Academic Ableism

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Published by University of Michigan Press

Dolmage, Jay T.
Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education.

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Chapter Five

Disability on Campus, on Film: Framing the Failures of Higher Education

Bartleby, the main character from the film Accepted, a movie about a college that students create for themselves when they can’t get in anywhere else:

“I’m not going to answer your question because I am an expert in rejection.” (n.p.)

In this chapter, I am going to discuss disability in popular films that also examine college and university life. We know that disability is generally underrepresented (or suppressed) in college life. But we also know that disability is overdetermined in film. Since the very beginning of its existence as a medium, people with disabilities have been on film and been used as a part of filmic rhetoric. In the famous “Odessa Steps” sequence of Battleship Potemkin by Sergei Eisenstein, the presence of disabled people is used to evoke an emotional reaction from the audience. Of course, the steps feature heavily in this scene, too, as the background against which some bodies are shown to be incapable of measuring up. Sally Chivers, Paul Longmore, Nicole Markotic, Michael Northen, and many others have examined the tropes and stereotypes and narrative uses of disability in film, where characters often conform to a series of stock roles and functions. These characters must overcome or compensate for
their disability; they need to be killed or cured before the end of the film; they are an “ethical test” for other characters, who establish their likeability and authority and growth in relation to how they treat characters with disabilities; finally, these characters are almost always played by able-bodied actors who receive a disproportionate amount of critical attention and praise for playing disabled. So, let’s start with this irony: disability is underrepresented and suppressed on campus, but overdetermined in film, and especially in popular films about college life.

Let’s also acknowledge another irony: When I say “popular film” in this chapter, as you’ll come to understand, I really mean it. I won’t be discussing great films or great art; this is not Sergei Eisenstein. I am going to look to what Judith Halberstam calls “silly archives”: archives that allow us to make claims that are remarkably divergent from the claims made about high-culture archives (20). Halberstam studies everything from animated film to *Dude, Where’s My Car?* I am working in similar territory here. So, yes, these are not high culture films. I am going to be talking about fairly vulgar comedies like *Animal House, The House Bunny, Back to School, Old School, Accepted*, and *Revenge of the Nerds*. I am going to be talking about ‘80s movies like *Real Genius* that perhaps can only be framed favorably through the filter of nostalgia. I am also going to talk about a contemporary animated movie, *Monsters University*, that is ostensibly for kids. These have become cult films in collegiate lore. And they are on the Hollywood spin cycle.¹ Yet this is not a “psychotronic” reading of these films, one that ignores political correctness and tries to rescue these films as aesthetic artifacts—in fact, it is the opposite. It is an attempt to engage with the fact that dominant culture has already “ironically elevate[d] these texts that often exhibit a naive disregard for sexism, misogyny” and ableism and transphobia, and on and on (Chibnall, 85). Part of the power of these films is that the dominant culture has already tried to be “psychotronic” about them: saying, basically, we know they are offensive, but let’s enjoy them anyhow.² Why do we want to treat films about higher learning with such political agnosticism? For my purposes, these “silly” films also offer overt and covert disabled forms of being and acting and knowing, alternative temporalities and economies made possible by alternative corporealties. But I am not here trying to rehabilitate the films or offer an ironic reading of them. College students and the general public still watch these films, repeatedly, and I think educators need to watch them carefully as well.

As Ben Wetherbee argues, we need “a rhetorical perspective on the
circulation of images of disability in Hollywood film—a perspective that asks not only if a given movie ‘argues’ for favorable or unfavorable treatment of marginalized groups like the disabled, but one that also asks how and to what ends disability images function within larger arguments and ideologies” (41). So here’s a thesis: these films show, I think, not really a reflection of what happens at universities, but instead disclose some sense of what our culture thinks colleges or universities should be like—and this in turn does influence or frame expectations of what the experience of college or university will be. These are also all powerfully and centrally films about disability, and thus examining these films helps us to understand the inextricable and complicated relationship between higher education and the difference disability makes. Whether the films get disability representation right or wrong may not even be as notable as the fact that, over and over again, when moviegoers consume images of higher education, they are also almost always encountering certain versions of disability.

This chapter, like all of the others, also focuses on rhetorical space. So first I want to examine how films about college and university offer fantasies of segregation: those who are obviously different from the mainstream of college life are physically removed or at a remove from its social and educational spaces in plainly notable ways. As Sara Ahmed points out, “when you realize that the apparently open spaces of academic gatherings are restricted, you notice the restriction: you also notice how those restrictions are either kept out of view or defended if they come into view. . . . to give an account of these defenses is to give an account of how worlds are reproduced” (“On Being Included” 178). Recognizing how groups are excluded from academic life in films—a trope that is so ubiquitous that we might even call it a rule—should show us how readily universities enforce these segregations. These excluded groups do band together. They create new fraternities, for instance. This offers opportunities for new forms of sociality and kinship, yet also underlines the logic of exclusion that is the baseline ethos of higher education. Animal House, Revenge of the Nerds, Old School, Accepted, Back to School, The House Bunny, and Monsters University all put forward the idea that abnormal or eccentric students can be gathered together, warehoused, and united—and these films cover decades and generations of influence.

Next I will discuss how these films, in justifying the segregation of nonnormative bodies and minds, really reveal the degree to which disability is educationally constructed—created in (perhaps large) part by the administrative, curricular, and pedagogical proclivities and tradi-
tions of higher education. How we teach and how we research and how colleges are administered creates disability.

I will then discuss how these segregated or contingent communities develop powerful rhetorics of failure and refusal. These films critique higher education by revealing the unfairness of the supposed meritocracy and by developing alternatives.

Finally, I am going to discuss how the rhetorical structure of these films distills and perhaps even comments on the epistemological nature of disability. More simply, how these films are put together tells us something about learning, about how we learn and about how central disability actually is to this learning.

This chapter address rape and sexual coercion on campus, content that is potentially upsetting and triggering.

Segregating Difference

In these films, we encounter groups with truly, truly diverse populations, perhaps ironically so: for instance *Old School* assigns names like “Spanish” to a Latino character and “Weensie” to a heavyset African American character. In *Revenge of the Nerds* there is Takashi Toshiro playing the Asian stereotype; Arnold Poindexter has a visual impairment; and Lamar Latrell is an effeminate black student. (Takashi dresses up in full indigenous headdress in one segment, perhaps to cover more bases). The nerds also can only be accepted by the black fraternity Lambda Lambda Lambda (who themselves are totally segregated) after they are rejected by all of the others. As Lori Kendall argues, “the film codes the nerds as gay through the fraternity name Lambda Lambda Lambda, referring to the use of the lambda symbol by gay organizations (e.g. Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Los Angeles gay pride flag, which includes a lambda symbol)” (269). Further, Lamar “plays a key role in the action, serving in part to code the nerds as all-inclusive. ‘We don’t discriminate against anyone,’ Lewis says pointedly to the national Tri-Lamb leaders” (269). By the third movie in the series, this inclusiveness itself is parodied or ridiculed: the “tour of the Tri-Lamb house early in the movie exposes a multi-cultural, self-sufficient utopia. . . . The film overplays this utopic vision to the point of parody, partially undercutting the presentation of it as desirable” (270). This movie also taps into a sort of badly borrowed civil rights discourse, as the white jocks burn the word “nerds” into the lawn in front of their house. All of this is played off as
satirical or humorous, but it belies a reality: as mentioned earlier, minority students have to exert a great amount of energy to navigate racism on campus, working hard to deal with micro-aggressions, for instance, while white students just work hard on their homework. What is a funny ethnic joke for the white characters reveals a true barrier to participation and success for minority students.

