripts make it difficult for me to remember much of their presentations, but I was worried about the message these Big Names sent by ignoring the conference's accessibility guidelines. If these titans of the discipline could not be persuaded to make their presentation materials accessible for attendees, then why would anyone else? That the panel was focused on inclusive feminism made the problem feel even worse, much like Sean Zdenek's critique of accessibility-themed podcasts that do not follow accessible practices. Clearly, there is a lot of work left to do.

Accessibility matters not only because it is best practice, but because the presence of accessibility shows who is welcome in academic spaces and who isn't. Access work isn't the sole responsibility of those of us who are disabled, either—it is our collective and shared responsibility as ethical practitioners, scholars, teachers, and administrators. It is not merely work of “helping” our disabled students and peers, but “radically transform[ing] the profession” (Brewer et al 153). These two ideas, above all, are my goals for this heuristic—for WPAs to not only understand that accessibility is a collective, shared responsibility, but that by creating more space for disabled students, GTAs, and faculty, we create more space for everyone to move a little bit easier.

### **Whispering Disability**

When I first started working as a Graduate Writing Program Administrator, (and even now, to be honest), I felt enormous pressure to be MTSU's “Disability Whisperer,” the magical scholar/administrator/student/teacher who always knows what to do, knows the perfect resources to consult, and what articles and books to recommend. This pressure was not entirely imagined. I would be stopped by faculty in the hallways who wanted to talk about the disabled students in their classes. My email inbox would fill with requests for advice or information about sources to consult. Friends who were fellow GTAs would text me with questions. As I learned more, I became known as the “disability person” in my department. In literature classes, professors would put me on the spot whenever a disabled character was mentioned in our readings. Afraid that providing an unsatisfactory

answer would sour them to my research and critical perspective, I would do additional research before classes on top of the readings. Exhausting as it was, I found this additional work far preferable to receiving bewildering glances when I would reference disability in my graduate classes. *At least they're interested*, I'd tell myself.

Originally, I felt the need to become the Disability Whisperer mostly out of necessity. I saw a need for more conversations about disability, more trainings, more awareness, and so I stepped in to address the need. Like many disability scholars, I existed in an institutional vacuum. There was no one else. In some respects, it forced me to become a stronger and more intellectually aggressive scholar: I read on my own, researched on my own, and learned on my own. I subscribed to every disability-themed listserv I could to learn more and ensure I was up to date on disciplinary developments and conversations. I scoured Twitter to follow as many disability scholars and voices as I could. I didn't have coursework to facilitate this, only the internet and a few academic journals at first. I mined countless bibliographies hunting for where I should turn next.

I did all of this additional work on top of coursework, exam studying, professional development, administrative and leadership roles, and managing my illness because I knew I would be challenged and questioned by peers and professors alike. Disability work is not always appreciated or accepted in mainstream circles, so I had to do my best to know concepts and scholars forwards and backwards. To quote the youths, I needed receipts. But I vastly underestimated the mental and emotional labor involved in being the Disability

Whisper ahead of this dissertation. I am proud of the scholar I am today. And I am utterly exhausted.

Moving forward, I want to whisper disability instead of being the Disability Whisperer. I don't want to be MTSU's Mary Poppins of Disability anymore—it is unhealthy and not sustainable. Whispering disability is less about swooping in to correct all the inaccessible woes and more about being strategic and looking for opportunities to gain more allies in access work. Instead of rushing in to try and solve every single disability problem I see, I want to offer suggestions, point out potential problems, and ask more questions. By doing so, I want to create space for other people to take on some of this access work. After attending that inaccessible conference panel in 2018, I resolved to ask for a script at every conference I attended in the future, whether I needed one that day or not. If I want others in my field to understand that access is needed, I need to ask for it consistently until it becomes a sustained practice.

