Day 2 Dr. Dolmage

Dr. Mark Markel: Our plenary session speaker today is one of the world's leading experts in disability rights and higher education. Dr. Jay Dolmage, a professor at the University of Waterloo is the author of *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. I know many of you are familiar with it, because it was the inaugural choice for our Diversity Community Reads book club. He also authored *Disability Rhetoric* and *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability*. Dr. Dolmage is also the founding editor of the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies. Please welcome Dr. Jay Dolmage.

Dr. Jay Dolmage: Hi, everyone. Thanks for being here today. I'm looking forward to this opportunity to talk and to learn a little bit from you as well. Basically, I'm going to break my presentation up into three parts today. And the kind of conceit around it is thinking about how we situate disability in higher education, and the potential that disabled students and colleagues have in higher education before COVID, during COVID, and after, hopefully. So, first, I'm going to lay out some of the ways that disability has been historically constructed at our colleges and universities, asking kind of how has ableism come to inflect what we do as teachers. And the metaphor that I commonly use for this approach is the steep steps. And we'll look briefly at some examples of these steep steps, both as architectural realities, but also as metaphorical, as things that are built into the culture and the curriculum.

The second part of the talk, we'll look at retrofitting. So, the ways that we work around and accessible features of the social, educational, physical, and digital environment to provide access. In that part of the workshop, we're going to explore how to identify retrofits, but also think about how we build them. This is in a way that during the COVID part of the talk, and I want us to examine some of the ways we have sometimes quite quickly pivoted or adapted to an emergency teaching scenario. And in some ways we've advanced access in this pivot and in other ways we've not. And then finally, we'll explore universal design, looking at how we might plan from the beginning to make our teaching as accessible as possible, so that we don't have to make temporary or unsatisfactory modifications later. Hopefully, this is also the after COVID part of the talk, where we think about what things we want to change permanently about education now that we've been offered a chance to reevaluate our priorities.

The first slide I'm going to show you here is steep steps. And this is from just about 40 minutes away from me at the University of Guelph, the Ontario Veterinary College. And what you're looking at it looks like a winter day in the background very much like today. It's a big red brick building. And there is a giant set of stone steps leading up to the front door of the building. It's a large, heavy wooden door. There are big concrete railings on either sides of these steps and there's a steel railing through the middle of the stairs. The way that the photo is taken, makes these stairs look even more imposing as we're at the very bottom of the steps.

The second set of steps I want to show you are from two separate blue coat ceremonies. So, these are, as you well know, the graduation ceremonies for veterinary medicine. One from that Ontario Veterinary College, where we get a different view of those steps we just saw. This time there are dozens of graduating students wearing their blue coats, there are some animals with them. And we can't see the steps because the students are arranged from the bottom to the top of the steps

for a photo opportunity. Below them is another set of stairs. This time, a more modern set. It's a concrete set of stairs with a steel railing on the side of a building at the Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Association. And again, there are dozens of students who are arranged on the steps with their blue coats on for graduation ceremony and for a photo opportunity. So, we have kind of some traditional views of these steep steps going back probably a century. We have a sense of the way that the steep steps have been built into the kind of culture of veterinarian medicine from the beginning. From the day you first encounter that building until the day that you graduate they kind of condition or shape that experience.

And then this other image I'm showing you here is from a new building at the Cornell Veterinary College. And it is a very modern set of steps inside a building. It's a very bright building with lots of glass, wood ceiling, an arching wood ceiling. And there's a concrete set of stairs in the bottom middle of the photo that brings students from one floor of the building to another. But arranged out to the left of the regular set of stairs is a big, wide set of stairs, what are called kind of social stairs. And we're seeing these at more and more schools. The stairs in this case are meant to get you from one floor to the other, but also as a social space. A space where students might relax, might collaborate, might socialize, might nap, might catch up on their work. And so again, central to the message that the college is sending is the sense that these stairs are central to the university experience, to the learning experience.

Truth is wherever you teach your campus is lousy with stairs. And so is my own at the University of Waterloo. Many of you, probably most of you have specific associations with steps like these on campus, having traveled up the many times or having avoided them. Regardless, students and faculty alike recognize that the steps have something to say. The steep steps metaphor puts forward the idea that access to the university is a movement upwards, and only the truly fit survive this climb as we can see from the blue coat ceremony. These blue coat ceremony photos all seemingly shot on sets of stairs highlight the ways that this metaphor works. I want to suggest that we've mapped the university in this way as a climb up the stairs of the ivory tower for particular reasons. The steep steps metaphor sums up the ways that the university constructs spaces that exclude.

So, not only have people with disabilities been traditionally seen as objects of study in higher education rather than as teachers or students, not only has disability been a rhetorically produced stigma, which could be applied to other marginalized groups to keep them out of higher learning. But the university is seen as performing the kind of societal and cultural function of pulling some people slowly up the stairs, and it arranges others at the bottom of the incline. So, I want you to think today about how this steep steps mentality has shaped your own education. Who and what helps you up the stairs? Where were they steepest or most difficult for you? What pushed you back? And also importantly, where did you start on the stairs based on your own privilege or lack of privilege?

