Academic Ableism

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Notes

Introduction

1. Throughout the book when I mention another source that the reader might find interesting, instead of writing “see Hunter” I will use the term “access.” Throughout the book I will also, more generally, make an effort to avoid relying on metaphors of sight or hearing.

2. The recent successful push from students and faculty to have Columbia University divest from private prisons is a story with a good ending, yet it underscores the fact that this is one of the only universities to do so; many others are heavily invested.

3. Take, for example, the recent story of Jasmin Simpson, a student who exposed the ways that the Canada Student Loans Program discriminates against students with disabilities.

4. This data is, admittedly, old—but there are reasons to believe that the situation is actually currently worse than it was 8–10 years ago. We also should ask why it is so difficult to access this type of data. Educators are engaged hyperactively in quantifying the benefits of higher education but very little data can be found on its failures.

5. This extends to the culture around seeking help for mental health issues. As Daniel Eisenberg, Ezra Golberstein, and Sarah Gollust show, “even in an environment with universal access to free short-term psychotherapy and basic health services, most students with apparent mental disorders did not receive treatment” (594). Their study showed that “of students with positive screens for depression or anxiety, the proportion who did not receive any services ranged from 37% to 84%” (594).

6. There are a variety of ways to tackle this clear discrimination against disabled faculty. One way is to overhaul academic hiring practices. Access, for instance, the article “Wanted: Disabled Faculty” by Stephanie Kerschbaum and myself in Inside Higher Education. Another key problem lies in the legalistic and minimalistic approach to accommodating faculty, a process that is perhaps even worse than the process for accommodating students. Access “Faculty Members, Accommodation, and Access in Higher Education,” an article cowritten by Kerschbaum, myself, and many others and published in Profession in 2013 (Oswal et al.)
7. Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) data shows that in 2009, “almost 3.7 million tertiary [higher education] students were enrolled outside their country of citizenship” (n.p.).

8. Later, when I write about the concept of Universal Design, I will discuss the concepts of “responsive design,” in which we expect to be able to access content across devices; positive redundancy, in which it is valuable to have access to multiple iterations of content; and tolerance for error, in which good design allows us to use a technology or an object in a variety of ways without failing or simply giving up. Plain language, the way I am trying to implement it in this book, hopefully will accomplish a lot of these objectives as well. Plain language should allow readers a variety of ways of accessing ideas without being left behind or left out.

9. Consider, for instance, what you have to do to get an accessible format of an article for a student, if that article were published in a Routledge or Taylor & Francis non-Open-Access, expensive, very proprietary journal. You have to join a disturbingly euphemistic club called “Academic VIPs,” disclose that student’s name and the fact that they have a “visual (or physical) impairment, or a learning difficulty” (access Taylor and Francis, n.p.). There are then a long series of legal provisions and rules. There doesn’t appear to be any provision at all for a faculty member with a disability seeking accessible formats; though it can be assumed that these teachers would also be compelled to disclose their disability. Not only is access not “open” in such a scheme, but the disabled person is forced to disclose that disability, or the teacher is forced to extend access as an act of charity or stewardship. The human “right to know” is significantly impeded (Willinsky, 7).

10. In Canada, it wasn’t much better: only 57 percent of pages used text equivalents, 55 percent followed basic HTML guidelines, and only 25 percent of pages “passed” basic navigational tests (Thompson et al.).

Chapter 1

1. Access Peter Jacobs; more on this in the final chapter.

2. Hudson is the cofounder of Black Lives Matter Toronto and former executive director of University of Toronto Students’ Union.

3. As Astra Taylor points out, “over 100 billion dollars of educational endowment money nationwide is invested in hedge funds, costing [schools] approximately $2.5 billion in fees in 2015 alone. The problems with hedge funds managing college endowments are manifold, going well beyond the exorbitant—some would say extortionate—fees they charge for their services” and include “the problem of conflict of interest on endowment boards of both public and private colleges” (n.p.). Some Ivy League schools end up paying hedge fund managers two to three times as much as they spend on tuition assistance and fellowships (Taylor, n.p.). Sometimes, these hedge fund managers are also members of their boards of trustees (Taylor, n.p.).

