Abstract

The past four decades have seen increasing scholarship on the relationship between disability and education. Colleges and universities responded positively, by and large, and took active steps in response. While disability/accessibility services offices are now staples of colleges and universities today, the majority of scholarship available is not written from the perspective of the disabled student. This follows a longstanding pattern of non-disabled persons speaking on behalf of the disabled community. Support services are crucial to the sustained success of students with disabilities at colleges and universities. Disability/accessibility services offices have been the primary support for these students, but they cannot thrive as fully stand-alone services. I work as a tutor at the writing centers of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University. I am also visually impaired and have been since infancy. In this paper, I will add the perspective of a disabled student to the conversation. I will also explain how the writing center is one support service that can assist in accommodating the needs of disabled students at institutions of higher education by implementing several key principles of universal instructional design.
Disability and education are inextricably linked. Since the 1970s, extensive scholarship has been published to build a knowledge base on how students with disabilities navigate all level of schooling (Gabel, 2005). Faculty members and disability specialists conducted initial research and published relevant findings as incremental progress was made, which certainly benefited students with disabilities to some degree. However, little scholarship has been published from the perspective of the disabled student: “Most articles written about disability in the writing center focus on serving tutees with disabilities … it is almost always the student writer, not the tutor…[who] has the learning disability” (Day Babcock, Daniels, & Daniels, 2015, p. 24). This imbalance is alarming because it follows a pattern of non-disabled persons speaking on behalf of disabled persons from perspectives that are limited to their own perceptions and interpretations of the disabilities in question. It is vital to allow students with disabilities to properly add their own insights and take ownership of this type of scholarship.

Throughout this paper, I will outline the ongoing relationship between disability and education while adding my own insights as a student with a disability. I am severely visually impaired and have been since birth. I was diagnosed with the genetic, retinal disorder, Leber congenital amaurosis (LCA). Per the U.S. National Library of Medicine, the main symptoms are photophobia—increased sensitivity to light—, involuntary eye movement and near-sightedness, which have significantly affected every aspect of my life. LCA affects about 3 per 100,000 newborns annually. I will attempt to add my unique perspective as a tutor with a disability to the local and national discussions, as well as briefly outline the everchanging landscape that is the relationship between disability and education. I am an undergraduate peer writing tutor for the Writing Centers at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, so I will also explore the ways that writing centers can be viewed as modelling a productive way forward
while highlighting how the writing center plays an important role in this conversation. My institution faces clear challenges, and I will attempt to outline them while articulating how they are linked to the nation’s current perspective on inclusiveness for students with disabilities. This work is intended to bring us closer to identifying and implementing solutions to the challenges students with disabilities face in post-secondary education.

**Placing Accessibility in the Local Context**

CSB/SJU is an institutional partnership between the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University. The former is a private, liberal arts college for women, located in St. Joseph, Minnesota. The latter is also a private, liberal arts college, but for men, and is located in Collegeville, Minnesota, a five-minute drive away. An inter-campus bus called The Link runs at regular intervals between the two campuses. Students from both colleges take classes together and resources are shared between the two campuses. As of July 2017, 3640 students attend CSB/SJU.

The CSB/SJU Student Accessibility Services [SAS] office, originally known as Student Disability Services, opened in 2011. The name of the office was changed in the fall semester of 2016 and is an example of an ongoing shift nationwide. Many similar offices across the country such as those of Amherst College, Concordia St. Paul, and the University of Nebraska Omaha, have also changed the names of their offices to reflect a new way of viewing disability. This can be viewed as a practical example of the social model of disability, which I will elaborate on later in this text.
Before SAS opened, all accommodations were handled by CSB/SJU’s academic advising office, or professors worked with students on an individual basis: “The Academic Advising Office provides assistance and support to students and faculty across the campuses. The office monitors academic progress, oversees academic probation, reaches out to a variety of student groups and coordinates accommodations for students with disabilities” (2011-2012 Academic Catalog: Faculty and Academic Advising). According to its mission statement, SAS’s primary goal is “to ensure that all students with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in both academic and non-academic campus activities.” SAS currently employs two Disability Specialists: Tom Sagerhorn and Krysten Schwartz. Jillian McKenzie also oversees all accommodations, serving as Accommodations Coordinator.

SAS facilitates the provision of private proctoring of examinations, note takers, additional testing time, assistive technology, and assistance if necessary with programs like Kurzweil and JAWS. Kurzweil 1000 and JAWS [Job Access with Speech] are two of the more well-known software programs designed to assist visually impaired students. Students can also receive dietary accommodations through SAS if needed. SAS is committed to accommodating any student who needs assistance and encourages students with “psychiatric conditions, learning disabilities, chronic diseases, ADD/ADHD, autism spectrum disorders, physical impairments, [and] mobility impairments” to register with its office.