Of course, the reality is a disability is always present. There's no perfect body or mind. There's no normal body or mind. And more literally, the US is a country within which the CDC tells us 25% of the population is affected by disability. We live in an age when despite physical and medical efforts to avoid disability or disavow and pathologize it, we will all become disabled at some point in our lives. And that shouldn't sound as scary as it does. In order for it not to be as

scary, we all need to care about disability now. In the United States, according to the most recent data, 19.5% of higher education students have a disability. For 40% of the students, the disability is mental illness or depression and that is a change, that's different. For 26.4% of the students, the disability or one of the disabilities is ADD or ADHD. We might also assume that many students with invisible disabilities like these pass hiding their disability or attempting to overcome it without seeking help. As teachers, staff members, and administrators, we might recognize and celebrate the diversity of the students we teach. We also have to recognize our roles within institutions, disciplines, and perhaps even personal pedagogical agendas, in which we may seek to avoid and disavow the very idea of disability. And I use the steep steps to express that negative force.

The university sorts the population by a medicalized and legalistic definition of ability very effectively, as effectively now as it ever has. Only 13% of US citizens 25 and older with a disability have a bachelor's degree or higher, which compares to 31% for those with no disabilities. Only 40% of students with learning disabilities complete their post-secondary education. Disabled students as well are likely to have up to 60% more student debt by the time they graduate. Think about this debt load and then think about how difficult it would then be for these students to choose veterinarian education post-graduation. These statistics are skewed because they only account for the students who receive accommodations. And in the United States, some studies show that two-thirds of disabled college students don't receive accommodation simply because their colleges don't know about their disabilities.

Those who do seek accommodations are likely to do so only in their third or fourth year of school after they've reached a point of crisis. We have a generation of students who are much more likely to experience higher education as disabling and much less likely to seek help. In the United States, while 94% of learning disabled high school students get assistance, and this is a really profound statistic and it sticks with me 94% of students with a diagnosed learning disability in high school get help. Only 17% of these students when they go to university seek help. So, the very same thing that helped them get through high school and get into a college or university, they're no longer going to seek that when they get there.

There's something about the culture, there's something about the steep steps that's telling them not to ask for that help. And I think we have thousands and thousands of students who don't seek help. And this leads me to think that we have a crisis of help-seeking around disability. I think we're losing thousands of students daily. And when students confront the metaphorical steep steps of higher ed, the message that they get is that it's not okay to ask for help. That they have to work hard individually, that they have to overcome, and that this hard work will compensate for their disability.

As many presenters yesterday pointed out, we need students to ask for help in a variety of ways, and especially around disability, I want to say today. In 2012, the National Alliance on Mental Illness conducted a national survey of college students living with mental health conditions to learn about their experiences. And they designed the survey to hear directly from students, right, about what improvements were needed. More than 45% of those who stopped attending college because of mental health-related reasons did not receive accommodations. Additionally, 50% of them did not access mental health services and supports even though they could have requested

accommodations right. When asked if they even knew how to access accommodations to their mental health condition, most survey respondents said yes, but 57% did not request for accommodations anyways, even though they knew how to.

Increasing number of students with mental health conditions attend colleges across the country. So, colleges need to take these issues seriously. And we see that students are reticent to seek help, and even more reticent to seek it in higher education. Of course, we know there are reasons why they may not be seeking help. The economics around accommodation tells us that universities get the outcomes they pay for the most recent survey of our Disability Services Office revealed that the average office budget in these offices was $257,289. Right? So, that's about what an assistant football coach at a large American University makes. You have a Disability Services Office serving thousands and thousands of students with a budget that's about as much as your linebackers coach for your football team. And these offices are not getting more resources, right? The ratio of these offices was one staff member per 80 students with disabilities. So, there are clear reasons why students are not seeking help. And it may have something to do with the fact that we're not resourcing properly.

The other thing I want to say is that looking at these steep steps in a world in which COVID has changed how we think about buzzwords like community should be jarring to us. In a world in which the prevalence of overt and systemic racism needs to be foregrounded in all that we do, we have to understand that these steep steps disproportionately impact students of color. Many of us have been working hard to address racism on campus. And I know that this has been a widespread issue at schools across North America. There have been specific incidents, but there are also systemic issues, and these intersect and overlap with issues around disability. For example, we know that African males are disproportionately placed into categories of special education that are associated with really poor outcomes at the K-12 level. And yet, in college and university, African-American students with disabilities experienced more difficulty accessing disability support.

I think the other piece to look at here as well is the amount of work and labor that students have to put into accessing things like accommodations. And this overlaps with as William Sedlerchick shows the fact that minority students have to do so much work to develop skills and expend energy coping with racism, looking for allies and forming their own community, and protecting their identities. And there's a lot of skill and effort that goes into that work, but it's not rewarded in an academic sense. So, the result is that these students are doing unbelievable amounts of sophisticated intellectual labor and that the majority students can just concentrate on their studies, and be rewarded for it. So, we have to understand that this is part of the steep steps as well.

There was a recent opinion piece published in Inside Higher Ed, and I know that one of the big discussion points yesterday was around resilience, and I think this overlaps with this. But a psychologist and psychometrician named Robert J. Sternberg argued that, "COVID-19 has taught us something important about intelligence. Which he goes on to define as, "The ability to adapt to the environment." In this calculus, we have to see disabled students, students of color, and other students from a wide range of backgrounds as, in fact, highly intelligent, and the labor and expertise they exert just to survive in higher education is remarkable. But we don't reward

these things in any way, shape, or form. We ask them to remain invisible, and we go ahead and reward traditional students for doing the traditional things that come as second nature to them. And that's part of how the steep steps work.