4. If such offices truly cared about wellness, they might work to make healthy food more available on campuses, and subsidize it. A recent study found that 39 percent of Canadian students experience food insecurity, with “Aboriginal and racialized peoples, off campus dwellers, and students that primarily fund their education through government student financial assistance programs experience[ing] exceptionally high rates of food insecurity” (Silverthorn, n.p.). An American study found that food-insecure students reported lower GPAs (Maroto, Snelling, and Linck, n.p.). Single parents, African American or multiracial students experienced the greatest
food insecurity (Maroto, Snelling, and Linck, n.p.). Unsurprisingly, food insecurity led to lower energy and concentration (Maroto). Food insecurity also led to higher rates of depression, disordered eating, and suicidal thoughts (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, and Eisenberg).

5. ADAPT is an activist organization that started as American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit, www.adapt.org. Following successful protests for the right to public transportation, and following a perceived shift toward greater access, the group has come to focus on the right to personal support services, and has renamed itself American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today, “fighting so people with disabilities can live in the community with real supports instead of being locked away in nursing homes.”

6. This protest was memorialized and repeated by ADAPT in April 2009.

7. So-called postmodern disability studies contradicts this British philosophy by suggesting that the strict separation of impairment and disability is an illusion or a lie. The social model suggests the existence of both physical impairment and cultural disablement as engaged, yet independently sovereign or separate, truths. The postmodern model blurs the lines between the two. This philosophy interrogates the ways that bodies and cultures, biology and social structures— even texts— interact and cocreate one another. Much as Judith Butler has troubled the natural/ cultural binary of sex and gender, this postmodern model has troubled the notion of natural bodies; the very idea of a body separate from culture. Judith Butler’s definition of a “partial” social construction of the body, from her introduction to Bodies That Matter, nicely distills this idea: “to claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which is conceded; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (5). Any reference to a body is also a formation of that body. In this way, every formation is a further metaphor— these metaphors, in referencing the “pure body,” may fortify it, while new metaphors might reform it.

8. Though Canada has no real equivalent to the ADA, smaller acts like the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) are already being framed in terms of legal minima and potential fines, not rights and responsibilities; and the backlash has been strong.

9. This repeats the historical pattern of disability and the experience of being disabled being negatively shaped and delimited by those who hold the cultural capital that allows them to pose (at least temporarily) as able-bodied. It is possible, then, that the university/institution binary simply gets reproduced within the university itself. The reality is that one cannot truly be included in any world until their input also shapes that world. As Brendan Gleeson has written, “disabled people in Western societies have been oppressed by the production of space . . . due in part to their exclusion from the discourses and practices that shape the physical layout of societies” (2). Or, as Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell write, “we cannot know a culture until we ask its disabled citizens to assess it” (Narrative, 178).

10. For instance, the term “moron” was invented by Henry Goddard in 1910, and the classification was key to research he performed on immigrants at Ellis Island beginning in 1913. As Anna Stubblefield has argued, Goddard’s invention of this term as a “signifier of tainted whiteness” was the “most important contribution to the concept of feeble-mindedness as a signifier of a racial taint,” through the diagnosis of the menace of alien races, but also as a way to divide out the impure elements of the white race (173, 162).
Chapter 2

1. As a result, public understanding of the ADA casts those who seek the protection of the law along the lines of, as Johnson notes, “the alligator in the sewers of New York City, like the worms in the Big Mac” (132). Thus, in Johnson’s words, “The ADA, despite the Supreme Court’s actions, still has a core premise that has yet to be understood by society: that people called ‘disabled’ are just people—not critically different from the rest of us. In order to address disability discrimination the right way as a nation, we first have to come to grips with the underlying realities of human abilities and disabilities. . . . The goal is not to fixate on, overreact to or engage in stereotypes about such differences, but to take them into account and allow for reasonable accommodation for individual abilities and impairments that will permit equal participation” (150).

2. Later in the book, I will examine Lauren Berlant’s concept of slow death to define this timing or chronicity. Slow death through “accommodation” and the supplemental logic of the retrofit would not be a way of “defining a group of individuals merely afflicted with the same ailment, [but rather] slow death describes populations marked out for wearing out” (Berlant, 76o). Annika Konrad’s term for this process is “access fatigue”; “being plain sick of having to ask for access” (n.p.). Berlant uses the term “death” intentionally, and Konrad uses the term “sick” intentionally. The process of looking for access is itself, in a way, disabling.