SAS, like similar offices in smaller universities nationwide, faces various challenges. One could argue that, considering its rapidly increasing use, it is both underfunded and understaffed. When it opened in 2011, there was only one disability specialist, and that remained the case until this year. Per data recorded by SAS, there are currently 350 enrolled students who are registered with the office and eligible to receive accommodations, which is about 9.6 percent of the total
student population. Since 2011, the number of students registered with SAS has increased by 14 percent on average, or about 36 new students per year. The number of students taking exams at the SAS testing center due to accommodations has also steadily increased since 2011. During the 2016-17 academic year, 1032 exams were proctored in the office compared to 680 in 2011-2012.

CSB and SJU have a partnership that is unique in higher education. Their relationship as partnering but separate institutions can make facilitating accommodations complicated at times. Although there have been plans to have one accessibility office on each campus, that is not the case. SAS is located on the CSB campus, and aside from one year [2012], there has been a higher percentage of CSB students registered with the office than their SJU counterparts. CSB and SJU are also older universities, so they were not created with the purpose of accessibility in mind. Even though the pendulum is shifting, there is still a negative stigma surrounding persons with disabilities across the country, and CSB/SJU is not exempt from that distinction.

**Framing the Conversation: A History of Understanding Disability in America and Its Consequences**

Inclusivity is becoming more and more important to universities nationwide. It is important to understand the value of creating inclusive spaces as college populations are comprised of students who all have unique needs. Disability is an important part of that conversation, particularly when looking at the consequences of non-inclusive spaces; we must recognize that “some students are often acted on differently, depending on markers that include race, ethnicity, gender and disability” (Day Babcock, Daniels, & Daniels, 2015, p. 21).
The discussion of disability in higher education has evolved significantly over time. Early conversations about disability were negative and discriminatory practices were the norm; students with disabilities were perceived as being “distinctly different” (Yambor, 2016). This is the medical model of interpreting disability, which originated in the 19th century. What this meant was that students with disabilities – especially learning disabilities – were viewed as being cognitively different, in a negative sense, from their non-disabled counterparts.

Disability was seen as a medical issue that needed to be treated via medication or therapy. There was little hope of independence or success for the disabled under this model. Disabled people were seen as burdens instead of human beings with the potential to achieve great things; “Throughout history, disability has been variously viewed as a sign of spiritual depravity, a cause for ridicule, a genetic weakness to be exterminated, something to be hidden away, a source of pity, a community health problem…” (Higbee & Goff, PASS-IT, 2008, p. 11). Through the medical model, discrimination against disabled persons continued to thrive via a process called ableism. Ableism is defined as “the pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people [with] . . . disabilities on . . . individual, institutional, and societal/cultural levels” (Rauscher & McClintock, 1997, p. 198). Ableism can be compared to other forms of discrimination, such as racism and sexism, which are more widely understood.

In 1973, discrimination against disabled persons was federally outlawed via the implementation of the Rehabilitation Act. The Americans with Disabilities Act was also implemented in 1990. Both acts and updates to those acts work in unison to legally protect persons with disabilities. Unfortunately, this legislation did not guarantee positive change; “Although federal legislation assures access for postsecondary students with disabilities, research indicates that faculty members continue to perceive barriers to providing academic
accommodations” (Higbee, Chung, & Hsu, Enhancing the inclusiveness of First-Year Courses through Universal Instructional Design, 2004). Barriers include but are not limited to: physically inaccessible classrooms, a lack of funding for research and proper implementation of assistive technology, and the continued pervasion of negative attitudes and stereotypes attached to persons with disabilities (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2017).

College education is vital for anyone, but even more so for students with disabilities because the medical model has had such a far-ranging negative impact. Persons with disabilities are at a higher risk of unemployment and more likely to be paid lower wages. According to research conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau between 2008 and 2010, it was found that persons with disabilities are three times more likely to be unemployed than persons without disabilities. On average, persons with disabilities earn 25 percent less than their non-disabled counterparts. Persons with disabilities often have little hope of pursuing meaningful, full-time work beyond custodial occupation; “Overall, janitors and building cleaners were among the most common occupations for individuals with a disability for non-Hispanic whites (184,000 people), non-Hispanic blacks (60,000) and Hispanics (54,000)” (United States Census Bureau, 2013). This is the reality students with disabilities face when pursuing higher education.

In 1983, the social model of disability was introduced by disabled British academic and advocate, Mike Oliver through his book, Social Work with Disabled People. Using this model, every learner falls on a continuum based on his/her cognitive or neurological ability; “disability is not seen as fixed or inherent to an individual … [those in education are more] concerned with how the social and physical environments disable an individual (Phuong, 2017, p. 49). Instead of looking at students with disabilities as having problems to be fixed, they are now being viewed more often as being on a different point in the learning continuum when compared to the
“normal” student. Disability is therefore understood as another way of learning, and instructors should, per this model, be flexible enough to accommodate students with disabilities.

