

Believe Your Colleagues with Disabilities

This is the third in a series of columns for this publication on disability in higher education. [Two months ago](#), I described how, when I made my teaching universally accessible, I made my teaching better—for all of my students, not just my students with disabilities. [Last month](#), I turned my focus on accessibility for faculty and staff—how institutions often fail to support faculty and staff with disabilities. In their failure, institutions often place a heavy burden on disabled employees. This burden means that employees must force their institutions to comply with disability employment laws; institutions require employees to reveal deeply personal medical information to prove that they deserve accommodations; and institutions put their employees at risk of ableism and stigma by requiring such revelations.

But individual [faculty and staff can also create burdens for their disabled colleagues](#), often without realizing it. [As I wrote in an earlier column](#), as colleagues in academia, we should want to take responsibility for one another and to support one another. Whether a colleague is helping an ill family member—a situation when most of us seem to have no problem reaching out and helping—or struggling to get disability accommodations at work, we all thrive better in conditions of mutual support.

The main problem I've encountered with collegial support in the academic workplace is often twofold. On the one hand, not-so-good-natured people can be suspicious of their disabled colleague's need for accommodations. On the other hand, good-natured people can feel insecure about knowing how to help their disabled colleagues. And because of this insecurity, they end up doing nothing at all.

This column addresses both of these issues: the suspicions and the good-natured insecurity. My main message is this: Even though you may have been taught otherwise, the best thing you can do is to believe your colleagues with disabilities. But because of how much suspicions have been placed on disabled people, setting aside those suspicions can be hard.

Unfounded Suspicions

[As I've written before](#), all workplaces, including (and perhaps especially) academia, put a heavy burden on a disabled worker when it comes to getting disability accommodations. When I was in academia, even though I had a disability that would have warranted accommodations, I never sought them. And I never, ever would have. The invasion of privacy, the stigma, the fear of ableism—the general blowback that seeking accommodations would have brought—all of that would have been too high of a price to pay for the paltry accommodations my institution would have granted me.

Institutions seem to be so concerned that an employee might be faking a disability that they require mountains

of invasive documentation. They require proof, heaps of proof, from people who are *not* the disabled person (such as doctors, occupational therapists and more). Institutions won't accept, say, a sworn statement from a disabled person that she is, indeed, disabled.

They would never take a disabled employee's word for it. I often make this joke with my disabled friends: Can you even imagine being able to walk into a gatekeeper's office—such as a human resources department—and request accessibility based on your promise that you are disabled and your description of your needs—and *to have the gatekeeper believe you?* Disabled people live in a world that, as a rule, doubts us. We must, every day, prove that our needs are real.

It's exhausting.

It doesn't help that the popular media creates even more suspicions by focusing on abuse of disability accessibility—just [take a look at the Anderson Cooper 60 Minutes segment](#) on “drive-by lawsuits.” It begins by stating that “the Americans with Disabilities Act has thousands of very technical regulations, and this store [that Cooper is visiting] is in violation.” When a writer wants to make a law sound unimportant, he calls it a “technicality.” But to the people who rely on that law, those “technicalities” mean that we can live healthy, safe lives. They are—technically—serious.

Believe Your Colleagues

In this environment of suspicion, what can you do to help your disabled colleagues? The first thing you can do requires very little: You can believe your colleagues who have disabilities. You can set aside your suspi-

cions. This might be hard at first because you have been trained to be suspicious of disabled people. We all have—that is the world we live in.

But you can make the radical decision that suspicion is not going to be your way of thinking anymore.

Remember, the mountains of paperwork institutions require before granting any sort of accommodations are a manifestation of deep suspicion of disabled people. Institutions—and the government laws they act under—show mistrust of people with disabilities.

In this environment of suspicion, being a disabled staff or faculty member can feel incredibly isolating. You can help your colleague feel less isolated simply by being aware of, and believing, what she is going through.

Fight the urge to be suspicious. Believe your colleagues' disability stories. Despite the ways that the popular media can focus on abuse of the ADA, remember that those stories make the news because they are unusual. Most disabled people just want to be able to live our lives and do our jobs, just like everyone else. 

—KRG

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