3. More on the power imbalance of this type of student-teacher exchange (this circulation of power through bodies) later in the book.

4. Ireland, Dale. Personal Correspondence with the Author. 16 April 2016.

5. Selber, Stuart. Personal Correspondence with the Author. 10 February 2016.

6. If you are interested in using these texts as more than just retrofits, access Tara Wood and Shannon Madden’s excellent Kairos piece on suggested best practices for these syllabus accommodation statements.

7. We could spend a long time talking about the trends in naming these offices and their uses of euphemisms and what Simi Linton called “nice words.” I could also comment on the increasing overlap between these offices and other (often much better-funded) student “wellness” and “success” offices, both of which are exnominative. That is, the terms “student wellness” and “student success” name or demand their inverse: don’t get ill or unwell; don’t fail out and stop paying tuition.

8. I am writing mainly about students here. It is beyond the scope of this book—in a way—to fully discuss the ways that universities and colleges shape and react to disabled faculty and staff (or even, really, graduate students). I would hope that readers will be able to use some of what I offer in this book to begin to better understand these other roles and positions as well—because they are inseparable. Margaret Price and Stephanie Kerschbaum’s ongoing Disability Disclosure project, examining the ways that college and university instructors disclose their disabilities, will surely break new ground in this area. Also of interest might be the coauthored “Faculty Members, Accommodation, and Access in Higher Education” published in Profession in 2013 (Oswal et al.).

9. As Michael Hiltzik wrote of the American disability benefits program in the Los Angeles Times, “perhaps because it covers a relatively small number of Social Security recipients, the disability program has always been a prime victim of mythmakers. Its beneficiaries are portrayed as slackers gaming the system like the Coen brothers’ Jeff Lebowski, whiling away his life at the bowling alley and snarfing down White Russians” (n.p.). He goes on to contextualize: “these are all varieties of a fictional genre known as ‘the undeserving poor’ that encompasses Ronald Reagan’s folksy
yarns about welfare queens living on six-figure welfare handouts. The goal is to rationalize cuts in benefits by portraying their beneficiaries as morally depraved” (n.p.). There are similar logics on college campuses, as well as in the general public about what happens on college campuses.

Chapter 3

1. And as Harvey Graff points out, “many literacies’ sits precariously between an essential, and a necessary recognition, and the dangers of trivialization and debasement of literacy. Overuse of the term ‘literacy’ and the concepts empties it of value and useful meanings” (22).

2. Similarly, Kress and Leeuwen take the “multi-skilled person” capable of freely choosing between modes of expression as a given, a “point of departure” in order to move along to a study of multimodal semiotics (Multimodal Discourse, 2). It is also important to note that Selber is not uncritically invoking this ideal student. His entire book is written along the faults of the digital divide, and is centrally about how “teachers and students should be mindful of ways in which they can unwittingly promote inequitable and counterproductive technological practices” (8).

3. The Super student is who all universities want to showcase, want to build their image around: look at any modern university website, and shuffled among the faculty profiles and event announcements are profiles of these Super students. Their varied skills and achievements stand in for the goals of entire institutions.

4. As the New London Group writes: “the new fast capitalist literature stresses adaptation to constant change through thinking and speaking for oneself; critique and empowerment; innovation and creativity; technical and systems thinking; and learning how to learn . . . as new systems of mind control or exploitation” (Cope and Kalantzis, 12). These “market-directed theories and practices, though they may sound humane, will never authentically include a vision of meaningful success for all students” (Cope and Kalantzis, 12).

5. There is further magical thinking surrounding Super Samantha: the fantasy that these students can basically teach themselves, or even teach one another, or teach us.

6. At least we would hope not—though, of course, the defunding of public education, often something voted upon, tells a different story.