This dissertation and heuristic, with its emphasis on policies, pedagogy, and programmatic spaces, marks another turn away from the Disability Whisperer and towards whispering disability. In the first few dissertation drafts, I was still holding tightly to the idea of solving all the problems, despite the consistent suggestions of my incredibly patient dissertation director. Instead of pointing out how access problems could exist, I kept trying to devise new solutions and grew increasingly frustrated as this proved to be impossible. Finally, my intellectual fever broke. I didn't need to solve anything—I could create a new instrument, point out how these problems exist, and then let others take

the instrument and grow, question, and flex with it. The final result, I hope, is more akin to whispering disability, which is not only where I am in regard to disability and access work, but, more importantly, where I want to go.

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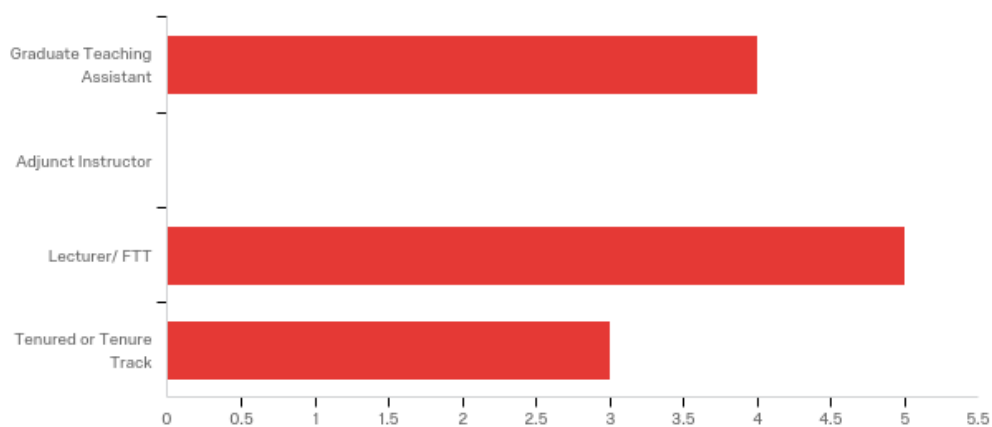
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## Appendix A:

Data from “Disability and Access Accommodations Used in MTSU’s First-Year Writing Courses” Research Study

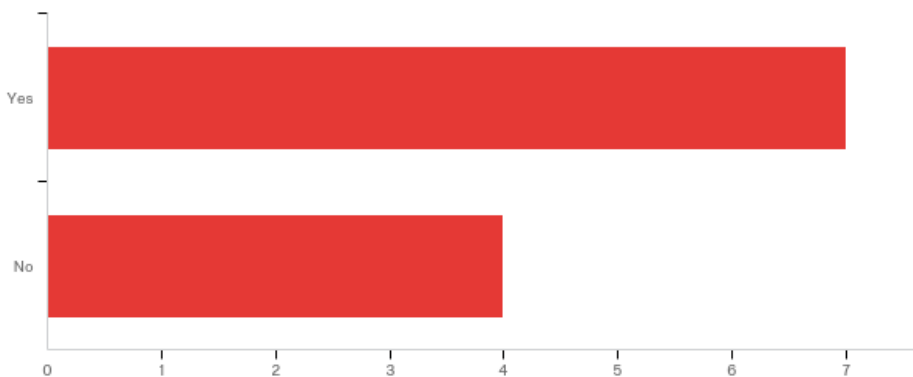
## Q1 - What is your instructional rank at MTSU?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Graduate Teaching Assistant	33.33%	4
2	Adjunct Instructor	0.00%	0
3	Lecturer/ FTT <sup>25</sup>	41.67%	5
4	Tenured or Tenure Track	25.00%	3
	Total	100%	12