So, I want us to try to look at campus differently. I'll give you one example here really quickly. There's a fair amount of text in this slide, but I'm going to describe it. This is actually a map of my own campus at the University of Waterloo. And students as part of an art therapy project during their time at home during COVID built this interactive map, and what it is, is it's an opportunity for students to tag a place on our campus where they have cried. It's a map of tears. And to tell a little story about what it was that led them to have that kind of emotional event in this space. Their goal was to help other students understand that they're not alone when they struggle. But it also is pretty arresting, to think of our campuses, to think of our curriculum, to think of the placements that students go on, and think about them in these effective ways. Right?

Can we utilize something like this map? Can we think about what this would look like at your own campus? Can we utilize it as a filter for seeing the steep steps around us? And building empathy, right, for students and for one another? I think one of the ways that ableism works is that we're obscured from understanding many of the barriers that students face on our campuses, in our programs, and in our professions. And I think that's what I want us to do in this first part of the talk is to think about where those barriers exist, right?

Steep steps have been a huge part of back-to-campus planning around COVID-19. All of a sudden, administrators have to look at their buildings entirely differently. If we go back to this set of social stairs, right, how many students can you actually fit on this set of social stairs with social distancing, right? We've built all these spaces that are built around this idea of being in proximity to one another, even when they're inaccessible. But now those six-foot increments don't easily fit on social stairs. They don't fit in crowded stairwells at all, and they don't fit in elevators, and the steps of going back to school timewise have also forever changed. Who will have a choice about teaching or learning in person, on campus?

Who will get to choose to work and learn from home? What social and student-centered spaces will replace physical ones like these steps? And who will be included? How has teaching changed right now, just by moving the steep steps online? With some of the same demands of student time and productivity, but without the overhead costs of buildings and classrooms? And what regimes of individualization? What ways will we force students to become more responsible for themselves and more individuated? What regimes of personal wellness will be put into place and who will have access to them? What new regimes of control and surveillance have been built or are being built online?

I want to give you another example here and this is again from close to me, just down the street at the Wilfrid Laurier University. This is a set of four dense, small haunted pages of rules given to students taking a midterm at Laurier. I apologize for the poor quality here. But the scan basically says that students must not use touchpads or touch screens, have to use only an external mouse, keep their upper body in view for the entire exam. And they actually have to show I need to go to the washroom and I'll come back quickly into their camera if they need to use the restroom. All of this just so that the instructor can give a test that's not been properly adapted to

online learning. The attitude towards students situates them all as potential cheaters, not as learners, community members, or co-constructors of knowledge. And these four pages of instructions, all of which must be followed, they're a perfect distillation of the ways we've adapted our steep steps to COVID. Maintaining, retaining, and adding to them rather than trying to remove them. As a recent article on students with disabilities and COVID concluded, barriers have not been removed. Barriers have changed.

I've got another slide here to show you. This is a poster that was created by disabled students at the University of Iowa. And it is a kind of map of institutional barriers faced by students with disabilities at the University of Iowa. What we see is a very, very large iceberg. And at the top of the iceberg, the part that's visible above the water, it's labeled that the Disability Services Offices on campus is located in a dorm basement, right? That's the visible face of disability on the campus. And even that is not in an accessible place or a central place. But underneath the water, labeling the other parts of this iceberg, are a wide range of other barriers before you even get to that office. And some of these unseen factors include mental health stigma to courses seldom inclusively designed, exclusion from diversity programs and initiatives, minimal administrative advocacy. And all of this calls to mind the idea that as disabled in higher ed has stated, higher education is not often better education, but is in fact higher barrier education for many students.

Another way of looking at this is to access, and I'll come back to this to remind you of it, but there's a hashtag on Twitter that's still being used. And it is simply why disabled people drop out. It was a conversation that was begun back in 2019, by Kate West at Oxford Brookes University. That conversation gives you some more of this, what's underneath the iceberg. What's hidden? And the cost and the pathway that many disabled students have to take to deal with these steep steps.

So, I want you to think about this, and maybe add some more barriers into the mix, particularly in the era of COVID-19. I want you to think thoroughly about how a mapping like this might be created for Veterinary Medical Education. You may have an official channel for legal requests for accommodation, but what other barriers are there around and underneath this? Maybe the best way I can say this is if we understand that students are not going through that official channel as much as they need to. And if we understand that channel is a very narrow one with a small budget, and that they're tasked with just meeting legal minimums, then we have to understand that we have to build something different than this steep and narrow staircase. And that leads me into the second part of the talk.

And the metaphor that I use for the alternative to the steep steps is retrofitting. To retrofit is to add a component or accessory to something that's been already manufactured or built. A retrofit doesn't make the product function, it doesn't necessarily fix a faulty product, but it acts as a sort of correction. It adds a modernized part in place of or in addition to an older part. Whether it's for a car or a factory. As a building is retrofitted to accommodate disability, as per the specs of disability law, ramps are added onto the side of a building or around the back, often around the back. So, you can make an accessible building, but the ramp brings you up through the kitchen or the freight entrance. And then you need to access the stairlift to get up to another floor. And then there's another elevator. And maybe the key for that elevator sits for the caretaker in an office in

another hallway. The building's accessible, but the retrofit is telling you that that accessibility is the last concern, right? And that it's not true accessibility, you're not invited in the front door. You're actually invited in in a highly stigmatized way around the back. I think we're all becoming much more aware of retrofitting given the pandemic.