From this perspective, it is not the fault of the student if he/she has difficulty functioning in an environment that never thought to include him/her until after the fact. Rather, non-disabled persons must acknowledge that there are barriers preventing students with disabilities from flourishing:

[The social model of disability] argues for a shift from emphasis on the individual to an emphasis on society. Disability then is no longer seen as “something that a person has” but instead becomes “something that is done to the person,” such as being excluded or confronted by “barriers” on a daily basis (Day Babcock, Daniels, & Daniels, 2015, p. 21).

Non-disabled persons often do not acknowledge the debilitating attitudes they unconsciously express towards persons with disabilities. Persons who do not sufficiently understand disability have historically been in charge of making decisions for disabled people. Under the medical model of disability, the responsibility was on society to take care or fix the disabled person. The power was completely removed from the hands of disabled people to shape their own lives and find ways of flourishing in society. The social model of disability attempts to change this by emphasizing the autonomy of the disabled person to live life like any other person. One of the most important goals for disabled people is to become independent. We do not want to be a burden on our families or our societies, and the social model of disability is based around finding inclusive ways to allow us to make our own contributions to the world in which we live.
This model is more progressive and accepting of students with disabilities, but to appreciate this new way of thinking, non-disabled persons must acknowledge the detrimental effects of the older model. The medical model of disability hampered and limited students with disabilities to what the able-bodied community believed they were capable of achieving. These students were led to believe that they were insignificant because of their disabilities due to the ableist principles of an antiquated way of thinking. For a student with a disability, matriculating through the American educational system can have adverse long-term psychological and social effects. We have historically been forced to adapt to fit within the confines of mainstream learning environments because of the longstanding pervasiveness of the medical model of disability:

…if students do not fit into the mainstream mode of expressing and processing knowledge in school early on, they quickly move into another realm, that of being disabled rather than simply (or not so simply) different. That label then becomes who they are and how they see themselves — disabled, needing to be fixed, valued for how well they “compensate” and subsequently “fit in” with mainstream schooling demands (Hamel, 2002, p. 3).

The pressures of being disabled are real and until the 1980s, there was little available knowledge to combat rampant discriminatory behavior. As a disabled person, it is my hope that the increased prevalence of the social model of understanding disability will help swing the pendulum forward. While it is important to point out the negative impact of physically inaccessible spaces, the true barriers for a disabled person stem from words and attitudes. Entering an educational system knowing that we are not looked at as not having the same potential to excel as our non-disabled counterparts is painful. The longstanding objectification of
disabled people through practices like ableism and archaic modes of thinking like the medical model of understanding disability excluded us from the conversation. The social model pulls us back into the conversation; a conversation we should have never been excluded from in the first place.

**Accessibility and Current Challenges**

While the role of disability in education has been studied for decades, one could justifiably question how much progress has been made. More and more college students are disclosing their disabilities or being diagnosed; “in 1995, roughly 6% of students reported having a disability, the number rose to 9% in 2000 and to 11% in 2008” (O'Shea & Meyer, 2016, p. 5). Some college students with disabilities make use of support services, but the majority do not.

At universities across the country, as many as two-thirds of students do not receive proper accommodations for their disabilities (Grasgreen, 2014). As a student with a disability, this does not surprise me, and there are various reasons for this. Once again, disability and education have had a troubling relationship. Students with disabilities were long viewed as inferior when compared to their “normal” counterparts. This is an indicator of the lack of understanding, as well as a general lack of knowledge historically possessed by educators in regards to disability. For a student with a disability, it is difficult to trust universities to provide accommodations for disabilities their personnel simply do not sufficiently understand. Previous research and surveying of other disabled students clearly supports this sentiment.

As I indicated at the onset of my discourse, insufficient scholarship has been published from the perspective of the disabled student. There are still a lot of questions surrounding accessibility and accommodations. Institutions have gradually increased the availability of
accommodations, but individuals continue not to disclose their disabilities. If they disclose, that does not guarantee that they will use the accommodations provided to them. This is an issue that deserves more attention. In 2016, Lyman, Beecher, Grimer, Brooks, Call and Jackson conducted a qualitative review to understand why students with disabilities continue to refuse to use accommodations provided by colleges and universities.

Lyman is a clinical psychologist operating out of San Juan Counselling in Utah. Beecher, Grimer, and Jackson are members of Brigham Young University’s [BYU] counselling and psychological services team while serving as assistant clinical professors of psychology. Call serves as academic accommodations and technology coordinator at BYU. Brooks is the current director of BYU’s accessibility center and served as president of Utah’s AHEAD [Association on Higher Education and Disability] chapter. He is also the current chair of BYU’s Disability Standards Compliance Committee.

In order to gather sufficient data, they interviewed sixteen college students with disabilities who were identified as being eligible to receive accommodations from their disability services office but declined to use them. The surveyed students experienced a wide variety of disabilities, such as “depression, anxiety, severe mental health disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Asperger’s syndrome, neurological disability, back injury, type 1 diabetes, endocrine disease, autoimmune disease, and visual impairment” (Lyman, et al., 2016, p. 125).

