**September 18, 2016**

**The New “Diagnosis of Privilege”**

(I am guessing that some of my readers are *not* going to be very happy with me, or with what I have to say here.  I don’t care.  I am going to say it anyway because I am too annoyed to worry about being politically correct.  Rant mode engaged…)

Students with learning disabilities first started appearing on college campuses in the mid 80’s.  For more than a decade, LD was largely a “diagnosis of privilege,” especially at the postsecondary level.  In the K-12 system, children with similar test results could receive very different labels depending on the socioeconomic profile of the student and the school district.  As students approached the college level, it cost big money to get LD testing done – money that was often only a possibility for students from more affluent families.  And FAMILY was a key element in the diagnosis and growth of services for students who were LD.  Let’s not forget that the Learning Disability Association (LDA) was the first, and is still one of the most prominent, advocacy organizations for people with learning disabilities.  And LDA started out as ACLD – the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities.  It started as a parent advocacy organization, put together by concerned parents who could afford to seek out better answers for their kids who were struggling.

There were (and are?) a host of other issues that complicated the recognition and acceptance of the LD diagnosis and slowed our move beyond the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic barriers.  I know we have made significant progress over the years, and I’d like to think that support for students with learning disabilities is much more likely to be equitably available to all who need it today.  But what goes around comes around, and it appears that there is a new “diagnosis of privilege” currently in vogue on college campuses – “students on the Spectrum.”

Let me preface the rest of my comments by saying that I DO believe students on the autism spectrum are students with disabilities, are entitled to protection from discrimination under 504/ADA, and should be acknowledged as potentially appropriate college students.  And I have been saying, for some time, that I think students on the spectrum are the exception that proves the rule when it comes to the services we provide to students with disabilities, and HOW those services are provided.  I believe it is appropriate to revisit the unwritten understanding that students with disabilities should be expected to behave just like every other student. I recognize and acknowledge that for students on the spectrum, the behavior IS the disability.  But, still, I think they are entitled to protection and support under the law because they are students with disabilities.  Not because they are SPECIAL students with disabilities.

About now, you are probably asking yourself, “what set her off this time?”  It was an OpEd piece in Inside Higher Ed on Tuesday morning:

<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/09/13/making-college-work-students-autism-essay>

Purportedly written by a mother-daughter team, the daughter on the spectrum, the mother a college prof (and am I the only one who is skeptical as to how much of this was written by the daughter?), the article castigates colleges and universities for failing students with disabilities because we refuse to… *wait*.  What is it we refuse to do?  Oh, yeah… we refuse to provide students on the spectrum with special education services at the college level.

The article readily admits that the ADA does not require colleges and universities “to modify their teaching style for disabled students and are not required to think about the social communicative needs of any students, let alone those with autism.”  But they SHOULD, according to the article.  “But common accommodations, such as providing a quiet exam setting, don’t adequately address the problems faced by many students with autism. (snip)  The inherent qualities of autism -- resistance to change, sensitive sensory systems, weakness at reading social cues and a tendency to take language literally -- interfere with communication and social engagement. A quiet exam room will not help students overcome those barriers. The problems students with autism face are more insidious.” In other words… *they’re special!* They shouldn’t be subject to (limited to) the same rules, and the same level of support, as every other student with a disability.

Part of my problem with the article is that it is well-written, and so it is easy to assume that what is given there not only makes sense, but is gospel.  And it is not.  In making the argument for how/why colleges have failed students on the spectrum, the article states:

*“Half of all individuals with autism have average or above-average intelligence. They can do the work. The problem is not the students. It’s the colleges.”*

Um… aren’t half of all *individuals* of average of above-average intelligence?  Doesn’t that mean they can do the work?  Then are colleges guilty of some sin of omission/commission because not all students (with or without autism) graduate?  If they are smart enough to be in college, then if they don’t graduate, it must be our fault, right?  RIGHT?

One of the more telling comments was this:

*“In these days when most community college disability offices are underfunded -- Elizabeth’s community college does not even provide* [*note takers*](http://www.washington.edu/doit/what-are-some-ways-provide-note-taking-accommodations-student-disability)*–“*

Come on, folks.  You know better than that.  Did you recognize this mischaracterization for what it is?  I talked to the folks at the community college in question.  *Of course* they provide notes and notetakers, in a number of different formats, for students with disabilities who have need for support in this area. They do not provide PAID notetakers in the way that the Finnegans appear to think would be appropriate.

The article sings the praises of institutions that have chosen to establish special programs to support students on the spectrum.  And, hey – I have no problem with those special programs.  There is nothing in the law that prohibits us from choosing to do more than is legally necessary for students with disabilities, and if something is arranged, that’s great.  But to suggest that schools that do not provide special programs for this one population of students with disabilities means that the colleges have failed is, simply, elitist thinking.

I suppose part of the reason the article ticked me off so much is because there was another piece on the same day that spoke to the problems facing low income students in getting a shot at the college experience (“Paying the Price: A Review”).  While the Finnnegan article says that 80% of students on the spectrum filter through community colleges “where students, often still highly dependent on family support, can live at home,” the second article speaks to the fact that a much lower percentage of low income students are ever able to reach college at all, in part because they are supporting their families, rather than being supported BY them.  The message seems to be pretty clear to me – students on the spectrum have parents who care.  Low income students?  They may BE parents, or be supporting their parents, or not have parents in the picture at all!

The only reason I am not more incensed by the article is that I am old.  I remember watching all of this go by before, when LD students – and then ADHD students – first burst on the college scene, propelled there by caring and dedicated parents who wanted to see their kids have a chance at the college experience.  And because of those early efforts, students with LD and ADHD who DON’T have pushy parents are now regularly acknowledged and served at the college level.  And that’s good.  So maybe this will turn out alright, too, down the line.

But for now, I refuse to apologize.  What we owe to students on the spectrum is the same thing we owe to any student with a disability… an equal opportunity to access the same college experience that students without disabilities are able to access.  That does NOT include providing individualized help and support for their special needs in hopes of achieving more success (and that is REALLY what lies at the bottom of the article – they want SUCCESS, not access).  Colleges and universities may not be what the Finnegans want them to be, but that does not suggest an inherent fault in what we are.

So there!

Janie

*When red-headed people are above a certain social grade, their hair is auburn.*

Mark Twain

*Maybe I’m elitist… but I don’t think I am.*