Our restaurants and businesses have plexiglass walls built, tables, and chairs are now measured distance apart. There are new laws and regulations designed both to make spaces safer, but also to allow them to remain open. Perhaps rightly so these retrofits are often criticized. Some are wise and well thought out, others seems simply performative, like a mask over one's mouth, but not over one's nose. On university campuses, retrofits can include ramps, like I said, that bring you through to the back to a freight elevator. On the syllabus and within the curriculum, we similarly create access, but only in minimal ways. And often in ways that actually confer their stigmatized students. We should think about this. If the only time we talk about disability is in that statement about legal rights, then is disability really a part of what we're doing? And will disabled students feel welcome? Retrofits like these are never value-neutral. With steps so steeped in tradition, so quantitative of the North American upward climb of elitism, especially on campus, ramps, and elevators threaten the very idea of higher education.

Also, despite the fact that equal access could be achieved relatively simply, the expense and labor of access marks accessibility at its difficult, elaborate, and costly when it need not be. It reinforces the idea that access for most people is free. And somehow the access needs of disabled people are extensive and expensive. And I think about this all the time in higher education, that any of the money that we spend on education is seen as an investment, except for when it's for disabled people. And then it's seen as a drain on resources and a cost. And we have to avoid that construction. We have to move away from that because it's so much a part of the way that disability gets talked about and situated on campus. The images I'm showing you here is, sorry, this is the hashtag, the Twitter hashtag, why disabled people drop out. I'll try to come back and remind you of that as well.

The next slide I'm going to show you is, there's a kind of popular kind of online game among disabled people of finding the images like this of what are called Curb Cuts to Nowhere. And in this image, I think it's from the UK, we're on the bottom of the hill, there's a stone wall leading up a hill. And along the side of the stone wall is a sidewalk. As you come down the sidewalk, at the very bottom of the sidewalk is a set of stairs. And then there's another sidewalk, and there are ramps coming up to that sidewalk from the street on two sides, and those are curb cuts. We've become very familiar with them. They allow people to get up onto a sidewalk without having to come up over a curb. But the point here is that the curb cuts lead to the stairs.

So, a city may have spent $10,000 to do this retrofitting. And the point is you still cannot get up this hill in a wheelchair or with a stroller or mobility devices. You've done this retrofitting, but it hasn't actually changed the environment. And that's so much of the retrofitting that we do in higher ed. It's designed to make it look like we've taken action, but we haven't actually changed the culture. We react to diversity instead of planning for it. We acknowledge that our students come from different places and that they're heading in different directions, but this does little to alter the vectors of our own pedagogy. As I said, most often, the only time disability is spoken or written about in class is in the final line of the syllabus. So, the message to students is a disability

is a supplementary concern, that it's not really even the teacher's concern and not really a part of the course. It's at the back door.

This calls out the unexpected status of disabled students an issue that Jane Tynan pointed out in veterinary medicine more than a decade ago. As Stone and Crooks have argued disabled academics are, "Unexpected workers in an able-bodied work environment." And as Tynan showed altogether, too many vet medicine programs had no expectation of disabled students enrolling. And that's no plans for how to adapt the curriculum for when they arrived. But this adds up over the course of time to thousands of unexpected students, and we cannot ethically have this same expectations or lack of expectations anymore.

As a result of the surprising status of disability and accommodation, faculty and students do not have positive attitudes about it. Students report negative attitudes from faculty when they disclose. Faculty and students have not, in general, had very much contact with disabled people. And this lack of contact leads to bias and ableism. Students with and without both learning disabilities and psychological disabilities view them as insurmountable problems correlated with low ability. Even though medical professionals don't see them that way, they're not constructed that way. Students who do work to secure accommodations can come up against what Annika Konrad calls access fatigue, as well as what Margaret Price calls conflicts of access when they struggle to develop for themselves what Neil Simpkins calls access transfer.

Research clearly shows how large a cognitive load disabled students have to carry. And part of this is, I think, I want to say there's a kind of Las Vegas nature to the accommodation process. And that is what accommodations you get in one class, stay in that class. And you have to renegotiate disclosure, renegotiate asking for this help that's constructed as extra and costly, over and over and over again. And navigating those things can wear students out. In fact, marks disabled students out for being worn out.

The other thing is that students don't often know what accommodations they're going to get or whether those accommodations are actually going to help them. A big issue is the lack of arrange and repertoire of real accommodations that might really help students. There's such a limited range of accommodations offered. More than three-quarters of the accommodations offered are this exact same accommodation, which is extended time on tests and exams. In veterinary education similarly by far the most common accommodation is extended time and a quiet environment for testing. But how much testing do you even do? We certainly can't act like testing prepares veterinary students for professional practice. Testing is much more likely to simply reveal and reward privileges students already have.