The nerds are also shown to be matched up with the “Delta Mu” fraternity, tapping into fat phobia or just plain fat hatred. Booger is the ticking time bomb character, a drug user with violent tendencies, and he even wears a “high on stress” T-shirt and makes suggestions like “we could blow the fuckers up,” in response to the threats of the jocks. As soon as the “nerds” arrive they are bullied—the chant of “nerds, nerds, nerds” starts as soon as they step foot on campus. Very quickly, the jocks have physically removed them from the freshman dorm and moved them into a gymnasium—where a series of cots are set up like a refugee camp or hospital. Undesirable students are literally warehoused. The other students in this movie, and in all of the others, are at first constructed as adversaries, are invariably white and good-looking and hyperable. At the very end of the movie, the protagonist Lewis declaims to the student body that “[y]ou might have been called a spaz, or a dork or a geek, any of you who have ever felt stepped on, left out, picked on, put down, whether you think you’re a nerd or not, why don’t you come down here and join us.” His friend Gilbert says: “No one is ever going to be truly free until nerd persecution ends.” All of the rest of the students come down and join them except the jocks, who are the real minority. The film ends with the same “nerds, nerds, nerds” chant that welcomed them to campus, but now it is affirmative and celebratory.

Similarly, in Animal House, Kent Dorfman—aka Flounder, “a real zero”—is played as intellectually disabled, “fat drunk and stupid.” When the outsider group in this film pledges at the jocks’ Omega House they get siphoned off into a separate room with other “undesirables”: Mohammed, Jugdish, Sidney, and Clayton, a seemingly blind student in a wheelchair. To render this scene, imagine the following film clip: Mohammed, Jugdish, and Sidney are sitting left to right on a brown leather couch. Mohammed wears a white turban and a dark suit and tie. Jugdish looks away from the camera—he has a mustache and is wearing a navy suit. As you can imagine from the names they have been given, Mohammed and Jugdish both have brown skin. Sidney wears large glasses and is the only person smiling. He has white skin and wears a light suit with a sweater vest. Clayton, a white man sitting in a wheelchair on the far right of the scene, wears an olive suit and a yellow shirt. He also wears dark circular
glasses and carries a white cane, to visually symbolize his blindness. The filmmakers, clearly, were attempting to cover all of the bases of difference and make it clear that these men were all being segregated from the rest of the party.  

*The House Bunny* offers a fairly uninteresting “flip” of the gender roles, focusing instead on a sorority, as a former *Playboy* bunny becomes the housemother for a group of seemingly “dark” and troubled female students after their previous housemother was “hospitalized with hallucinations.” One of these students is pregnant, one talks about her “trailer park in Idaho.” The new housemother just turns these girls into sexual objects as they teach her “how to be smart” (so she can land a man). When she says that the fraternity and sorority houses look “like a bunch of little Playboy mansions” she is perhaps far too close to correct, and the sexualized role of the women is something she successfully reinforces. Most female “outsiders” in these films are rehabilitated only once they can stop being such good students and start becoming sexual objects for male students. Thus these films reinforce the rape culture or “sexual coercion” culture on college campuses.  

I use the term rape culture here carefully. Yet as Jennifer Doyle points out, colleges and universities are run by “communities of men who cannot use the word ‘rape’ in a conversation” because “always-already there is an agreement not to talk like that” (75). But as I discussed previously, one-fifth to one-quarter of women at U.S. schools will be victims of rape or attempted rape (Fisher et al.); 83 percent of disabled women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime, a shocking statistic (Krueger et al.); a study by Gwendolyn Francavillo into the experience of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students suggested that 48 percent of these students experienced unwanted sexual contact, at least double the rate of hearing students. In short, rape and sexual assault are themselves a force for disablement on college campuses. And students with disabilities are disproportionately impacted. So I refuse to edit the term out or to discuss universities and colleges without centering the reality of rape culture. These films are artifacts of and promotional materials for this rape culture.

One key aspect of rape culture is that we are invited, asked, or even coerced into laughing at sexual assault—what Donald Trump called “locker-room talk.” A rape culture is a culture in which we are told we should be entertained by the availability of women for sex, something that all of these films participate in; they may even lead the conversation. Thus, this sexual objectification is literally a demand—and appropriation into this rape culture becomes the key vector of character develop-
ment for almost all female characters, monumental and real, and a force for the character development for all male characters, who only become real students through conquest. Acculturation into rape culture is part of the development of outsider male characters as well: in *Revenge of the Nerds*, when the nerds seek revenge for their mistreatment they stage a panty raid on the Pi Delta Psi house and use the distraction to install video cameras to spy on the women while they undress. As the nerds watch these women naked, manipulating the cameras with remote control, the effect is surprisingly unremarkable (though distressing). This camera view is really no different than the filmic gaze upon women in all of these movies, as sexual objects that men go to college to access, discard, trade, or obtain as symbols of status.

One way to be included on campus seems to be to buy into this hyperheteronormative sexual acquisitiveness. It's what we come across in *The Social Network* when a fictionalized Mark Zuckerberg and his friends create the earliest version of Facebook—a panoptical, voyeuristic, and eugenic technology for sorting women based on their sexual desirability. “Face-mash,” as it was called, asked users to look at two pictures and vote on who was “hotter.” The real Zuckerberg, writing on his own blog the night of the site’s actual creation, mentioned that “these people have pretty horrendous” images in the Harvard yearbook; “I almost want to put some of these faces next to farm animals and have people vote on which is more attractive” (Hoffman, n.p.).

Of course, the acquisitiveness of many of these movies gives way to the actual hunting of female students in horror movies from the schlocky *Black Christmas* to the *Scream* series. And the fantasy of selection and segregation takes on a different valence in John Singleton’s *Higher Learning* and in Spike Lee’s *School Daze*, both of which focus on black college life. Amiri Baraka suggested that *School Daze* offers a “‘pop’ cartoon approach to one segment of black life . . . simply a construction, a composite of scenes to make something like a story, limiting the focus on effects . . . the film presents Black college as a hipper (?) Blacker *Animal House*” (148). Cameron McCarthy et al suggest that “the gangster film has become paradigmatic for black filmic production out of Hollywood. It is fascinating to watch films like Singleton’s *Higher Learning* glibly redraw the spatial lines of demarcation of the inner city and the suburbs on to a university town; *Higher Learning* is *Boys ’N the Hood* on campus” (283). Thus, in both movies, the college outsiders are the black students—a trend that is repeated in the recent *Dear Black People*—and this exclusion on college campuses both challenges current exclusions elsewhere in public and political life.
and reproduces the insider-outsider battles of a long line of college films. What remains constant is the powerful idea that colleges and universities sort students on campus, and sort society more broadly.

In the movie Accepted, in which a bunch of high school graduates who haven’t been accepted at college create their own university, the segregation is truly literal—they don’t make a new fraternity, they create a new school for other “rejects” like them. The inverse image of the college they create is prestigious Harmon College, whose dean opens the film saying: “Do you know what makes Harmon a great college? Rejection. The exclusivity of any university is judged primarily by the number of students it rejects. Unfortunately for the last couple of years we have been unable to match the number of students that Yale, Princeton, or even Stanford rejects, primarily because of our physical limitations. But, all that is about to change. Yale has one, Princeton has one, and now Harmon College will have one: a verdant buffer zone, to keep knowledge in and ignorance out.” He wants to extend the Harmon front lawn, literally keeping the rest of the world at a further distance.

The film does a good job of showing that those who are kept out really are a ragtag bunch. The African American character lost his football scholarship when he injured his knee. We have Abernethy Darwin Dunlap who unnecessarily suggests that “you can call me ADD on account of I have ADD.” Rory is a stressed-out, overachieving female character. In one scene, the students at this invented college populate their campus with students from an English as a Second Language class that Rory volunteers at when they need it to seem busy. Because Rory also used to “do volunteer work” at the now-condemned Harmon Psychiatric Institute, they also get the brilliantly and profoundly significant idea to rent the old building for their fake school. We watch a montage of the rejected students cleaning up the institution—including bouncing off the padded walls, trying out the electroshock machines and laughing. Later they are shown sitting in the institution’s old wheelchairs to play video games or to talk to one another, or wearing the old straitjackets to meditate.