7. Access World Bank: “Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP ).”

8. The retrofit is also a logic of fast capitalism—fast capitalism is the tendency of capitalism to extract surplus value with as little investment as necessary for the greatest return, while adding as little to the real economy as possible, often by means of financial speculation and the quickening of production. Yet what gets produced gets less and less tangible, harder to measure. This fast capitalism is seen by some as the necessary consequence of capitalism—it keeps speeding up, keeps extracting value, keeps becoming more efficient, and continues to exact more and more affective and embodied—and environmental—costs. Like fast capitalism, the retrofit marketizes philanthropy and charity—the industry of temporarily correcting or normalizing disability is massive, one of the largest and fastest growing industries in our modern world, encompassing global pharmaceutical and biotechnology corporations, as well as architects and lawyers and even educational “specialists.” Like fast capitalism, the retrofit offers only a quick and temporary fix to critical sociopolitical and economic conditions, and it does so with a fix that offers next to nothing of practical use.

9. Their landmark edited collection Disability Incarcerated, among other things,
“shows that experiences of disabled people, and processes of disablement, are central to understanding the rationales, practices and consequences of incarceration” (Ben-Moshe, Chapman, and Carey, x). I would add that we cannot disconnect these rationales, practices, and consequences from higher education, as counterintuitive as that may at first seem.

10. Robert Davis and Mark Shadle, interestingly, also cast this as an existing and ongoing equity issue: “The most successful students are often those who cut across the grain to mix discourses in intelligent ways, despite the structure of the course, while those who struggle cannot find voices despite, or because of, being told how they should sound” (31). In this scheme, if we don’t explicitly teach and assess multimodality and multiliteracy, we will just continue to tacitly penalize those who can’t do it. Access also Hitt.

11. I have written elsewhere about how this metaphor of “slow thought” conditions cultural perceptions of disability by utilizing pseudoscientific premises about how the brain works (access Dolmage “Between the Valley and the Field”).

12. Here I am borrowing from the idea of “racecraft”: Barbara Fields and Karen Fields’ coinage used to define how discussions of racism turn into discussions of race, how a conversation about poverty actually becomes a way to denigrate racial groups, how people can say racist things and still defend themselves by saying they weren’t talking about race at all. So when former Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper praised “old stock Canadians,” it appeared to many that he was actually denigrating newer groups of immigrants from non-Western countries. But he was able to defend himself and in fact label his critics as the racists.

13. As I have explored in other work, one of the pseudoscientific legacies of eugenics is that we now ally disability with “slowness.” One particularly damaging metaphor is the word “retarded,” which, when we examine it, suggests that some people think more slowly than others, as though anyone has ever timed the speed of thoughts moving through the brain; or as though some people are arrested in their development. Despite this, the word “retarded” has long been given a reified and unquestioned status as a scientific term. But any time a student is constructed as slow, this eugenic legacy is invoked and utilized (access Dolmage, Disability Rhetoric).

14. While an argument that more senses equals more learning could be used to impose unwarranted assessments of ability upon learners, there is little proof—and little to be gained from arguing—that one organization or utilization of these pathways is better than another, or that learning happens best when they are all “maxed out.” This said, Gunther Kress also argues that, because a culture selects and privileges certain forms of embodied engagement, some will be “affectively and cognitively at an advantage over those whose preferred sensory modes are not valued or are suppressed in their culture” (“Multimodality,” 187). Kress sees how this cultural exclusion works, and wouldn’t fail to recognize that there is a short jump from this attribution of cultural exclusion—a disadvantage only when the social practice disadvantages—to the attribution of a cognitive, even a biological deficiency. I would argue that this may lead us to attribute disabilities to learners who don’t have access to whatever comes to be defined as the full range of connected modes. So we must remain critical not just of which literacies a culture privileges, but also which combinations of literacies and which interactions between literacies come to represent advanced (or deficient) cognition

15. Sometimes, this comes down to the difference between process and product: if we remain amazed with the diverse multimodal products that great students can create, we neglect real inquiry into the multimodal processes of composing, regardless of output.
Chapter 4

1. Hopefully, there will soon be an archive of Mace’s papers at North Carolina State, and thus an even more robust history of the Universal Design movement. Scholars such as Aimi Hamraie are at work on this history.

2. As I mentioned in my introduction, my hope is that the plain language approach to writing this book also creates things like tolerance for error, intuitive and flexible use, and so on.

3. We also know, based on my earlier discussion of “sick buildings,” that the ability to carefully control climate in academic and other workplace buildings is part of what led to this sickness.