Interviews were conducted one-on-one, and were about 40 minutes on average, but ranged from 23 to 64 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured as interviewers had a list of possible questions to draw from, but deviated when necessary. Analysis of the responses were ongoing and assisted the researchers in formulating new questions on the fly. For instance,
initially no questions were asked about fears associated with the impact using accommodations could have on a student’s future. However, during several interviews the participants said they were anxious about the potential consequences of asking for and using their approved accommodations (Lyman, et al., 2016, p. 126).

Based on the analysis of the responses, trends were observed and grouped into various themes, to conclusively answer the question of why students with disabilities refuse to use available accommodations. To ensure transparency, all of the themes were first audited for accuracy, and then emailed to the interview participants, so they could confirm that they were authentic representations of their thoughts and feelings.

The results of the interviews pointed to a variety of themes, or reasons that contributed to students with disabilities declining to receive accommodations. The first was a desire to remain self-sufficient and independent. One student explained by saying

I really want to test myself to see if I can compete at the level of everyone else with the same standards as everyone else and I kind of do it as a test of my own abilities to see if I can do it… I mean eventually I would like to get to a place where I don't need such accommodations anymore; that’s my ultimate goal (Lyman, et al., 2016, p. 127).

This is something I have grappled with throughout my life. I have always had a strong desire to prove that I can compete with any students, disabled or not, and students with disabilities take pride in excelling without receiving additional help.

Additional reasons to decline accommodations included a desire to avoid discriminatory practices and treatment, a negative view of the effectiveness of disability service providers, and discouraging encounters with professors regarding their disabilities. Lack of knowledge was
another notable reason. They noted that “Many participants [in these surveys] either did not know about available accommodations or did not use them because of incorrect or insufficient knowledge” (Lyman, et al., 2016, p. 128). Clearly, the widespread hesitance to use accommodations by disabled persons is a multi-pronged issue.

Thus, we must acknowledge that learning environments are very rarely designed with the disabled student in mind. Students with disabilities are usually an afterthought because there are so few of them when compared to the rest of the population, given the relatively low frequency of disclosure and diagnosis. By the time enough people with disabilities arrive on campuses to warrant the opening of a disability services office or department, the way classes are taught and the way campuses are laid out is already set in stone. This structural framework creates a plethora of barriers – to information and navigation alike – for the disabled person. When the Purdue Online Writing Lab, or OWL as it more commonly known, was being designed, the impact of barriers to information was immediately identified as hindering the potential of students with disabilities, especially visual ones, to engage with content and learn; “Our results also showed that users often face multiple, simultaneous barriers to information—multiple assistive technologies, low bandwidth, and language” (Brizee, Sousa, & Driscoll, 2012, p. 12). For example, before the OWL was redesigned, the website was coded in a way that screen readers could not properly read. A sighted person would have been able to navigate the website without any issues, but to a blind person, the website was useless.

Many students with disabilities have deep-rooted skepticism about what attitudes they will encounter from other students, faculty, and staff as they enter universities. In the negative sense of the word, disability is a label. Persons with disabilities like their non-disabled counterparts want to be appreciated based on the multiple facets that make them who they are,
rather than by their disability. If a person with a disability has received accommodations in the past, that skepticism may decrease, but it does not completely go away. As indicated by the aforementioned study, persons decline to disclose and/or use accommodations for many reasons, such as a deep desire to be viewed as a whole person, and to thrive independently. Some students even questioned whether they were disabled enough to qualify for accommodations because they had done just fine without assistance prior to college.

On the other hand, there are students who recognize the benefits of receiving accommodations but decline due to “fear of future ramifications” which is a relatively new discovery in the study of disability and education (Lyman, et al., 2016, p. 130). Persons with disabilities may be wary of how they are perceived by professors as well as other students when requesting accommodations, and may worry about the consequences. If a disabled student performs better with accommodations academically, professors and students could attribute the success to the assistance, as if the student has an unfair advantage, rather than accommodations levelling the playing field. This is a part of the psychological back and forth disabled students go through.

I have been a part of mainstream learning environments for nearly my entire life, and I have always had a desire to be treated like any other student. I never liked the idea of an arrow hanging over my head that blinked and said “Hey, this student is disabled.” At the beginning of my freshman year, I was given vocational training to aid my transition into a new environment. I had never studied at an institution this large, so I needed to become as familiar as I could with both campuses. During the training, I used a cane, and my parents suggested I continue to use it throughout the academic year. I used it for about a week, and that was it. I have not touched a
cane since. I found it necessary to find other ways to navigate the campuses because I wanted to be seen as an ordinary person, rather than a blind man walking with a cane. If possible, I mask my disability as much as I can. I am permitted a wide variety of accommodations, such as extended time during testing, and any assistive technology I need. There was an instance in which during my sophomore year that I had access to ZoomText, which is a portable magnifier that can connect to laptops. It would allow me to see what was on the board during my classes. My vision is limited to the degree that I can’t see what is on the board unless I stand directly in front of it, so the device would have helped. But I never used it. It was too conspicuous. It was too cumbersome. And it would remind everyone, including myself, that I was disabled. This is how a lot of students with disabilities feel:

[many have] a strong desire to not be singled out or have attention drawn to them. Also of note was the desire to not be labeled or categorized as “the disabled student” and thus treated as less competent or fragile. In general, participants reported that they worried about being perceived and treated differently if peers or professors learned about their disability and accommodations (Lyman, et al., 2016, p. 128).