Again, imagine a film still: Abernathy, our “ADD” character, is taking part in a yoga or meditation class. A young red-haired woman sits beside him on the grass outside of a building. We view another student behind the two of them, but this student is partially obscured. Abernathy has blond hair and has his eyes closed. He looks peaceful. He is wearing a white straitjacket, done up so that his hands are pinned against his chest.

When the protagonist, Bartleby, brings his family to campus his sister asks: “Why are there bars on the windows?” He answers, “That’s so no one
accidentally gets thrown out.” Yet this reveals that the bars might be the only difference between this building and a real college building. Notice that the psychiatric hospital is so close to the academy that for Harmon College to expand its front lawn it needs to purchase the property that the hospital was built upon—that shows what the real straitjacket and gown relations have always been between colleges and their surrounding communities. For instance, recall the tunnels connecting my own alma mater, Miami of Ohio, and the Miami Retreat, the asylum just across the street, or the burial sites in Mississippi or Austin I discussed earlier. (I urge you to research the connections in your own area.) The straitjacket scene is played off as a joke and yet, perhaps unintentionally, the setting has the profound effect of reminding the viewer just how tightly yoked together universities and asylums have always been.

We know that people with disabilities have been traditionally seen as objects of study in higher education, rather than as teachers or students. And disability has been a rhetorically produced stigma that could be applied to other marginalized groups to keep them out of the university (and away from access to resources and privileges). The university is also an elite space that justifies the exclusion and warehousing of nonelite and nonstandard bodies and minds in other spaces of incarceration. _Accepted_ plays this up as an ironic joke, and yet at the heart of this joke, consciously or not, is an ironic argument about the ways that the rejection, acceptance, and diagnosis of higher education has constructed disability, and has attributed disability to other marginalized groups.

The segregation of nerds and outsiders also has a profoundly eugenic argument to make. Crucially, who partners with whom is a key consideration, and an example of eugenics. That the Sigma Mus—a misfit sorority with a name that is supposed to describe their undesirability—are partnered with the nerds in _Revenge of the Nerds_ is also an example of this. Combined with the sexualized role of women in all of these films—women who don’t seem to go to class and yet do seem to go to parties—there is a perhaps subconscious, and yet nonetheless profound, eugenic sentiment underlying the fantasy of segregation. These films are about eugenic mergers—a matter I discussed at great length in the first chapter.

Films like _The Rules of Attraction, Dear White People, and Spring Breakers_ paint female students as targets for male professors, with varying degrees of agency in this exchange. Other films like _The Paper Chase_ and _Back to School_ are really about masculine competition between professors and students for female love interests. Basically, if a college movie isn’t about sports, it is about the sport of chasing women. As already mentioned, this
reinforces the rape culture on campuses, but it also highlights a eugenic undercurrent: college is about figuring out, often through violent competition, who should mate with whom. This competitive focus on “breeding” is what Francis Galton, the “father of eugenics,” called “positive eugenics,” something higher education has long had as a key feature: the propagation and mixture of desired groups. In *Real Genius*, which similarly groups nerds and outsiders, Jordan is the “autistic” female character in the film, even though in 1986, when the film was made, we didn’t have the same awareness of autism that we now have. Instead, Jordan says that “I am 19 and I am brilliant and I am hyperkinetic so guys are a little afraid, possibly if I stopped to think about it I’d be a little upset.” Later, she follows Mitch, a male character, into the men’s washroom to say: “I made you a sweater. It’s just something I like to do with my hands.” Jordan is the object of desire for Mitch, but also an equal partner with the rest of the scientists. She has to partner with another nerd or outsider because no female character in any of these films can avoid being a sexual object. But, importantly, who partners with whom is a key consideration, and an example of “positive” eugenics.

Wherever there is the promotion of the propagation of desired groups, there is policing around the edges of the group. This guarding still happens. Look at the University of Alabama and a recent controversy about sororities refusing to accept African American students—this wasn’t just racism and xenophobia and segregation, this was antimiscegenation, and there is a long history of this form of eugenics at North American schools. When we deny students access to the university, or we fail them, we are also cutting them from the supposedly favored gene pool. Sororities and fraternities have long been engines of North American eugenics, and these films reveal how this works. In one profoundly disturbing scene in *Revenge of the Nerds*, a nerd impersonates a jock in the dark to have sex with one of the popular girls. We should find this extremely disturbing because this is rape. The scene also draws symbolism from the trespassing of the boundaries of “positive eugenics”—he is accessing a body that he should not, genetically, have access to.

The eugenic nature of higher education is not a new theme for Hollywood. *College Holiday* is perhaps the most famous film about eugenics to come out of Hollywood—and it is presented as a comic eugenic farce, antieugenics. It’s not set on a college campus, but college students are used as “subjects of eugenic experimentation”—in the form of the idealized breeding of desirable students—as Karen A. Keely shows. The film “explicitly ridicules eugenics programs” but “simultaneously and implic-
itly upholds eugenic ideology” by keeping the unfit from reproducing and showing that the desirable pairs of undergraduates mate up in the end (Keely, 327). All of the films I am studying work within this dynamic to a greater or lesser degree: they reveal the eugenic underpinning of higher education in order to critique elitism, exclusion, and structural inequity, but then most often end up reinforcing these same values across slightly different axes. Real universities were involved in overt eugenic research and teaching and continue to be involved in new forms of eugenic research and teaching. At real universities, structural ableism and coercive sexual culture ensures that “desirable pairs of undergraduates mate up in the end,” still.

The different sororities and fraternities in Monsters University need to be seen eugenically as well: PNK and EEK, HSS and OK, JOX and ROR. These groups clearly mirror other segregated groups in other college films. There is an undesirable group of women and a clearly desirable group, as well as a scary group; there are men who clearly have the genetic gifts needed to be eugenically desirable, and those who don’t. The desired Monster phenotype (or body form) for men seems to be something out of professional wrestling, while the desirable women look like Barbie dolls and the scary girls look like Bratz dolls, and yet both groups are perhaps anatomically impossible. Both are also clearly very physically different from the “EEK” girls, whose name signifies their (un)desirability. Let’s remember, as well: this is ostensibly a movie for kids. But the issue is a serious one. As Jennifer Doyle argues, “where we find radical segregation—the complete banishment of sexual difference from a community”—as we do in the sorority and fraternity system in these films—“we will find sexual violence. We will find sexual violence at the center of that world, just as we will find it on its borders” (73).

A final feature of the fantasy of segregation is the sense of real precarity or danger: these students are constantly losing their homes and places to live, there are homeless characters who live in closets, and these movies are peppered from beginning to end with homes exploding or burning down, with people sleeping on lawns or in refugee-camp-like conditions.9 This insecurity aligns with the fact that there were at least 56,000 homeless college students in the United States in 2015 (Douglas-Gabriel). This insecurity also aligns with Mitchell and Snyder’s concept of the “precaritization” of disability under neoliberalism—the ways that “disability serves to identify populations most in danger of rampant social neglect” and expendability (Biopolitics, 19). This highlights the precarity of higher education itself, not just as a game, but as a place
where we parcel out life chances from a very finite or small set of real opportunities, and also decide who will be “marked out for wearing out,” to quote Lauren Berlant (760). Winning and losing are deeply part of these films—jocks need to be totally vanquished, for instance, and losing often means expulsion. The stakes feel high because this competition has long been built into the college tradition. As Laurence Veysey wrote, the university as it emerged in the United States in the early part of the 20th century “catered to those who sought to compete against men who were basically like themselves” and it fostered ambition to “rise competitively in ways that had been strongly stylized by the urban middle class” (440). The stakes also feel so high because they currently are. Less than two-thirds of college students in the U.S. graduate; 30 percent drop out after the first year; and if you drop out you are twice as likely to be unemployed and you will earn 84 percent less than a graduate (Beckstead).