Testing in higher education is a significant crater of barriers, in particular for people with learning disabilities and mental health-related disabilities. And it doesn't make sense to think that these students will experience anything like these barriers in a practical environment. There will be barriers, but they will be other barriers. So, the fact that they're expending all this energy over and over and over again, to ask for an accommodation for something that's not going to help them in their professional career, strikes me as profound and worth noting. Nothing that they'll encounter is like the barrier imposed by a test. Likewise, the accommodations that these students will need in a professional capacity are unlikely to look anything like a quiet room and extended

time. Unlikely to look like the accommodations they get in veterinary medicine classroom. And that's a huge problem. But also, I hope we can agree, just a wasted opportunity, an opportunity that I hope we can begin to take today.

So, if like me, and I imagine there's a lot of you, you don't offer a lot of tests or exams, and never in a timed way, well I think that's good, but there's more to it. If you keep working with disability services, and they keep offering only this limited range of accommodations, then we're short fusing the process. It's a ramp like this curb cut that leads students nowhere. We need a much broader repertoire of accommodations. Many teachers argue for innovative teaching methods that move beyond lecturing, testing, and rote learning. And I bet a lot of you do too. But continuing to work with a very narrow range of accommodations, while at the same time advocating for a broader range of literacies and modalities and teaching techniques, that's really problematic. Because the accommodation stayed stuck in the 50s and afforded this educational regime where rigidity and uniformity and above all else, timing reigned supreme. And that brings us closer if we stick with that model, to something like malicious compliance. We're following the letter of the accommodation law will actually hurt the students in our innovative classrooms.

Imagine what accommodations might be offered to the student taking that really silly exam at Laurier University. The Disability Services Office would have to take weeks to figure out a workaround all just to support the -- So, we need to allow for an environment in which students can claim difference without the fear of discrimination, and disability must be seen as socially negotiated. But we need to understand that the system we have is based on a very minimal sense of what disability is and can be according to a very limited idea of a legal and medical definition. And we need to change.

One of the pieces, I think, is to say that we've taken some retrofits, accommodations that we've made for students, and we've turned them into inclusive pedagogy. And that's one of our ways to think about this moving forward is to refuse that Las Vegas metaphor and say, the very first time I -- folded into what I do as I move forward. In that way, the changing face, the increasing diversity of students that we get in the classroom will be empowered to change what we do in the classroom. And otherwise, the consequences if we stick with the traditional teaching, and we stick with this accommodations model, we'll continue to mark those students out for wearing out and we'll continue to lose them.

I do think we've had an opportunity over the last 10 months to redesign higher education in ways we never have before. Yet, nobody was talking about accessibility or very few people were talking about accessibility as part of this process. In fact, universities have spent a ton of time investing in surveillance and test proctoring software, and not a lot of time developing alternatives and accessible alternatives. Disability Services Offices were rarely even consulted in the rollout of online classes with no new parameters for accommodations in the new environment. There's some irony of course that the ablest demands for physical attendance and participation that teachers used to cling to so tightly. Ask anybody with an episodic or chronic disability, how difficult it was in the last decade to have a teacher understand that they might need to miss class sometimes. They might need to be late sometimes. They might need extended deadlines. They were told there was no alternative to being there in person and being on time. And there's some irony that now none of us can do that. And we were very quick to switch over

to a system where we could understand, and in fact, where universities would make very strong arguments that we're getting an equivalent educational experience.

So, I think also, in the spring of 2020, and end of winter of 2020, many students were able to ask to have a grade converted to credit rather than a numerical grade. Faculty members got extra time on research grants or tenure deadlines. And lots of flexibility around physical attendance. But disabled people can hardly count the number of times they were denied these things before COVID and stigmatized for even asking about them. Most of those ablest demands will likely slide right back into place, if we're not diligent. Others, hopefully, will be gone for good. And the advocacy of actual disabled people, unfortunately, based on the patterns we've seen, is unlikely to be what determines this future. So, there needs to be thought about what ablest demands might slide into the place of the demand for physical presence, for example, will we all need to begin to shout into our webcams?

We have the barriers that we identified in that iceberg and the mapping of the steep steps in the last activity. But I also want you to think about how some of those barriers get accommodated, and what are the workarounds? How have we built some accessibility into our pivot to online learning during COVID? And how will we need to retrofit our teaching in ways that remove barriers as we return to campus? Okay. So, I want to make a transition here to thinking about what accessible teaching might look like and get into some actual examples. In that hopeful space of thinking that we can make changes now.

I think that educational practices that seem like they have simply always existed such as letter grades, they started hardly more than a century ago. People may know this story, but letter grades parallel the system imposed on the American Meat Packers Association. At first, the meat packers objected because they argued meat was too complex to be judged by letter grades. The factory assembly line provided inspiration for the standardized bubble test, which was adopted as a means of sorting students for admission to college. Such practices helped, they gave legitimacy to education because they made it seem efficient and measurable, and meritocratic, but they tended to screen out collaborative approaches to problem-solving. Yet still, somehow, we've held on to them for so long, and we've held tight. This despite the fact that they've not always been around. And despite the fact that becoming a veterinarian is nothing like becoming a meat packer.