For the disabled student, navigating the trials of higher education can be a push and pull between wanting to thrive independently and seeking assistance when needed. I have gradually become more comfortable with the idea of accommodation and taking advantage of the assistive technology available because I recognize that my disability is an important part of who I am. However, some students with disabilities do not see their disabilities in the same light, which is important when trying to understand why they may be apprehensive about using support services; “students who are conflicted about having a disability have been found to be less likely
to utilize services than those who have accepted their disability as a part of their identity” (O'Shea & Meyer, 2016, p. 6).

Having a disability takes a psychological toll, and using accommodations can be a daily reminder of being different from peers in a negative sense. It should not surprise anyone that many grapple with the idea of using support services for this reason. It is also worth noting that a lot of students have disabilities that are relatively invisible – bipolar disorder and anxiety, for instance. For persons with invisible disabilities, it is easier to blend in and socialize with persons as if they are not disabled, and we cannot forget the deep-rooted desire not to be treated differently or ostracized. The apprehension of persons with disabilities should be easily understood, but I believe there are ways to address that. Disability service departments are important and they will always be important in assisting students in the disclosure process, and ensuring they are aware of available accommodations. However, I do not think disability services can thrive and serve students as a fully stand-alone service. It must work in tandem with other service providers in order to ensure sustained success for disabled students. What I would like to argue is that the writing center is uniquely positioned to face the many challenges disabled students encounter, while working with disability service offices. This is one way universities can bridge the gap between students with disabilities and inadequate accommodation.

A Brief History of the Writing Center

The writing center has long been an underutilized support services at colleges and universities. What may not be as universally known is that the writing center has also historically
been very important to the sustained success of students with disabilities. The reason for that goes as far back as its humble beginnings.

A common misconception about writing centers is that they started out as arms of the English department that received little funding and was relatively understaffed in the early 1970s, but quickly expanded in visibility through the 1980s (Waller, 2002). This is only partially true. Stephen North argues that writing centers or writing labs “have been around in one form or another since at least the 1930s when Carrie Stanley was already working with writers at the University of Iowa” (North, 1984, p. 436). North also points to writings such as Robert Moore’s 1950 article, “The Writing Clinic and the Writing Laboratory” as further evidence that the idea of a writing center existed long before the 1970s. Moore noted the following: “writing clinics and writing laboratories are becoming increasingly popular among American universities and colleges as remedial agencies for removing students’ deficiencies in composition” (p. 388). Early writing center theory, exemplified by the work of North, as well as Elizabeth Boquet, attributes the formation of writing labs as based more in method than a physical space.

The strategy had been that all composition would occur in the presence of the English professor, so that students could get immediate feedback. However, this proved unsustainable as both universities and class sizes increased over time, so peer tutoring was adopted. Writing centers prior to the 1970s were known as writing labs and were staffed mainly by faculty. Later, graduate students, and more recently undergraduate students, were hired as members of staff; peer tutoring was seen as a radical solution to the challenges of increasing populations, insufficient staff members and a lack of funding faced by writing labs in the United States.

Boquet explained that there are additional motivations to adopting the peer tutoring approach to writing center operation. Even though it can be argued that faculty did their best to
ensure their authority was not a factor during sessions, the writing center needed to place the student at the forefront. Giving students the power to lead tutoring sessions was a powerful way to do that, as well as shift the focus to a more collaborative approach.

The modern writing center was arguably most inspired by a need to the disadvantaged and underprivileged with the advent of open admissions. Open admissions was started as a means of decreasing discrimination against underprivileged populations in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement (Cross, 1971). In the late 1960s, universities started providing tutoring services for veterans, athletes, and low-income students. This kind of service was not available to the public until that point; “Wealthy students, as had always been the case, could afford private assistance” (Waller, 2002). The writing center was where persons who were first-generation college students, or those whose parents emigrated to the United States went to for assistance via remedial programs.