4. This tolerance for error also links to the “art of failure” that I will discuss in my final chapter.

5. If the goal is to test spelling, then the autocorrect metaphor may not work. But if the learning goal is larger than just spelling correctly, why would we make spelling the first barrier to participation?

6. I don’t pretend here, or anywhere in this book, to know what “better” thinking is or what it looks like. In fact, I am trying to avoid cognitive approaches to teaching and learning as much as possible. I am not even certain that “more” thinking is better. What I am gesturing toward is that a different approach to teaching that allows for a wide variety of ways to think—slowly, quickly, and so on—is most likely to allow a wide range of students to learn.

7. One interesting offshoot of this reorientation of design thinking is Julian Bleecker’s advocacy for “design fiction,” a means of using science fiction scenarios to develop design ideas and to create empathy for other worlds. As I have written elsewhere, in science fiction, we are often asked to associate disability with future dystopia (access Dolmage, Disability Rhetoric). This said, looking at the ways that disability is represented in the work of Philip K. Dick, or Margaret Atwood, for instance, we might find ways to design hypothetical technologies that, instead of fixing disability, address what is dystopian about the cultural (and technological) construction of disability in these worlds. Such an activity would be excellent in a Literature, Disability Studies, or Design classroom.

8. Hopefully, stating this fact doesn’t diminish the important ongoing design work of disabled folks such as Joshua Miele, creator of tactile maps, crowd-sourced video description, and DIY (do it yourself) hardware prototyping programs for the blind, developed out of the Smith-Kettlewell Eye Research Institute in San Francisco.

9. ADAPT is an activist organization that started as American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit, www.adapt.org. Following successful protests for the right to public transportation, and following a perceived shift toward greater access, the group has come to focus on the right to personal support services, and has renamed itself American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today, organizing disability rights advocates to engage in direct action on a variety of issues including housing, education and healthcare, in order to ensure the rights of people with disabilities.

10. Aside from this one classroom anecdote, there have been huge developments in design thinking in the last decade. For example, with the popularity of “responsive design,” people expect the right to access content and media on whatever device they use. Can this extend to whichever body they use? The range of ways we think of what we might call design-for continue to expand. But we also get significant changes in how we think of design-by. For instance, Sara Hendren and Caitrin Lynch’s recent Engineering at Home project shows that “an expanded view of engineering takes on new urgency . . . when it comes to design for disability. . . . Placing people at the center of
the research and development of ‘assistive technologies’ is critical to robust, innovative, adaptive engineering. Their project seeks to tell stories and provide examples of not just user-centered design but also ‘user-initiated’ design” (n.p). In their words, “perhaps especially in design for disability, attentive design-for-one practices can yield a powerful course correction to the top-down modes of manufacturing. A disposition of experimentation, a willingness to harvest the lessons of singularity, a provisional commitment to the one-off; these unique objects together form an argument for the recognition of more user-initiated technologies as engineering, wherever they originate and whatever market they may eventually find” (n.p.).

11. We then find very similar wording—a similarly affective description—of the feelings of people with disabilities who feel the International Symbol of Access (ISA)—the stick-figure wheelchair symbol—does not represent them. As Kelly Fritzsch writes, “With the ISA, disability appears in order to disappear, is included to be excluded. The deployment of the ISA solves the problem of disability without ever needing to include disabled people or without ever needing to confront the contradictions of accessibility as it reduces ‘the lived complexity’ of disabled embodiment [into . . .] a thing that is contained and known; a stick figure in a blue box. In being known, disability can be taken care of by building ramps or, more importantly, simply by posting the ISA. That disability is taken care of is a good feeling. In this good feeling, ableism and compulsory able-bodiedness are covered over by happy affects. It is only when someone gets upset that these happy affects are disrupted. In these moments disability becomes a problem again” (n.p.).

12. Beacon College is a similar college to Landmark, aimed directly at students with learning disabilities. Their tuition is $31,916 a year, but they try to soften the blow by foregrounding the medical tax deductions families might get, just as other schools market federal student aid programs. Other programs like “Achieve,” an online-only BA in liberal studies with an emphasis in computer science program at Sage College, are also marketed solely to students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders. The tuition in the Achieve program starts at $27,000 for the first year, then a small jump in the second year, then to $43,000 in the third year, and another increase in the fourth year. Again, that’s an astronomical cost for an online-only BA. The University of the Ozarks also offers special services for learning disabled students, at a cost of $22,900 a year, on top of the usual $23,750 tuition. Unsurprisingly, they actively recruit into the program (Krupnick, n.p.). It is also important to remember that it often costs around $5,000 to even get the testing done to verify a learning disability.