Through the fantasy of segregation, the characters in these films are, as Aimi Hamraie and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explain it, “misfit” as they are also “misfits.” That is, we actually may rely on universities to mark out and exclude these forms of difference, or to rehabilitate it. I am not at all exaggerating this trend of segregation, and the grouping of physical and mental diversity in these outsider communities—it isn’t even a trend, it is the rule in popular films about university. Perhaps the only way to be even more stereotypical is to be totally cartoonish—and that actually happens in Monsters University because, of course, it is animated.

**The Educational Construction of Disability**

Kevin Kiley, writing in *Inside Higher Education*, argues that “more than a comment on college, Monsters University is a film about diversity, the innate differences between individuals, and the institutions and situations that help foster connections and understanding between those individuals” (n.p.). Yet it is worth noting that Elizabeth Freeman anticipated Monsters University way back in 2005 when the first film Monsters Incorporated came out: “the monsters would be right at home on the cover of a corporate brochure or college catalogue. . . . the film presents ‘pure,’ apolitical difference” because these are all monsters and it is easy to give them a full array of differences in a true spectrum of colors and sizes. Monsters University, borrowing the plotline of Animal House and Old School and other films, is also about a group of outsiders who have been kicked out of an elite program within the university because they
don’t measure up. Kiley goes on to suggest that the movie is really about “what students in the social and intellectual crucible of college can learn from each other” (n.p.). Kiley argues that *Monsters University* shows that

a diverse student body adds significantly to the rigor and depth of students’ educational experience. Diversity encourages students to question their own assumptions, to test received truths, and to appreciate the spectacular complexity of the modern world. This larger understanding prepares . . . graduates to be active and engaged citizens wrestling with the pressing challenges of the day, to pursue innovation in every field of discovery, and to expand humanity’s learning and accomplishment. (n.p.)

This is exactly the sort of organized, normative diversity that Elizabeth Freeman is criticizing in the movie and in higher education more broadly. But despite what Kiley argues, this celebration of diversity is not the message that *Monsters University* finally offers: the two main characters flunk out of the school at the end, and this is preceded by a series of high-stakes trials, rejections, personal risks, and referenda. No matter what the frozen snapshot of diversity is, the protagonists, Sully and Wazowski are marked out for wearing out.

This happens in part because the movie showcases the most diverse possible array of bodies, but doesn’t adjust its space at all. The filmmakers studied Ivy League campuses to figure out how to make their animated campus, and then they drop all the monsters in, where they clearly won’t fit. Alternatively, we could imagine how these students would push us to imagine a much more accessible campus. A campus designed for learning monsters, so to speak, might be quite a bit better for all students. But this doesn’t happen in the film (and doesn’t happen, yet, in the real world). This lost opportunity speaks to the idea of “diversity” at all North American colleges—there is some desire for a certain spectrum of bodies but no real structural change to how things are built or how pedagogy unfolds to accommodate these bodies. *Monsters University* becomes a failure machine.

So these films, in justifying the segregation of nonnormative bodies and minds, also really reveal the degree to which disability is educationally constructed—is created in (perhaps large) part by the administrative, curricular, and pedagogical proclivities and traditions of higher education. All of these characters prove to be disabled by the sociality and the pedagogy of the university.
Imagine two film stills. In the first image, five students are shown sitting in an amphitheater-style lecture hall, diligently writing notes at their desks. But there are also five large, silver, portable cassette players, presumably recording the lecture. The second image appears later in the movie, once all of the students have been replaced by cassette players/recorders. Now, a large reel-to-reel player is positioned on the teacher’s desk at the front of the room, presumably playing the lecture. Behind the player, written on the blackboard, are the words “math on tape is hard to follow so: listen carefully.”

Recall that I began this book by discussing David Rothman’s highly influential book *The Discovery of the Asylum*. The book showed not just how institutions developed, but how they allowed society to impose order through their connections with factories, hospitals, schools, and other institutions (xxv). What is ironic about how Rothman describes asylums and almshouses is that if we were to flip a few key points, we have a great description of the universities also being developed in the same period (the late 19th century): fully removed, rigidly patterned, isolating, labor-intensive, increasingly corrupted and corruptible, but for only the highest orders of society. I argued that perhaps the college or university is in fact exactly the same as the almshouse or asylum, organizationally and even architecturally. And yet we view it as the opposite. Thus the subjects in one total institution, the college, are elevated. The inmates in the other spaces are confined. Importantly: one studies; the other is studied.

Films like *Accepted* and *Monsters University*, however, reveal the tightness of the connections between, for instance, prison choreographies and architectures and those of higher education.

As Kieran Healy writes in his brilliant satirical review of the film, “*Monsters University* is a highly traditional institution with many problematic aspects in both its organization and culture. Instruction is resolutely ‘chalk and talk,’ with faculty members presenting dull lectures to (often very large) classes of obviously disaffected students. Lecture theaters are ill-suited for anything but the most direct sort of instruction” (n.p.). This disconnect is mirrored in *Accepted*, when the protagonist Bartleby sneaks into a class at the prestigious Harmon College and ends up in a “spill-over” room listening to a lecture from a speaker perched on the lectern, or in *Back to School* when Rodney Dangerfield’s character sends his secretary to take notes in all of his classes, or through a running joke in *Real Genius* wherein students begin leaving tape-recorders in their seats in a class and we witness the room filling with more and more tape record-
ers as the semester progresses, until the lecturer is also now replaced by a tape player and the room has only tape recorders and no students. This could be read as a prescient argument—a good prediction—about the ways higher education might be undermined by online learning and other pedagogical innovations in the near future, and Healy makes this point, but I read this as a critique of the normative pedagogies, the dominant and traditional ways of teaching in these schools. Even though Real Genius was made in the mideighties, it can still be read as a critique of the ways that rote learning, memorization, attendance, listening, duplicating, and other modes are overemphasized, while teachers are undersupported, facilities are subpar and inaccessible, and so on.

Yet in contrast to this seeming “checking out” of students, consider all of the ways that participation is now mandated in higher education. Bruce MacFarlane, writing in the Times Higher Education supplement in the United Kingdom, points out how “lecturers elicit responses from students in class by calling on individuals to answer questions or give an opinion. The use of clickers, hailed as an ‘innovative’ practice across the sector, has much the same effect. This enforced participation contrasts starkly with the way academics treat each other at conferences, where we generally grant our peers the right to reticence” (n.p.).

In classroom scenes in all of these movies, professors channel power through the fact that they can call on any student, at any time, and test their knowledge on the spot. This is the opposite of my universally designed note-card activity, played out over and over. MacFarlane’s essay goes on to call attention to many other spheres in which the freedom that scholars enjoy is not passed along to their students. For instance, “there are now strict rules on attendance at many university classes and growing use of ‘class participation’ grades as a means of rewarding so-called student engagement. These are reliant almost entirely on crude indicators, such as turning up or asking questions, rather than harder-to-observe measures of genuine learning” (n.p.). Margaret Price’s work on the ableist nature of these participation measures is crucial to mention here, too (access Mad at School). MacFarlane argues that “such compulsory attendance rules represent an intergenerational hypocrisy, since they have been developed and implemented by baby boomers who were never subject to such restrictions on their own academic freedom” and now academics who “jealously guard our own academic freedom” fail to understand “enough about why student academic freedom is so important” (n.p.).
Most of these movies about higher education reveal that when we take classes in which memorizing class content and then being tested on it is central, and add mandatory participation, we get a class full not of tape recorders, but full of students using mainly the aspects of their intellect that best allow them to memorize and to perform normative gestures of participation.