The CSB/SJU Writing Center follows a similar trajectory. The first inklings of anything resembling a writing center took shape at SJU in 1976 with the formation of a seminar-style course for first year students, called Symposium. It has become what students and professors at CSB/SJU know today as First Year Seminar (Thimmesh, 2017). Faculty members from various departments led classes of 16 students, with faculty from the English department teaching many sections of this language and composition-centered class. Faculty across the curriculum saw that students needed help with their writing, especially the fundamentals of the English language. As this shift took place, faculty members started to brainstorm; they started to think of forming a place students could go to get assistance with the writing that would be both student-centered and staffed by students. By fall 1978, this idea became reality: The First-Year Seminar [FYS] program and the CSB/SJU Writing Center were born.
From 1976-1981, faculty members like English professors emeriti Mara Faulkner, OSB and Jane Opitz, who served 35 years as the founding director of the CSB/SJU Writing Center held discussions and experimented with different strategies. Initially, the writing center was thought of as being an arm of FYS, and would exclusively be available to first years. However, Opitz realized that it could benefit everyone, regardless of year or major. During the early years of the CSB/SJU Writing Center, tutors focused on assisting students with English fundamentals and did not go beyond trying to correct sentence-level errors. Opitz inspired more sophisticated assistance that emphasized higher-order concerns, such as finding ways to improve the coherence of arguments made in students’ writing. This shift mirrored the national trends in the evolution of writing centers, and would pave the way for the writing center we know today.

The CSB/SJU Writing Center now has a location on each campus. The objectives of the writing center are reflected in its mission statement: “... we believe in the value of teaching students how to brainstorm, how to organize their thoughts, how to clarify their assertions, how to recognize and fix their grammar mistakes, and so on. We believe in teaching students skills they can use in all their writing.” During the 2016-17 academic year, the CSB/SJU Writing Center employed 19 student tutors with various specialties including literary analysis, creative writing, speech writing and analysis, and MLA style guidelines.

The CSB/SJU Writing Center has its roots in assisting first-year students and to this day, first years remain the primary users of the writing center;

In [Academic Year] 2016-17, 2135 one-on-one appointments were conducted at the CSB/SJU Writing Center. The majority of these students were first-year students, as 737 first-year students came to the Writing Center for an Appointment. (CSB/SJU Writing Center Annual Report Academic Year 2016-2017).
In addition to conducting one-on-one tutoring, writing center staff also led small group workshops in various FYS classes throughout the year, as well as participated in International Write-In Day. Like most writing centers, CSB/SJU’s was born of humble beginnings, but has grown and flourished over time. It is a key support service for students of all backgrounds and abilities.

Writing centers now have a well-established reputation as advocates for all writers, regardless of background or disability. Once an afterthought, the writing center is a mainstay at universities nationwide. The modern writing center is supported by bodies such as the International Writing Centers Association which hold conferences annually. The Writing Lab Newsletter and the Writing Center Journal support annual research and scholarship. The writing center is often an arm of the English department or seminar programs for freshmen, but I argue that the responsibility of the writing center goes beyond that. It goes beyond North’s famous call “to produce better writers, not better writing” (The Idea of a Writing Center, 1984). Writing centers serve to accommodate; to bridge the gap for students neglected by other arms of universities. Along with disability service offices, assisting students of every background, especially the disabled, is the writing center’s ethical responsibility, as it has always been. The International Writing Centers Association reaffirms this call: “[writing centers should] remain current and familiar with disability issues (including the standards followed by local government and other organizations/institutions) and be involved with disability officers at their institutions…” (Position Statement on Disability and Writing Centers, 2006). However, the writing center must combat similar issues faced by other support service providers in order to reach its potential to serve as a go-to for disabled students.

**Barriers to Accessibility and Other Challenges Facing the Writing Center**
Like many faculty members, writing center staff often lack sufficient training to assist students with disabilities (Brizee, Sousa, & Driscoll, 2012). This is not necessarily the fault of the writing center. Rather, it is an institutional issue facing most universities nationwide. One should not expect the writing center to thrive if educating its staff on how to best work with disabled students is not placed at the forefront of its mandate.

Unfortunately, disability disclosure can be tricky, so the writing center is typically at a disadvantage compared to other support services; “Writing center tutors are not always privy to personal information of the students that they consult with, so if a student has a disability, tutors seldom know beforehand if a different kind of support is needed” (Day Babcock, Daniels, & Daniels, 2015, p. 22). Compounded by a general lack of adequate training in how to properly cater to students with disabilities, writing centers – even though in an ideal position to assist – are often handcuffed.

As a peer tutor, there have been instances in which I have wondered whether or not a student I was working with had some sort of learning difference, but all I could do was speculate internally. I understand why disclosure is difficult. As a visually impaired student, I work and learn everyday with the hope that I will be viewed as a person, rather than a disabled person; I am more than my visual impairment. There is usually a negative connotation that accompanies difficulty.