The meat packers fought back, but we've not. I'm going to admit something here to myself as well because I think this shows how the force of orthodoxy works in higher ed. In a way, there's a popular public sentiment that what happens at colleges universities are packed full of like, really left-leaning progressive people and snowflakes, and that they're radical places. And in fact, I think they're very conservative, highly, highly conservative places in the sense that we keep doing the same things over and over again, especially in the classroom despite the fact that innovation and entrepreneurialism are these big keywords. What we do in the classroom is actually very conservative.

For probably 15 years myself, I taught classes where I gave a participation grade that I didn't think very much about. It was really who put their hand up and spoke in class. And to be honest, there's only ever so much space for people to speak in class. And when I was rewarding that

with a grade, I was actually rewarding the kind of students who will speak over other students and take up all the space. Or maybe are not even listening that carefully. It was not a good way to teach participation. I was teaching participation the wrong way through the way I was assessing it. And it was creating a lot of barriers for students to be able to take part.

When I began teaching online, and I moved to message boards, what I realized was a lot of the students who weren't saying anything in class actually had a lot to say. It was just the barriers that existed in the physical class. They needed a little bit more time to think. Thinking does not always happen in 50-minute chunks, right? Especially between 08:00 and 08:50 in the morning for a lot of people, or 12:00 and 12:50 or 05:00 and 05:50. But I was creating this barrier to the students to be able to show how much they knew, which I needed to see. And I was really creating a barrier to having them be part of this conversation and shaping the conversation in the classroom. So, we were all missing out on learning from them too. And put that way, those are two very big losses.

The way that I do participation now is that I give students a longer kind of laundry list of possible valuable ways to participate. And that can include taking notes for other people, it can include finding contemporary cultural examples that illustrate a concept. It can be peer reviewed with other students. It can simply be emailing with another group of students who might have missed a part of the class. There are so many ways to do it. And the students write a reflection where they tell me the different ways they participated. And they're allowed to come up with new ways. And they invariably do. And they assess that themselves.

So, every semester, then the conversation is much greater. I'm not the only one who's creating positive redundancy in the class, who's keeping track of how we're learning, or who's even having the final say on what we take away from a discussion. Every semester, I learn new ways that students can valuably participate in class. And a lot of those participation are forms of note-taking or transcribing, where we can share the commitment to accessibility as well. I think that during COVID, some of us may have realized that it just isn't fair to grade participation based on quantity. Because we just don't know the context that students are learning in. And I think what I learned and realized is I've never really understood that context, and I always needed new ways to come at it and learn it.

I don't know, maybe others who are in the audience today, like me, are now in a house with five people learning online at the same time. Which is incredibly illuminating. We need to put ourselves into those situations to stop thinking that everyone else learns like we do. So, what are the opportunities that we can create, to see the valuable ways that other people learn that helps us to expand? That really is universal design, and that's what I'm trying to get to here as my final kind of piece of the talk.

I think another way to look at this is, I think you all know, and I think we could come up with a really powerful and important list of accommodations that can really help veterinary medicine students in the classroom and in practice. Including things like help with note-taking and record-keeping, technological solutions around communication and memory. And I also want to suggest that if we plan for more disabled students in the classroom and in your profession, we could really change the shape of higher education, because the way that you all teach is so practical,

because it actually is innovative. The danger, though, is that we don't bring the accommodations along with the innovation and the practicality of the teaching. That's the real danger.

But on the flip side of that coin is a real potential. And other disciplines could really learn from the ways that you all create an accessible pedagogy for your students. It's a kind of innocuous but revolutionary question. What if we allocated all of the energy that we currently spend on adapting to an old educational regime into building a new one? One in which disabled students don't always need to ask for accommodation, but instead, their needs are expected. So, like in the fairy tales of the three little pigs, or Goldilocks and the Three Bears, universal design then becomes our third image or metaphor. And I want to kind of quickly get to this.

This is the Veterinary College at Virginia Tech. And it's a bit of an example of universal design in that instead of like that Ontario College of Veterinary Medicine in Guelph, the entrance to this building is a ramp. There's a kind of creative landscaping done that transforms all of the concrete space outside of this building into ramps. There are no stairs there at all. And whether you're walking or using a wheelchair, no matter how you're getting around, you access the space in the same way. I mean, there is still a pretty prominent set of kind of floating stairs inside the glass building when you look inside it. It's a very modern glass building almost entirely glass wall with a concrete ceiling. But this idea of planning and designing a space that everybody comes in the same entrance is a way of thinking through universal design.

Ronald Mace, who is seen as one of the founders of universal design wrote, "The universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible without the need for adaptation or specialized design." So, you don't need a ramp around the back for this building that we're looking at. And universal design was at first an architectural movement, but we've taken that architectural movement and some of the principles of it, and we've turned it into a pedagogical movement as well. And universal design for learning then is based on three big concepts.

The first is we need to have multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge. So, that is my talk today, there's a script, there's captions, there's ASL interpretation, there is my slides, right? There's me repeating myself in the talk on key points or definitions. It's a kind of redundancy and multiple means of representation. That means I'm not thinking everybody's going to get the message the first time. It means that I'm not going to just try to deliver the information a single way. If the goal is for people to learn, then I need to give multiple ways I need to express myself in multiple ways. And the other pieces around multiple means of expression, which provides learners with alternatives for demonstrating what they know. I think my participation example is a good one there. If we stick with just one way of showing what you know, then we're not going to learn all that students are learning. And they're not all going to get the opportunity to contribute in a shaping way to the conversation, to the building of knowledge together. So, that means not just standard times testing, it means being creative about allowing students to show us how much they've learned.