13. Neil Fitzgerald also writes about the similar “Passport” program at the University of Wisconsin. These geographic, immigration-tinged metaphors seem to be a trend in disability services offices, as the process of presenting accommodation letters over and over again is like “showing your papers.”

14. Access Kimber Barber-Fendley and Chris Hamel’s apologia for this program in CCC a few years back and my discussion of this in the last chapter.

15. The discourse about learning styles precedes the conversation around multiliteracy and multimodality, even as they overlap. And a key difference is that while learning styles are fairly overtly labeled as innate or unchanging, a matter of student biology, something that allows us to label a student and thus teach toward a series of differences, multimodality has more frequently been discussed as a goal: a flexibility that needs to be encouraged. You can have only one learning style (supposedly), but there is a kind of demand to have multimodality.

16. Further, Ellen Samuels shows how, within the “fantasies of identification” by which we try to classify bodies, disability is always “lurking at the margins of [these discourses] ready to be invoked to justify a range of oppressive and reductive identifica-
tions” (214). There are crises when we cannot easily and readily classify difference—and we react with fantasies that we can carefully identify things like sex and race and disability. But we also do this with different parts of the brain or with different types of brains—for instance, pop science seems obsessed with “the teen brain” (access Julie Elman’s book Chronic Youth). According to Samuels, fantasies of identification “retroactively naturalize [their] determinative effects” (22). Such identifications search for “scientific underpinnings [and] homes” (214). More simply, we classify things first, and then we give them justifications that make the classification look scientific.

17. Ireland, Dale. Personal Correspondence with the Author. 16 April 2016.

Chapter 5

1. As Patrick Kinkade and Michael Katovich argue, “cult films are secular documents, celebrated as sacred texts by audiences and used as shared foci to collectively create rituals and belief systems. They differ from popular re-releases, fad films, films with cult qualities, and critical cult films in that they involve typical people in atypical situations, sympathetic deviance, challenges to traditional authority, reflections of societal strains, and paradoxical and interpretable resolutions” (n.p.).

2. As Jacinda Read shows, this sort of psychotronic reaction protects “laddish political incorrectness” and “legitimizes its anti-feminist and feminine tendencies through the reproduction, rather than analysis, of oppositional subcultural ideologies” (67). In short, saying that we need to ignore what’s offensive in these films—because we all know they are offensive—and just focus on what’s good about them is a way of actually legitimating their offenses.

3. There are ways that this segregation might provide opportunity for what Judith Halberstam and others call queer kinship: “relations that grow along parallel lines rather than upward and onward. This queer form of antidevelopment requires healthy doses of forgetting and disavowal and proceeds by way of a series of substitutions” (73). Yet the nerds most often are seen to reject the “Mus,” and in most of these movies the possibility of queer kinship is pretty vexed. For instance, in Old School and Accepted, the protagonist “gets” the popular girl; the only overtly queer character is a caricature in Revenge of the Nerds; and yet an argument probably needs to be made about the intense homosociality of all of these films and how that interacts with the disability “closet” I mention in another part of this chapter.

4. Throughout this final chapter, instead of including movie stills and adding visual descriptions as “retrofits,” I am going to omit the stills altogether, and instead only offer thick description.

5. As Jennifer Doyle argues, the phrase “rape culture” can be useful to “name places where sexual violence is explicit, frequent, rewarded” but “it can also distance us from the force of the ordinary” and the ongoing culture of sexual coercion on campuses (63).

6. As Doyle points out, this is tacit because “fraternity members [and other men] do not know how to narrate the centrality of sexual-coercion-by-men to their formation as men, or what it means to affirm that non-consensual sex forms the bedrock of their masculinity. They do not know how to reconcile their hatred of women with their certainty that they are not gay. They know even less what it means to resist the architecture of this entire scenario” (75).