In the films, most often we view large groups of students acquiescing to these strange educational demands. Yet the films need to portray to the audience what the toll of these normative pedagogies and processes actually is. So there is also a “ticking time bomb” character in nearly all of these films. We might classify this student as a third type of Samantha: Scary Samantha. In Back to School this character is played by a Vietnam veteran professor who is described as “really committed or I think he was”—and constructed as having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In another scene in which students are studying in a library, a student simply jumps up and begins screaming and runs out of the room. In Accepted, the elite Harmon College is accused of “putting so much pressure on kids that they turn into stress cases and caffeine freaks . . . you rob kids of their creativity and passion.” Clearly, characters are given mental or psychological disabilities as markers of their difference, and yet the university environment is also shown to make professors and students “crack” or go “crazy.”

We witness a troubling binary between the expectation that these outsider students have to be geniuses (overcoming and compensating for their disability or difference) and a fine line between genius and violence, a trope that we are seeing more and more in higher education post–Virginia Tech, or even post–Umpqua Community College. The “ticking time bomb” character in Accepted, when asked what he wants to learn says, darkly, “I want to blow things up with my mind.” The film ends with him seemingly using this power to blow up the BMW of the dean of Harmon. The scene may have been intended to be played for laughs, but it is hard to view as anything but quite scary. Real Genius ends with the outsiders aiming a laser at a professor’s house and using it to fill the mansion with popcorn, a much less threatening gesture but nonetheless a troubling statement about the tight binary between extraordinary and nonnormative intelligence and the societal belief that the flip side of thinking differently is the potential for acts of aggression.

On the other hand, Katie Rose Guest Pryal writes about the trope of “creativity mystique,” wherein mood disorders are correlated with creativity. This trope is “a product of the era of modern psychiatry, [and]
suggests not only that mood disorders are sources of creative genius, but also that medical treatment should take patient creativity into account” (n.p.). Pryal shows how conservative scientific literature has begun to draw that correlation, but also how more fringe scientific and pop-scientific publications have begun to go so far as to suggest a causal link between mood disorders and creativity, or even “inverse-causation” wherein creativity causes mood disorders (n.p.). This research may greatly affect treatment options, but it also constructs mood disorders as phenomena that had better connect to genius. Emily Martin, in *Bipolar Expeditions*, also suggests that as we begin to understand manic depression as an “asset,” we may be constructing two kinds of mania: a “good” kind characterized by successful celebrities and a “bad” variety “to which most sufferers of manic depression are relegated” (220). The consequence is that “even if the value given to the irrational experience of mania increases, validity would yet again be denied to the ‘mentally ill,’ and in fact their stigmatization might increase” (220). In these films, we recognize both treatments: “real” geniuses fabricated by the creativity mystique, and ticking time bombs. We would be well advised to think carefully about the roots of both of these tropes in films about collegiate life. Both tropes, after all, do very little to shift the focus to the ways that disability is educationally constructed. Which students (from which backgrounds, and under which circumstances) get to be geniuses, and which drop out, for example, and why?

Because we should note also that in almost every single one of these movies the climactic scenes involve some form of extremely high-stakes testing—most often involving a mixture of sporting events, perhaps some drinking, and more traditional scholastic contests like debates or speeches. In almost all of these climactic sequences, the outsiders compete well but eventually lose. They are clearly adapting themselves to events for which they are not ideally suited, unlike their jock competitors, and the triumph is that they even hold their own. But there are clear winners and losers, without a doubt. This trend needs to be twisted into some form of critique of the adversarial, normative, very physically demanding, very time-sensitive and urgent, very high-stakes nature of the entire curriculum and pedagogy of the university.

As Tanya Titchkosky argues, “there is an intimate relationship between establishing disability as an important form of critical knowledge production within the university and creating accessible learning environments where learning communities can thrive” (70). Yet these movies, while they feature a wide arrange of bodies, disabilities, and learning
“styles,” rarely argue that the pedagogical or physical architecture of the schools should be made to accommodate, let alone transform. Whereas audio recorders could in fact add to the accessibility of a classroom, they serve to undermine the value of the version of education put forward in these films.

As Healy writes in his satirical review of *Monsters University*, “Classroom spaces also seem poorly equipped to address the needs of nontraditional monsters, especially giant monsters. . . . all of the classrooms are tiny, or accessible only by very small doors that even a moderately-sized undergraduate would have trouble fitting through” (n.p). Disturbingly, the two most giant monsters are both depicted playing sports: a female giant monster is shown playing giant ultimate Frisbee (or possibly ultimate Frisbee), and a giant slug monster is evidently the key player on the football team.16 Healy’s review gets at a key feature of each and every one of these films: the educational/architectural construction of disability.

Here we would also do well to recall some numbers I have mentioned a few times already: the average annual disability services office budget in 2008 was $257,289 (Harbour, 41). These are the places where students are supposed to be able to access the means of countering those structures and processes that disable or that create an uneven playing field. Yet this budget is equivalent to the average salary of a single dean like Monsters University’s Dean Hardscrabble. And we know that more and more services at colleges and universities are being offered as pay for accommodation and framed as outside of the usual role of the disability services office. Characters do critique these constructions, as when Robert Downey Jr.’s character in *Back to School* mounts a pseudo-Marxist critique of the university as a machine for capitalism, yet this is undermined when Downey’s Marxism is shown to be focused on remedying unequal access to women.17 So, while these films do propose changes, too often the changes are hyperbolically revolutionary, not incremental or practical.

Perhaps Lewis Black’s Dean Lewis in *Accepted* puts it best: “Look, we throw a lot of fancy words in front of these kids in order to attract them to go to school in the belief that they are gonna have a better life. And we all know what we are doing is breeding a whole new generation of buyers and sellers . . . and indoctrinating them into a lifelong hell of debt and indecision.” *Accepted*, through this alternative college set at an old psychiatric hospital, and as the clear exception to the other films’ academic ableism, does begin to develop the curriculum and pedagogy
to challenge the ways in which mainstream colleges and universities construct disability and portion out life chances.

**Failure and Refusal**

This leads me to my next point: these segregated or contingent communities develop powerful rhetorics of failure and refusal. These films can be seen to critique higher education by revealing the unfairness of the meritocracy and by developing alternatives.\(^{18}\) This has been a theme throughout this book and throughout history. From the disabled students movement at Berkeley (certainly as well as before it), to examples like Navi Dhanota’s successful human rights complaint in Canada, to the ongoing activist work of disability studies scholars like Sam Schalk, Catherine Kudlick, Melanie Yergeau, Sara Maria Acevedo, or Margaret Price doing coalitional work for various forms of access, to local organizations like Students for Barrier-Free Access at the University of Toronto, to the students with disabilities on your own campus navigating and negotiating attitudes and structures every day, there has always been resistance to academic ableism. So we shouldn’t be surprised that these movies center on themes of student solidarity and defiance.