And then the final piece is multiple means of engagement. And that's just multiple ways of tapping into learners' interests, offering appropriate challenges, and increasing motivation. And a lot of this has to do nowadays, with hands-on learning, with problem-solving, with collaboration,

and that there has to be a variety of ways of engaging students that way, if we hope to build an accessible culture around teaching. So, how do we build and design the future of the university to look like this entrance at Virginia Tech, rather than like those steep stairs at the Ontario College of Veterinary Medicine? How do we build something different from the beginning for the broadest spectrum of users, and that thinks about the people who come into our classrooms as moving across a range of embodiments, throughout their course of their lives, just as we will?

For the last decade, I've been working on creating a long, long list of universal design ideas. And I call these places to start because that's how I want fellow teachers to approach them. As things to try, to experiment with in their own teaching. And there's hundreds of these examples on this if you follow these links on the slide. And they're adapted for a wide range of classroom settings: labs, field trips, practicums, co-op, it's not just the traditional classroom. In all those cases, I'm trying to think about ways that anybody could try something out to make their class more accessible, like today, or tomorrow. And my hope is, forgive the metaphor, that it's kind of like a gateway drug. Or kind of evangelical tend to this. If you give this a try, this one thing as a place to start, you're going to see how much more included students are, you're going to see their learning in a new way. And you're going to want to try more.

So, as I near the end of the presentation, I do want to offer two specific challenges. I think that the first I guess, is to go and have a look at these ideas. And we're going to engage a little bit on Twitter after the talk. But that's also a place to share your ideas around accessible teaching, share them with your colleagues. Reward your colleagues for new forms of teaching, for being innovative. But I want to offer two specific challenges. And the first I think is around help-seeking. How can we build approaches to help-seeking for students, that foreground Disability Justice, that are not just about minimum accommodations? I think that means asking disabled students to co-design these systems. Develop them in ways that understand things like systemic racism, and that are focused not on legal minimum accommodations, but rather on the flourishing and success of disabled students in all aspects of campus life. Understanding that we need permanent systemic changes if we hope to build a campus culture that works.

And then the second piece that I want us to build on I think segues directly from the first. I talked about this article earlier, Inside Higher Ed, there was a response to that article by Micah Savagilo. And in that response, he suggested, why not center students and faculty with disabilities by inviting them and paying them to help envision and design flexible courses that will survive the pandemics and unforeseen challenges to come? Then we can measure how adaptive and flexible a learning environment is rather than how intelligent students are when they succeed or fail to adapt to a new normal as rigid as what it replaced. Why not? How can you invite disabled students, staff, and faculty to audit your programs and processes? How can you authorize them to advocate for change? This would be the very opposite of the unexpected approach disabled students that has occurred for so long.

On the way to this for further involvement, we can also begin by developing habits that allow us to hear from disabled academics. There's a great series of podcasts on disability and veterinarian medicine put together by Lisa Greenhill and the AAVMC in their Diversity Matters series. Put these into your podcast queue now. Accounts to follow on Twitter include Lisa Greenhill, but also Disabled in Grad School and Disabled in Higher Ed. Follow them now. Go ahead. Bring

disabled speakers to your campus, create panels on disability at your conferences, and special issues in your journals. Start planning for accessibility now. The best way to plan for this is to let disabled alumni, professionals, and students plan with you. So, start writing that email to them to engage them right now. Thanks for your time today, and I hope we can talk more about how to continue to design an alternative future for higher education. Excuse me. I think we all agree that before COVID, our schools had too many unnecessary barriers in place for students. During COVID, we all viewed and experienced new barriers, or saw the old ones from new perspectives. And now, we have a chance to build something different.

Speaker 3: Dr. Dolmage, thank you so much. That was wonderful. I hung on every single word, and I'm sure that many of our attendees had aha moments. For our attendees, as Dr. Dolmage mentioned, he and I will be continuing some of this conversation on Twitter at the end of this session. But for now, we have a few minutes for questions. So, please feel free to drop those questions in the chat or in your Q&A boxes. And in the meantime, I have a couple of questions to kind of get this started. So, can you share a little bit more about the burden that students really kind of endure in trying to seek accommodations?

Dr. Jay Dolmage: Sure. So, one thing I'll say, I had a student describe the process of going into the Disability Services Office as being like playing the game Battleship. And the game Battleship is this game where you know, you've got a game board, and you can see your own pieces, but you can't see the pieces on the other side, you're divided by a screen. So, you sort of send things over to a coordinate on the other side of you hope that it lands on something over there. But students really feel that way in that they have to take a big risk and often log a diagnosis, or come first to a teacher with their limitations, which is not something that anyone wants to do. And they have to throw something over the screen. And what they hope for in taking that risk is that it's going to land on some of the other side that actually helps them.