7. We perceive this segregation, often, morphing into a form of elitism. This happens through the Harry Potter books and films, for instance, where there are clear differences between those who can go to Hogwarts and those who cannot, as well as between the different houses, leading to insufferable articles such as “If Hogwarts’
Houses Were Ivy League Schools.” Further, as Michael Bérubé notes, there is a very important plot point that revolves around the disabled Ariana Dumbledore and her exclusion from school and social life (36). We could also discuss the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning in the X-Men films in a similar manner. I am isolating mention of Potter and X-Men to this footnote so as not to open up an entirely different can of worms, as fun as that might be.

8. I am very hesitant to retroactively diagnose Jordan here. My goal is not to do so in a way that newly stigmatizes her, or to suggest that we can’t understand the character without the diagnosis. My goal in making this connection, however, is just to clearly show that the film codes all outsider characters with some form of embodied difference.

9. Lazlo is a “ticking time bomb” character in Real Genius, but he is also the one who figures out what the military uses of the laser that the students develop will be. He actually lives in a closet. There is a lot going on in Real Genius about the disability counterculture or shadow culture of the university, and the epistemology of the closet.

10. Perhaps the most arresting of these contrasts can be found in With Honors: Monty is a student, and when his computer crashes, he’s left with only a single paper copy of his thesis, a thesis he needs to submit to graduate. Frightened of losing it, he immediately rushes out to photocopy it, only to stumble and drop it down a grate. Searching the basement of the building, he discovers that it has been found by Simon, a squatter. Simon makes a deal with Monty: for every day’s accommodation and food that Monty gives him, he will give a page of the thesis in return.

11. Revenge of the Nerds comments on this in showing that the nerds become just as bad as the jocks after they have won—not “just the nerds they say we are,” but also just like the jocks they said they hated. The underdogs, in these films, when these films have sequels, often become overdogs.

12. As Mary Nguyen showed in a 2012 study on how students balance debt, they are often involved in a “complex calculation, and students may not always make the best choices. Some students may borrow the entire cost of college, including living expenses, as a means of successfully earning a degree, only to default on loans that are too large to repay. Other students might not borrow enough money, taking on so much remunerative work that they don’t devote enough time to their studies and end up dropping out. . . . risk factors among non-borrowers who dropped out were substantially higher than those among borrowers who dropped out, with almost three times as many non-borrowers enrolled part time their first year and then dropped out. The presence of these risk factors is often cited by colleges as an excuse for high student loan default rates, which are used by federal regulators to judge whether programs should be eligible for federal student aid. But it’s important to note that these risk factors are not static traits. . . . they are behaviors, choices that students make, in significant part, in response to college prices. If colleges weren’t so expensive, they wouldn’t have as many working students with some combination of debt and work-related risk factors for dropping out” (n.p.).

13. Again, the monsters are mostly all men, and coded as white; the only major female character in the movie is the Dean Hardscrabble, who is dark purple and thus coded as African American. It is worth noting that her name—and her tough attitude—seem to denote the idea that she has worked very hard for the privilege she has been able to access, and has no patience for others who won’t or can’t work as hard.

14. In an earlier footnote, I discussed Julian Bleecker’s concept of “design fiction”: using sci-fi novels to help design students conceptualize a more diverse future
world. This entire chapter might be used in a similar way. How could *Monsters University*, for example, be used as design fiction: create a campus space and pedagogy that would actually work for these monsters.

15. The administrators, of course, are shown to be evil. Deans Barbe and Hardscrabble and the ones from *Old School, Accepted*, and *Animal House* are all stuffy, traditional, and out to fail and expel. They talk about handpicking their students from the “crème de la crème” and they have absolute power and authority over everything from the size of the lawn to individual admissions decisions. They have lots of money and they are invested in maintaining their privilege. Dean Martin is shown to be a pushover, out for the money, but the other deans are also shown to be in someone’s pocket—usually the Greek system or the football coach. Dean Barbe is the only dean who seems to also teach. Kieran Healy seems to agree, pointing out that “the role of Dean Hardscrabble in the everyday life of the university is particularly disturbing. She seems to feel it her right to observe and even interrupt lectures in progress, to overrule the teaching decisions of tenured faculty monsters, and to generally interfere with the curriculum’s content and standards whenever she feels like it. It is a generally accepted rule of university governance that the faculty control the curriculum, and yet here we can recognize administrative interference on a very worrying scale. She also is clearly far too involved in the extracurricular life of the school, and in particular with its powerful fraternity and sorority culture. Moreover, the fact that there is a statue to Dean Hardscrabble placed inside the main lecture theater of the school which she administers bespeaks of a level of administrative hubris rarely seen outside of certain English universities. It is difficult to see how the faculty could be expected to work under such a dysfunctional managerial style” (n.p.).