*Monsters University, Old School, Back to School,* and *Real Genius* are all driven by the prospect of the protagonists either flunking out of school or of being rejected. But by the time the movies end we understand that the success that higher education offers isn’t worth all the trouble. Their eventual failure doesn’t stop the characters from jumping through all of the hoops and measurements necessary to be deemed successful under these ridiculous terms; it just stops them from finally accepting the idea of being judged by them. Thus we have a critique of the system without assimilation into the system; yet we also have a capitulation or bending to every measure of the system before it is finally rejected. These refusals are often shadowed by critiques of capitalism, and yet most often are resolved with failures in academia that instead often serve to advance the cause of capitalism, entrepreneurialism, and bootstrapping. I’ve been writing, after all, about the ways that academia structures and creates disability, and through the climactic high-stakes contests in these films the outsider groups show themselves capable of competing on this very normative stage.\(^{19}\) But they don’t succeed. Often, they choose not to.
Monsters University ends with Sully and Wazowski dropping out of school and getting mailroom jobs instead. In Accepted, the entire film is premised on failure, and Bartleby, whose name is no accident, turns this failure into an art—or into Arts and Sciences. As Scott Sandage writes, “Black and white are the favorite colors of capitalism, which pays a premium for clear distinctions and bold contrasts. Failure is gray, smudging whatever it touches. However unsightly, failure pervades the cultural history of capitalism” (10). He goes on to argue that “American capitalism has been constructed so that we see failure as a ‘moral sieve’ that trap[s] the loafer and pass[es] the true man [sic] through” (17). Clearly, we are asked to understand the North American university as very much a central part of this moral sieve. Yet failure can have its own moral or ethical subversiveness.

Bartleby is also the name of Herman Melville’s protagonist, famous for refusing to do the work—mindless copying and writing—that is asked of him. He is one of the most famous refusers in literary history—and it is no coincidence that the main character in Accepted is named Bartleby. As Gilles Deleuze says of Melville’s character: “Bartleby is neither a metaphor for the writer nor the symbol of anything whatsoever. It is a violently comical text, and the comical is always literal” (76). As mentioned, many of these films are driven by the prospect of the protagonists either flunking out of school or of being rejected. But by the time the movies end we are led to believe that the success that higher education offers isn’t worth all the trouble. Accepted flips the script by setting up an entirely alternative university without accreditation.

Once Bartleby realizes that thousands of fellow rejects have now enrolled at the school he created as a lark, he simply asks them what they want to learn. Most of the men say “girls,” yet others choose and then create classes like “getting lost,” “walking down the road thinking about stuff,” “doing nothing,” “dreaming,” and “bullshitting.” Like Universally Designed classes, these seem to allow a lot of tolerance for error, positive redundancy, and true choice of modes of engagement (and disengagement). “The students are the teachers” at the South Harmon Institute of Technology (SHIT), and they call themselves SHITheads. Much like the argument for UD, the SHIT curriculum is based in the idea that normal and normate pedagogy are ineffective, and specifically out of touch with the ways that a diverse range of bodies might learn.

In front of a state review panel at the climax of the movie, Bartleby says “I’m not going to answer your question because I am an expert in rejection and I can see it in your faces. . . . We came here today and
ask for your approval and something just occurred to me, who gives a shit.” Likewise, Blutarski’s famous speech in Animal House calls for “a really stupid and futile gesture.” In Real Genius, instead of allowing an evil professor to use their laser for military purposes, the outsiders use it to microwave a massive amount of popcorn, which they eat in slow motion as Tears for Fears’ “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” plays in the scene that ends the movie.

As Lisa Le Feuvre writes, “Failure, by definition, takes us beyond assumptions about what we think we know” and “the embrace of failure can become an act of bravery, of daring to go beyond normal practices and enter a realm of not-knowing” (13). Judith Halberstam explains that “as a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent” (88). This exploitation also offers clear resonance with disability studies theory. Halberstam argues that “while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to” critique the belief that “success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions” (3). She argues that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2–3). Failure can reveal structural ableism and other forms of entrenched oppression while making space for other ways of knowing and learning. This is clearly the argument that Accepted in particular is making, yet all of these movies to a certain degree champion failure as a means of critiquing the disabling structures and the false meritocracy of higher education.23

In Accepted, Bartleby’s father argues that “Society has rules. . . . if you want a happy and successful life, you go to college.” Yet, after getting expelled from Monsters University, Mike and Sulley manage to achieve success without earning their degrees, by working their way up the bureaucracy at Monsters Inc., allowing Kiley to suggest that this “plays into the popular zeitgeist that questions the value of a college degree, reinforced with the Gateses and Jobses and Zuckerbergs that have captured public imagination. But it is an ending that certainly runs counter to the data” (n.p.). In Back to School, Thornton Melon is a self-made man (owning a chain of Tall & Fat clothing stores) but what he lacks is taste and class. He buys his way into college by paying for a new business school building. Dean Barbe then suggests that “Mr. Melon thinks he can buy his way out of the gutter.” Melon replies: “While you were tucked
away up here . . . I was out there busting my hump in the real world. . . .
the reason guys like you have a place to teach is because guys like me
donate buildings” (n.p.). Later, in the bookstore, literalizing this rela-
tionship, he foots a giant bill for his fellow students: “It’s on me, Shake-
speare for everyone” (n.p.). This calls to mind my earlier discussions
of the economics of higher education, and the influence of academic
investments and giving—where the very genetics of the student body are
intentionally shaped by the potential of students to become benefactors.
These acts of failure and of corruption are often infused with pow-
erful anti-intellectual sentiment. But why do we want to view stories in
which college degrees can be bought, or in which they aren’t worth any-
thing at all? Perhaps these sentiments reveal how disability studies’ cri-
tiques of the inaccessibility of higher education can and cannot engage
with larger societal critiques of the academy. 24 In simpler terms, what if
the general public would be completely unsurprised to hear about the
ableism of the academy because higher education is something they’ve
distrusted from the word go? These films construct one group of students
as “rich and lazy” or “privileged, because school is a luxury” and on the
other hand they construct another group of students as “poor, naïve and
foolish” until they realize that college is something they cannot afford or
should not invest in (Doyle, 115). There is very little room between these
two extremes. So these films seem to show that popular culture doesn’t
trust college or university very much, in part perhaps because the outsid-
ers or underdogs are so clearly disadvantaged by its normative cultures
and mechanisms, even if the “real world” is no less ableist.
The films also make real what Mitchell and Snyder call “a non-
normative positivist approach” in which the failure and refusal of out-
siders, and particularly disabled students, represent “modes of recog-
nition” that “facilitate the mutating potentials of life in the interstitial
social alternative of crip/queer socialities and collective consciousness”
(Biopolitics, 114). Much more simply: when we even witness disability on
campus, on film, this challenges the normativity of film and of campuses.
Even if these alternative roles and oppositional stances can be easily co-
 opted, they do open up the possibility of a differently embodied position
and a different attitude toward school. This might be metaphorized by
the title Back to School, a title that also narrates a positionality: turning
one’s back on school or, at least, approaching it sideways, skeptically.
This is an apt description of general public sentiment about university
and college life and learning.
But who is this “public”? It seems that some of the popularity of this critique is generational. If you can laugh at higher education as a college graduate, it may allow you to reinforce the sense that the hoops you had to jump through were more difficult, and the merit you’ve received and privilege you have access to are thus more deserved than those of “kids these days.” If you didn’t go to college and don’t plan to, the critique is also about reinforcing the systems and beliefs that assign value to your own (different) path and your own (different) choices. In a culture in which higher education seems like a monolithic “good” and a requirement for access to privilege, it is reasonable to want to critique it and valorize other options—maybe this is why we celebrate some of these characters dropping out.

In the end, watching these films might convince us that the public doesn’t seem to like university administrators or professors, and also seems to dislike the students for whom success in their university studies seems natural and easy. In a climate in which academia is increasingly under fire for “coddling” students, for promoting identity politics, for being too “liberal,” it will be increasingly important to better understand these critiques and this “back to school” positioning.