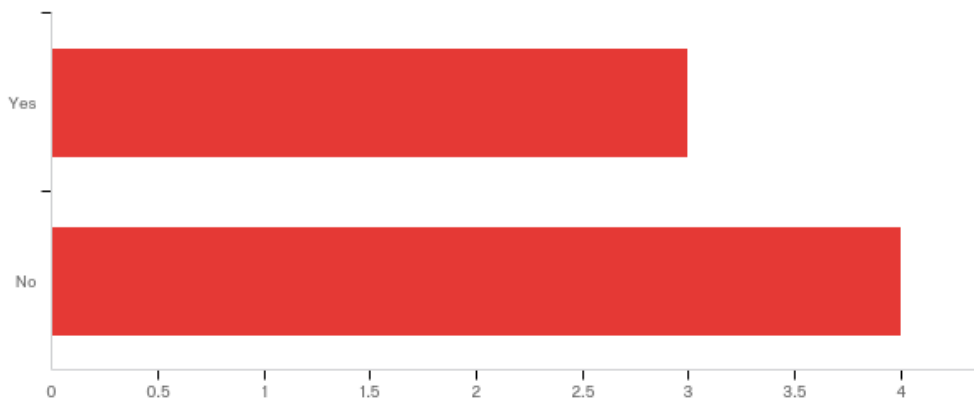
Q2 - Did you teach ENGL 1010: Expository Writing during the Fall 2018 semester?

<sup>25</sup> Full Time Temporary Instructor



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	63.64%	7
2	No	36.36%	4
	Total	100%	11

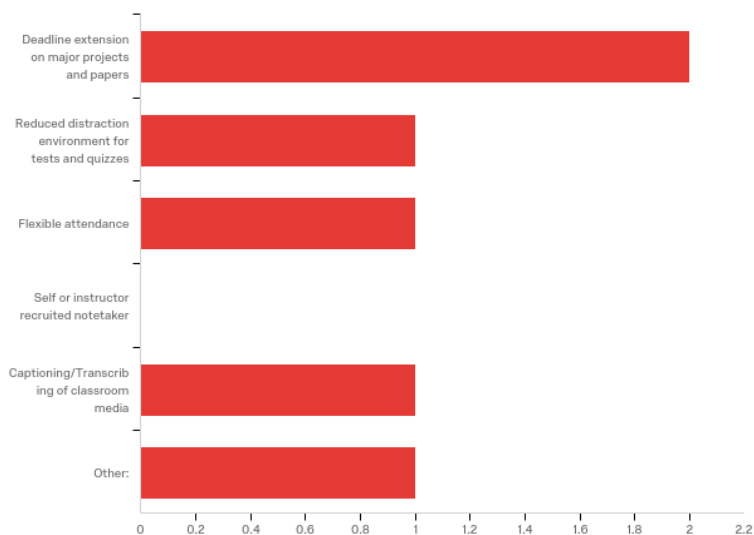
Q3 - If you did teach ENGL 1010 during Fall 2018, did you have any students who provided documentation from the Disability and Access Center regarding their student accommodations?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	42.86%	3
2	No	57.14%	4
	Total	100%	7

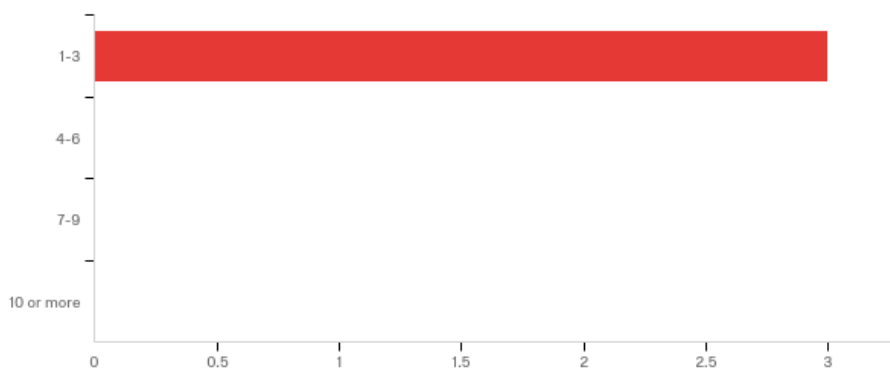
Q4 - If you had ENGL 1010 students provide DAC documentation, what kinds of accommodations did they request? Please select all that apply.





