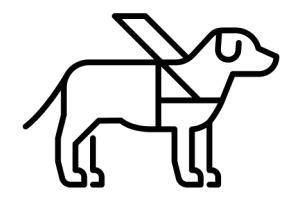


On Friction: Challenges of Equitable Access

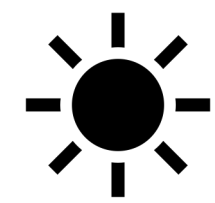
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What's the equitable outcome?

Sarah needs a service dog with her at all times. Her classmate, Jamal, is severely allergic to dogs.



Kailani has a visual processing disorder and needs slides to be high-contrast and bright. Maxim has light sensitivity related to an autism spectrum disorder and finds it painful to look at bright, high-contrast slides. Both ask their professor to accommodate their needs.



Ricardo has an auditory processing disorder and requests captions. His instructor, Dr. Kim is a person of color who teaches controversial material and worries that captions might incorrectly capture her meaning, and that misleading screencaps could be used to attack her online and endanger her reputation, career, and safety.



As undergraduate coordinator for his department, Micah is asked to proctor exams for students with extended time. To do this, he needs to sit quietly in a room for long periods of time. Micah wants—and his job duties require him—to support these students, but he has ADHD and finds it extremely difficult to be still and quiet for so long.



Abena has an executive functioning disorder and asks for slides before class to help with note-taking. His TA, Aiko, also has an executive functioning disorder and does not feel able to add this additional time-sensitive task to her plate, nor does she know how to discuss this with her supervising professor, who has made it clear that undergrad student accessibility and success is a top priority.



Priya and Tom are both professors who introduce flexible deadlines to support students with learning disabilities. Priya's students rarely submit work on time and ask for lots of additional support. This adds to her workload, which is already disproportionately heavy since students look to her, as a woman of color, for support and mentorship. She later learns that students almost always turn work in on time in Tom's class and rarely ask him for additional support, and that Tom has used his extra free time to write a new article that will help him get promoted.



(Ahmed 2012 Silverman 2024,
Berowitz 2023, Jackson 2019)

“As we continue to learn the needs of different learners in higher education, we expand the populations to which inclusive teaching applies, acknowledging inequities can occur even more broadly...and encompassing a broader definition about what an equitable college experience looks like.” (Addy et al, 2021)

- What happens when students' needs conflict with one another?
- What happens when student, faculty, and/or staff needs conflict with one another?

Access Friction: “a situation in which people have seemingly *opposing* access needs.”
(Silverman 2024)

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Action Plan

1) Consider institutional limitations

U.S. colleges and universities are required to avoid discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, and age. They are incentivized to prioritize legal compliance and to treat discrimination as the anomalous result of single bad actors. Institutions are often ill-equipped and ill-positioned to navigate clashes, and subject to legal liability if they do not comply with the letter of the law. (Ahmed 2012, Spade 2015) Therefore, institutions of higher education cannot prioritize one party over another, nor can they overtly decline to meet any party's needs. Acknowledging access friction can be legally risky and institutions are often ill-equipped to address it.

2) Turn to practitioner experience

Within higher education, there's considerable academic and lived expertise in navigating unjust systems. For instance:

- Lean into friction as an opportunity to think creatively about new solutions (Cavanagh 2024)
- Seek external support to remove friction via increased resourcing (Silverman 2025)
- Refuse to engage in situations where “access...can be read as a violent demand for transparency...an extractive project aiming to fix (in all senses of the word) nonnormative approaches to knowledge” or “becomes...another legalistic document adding to the disproportionate “labor of living” borne by disabled people.” (Cavar 2025)
- Engage in “access thievery”: “I told a couple of lies today because I recognized that I had access needs that would not be met if I did not meet them myself and that if I let my needs go unmet, I wouldn't be able to provide the care that I'd promised to others. As a result, I did not ask for access. I did not arrange accommodations. And I did not wait until my well-being depended on others' provision of my access. I stole the access that I needed in order to flourish.” (Smilges 2023)
- Go on a “life strike”: “Inspired by anti-work politics and labor movement rhetoric, a life strike pursues a total relinquishing of all labor beyond what is required for our sustenance.” (Smilges 2023)

3) Build virtual communities of practice

Rather than relying on constrained and constraining institutional mechanisms, those who are invested in and affected by equity and accessibility can join together to share strategies, brainstorm solutions, and offer mutual support. A series of virtual communities allow faculty and staff to discuss challenges with colleagues from other institutions; cross-institutional engagement allows more candid discussion without requiring disclosures to those involved in hiring, tenure, and promotion; virtual communities provide greater access around disability and care needs by allowing participants to join as able and offer flexibility for individuals to meet sensory needs; and collective brainstorming spreads the work of problem-solving around so that members can take turns seeking support and supporting others and those who are “maxed out” can look for fresh ideas rather than having to do more work to find a way through while already strained.