The Disabled Professor: How to Win an Oscar

Hollywood (and the broader public) may have its back to school, and this may or may not be useful for creating a larger critique of education. Yet, on the other hand, Hollywood seems to love disabled professors. Eddie Redmayne won an Oscar in 2015 for his portrayal of Stephen Hawking in *The Theory of Everything*. Julianne Moore also won for her portrayal of a professor with early-onset Alzheimer’s in *Still Alice*. From *A Beautiful Mind* and *Temple Grandin* to these recent examples, it’s a long-held acting truth: Want an Oscar? Go disabled. The argument goes that an actor playing a disabled character is stretching their theatrical chops, because disability has to feel like the most foreign experience there is. When that able-bodied actor confidently walks up to the stage to eloquently accept their Academy Award, everyone can feel better knowing that it was all an act. Redmayne and Moore used their Oscar speeches to raise awareness of ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) and Alzheimer’s, respectively. Redmayne even said his award was “for all those people battling ALS.” Yet Moore joked that winning an Oscar is supposed to make people live
five years longer, reminding us that she is not *Still Alice* at all. And that’s important: because the audience is supposed to feel that they too are not Alice, and not Stephen Hawking.

Further, in movies in which a character becomes progressively more disabled, as happens in both *The Theory of Everything* and *Still Alice*, having an able-bodied actor to flash back to throughout the movie strongly reinforces the idea that the able self is the real person underneath the disability. Disability is just a neat costume. We’re encouraged to identify with the able professor they were, rather than the disabled person they’ve become (and the disabled people we will all become). The movies thus play on the fears of many temporarily able-bodied academics: What if the very things that I have based my career around—my intellect, my ability to concentrate, to “stand and deliver”—were gone tomorrow? This fear overwhelms much more reasonable questions, like, for instance, what will my employer do to protect my right to workplace accommodations as my abilities change, because all abilities do? What can I do to advocate for the rights of others who can contribute to academia greatly, but need a few accommodations to do so? *Still Alice* and *The Theory of Everything* might just succeed in Hollywood because they do not lead anyone to ask such questions.

In these films, when a medical professional explains the character primarily through their deficits and diagnoses, the audience is supposed to feel scared. In Moore’s case, Alice’s role as a scholar adds to the power of this diagnosis. We are supposed to feel pity because the expert is now the specimen. This pity might, ideally, reveal some of the power imbalance of medicalization, or the ways that higher education reinforces the binary between researcher and researched, medical authority and medical anomaly. But in Hollywood, more often it simply robs the disabled person of agency, renders them powerless, and makes their identity mainly about the disability.

As mentioned previously, in Canada, there are barely more than 200 professionals employed to provide disability accommodations at colleges and universities. In the United States, the average operating budget of an entire disability services office is about $250,000. That could pay for one-eighth of a college football coach, or for the dress that Karl Lagerfeld made for Julianne Moore to wear at the Academy Awards. This lack of investment tells the rest of the university that disability doesn’t matter. But watch *The Theory of Everything*, and you can retain the fantasy that all students and faculty with disabilities get accessible housing and technology, that they might even get star treatment, and that they are sure to succeed if they keep working hard.
Of course, in *Still Alice*, we do get a harsh and realistic reminder of what disability can mean in the real world: when Alice discloses her disability to her department chair at Columbia University, she is almost instantly fired. Please don’t think that what happened to Alice in the film was either legal or ethical. It wasn’t. The trope of the disabled professor should at the very least reveal that people with disabilities can and should work in any career, including higher education. That means that they can’t just be fired for disclosing their disabilities. But that also means that Hollywood could do a bit more to reveal the fact that, Stephen Hawking and Temple Grandin aside, students and faculty with disabilities are much more likely to experience the stigma and mistreatment Alice receives than the star treatment Hawking does. In the real world, academics with disabilities could all be supported as Hawking is, but most are mistreated as Alice is.

As a star researcher, and a tenured worker, Alice would have had protections that the vast majority of teachers in higher education do not have. And many faculty members fear that requesting accommodation of any kind will be seen as a sign of weakness or inability to perform, particularly in a neoliberal climate that demands hyper-productivity and individual flexibility from all members. When Margaret Price published “It Shouldn’t Be So Hard” in *Inside Higher Ed* in 2011, arguing for a more accessible climate for disabled faculty, for example, numerous responses to the essay only reinforced the sense that faculty members should mask or carefully disguise any weakness or inability to perform. For instance, one commenter wrote, “In today’s job market, when there are well over a hundred qualified applicants for a tenure track position, there is little basis for hiring a person who will struggle with half of his or her job duties.” Another added:

I’m sorry but some of these things (it differs for everyone) that are required to be a professor are hard. It comes with the territory so we don’t go head first into the realm of snowflakes and gumdrop unicorns. . . . As much as you want it to be an issue of diversity it is not. It is about the work load in a department and our interest in hiring someone who will do it effectively. (n.p.)

Not much has changed in the intervening semesters since 2011. In spite of some calls for faculty to be more open about disability, the administrative and cultural milieu for disabled faculty remains relatively inhospitable, whether overtly or covertly. It’s still very, very hard.

Disabled people with PhDs are much more likely to end up under-
employed, exploited as adjunct labor, and to experience discrimination as a result of their disability. A 2012 study published in the journal *Work* found that 15% “of faculty and staff respondents were found to have disabilities, with 26% reporting experience of job discrimination, and 20% reporting harassment because of their disability” (560). As the *Inside Higher Ed* commenters highlight, faculty attitudes about disability seem to sort their potential colleagues into two fictional worlds: the world of the superhero (like Hawking), where that disabled colleague will dramatically compensate for their disability, rising above the competition, or they will exist in the world of “gumdrop unicorns,” where asking for the right to accommodation, a right established a quarter of a century ago in the United States, situates you in a fantasy world.

So, why do disabled characters show up in Oscar nominations year after year, yet with no disabled people in these roles? Well, Hollywood is in this way just like higher education, where disability is studied and represented everywhere, most often in the absence of the employment of actual people with disabilities, and definitely in an environment in which it is still profoundly dangerous to disclose disability. Hollywood thus ensures that the public never really understands disability as a culture or a movement, never views disabled people as the largest minority in North America, with rights that are often unprotected and overlooked. The Academy also ignores the tremendous artistic—and academic—production and talent of disabled people themselves. Disability can safely continue to exist as something purely theatrical and highly theoretical.

*Not Yet*

In *Still Alice*, a key scene involves Moore running around her campus—jogging for fitness. Though it seems clear that Alice has run this route thousands of times, that she is fully “at home” on this campus, that this “wellness” or “mental health” regime has long been a key part of her academic day, in this scene she becomes confused, can’t recognize where she is. On her own campus, she is all of a sudden totally lost. This is supposed to be upsetting, and signal that something is not right with her brain. At the beginning of *Monsters University*, we view a slug slowly making their way to class—an example of a Slow Samantha, it would seem. At the very end of the movie, after what we are to suppose is a full year or at least a full semester of school, the slug finally makes it to class. This is supposed to be funny. But there is much we can learn from the slug, and
from Alice. Finally, I am going to discuss how the rhetorical structure of these films distills and perhaps even comments on the epistemological nature of disability—or the ways that disability might help us to think and move through higher education differently.

First, I think we can understand that the slug represents what Tanya Titchkosky calls the “not yet” time of disability within higher education: there is no way that the environment is going to accommodate his pace individually, but his trajectory also physicalizes the chronology of being “marked out for wearing out” in higher education, or the ways that college keeps certain bodies and minds in abeyance. The slug is moving in what we can call “crip time”: “recognizing how expectations of how long things should take account [of a range of] types of minds and bodies” so that we can “bend the clock” rather than bending bodies (Kafer). Margaret Price suggests that crip time is the “flexible approach to normative time frames” (62). Crip time has generally been interpreted as responsive: a way to impose critical delay through the refusal to follow strict schedules (schedules that might be normative, ableist, medically rehabilitative, and so on). Time marches on, and we can refuse to roll with it. But in arguing that a standard and obedient response to time and timing actually overlooks unique opportunities for making meaning, we can also situate crip time as an epistemology—a way of thinking and moving.