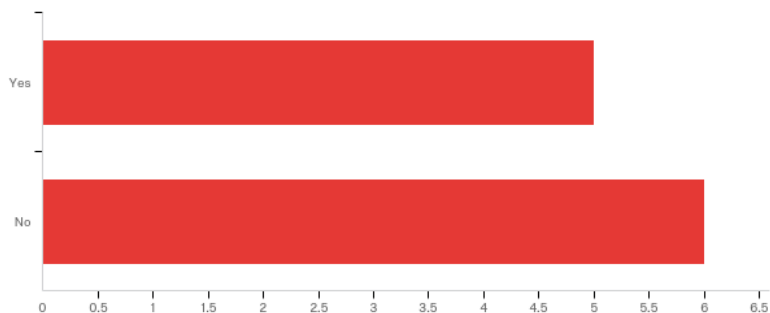
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Deadline extension on major projects and papers	33.33%	2
2	Reduced distraction environment for tests and quizzes	16.67%	1
3	Flexible attendance	16.67%	1
4	Self or instructor recruited notetaker	0.00%	0
5	Captioning/Transcribing of classroom media	16.67%	1
6	Other (extra time for texts/quizzes):	16.67%	1
	Total	100%	6

Q5 - How many total students in your ENGL 1010 class(es) provided accommodation documentation?



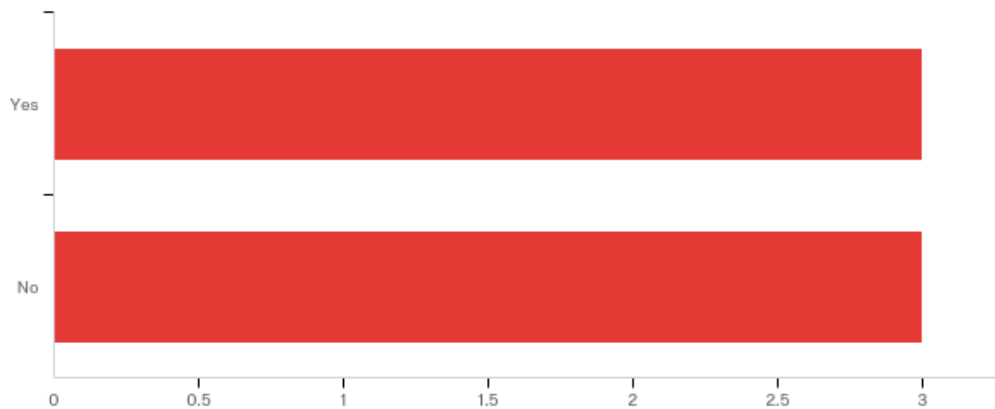
#	Answer	%	Count
1	1-3	100.00%	3
2	4-6	0.00%	0
3	7-9	0.00%	0
4	10 or more	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	3

Q6 - Did you teach ENGL 1020: Research and Argumentative Writing during the Fall 2018 semester?



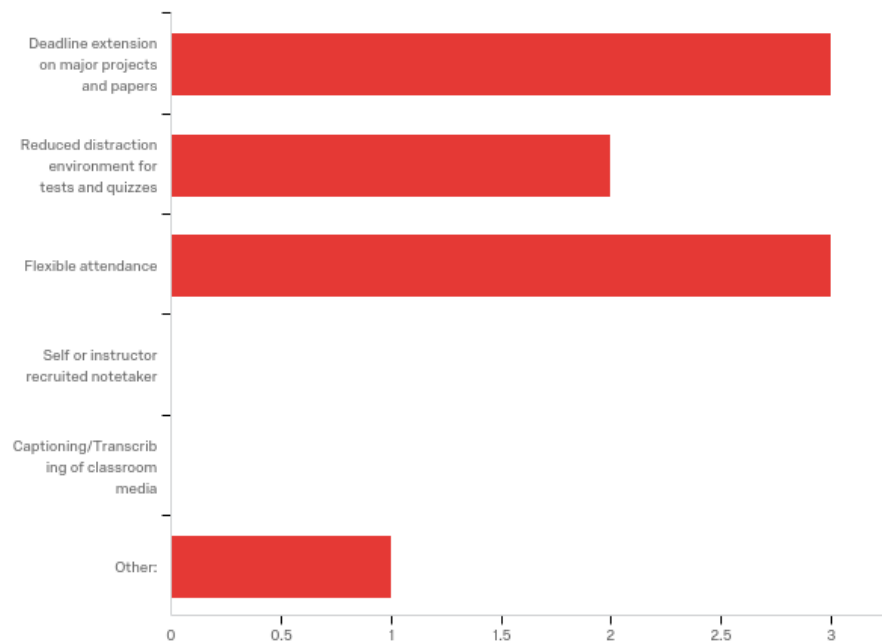
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	45.45%	5
2	No	54.55%	6
	Total	100%	11

