

Mike Liemohn:

Welcome to Advancing Faculty Excellence, a podcast where we at the U of M ADVANCE Program talk about issues facing faculty and what we can do about it. I'm your host, Mike Liemohn, an Associate Director of the U of M ADVANCE Program, an office focused on faculty excellence.

Kelsey Arras:

And I'm Kelsey Arras, podcast producer and a Communications and Project Specialist at the ADVANCE Program who oversee the RISE Committee.

Mike Liemohn:

Today we're talking with Professor Amy Hughes from the Theatre and Drama department about creating a climate that is supportive for disability. Kelsey, we had a great conversation with Amy.

Kelsey Arras:

Yes, we did.

Mike Liemohn:

She brought so many personal examples and experiences to this discussion.

Kelsey Arras:

Amy had many great resources to offer our audience far and beyond what is just listed in the case study. I took a lot of wisdom away from our conversation.

Mike Liemohn:

For this particular conversation. The climate case study has this scenario to focus our discussion: "How to foster respect and inclusion in your unit when recent survey results show that 20 to 30% of faculty and staff in your unit identify as having a disability." We hope that you enjoy the episode. Our guest today is Professor Amy Hughes, a professor in the Theater and Drama department of the School of Music, Theatre & Dance, and a Faculty Associate in American Culture in the College of Literature, Science and Arts here at the University of Michigan. She's also an Associate Director of the University of Michigan's ADVANCE Program. Amy, welcome to the show.

Amy Hughes:

Thank you so much for having me.

Mike Liemohn:

Our topic today is creating a climate that is supportive of disability. Amy, can you tell me about your enthusiasm for this topic?

Amy Hughes:

I should start by saying that even though my first encounter with disability was more than 20 years ago, I still feel like a student and a learner of these principles and practices, and I probably always will feel that way. But how it started for me, I would say, is I'm a theater historian and I became interested in 19th

century US theater and performance as a graduate student, and that was when I first encountered an incredible community of scholars writing about disability and performance.

Mike Liemohn:

Oh, Really?

Amy Hughes:

When I became curious about displays of extraordinary people, which are commonly called the Freak Show. And so I got really inspired by ideas offered by people like Rosemary Garland Thompson and Leonard Davis and Rachel Adams. I learned and started to think differently about how notions of what a normal "body" looks like and how it operates is a form of oppression. That was an argument advanced by these scholars.

And also another argument that really stood out to me, and I try to live my life by this, is that they point out that pretty much everyone will experience disability if they just live long enough. Very true. My mind just really exploded with these ideas and others because they just felt so true. And then more recently, I'm happy to share that I identify as someone with a dynamic disability. And what that means for anyone listening who doesn't know it is it's not a constant disability for me, but it comes and goes, and for me, it's caused by side effects from breast cancer treatment. I'm fine everybody, I'm fine, but as many people who have experienced all kinds of cancer or know folks who do, cancer isn't ever over. So I have had to make my life accommodate my experiences, and so that's another connection for me.

Mike Liemohn:

I really like this topic and I'm glad that there is a climate case study about it. I tend to think about this in terms of physical accessibility within the workspace, and I think most of what we will discuss perhaps later centers around that. But another aspect of this topic is accessibility for those with mental illness and one of the additional resources focused on this topic. Amy, could you briefly summarize that one?

Amy Hughes:

Sure. So this is a publication called Promoting Supportive Academic Environments for Faculty with Mental Illnesses by Margaret Price and Stephanie L. Kerschbaum. Some of the highlights for me, I would say the authors encourage us in academic environments to create what they call a "culture of access" rather than merely or only what many would describe as an accommodations approach. They define culture of access as "a culture that considers disability a source of knowledge and diversity, and that encourages collective accountability and cooperative action." And I would say the biggest differences in my mind between the two models are the assumptions and the norms of each context, as well as who does most of the labor for creating an environment supportive of disabled people. In an accommodations approach, usually the focus is compliance, so questions like what is required or what is the law, which often translates into what is the minimum. Implicitly, this is a framework in which individuals who need support are exceptions to a norm where no one needs anything. Again, thinking about labor in each model. In this model, the accommodations model, the onus is on the disabled individual

To get the support they need to ask for help to educate others about how to make spaces better for them or less ableist in general. In contrast, as these authors note in a culture of access, accommodations are proactive rather than reactive. The question guiding everyone's thinking is what do disabled people



need as opposed to what's required. Universal access is the norm in this framework. It focuses on environments and structures rather than individuals. It assumes that everyone will benefit from accessibility, and a great example is the automatic door opener. People who use wheelchairs obviously benefit, but also someone who has a broken arm, someone who's recovering from surgery and can't lift anything more than five pounds for six weeks, someone with their hands full just that day. Right, benefits.