16. Healy continues: “One has to wonder whether Monsters University recruits these talented young giant monsters for anything other than their athletic ability” (n.p). There is much more to be said about this, of course. Every one of these movies places sports, particularly football, at the very center of campus culture, and although most of the movies paint the athletes in a negative light, the pervasiveness and power of athletic culture on campus, hinged to fraternity culture, shows just how powerfully these institutions have stamped themselves on the public perception of college, to the exclusion of all other campus cultures.

17. This said, Downey’s character is shown to be involved in protest, and he calls football a metaphor for nuclear war (and this was before Don DeLillo’s *End Zone*). There is also a subgenre of Vietnam era films about college that look at protest culture, and perhaps Downey’s character borrows from this genre. In fact, most of these movies steal from that genre but have their characters protesting for individual goals, not political ones.

18. Another place where this meritocracy is critiqued is through the application process: “I don’t have a clue [what to do with the rest of my life]” is Bartleby’s entrance essay in *Accepted*. The entire movie *Admission* is about the process, and how an officer in the admissions department at an Ivy League school is convinced to consider alternative forms of knowledge and success in students from underfunded schools. There is in fact a genre of admissions movies, films like *Orange County, Risky Business, The Spectacular Now, Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*. Each of these films focuses on the college admissions letter as a framing device and even as a narrative technique. Trying to figure out how to write a letter that will get them into college is a means of kick-starting self-reflection and development. Amy Vidali studies such letters for their normative power, and the films use the prospect of going to school or getting into school as means of making characters grow up, realize their true priorities, or focus on their dreams—they don’t even need to set foot on campus to be conditioned by
the selectivity and the norms of academia. Many of these movies are also about how these potential students might be able to even afford to go to college in the first place. In *Stealing Harvard*, the plot is driven by the need to deliver a girl from her lower station in life, and, as you might predict, theft becomes the only feasible solution.

19. In *Old School*, this takes the form of “The Charter Certification Review,” given by the board of trustees: comprised of academics, athletics, community service, debate, and school spirit. In *Accepted*, there is a similar accreditation hearing in front of “state board of education.” In *The House Bunny* and *Revenge of the Nerds* the accreditation board is made up entirely of Greek leaders.

20. The subversive nature of this move is undermined a bit or a lot by the fact that we know they will eventually bootstrap their way up in their new workplace, *Monsters Inc.*, as this is a prequel.

21. And they turn that into an actual class where all the men watch three women in bikinis float around in a pool; further literalizing the sexualized gaze that already exists in these films. As I mentioned before, women in these films don’t seem to go to class, but they do go to parties.

22. This is accompanied by an antifaculty sentiment: “why don’t you take your P-H-D and shove it up you’re A-S-S” Dean Lewis yells at the dean of Harmon, and this sentiment can be tracked across all of these movies. Male professors are in general angry and incompetent or narcissistic and duplicitous and out to use their students (especially the misfits) for their own personal profit; female professors are, just like female students, sexual objects.

23. Back to School is also a statement of positionality: popular culture has its back to school. There is work to be done to argue that schools actually shape cultures, though without a doubt we can recognize the resistant attitude that the general public has towards school culture. Access, for instance, Andrew Ross’s *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*.

24. Jeffrey J. Williams goes so far as to argue that in these films “the university is generally not depicted as an ivory tower; it is a transformative zone toward full participation in adult life and in fact is often a public sphere in its own right. . . . University fiction, even in parody, takes the social position of the university seriously” (24).

25. Access *Rudy, He Got Game, Blue Chips*, and so forth. We should also note that *Rudy* is the *Rocky* of university films—he doesn’t just overcome his stature to get onto the football field, he also overcomes dyslexia.