For students who have been diagnosed with disabilities, once again, there can be a clear psychological impact. In fact, the stigma itself can be “self-deprecatory” (Haen, 2017). Discrimination can be just as detrimental to the psyche of the disabled student as the self-taught belief that one is inferior to one’s peers. For as long as I can remember, there was an unspoken skepticism about how much I could achieve in and out of the classroom by instructors. I could
feel them wondering if I could complete the necessary assignments, and this is a mistake faculty and tutors at the writing center may unconsciously make when working with disabled students. That kind of doubt can be damaging; “we should always ask students with disabilities “how, not if” they accomplish a particular task” (Logan, 2015). One of my goals in achieving great things despite my disability is to shift the perception of disability in a more positive direction. There is no reason that persons with disabilities should not be seen as well-rounded individuals, and that is what I have aspired to be. At the university level, I have achieved success both in and out of the classroom. I have served on the student senate, Cultural Affairs Board, and the Archipelago Caribbean Association of students. I have made regular contributions to The Record, CSB/SJU’s newspaper since my sophomore year. In doing these things, I believe I am serving as an example of what every single student with a disability can accomplish. Students with disabilities are just as capable – even more so in some cases – of achieving as their non-disabled counterparts.

There is also a question of how much knowledge tutors have available to them when it comes to assisting students with certain disabilities that may be less common;

as ADHD has become a more widely discussed disability in our culture within the last decade, it might be easier to discuss with support staff when compared to other types of disabilities such as a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) or Asperger’s Syndrome …

Additionally, it is imperative the faculty be well versed in understanding a disability in order for the student not to feel uncomfortable about making use of accommodations (O'Shea & Meyer, 2016, p. 17).

When working with tutors, comfort is important. A writing center appointment can be very personal. The trust required to allow a tutor to work closely with a student on a piece of writing is important to be cognizant of. This is a collaborative relationship. Working with disabled
students can be difficult because tutors are often not well versed in even more well-known disabilities. Disability is not a subject that tutors are generally very aware of and educated about, so when faced with a lesser-known disability, writing center staff may be even more caught off guard. Ignorance like this, while understandable, decreases the likelihood that students with invisible and lesser known disabilities would be comfortable disclosing and expressing their unique needs and preferences when working with writing center staff.

The challenges are clear, and so is the solution. Education on various forms of disability should be placed at the forefront of writing center staff training. It cannot be retrofitted into instruction. Rather, it must be an integral part of writing center pedagogy. The writing center is mandated to assist all students, especially those who need additional assistance, such as persons with disabilities, and ELLs [English Language Learners].

While workshopping possible ways to work with disabled students is helpful, it would be helpful to have a disability specialist for tutors to consult with during training. The specialist could even assist in conducting a review of promotional materials to ensure they are accessible to all students. If possible, it would also be invaluable to allow as many willing students with disabilities to be consulted for their input as possible. The thinking is that the writing center, students with disabilities, and disability/accessibility departments should be on the same page. If these adjustments are made, the writing center will be in an ideal position to help a wide variety of learners, but will also stand out as a place that is willing to adapt and assist a rapidly increasing population of disabled students.

Universal Design: Using the Writing Center as an Accessibility Model
The writing center has already served as an example of best practices when working with disabled students. The origin of the modern writing center and other learning centers like it follows in the spirit of accessibility for all: “Learning centers were initially born to meet the needs of students who have the capacity to succeed academically, but for a variety of reasons may require additional resources or different approaches to learning” (Higbee & Goff, PASS-IT, 2008, p. 218). Key words that often come to mind are patience and consistency when working with disabled students: two things students with disabilities require to flourish. There is not a lot of information currently available about Asperger’s syndrome when compared to many other disabilities, but Collins provided some insight into how to best work with these students:

if at all possible, the Asperger’s student should meet with the same tutor throughout a semester. This will limit the changeability which many Asperger’s students find debilitating. Further, these tutors should be prepared to repeat instructions or guidance they may have already provided in previous sessions. This is because the Asperger’s student often lacks any kind of carry-over effect (Collins, 2008, p. 15).

Nash provides similar advice when working with Deaf students:

If one or two tutors can work well with a Deaf student, we should set regular sessions up by appointment so that the student consistently works with the same people on their writing. This consistency can make a big difference simply because it avoids the problem of having to start the communication process over with a new tutor each time the student comes into the writing center for help (Nash, 2008, p. 4).

The same goes for students with learning disabilities (Pemberton, 1998, p. 12). There is a clear trend: consistency matters for students with disabilities.
However, I argue that more can be drawn from these sentiments. One of the primary goals of working with students at the writing center is to establish relationships. Based on my experience and observation, when tutors establish good working relationships with students, follow up appointments are more likely. That is one example of how adopting strategies that particularly benefit students with disabilities can positively affect everyone. This is a cursory example of a system of practices called universal instructional design, which I believe is the ultimate solution to the above issues and challenges.

Universal instructional design is a subsect of universal design. The intent of which is to “simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and the built environment more usable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost. Universal design benefits people of all ages and abilities” (Duncan, 2017). This approach is a clear solution to an approach that limits and hiders students who do not fit the mold of the typical, able-bodied person. When Purdue was designing its OWL, it consulted universal design theory very closely. The premise stands that students with disabilities require accommodations in order to level the playing field in academic settings, but these improvements could actually be valuable to every single student (Brizee, Sousa, & Driscoll, 2012, p. 5).