Mike Liemohn:

Hit it with your elbow.

Amy Hughes:

Yeah, from an automatic door opener. Bottom line here is that accessibility is a community responsibility and also a community benefit.

Mike Liemohn:

The approach of the RISE Committee is to simplify these large scale complex issues by postulating a hypothetical situation. For this particular conversation, the climate case study has this specific scenario for us to focus our discussion: "How to foster respect and inclusion in your unit when recent survey results show that 20 to 30% of faculty and staff in your unit identify as having a disability. As a department chair, how do you create a climate where those with disabilities feel respected and supported?" This scenario actually is not hypothetical. It arises directly from a statistic in one of the additional resources for this climate case study. It's from a survey conducted in the fall of 2020 of experiences of faculty and staff in the College of Literature, Science and Arts here at the University of Michigan. And of the almost 900 respondents, 32% indicated that they had a disability. And so I should note also that the survey defined disability, and I'm going to quote here, "broadly and inclusively, regardless of whether or not respondents have any official diagnosis or documentation to encompass physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, chronic illness, neurodivergence, mental health conditions, learning disabilities and more, that can at times make job relevant tasks difficult." That was their definition. So the survey found that roughly three quarters of those answering yes to having a disability indicated that this disability was appropriately being accommodated by the college or their department. One big thing that the survey found was that it was up to the person with a disability to request the accommodation. So exactly what you've just said,

Amy Hughes:

An accommodations model. Yeah,

Mike Liemohn:

And that this process was sometimes long and frustrating, and why it's only three quarters is because some people gave up trying to get adequate arrangement.

Amy Hughes:

It happens all the time.

Mike Liemohn:

So this survey also found that the assumption is that there isn't a disability for the norm, that there's the underlying culture of almost disrespect for faculty and staff who have accommodations because you're asking something special. So creating a climate supportive of disability is a real and current challenge for academia. So a way that the RISE Committee thinks about these scenarios is to apply the concept of the eight levers of action, an idea created by Project Zero, and then adapted by the RISE Committee for approaching this particular scenario from a variety of angles so that the issue can really be robustly addressed. Are you ready to robustly address this situation, Amy?

Amy Hughes:

Yes. Yes. I think all of us bring good ideas to this task and I'm excited to share some of my thoughts. Yeah.

Mike Liemohn:

Okay. It's time to move on to the levers. One lever is environment, which is about how we design the physical space in our department, say the appearance, the flooring, the layout, that kind of thing, to make it either welcoming or exclusionary of people with disabilities. So Amy, could you give us an example or two of how to use this lever?

Amy Hughes:

I of course, am inspired by the climate case study, and I'm thinking about how one of the first suggestions is connect with an expert to review your physical space. So some of the examples are hallway hazards, automatic doors, seating options, desk and counter heights. Both that and podium heights. Built environment does make a huge difference for all kinds of bodies. We can all become an expert or at least an intermediate, and the reason that's important is people with disabilities experience "access fatigue." This is a phrase that I borrow from colleagues here who have shared their experiences with me.

Mike Liemohn:

Great term.

Amy Hughes:

Yeah, that access requires a lot of time, effort, and emotional energy, and it causes fatigue, and this stems from constantly having to advocate for themselves and in a culture of access that wouldn't happen. Everyone would share the responsibility for meeting each other's needs like your classroom. What if you were to walk in one day and say, okay, so how can I imagine this space from the perspective of someone with short stature

Mike Liemohn:

Mhmm

Amy Hughes:

Or someone in a wheelchair or someone who is above average size than these desks or what have you. There's lots of ways we can look at a space no matter who we are and note things that could be improved. Share them with facilities, share them with your department chair if you're not a campus

leader and act on it. Environments are physical, but they're also virtual. So think about your virtual spaces too. Think about how you can integrate multiple modalities for your colleagues in your meetings. Is it possible to have a hybrid meeting? Is it possible to provide live captioning while I give this PowerPoint? There's all kinds of creative solutions we can come up with no matter how expert or not we feel. And, when needed, know the resources that you can share. Point folks to staff in the department or the unit or resources on campus so that folks know how to get the resources they need and don't have to do it themselves because again, access fatigue is very real and the more we can provide help and support the better.

Mike Liemohn:

The expectations lever is about the words, actions and cues of the group, both explicit and implicit that govern the norms of interaction. For this case, it's about setting the norm so that people are inclined to make choices that improve accessibility. Amy, how do you see this lever working?

Amy Hughes:

I think this is a really important lever because of the very real fact that not all disabilities are visible. The way that disabilities impact my life, for example, can be very, very different from what people see or know about me. And mental illnesses are in this category, cognitive differences, there's all kinds of things that we can't see. Another thing to remember is there's a disclosure gap, especially about non apparent disabilities.