The problem is there aren't many ships on the other side of that game board. If I can use the metaphor. Like I said, it's a very narrow range of accommodations that might help. And they're often slow to come. So, students can wait for a notetaker all the way until after their midterm. It doesn't take many times going through that process to want to give up on it. And I'm not faulting Disability Services Offices. I hope I've been clear about that. They're overworked and under-resourced. But that's a big part of the issue is that the time and the effort, and the uncertainty around the actual usefulness of the accommodations means that students really do feel that fatigue, and that they have to do it over and over again. They often even have to go and get diagnoses over and over again, and diagnoses are expensive to get. There's a huge cottage industry around charging a lot of money to give those educational assessments diagnosis. So, that's one piece of it.

But I also think you can think about -- another way to think about this in terms of physical access is move around your own campus and only use the accessible entrances for a day. Don't let yourself use any stairs. And you can see there's a physical toll that's taken just to move around campus. And then use your imagination and understand that that happens administratively, that that happens in the curriculum when you need to have alternative formats, for example. That you're uncertain when you show up for an exam. I mean, one of the big extensions we get is like a quiet room and a quiet space to take an exam. But too many times those are staffed by other

students who can't answer your questions about that exam. There's not somebody there with the expertise to be able to tell you why a page is missing, et cetera, and so on. And they're supposed to be places that remove stress, but they don't. And when we see the number of disabilities now that are stress-related, that are mental health-related, and then you understand that this process itself could be one of the most profound causes or constructions of distress for students, you understand how bad a match it is. Yeah.

Speaker 3: Yeah, yeah, we've had some really fantastic conversations about well-being and the increased stress and lack of sleep, and all of these types of things. And we spend a lot of time talking about mental health, but we often kind of pathologize the folks instead of kind of thinking systemically about what needs to change. So, it's always coming back to that systems-level change. So, we did have a question from Dr. Livermore at UC Davis. Another barrier is faculty resistance to change. So, do you have recommendations on how we can kind of break the orthodoxy that you mentioned during your talk and kind of get folks to open up that there are different effective ways of doing things?

Dr. Jay Dolmage: Yeah. I think one of the biggest pieces is the faculty don't talk about teaching very much at all. We don't get rewarded very much for innovative teaching, we get rewarded if we get good scores from students. So, I think one part of it is being transparent about the accessible teaching that we do do, and understand that that can have an impact. And building rewards for accessible teaching into promotion, and merit, and all those other processes. I mean, there are other ways to do it too, but nothing will be as effective as that, truly. We have to have a way of rewarding it. Or else faculty won't do it. We've got too many emails to answer. We've got too many research demands, we've got to publish or perish. We have huge classrooms with students who are very demanding. I definitely understand where faculty are coming from. So, for me, again, it is not necessarily an attitudinal difference, it has to be a structural change, one in which we reward teachers for teaching more excessively.

Speaker 3: Great. Thank you. So, we've got time for a few more questions, maybe one or two. And as we wait for some more to come in, you talked a bit about how the pandemic has changed things. And for those of us that kind of are falling a bit of some of these disability conversations online, there's been a lot of response, I'd say from disability advocates that it is essentially in a nutshell, or now all of these things are available now that the able-bodied folks need them. It's really been an interesting kind of discussion. So, you talk about how the pandemic has certainly increased some forms of accessibility, what positive things do you think and hope will stay around?

Dr. Jay Dolmage: To me, a couple of things. One, I think, what I really want to advocate for -- So, I'll give you an example from my own campus. Midway through the spring term on my campus, there was a big survey about how students were dealing with the pivot to online learning. And they all basically said that they were not dealing well with it at all. Well, to begin with, we never do surveys like that, and we never act on them. So, that's something. But we were actually told by our Associate Dean in our faculty of arts to pull back on content, to teach less content. That was incredibly empowering because if anything, we feel like we need to keep adding more content year after year. And myself, I pulled back on one major assignment and I made myself pull back 30% on content, less reading. It allowed me to focus on connecting with

students rather than content. It allowed me to pull back on assessment, move some assessment or give students the responsibility for assessing themselves on some pieces that I maybe wouldn't have given myself permission to do otherwise.

We talked about Zoom fatigue, like the students are fatigued by the amount of time they have to spend on Zoom. Let's not forget that, they're not just fatigued by Zoom. They're fatigued by the drink from the firehose approach of higher ed, that everybody is giving them more and more content to master. And we know that the jobs that they're headed for are not going to be about content. They're going to be about critical thinking, problem-solving, innovation, many ways to answer a question or solve a problem. So, that's my thing is like, pull back 20 or 30% on content, and replace that time with connection; more office hours, for example. Doing group office hours so students get the opportunity to speak with one another, they may not get otherwise. And pulling back on assessment. Assess less and connect more.

Speaker 3: That's awesome. Thank you so much. So, we do have a few other questions, but we are bumping up against time. So, this is a great opportunity to plug the fact that I'll be taking over AAVMC's Twitter feed for just a little. Maybe about 10-15 minutes as we take a few more questions with Dr. Dolmage. So, be sure to log on to Twitter at AAVMC and join in that conversation. There are a couple of questions about how do we make mental health services more accessible. How do we handle some of that -- the help-seeking behaviors that we want to see more of? As well as student resistance to change and kind of how there's often sometimes these moments where folks think, "Ah, these folks are getting something over on me. They're getting an advantage," when really it is about leveling that playing field. So, be sure to check out the remaining sessions for today's conference, but also be sure to check us out on Twitter in just one minute.

Dr. Jay Dolmage: Thank you.