Q7 - If you did teach ENGL 1020 during Fall 2018, did you have any students who provided documentation from the Disability and Access Center regarding their student accommodations?



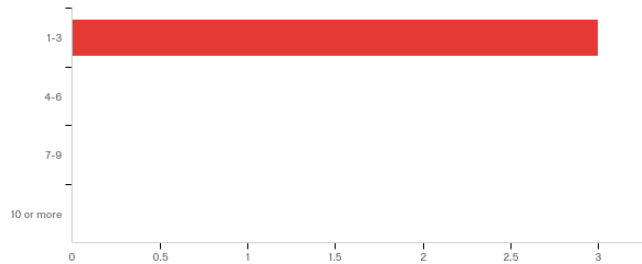
#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	50.00%	3
2	No	50.00%	3
	Total	100%	6

Q8 - If you had ENGL 1020 students provide DAC documentation, what kinds of accommodations did they request?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	Deadline extension on major projects and papers	33.33%	3
2	Reduced distraction environment for tests and quizzes	22.22%	2
3	Flexible attendance	33.33%	3
4	Self or instructor recruited notetaker	0.00%	0
5	Captioning/Transcribing of classroom media	0.00%	0
6	Other (extra time on tests/quizzes):	11.11%	1
	Total	100%	9

Q9 - How many total students in your ENGL 1020 class(es) provided accommodation information?



#	Answer	%	Count
1	1-3	100.00%	3
2	4-6	0.00%	0
3	7-9	0.00%	0
4	10 or more	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	3

## Appendix B:

Interview Questions From Disabled Graduate Teaching Assistant Research  
Study

**Principal Investigator: Rachel Donegan**

**Study Title: “Disabling the TAShip: Highlighting the Access Gaps Within the Liminalities”**

**Institution: MTSU**

1) What type or types of disabilities have you been diagnosed with?

- Speech or language impairments
- Learning disability
- Psychological disability
- Hearing impairments
- Orthopedic impairments
- Visual impairments
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Other health impairments

2) Are you registered with MTSU’s Disability and Access Center?

- If so, what accommodations do you receive?
- If not, why not?

3) Has your disability or disabilities made your work as a graduate teaching assistant more difficult?

- If so, how? Please provide specific examples.

4) Has your disability impacted your ability to participate in, complete, or execute:

- Professional development opportunities
- Grading
- Instruction
- Service opportunities
- Collegiality and department social events
- Gatherings such as GTA Fall Orientation and the Fall and Spring Curriculum Meetings
- Office hours
- Other aspects of work or expectations of being a GTA in the English Department

If so, how? Please provide specific examples for each.

5) Have you shared your disability status with your peers or other members of the English Department?

If so, what prompted you to do this?

If not, why not?

6) Have you ever shared your disability status with your students, whether individually or as a group?

If so, what prompted you to do this?

If not, why not?

7) Have you ever talked to your GTA Supervisor about possible accommodations specifically related to your work as a GTA?

If so, what was the result of this conversation?

If not, why not?

8) Is there anything else about your experience being a GTA with a disability that you would like to add?



## Appendix C: IRB Approval Forms