Normative time, on the other hand, is what usually structures college life. Recall for instance the parallels between the tight scheduling of the asylum and that of the university, from Rothman’s history, or the parallels between the “eugenic design” of factories and of a version of higher education that was intended to produce factory workers. Normative time renders the slug late, rather than the college campus inaccessible because it doesn’t have a bus for slugs. Normative time renders Moore not just lost, but panicking and checking her watch because she is also suddenly late. And curative time, as Kafer has shown, syncing with this normative time because it describes the patterns in which one must always be getting better on a college campus, which is why going for a jog seems like such a perfectly academic thing for Moore to do.

On the other hand, crip timetabling happens in *Accepted* when students ask for classes like “getting lost,” “thinking about stuff,” “doing nothing,” or “dreaming.” These are subversive suggestions not just because of the kind of thinking and doing they entail but also because of the chronotopes (or time rhetorics) they invoke. More simply, these classes don’t clock onto quick progressions and performances, or timed
accumulations of knowledge. They don’t follow the rigid timetabling of Rothman’s asylums.

On the other hand, in each of these movies the filmic device of the montage highlights speed and performance. In all of these movies, the montage is used to narrate overcoming, often against the analogue backdrop of the athletic contest (individual triumph at the expense of others, races, timed quizzes, or debates).\textsuperscript{25} Both the athletic backdrop and the accelerated time of the montage say revealing things about the university, as the inverse of crip time and of accessible pedagogy, as a place that is both rigid and rushed in a manner that makes learning seem exceedingly stressful and difficult, if possible at all. As Dean Barbe says in \textit{Back to School}, “there are two types of people in business today, the quick and the dead”—and this seems to apply to the university as well.

In general, crip time and the montage fall at two ends of the spectrum of filmic time. Filmic time can be understood as the temporal ordering and arrangement of events in film, to fit the action into 100 minutes—and this is generally quite different from “real time.” It gets called “filmic time” because the people who think about film generally write about it in ways that makes film theory hard to understand. But also because time is a subjective thing. Time, something that we think of as needing to be uniform, standard, and normal, actually is subjective, experienced differently by different people, and malleable. Sound familiar? Yes, like the body itself, time can only cling to a fantasy of normality. So we need modifiers to properly understand time. There is no one type of time—instead, for example, there is academic time, and there is film time, the time constraints that films have to fit into, but also the version of time that film argues for.

One of the key ways we control and shape the experience of time is through mediums like long-form Hollywood films. So we need terms like “filmic time” because they show us that movies shape time in particular ways. They plot lives and relationships and communities and societies out in relatively short—100 minute—bursts. The ways that popular film plots out these bursts of time tends to be normative. So when I use the term “filmic time” I am also saying “normate time”: the ways that time disciplines the experience of disability and the ways that disability can only appear in a prescriptive, limited when.

Generally, disabled characters are shown as a drag upon filmic time: too fast, too slow, always held in the “not-yet” space of disability, mandated by its “not-me” status (Titchkosky “The Becoming”; Garland-
Thomson “Extraordinary”). So disabled characters usually either die or are cured when a film is sequenced in a normative way.

But even when there are flashbacks and flash-forwards and dream sequences, disabled characters often get depicted as obsessing about memories of their previously able selves or dreaming of cures and normative futures. One of the main ways that mainstream film controls and shapes perceptions of time is through its treatment of the disabled body. For decades, seeing a disabled character in almost any genre of film was like seeing a ticking time bomb—that character would need to be cured, or die, before the end of the film. Someone famously said that there are no second acts in American lives. Well, there have also generally been no second acts in the lives of disabled characters on-screen. When a disabled character is cured, they are cured because the viewer needs to believe that they themselves would be cured—or would compensate, or would overcome—if they became disabled. Perhaps even more disturbingly, when disabled characters die, there is the satisfaction of another kind of fantasy, perhaps eugenic. This extends so far as to affect the casting of films: every time a disability is depicted by a nondisabled actor, the audience is already jumping ahead to that actors’ next able-bodied role, their disability drop. And Moore followed this script carefully in her Oscar acceptance speech.

Yet I want to end this chapter by suggesting that perhaps the ultimate fantasy of education in these films, and in popular culture, is that learning itself has a predictable narrative arc or sequential chronology, that it takes place across normate time, across campuses that we will always be at home in, or will always be recognizable to us—and that this narrative somehow makes us all more able (even slowly, through the gradual progression of “positive eugenics”). Instead of seeing education as a process of accumulation and realization, transfer, continuity, coherence, or progression, maybe it is a process of recursion, forgetting, simultaneity, regression, chaos. My hope is that we can refocus on the failures and refusals sometimes driving, sometimes ghosting, these films. This chapter itself is a montage, a supercut, a dream sequence, a series of flashbacks, and at a certain point this is how we all experience any film—or any learning. Further, because through these films we spend so much actual time with the underdogs, with those constructed as disabled or shown to be disabled by the pedagogies we witness in these films, we can ultimately resist the fantasy of segregation and perhaps reframe the who, the how, and the when of higher education.
While these films drastically misrepresent college life, in many ways, these movies about university also know and show more about universities than universities themselves do—unwittingly, perhaps, but to great effect. That is, universities and their stakeholders are not aware of themselves as exclusionary. Instead, they paint themselves as diverse, albeit with careful curation. Every rejection and failure in higher education can be carefully justified, quantified, and legally explained by the organization, while in the movies and in the lives of actual students, they feel arbitrary, frequent, and personal. Universities will not admit their role in rape culture, even when they establish small committees of the powerless to address “sexual violence”—and large committees of powerful lawyers to perform the calculus required to avoid lawsuits. The curriculum and the pedagogy of the college instructor is closely guarded by standards and elitism and intellectual freedom, even when this teaching can take away the freedom of students and leaves them feeling confused, stressed, and ignored. In the end, perhaps we should trust Hollywood more than we trust the public relations departments of universities.

The classroom is a rhetorical space, one that must be read carefully and critically, and one that can be reshaped. The classroom is also a public and a “protopublic” space. Its forms, routines, modes, power dynamics, empowerments, opportunities, exclusions, inclusions, disablements, accommodations, designs, failures, successes, limits, and possibilities extend into the public sphere. Classrooms reflect and shape larger cultural and social trends. Higher education is a social experiment, eugenic experiment, economic experiment—and an experiment with human subjects, not just abstract ideas. This is the case outside of North American and Europe as well, as movies such as Twenty (South Korea) and Three Idiots (India) could just as easily have been the subjects of analysis in this chapter.

A protopublic space, the university is also increasingly a retroprivate space. That is, private industry leaders and private industry values get imported into academia to try and clean it up, or to wrest power away from the self-governance of academics. And, more and more often, higher education is a political pawn, a place where the protopublic potential of the classroom is harnessed by governors, premiers, and other politicians who understand that they can utilize the university to make ideological arguments. So they imperil tenure, or they cancel programs that they see as teaching only “political correctness.” They harness the doubtful, skeptical, critical attitude of the public toward the university, knowing that they can gain a certain group of voters by attacking the elitism of
the university. In this way, the politicians follow the lead of movies about higher education.

Yet these films also harness the positive energy that comes from learning, and the positive energy that results when students begin taking control of their own learning, often in opposition to the traditional regimes of education.

These films show, finally, that if rhetoric is the circulation of discourse through the body, then spaces and institutions cannot be disconnected from the bodies within them, the bodies they selectively exclude, and the bodies that actively intervene to reshape them. These fictional worlds also cannot distract us from recognizing and making space for the real bodies, the real students in, currently kept out of, accommodated within, or actively reshaping the future of higher education.