UID is centered around eight principles, but I believe writing centers have the highest potential to exemplify the following as it relates to working with disabled students: “design teaching methods that consider diverse learning styles, abilities, ways of knowing, and previous experience and background knowledge,” and “promote interaction among and between faculty and students” (Higbee, Chung, & Hsu, Enhancing the inclusiveness of First-Year Courses through Universal Instructional Design, 2004, p. 14). One example of this is the digitization of course materials such as syllabi and assignment sheets. This practice was traditionally done at
the request of visually disabled students such as myself as an accommodation, but there is no reason to believe that this would not benefit every student. One professor describes how adopting this practice in his classroom yields positive results for all as follows:

I have started posting my assignments, a plagiarism and proper documentation guide, and other helpful handouts on public speaking and how to read cases on the Web page, in addition to giving students a paper copy. This assists all students, including students with learning and psychological disabilities. If students need to start an assignment early, they can do so (Higbee & Goff, PASS-IT, 2008, p. 108).

This would also help to streamline interactions with faculty and students that writing center staff regularly participate in. Staff would have access to all the necessary course materials prior to sessions, but they would also be able to get a more complete picture of what relevant classes are doing at any given time;

Tutors in the Writing Center also have access to the assignment guides and find them useful in understanding what I expect of my students. Posting a course syllabus to a Web page not only assists students currently enrolled, it also provides helpful information to advisors and prospective students about course content, goals, and the instructor’s teaching style (p. 108).

In writing centers, students are given individualized, one-on-one attention that can go a long way to helping their writing grow. The peer editing process is unique because it allows students to receive a distinctive viewpoint that is much different from getting assistance from a professor. The writing center has become a staple of most universities across the country because of its unique approach to this process, and it directly follows the principles of UID; “The eighth
principle of [UID] emphasizes the importance of creating a community of learners, and peer editing supports this” (Higbee & Goff, PASS-IT, 2008, p. 134).

Given the nature of writing center appointments, an additional commitment to assisting the disabled student – following the principles of UID – is a perfect fit. Should a working relationship between accessibility services and the writing center be established, the transition could be seamless. The writing center could be a model by which other support services could follow because of the accessibility potential it provides. There are clear possibilities for writing centers to seamlessly cater to the needs of students with disabilities: “One-to-one tutoring, for example, may require arranging for a sign language interpreter or real time captioning for a student with a hearing impairment, but if tutoring appointments are scheduled in advance for all students, making these arrangements should not pose overwhelming obstacles” (Higbee & Goff, PASS-IT, 2008, p. 219). If assistive technology is integrated into the writing center, it is possible that students with disabilities are more likely to use the writing center’s resources, sign up for tutoring sessions, and interact with the wider community since they will not be relegated to an office exclusively with the provision of accommodation for disabled students in mind.

Conclusion

The history of disability in America and worldwide should make everyone feel uncomfortable. It should unsettle and cause one to question why anyone would be treated as inferior or inadequate because of factors they never asked for. As a society, we should dismiss the medical model of disability as an antiquated relic of a troubling past. The tenets of that philosophy do not represent me and they never have.
With the passing of groundbreaking legislation such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and its ratification in 1990, the shift towards new thinking was taking place, and rightfully so. Instead of focusing on the limitations of a person, it was deemed necessary to understand that society too had limitations in its understanding of the capabilities of disabled persons. It became understood that society designed its pillars, such as the transportation and educational systems with only a select segment of the population in mind, and reform was needed.

There is no reason that the disabled community cannot succeed in every area of life. There is no reason that the disabled community should not have a voice. I hope that by performing this research that I can serve as one example of a voice that is powerful, and one that has been long ignored because of ableism and ignorance. Writing centers exist to serve as well. At my institution, I see potential for a greater commitment from the writing center to fulfill its mandate to accommodate all learners, regardless of background. Forming a sustainable and consistent working relationship with SAS will hopefully go a long way towards facilitating increased usage of both services by a community of disabled students that continues to grow. Nationwide, this kind of commitment and partnership should be the goal because of the wide-ranging potential of UID to assist every student.

Right now, there is a gap between students with disabilities and the support services of institutions. The gap is glaring; most students with disabilities still do not disclose their disabilities. Those that do disclose may even decline using the accommodations allowed by their institutions. Extensive research has been conducted to figure out why these problems exist, but it is time to work harder to find ways to fix them. Fixing them starts with listening to the disabled community. Fixing them continues with ensuring professors and writing center staff are sufficiently educated and aware of disability. The writing center, guided by the principles of
universal instructional design, has the potential to raise the bar higher; to bridge the narrowing gap. It is time to take the next step.

References