People don't disclose for a lot of reasons. There's obviously stigma around having a disability. Folks feel fear that people will look at them differently, they'll lose their credibility in one or more ways. Lack of access to medical documentation required by an accommodations model. I can't get the right doctor to say the right thing about my disability. Also, people might be worried about being perceived as less capable or needy or not self sufficient. And all of this and more results in this disclosure gap. And this came up for me recently when I attended a webinar offered by the U of M Disability Equity Office about non apparent disabilities. It was recorded, so anyone who'd like to watch it can do that. The presenter offered a graphic from a 2017 report by the Center for Talent and Innovation, and I'll give a visual description, but there are two pie charts. On the left is a pie chart that indicates 3.2% of employees self-identify as having a disability to their employers.

And 30% in the pie chart on the right say they do not disclose or they have a disability and they have not disclosed. So we have this reflected in our own data, and this is a survey of all kinds of industries, not just academia. So it's really imperative to keep this disclosure gap in mind when we're thinking about expectations, but also I would add regularly remind folks about the resources and offices available to protect their privacy because no matter how supportive and welcoming and friendly we may feel, we can't make choices for other people. And there's just so many reasons why someone would not disclose. So always remind folks that they have a neutral third party to go to, and indeed they should.

Mike Liemohn:

The language lever is similar to the interactions lever, but this one is directed specifically at the language that we choose in conversations. Amy, do you have examples of specific language choices to address this particular scenario?

Amy Hughes:



Yes, so I was thinking about how language is often the starting point for many people when they've decided to think about creating or participating in culture of access. If you're wondering, how do I talk about disability? What words should I use? I don't want to say it wrong. This piece, "The Problems of Ableist Language" by Melody Schmitke, which is a Medium post from 2020

Is a short and sweet primer. And some of the terms in this post include ableism, which is a concept that is akin to racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. I would describe it as a widespread cultural, almost common sense belief that disabilities are bad and must be hidden or fixed rather than accommodated in the ideal situation or a tendency to ignore or overlook the needs of disabled people because people without disabilities are the majority. Also, all of us will experience disability one day if we live long enough, period, full stop. So it's in our best interest, in other words, to address the ableism in our culture and to actively work against its existence. Language is one way we do that, she argues. Person-first versus identity-first language is one of the things that she mentions we be attentive to. For those who aren't familiar with this, the person-first approach is to describe yourself as a person with a disability. The identity-first approach is to say disabled person, and they're both different. In one, the person is centered in person-first language. I'm a person I'm not my disability is often what I hear from folks who use that or prefer that. Those who prefer identity-first language as in disabled person, I am a disabled person. I've often heard them tell me that they are disabled by the culture, they're disabled by the environment. There's nothing wrong with them. It's the environment and the people around them that cause the disability. And I really appreciate both frames and in fact, some people, as Melody points out, use both depending on the context.

Mike Liemohn:

Mmhmm

Amy Hughes:

So I think for folks who are curious about how ableism manifests in language, this is a great place to start. By the way, I want to make an important point about the language lever, which is that for some folks, I know that this might land as "this is a lot of political correctness" or "this is a lot of gymnastics that we have to go through, not to offend people", and I hear that, but I want to ask such folks, why not use a different term if it's more supportive?

Mike Liemohn:

That.

Amy Hughes:

Is there something wrong with having some empathy, approaching folks with kindness and trust, instead of suspecting that there's some kind of nefarious thing around language here that we're trying to regulate? It's really honestly about being kind and generous with our fellow humans.

Mike Liemohn:

A physics friend of mine wrote a recent article on being supportive of neurodivergent faculty and students in an academic setting and had a nice table in there of do's and don'ts regarding language. And so that thing we'll put in the show notes,

Kelsey Arras:

Yes, and language changes all the time. It's something we've talked about on the RISE Committee before in various types of case study development. So I appreciate that you're underscoring that point, Amy, because I think we can apply this to other areas. Talking about issues that we find really important

Amy Hughes:

And I felt in thinking about this and reading this article. About my own spiritual practice, which is I'm a student and practitioner of Buddhism, and I thought this might be helpful for some folks that in this tradition there's a concept called "wise speech" or "skillful speech." And it helps me a lot when I'm in a situation when I'm not sure what to say or when to say it. In this notion or approach of "wise speech", before you say something, you should ask four questions of yourself: Is what I'm about to say truthful? Is it kind? Is it necessary? (which is really hard for me), and Is this the right time?

So when I'm in these interactions, I try to take a breath. I try to think, is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? Is this the right time? And if all four things are yes, I'll do my best to ask the question. But equally important is rather than worrying about getting this perfect or right, which is understandable, it's a desire we all have. We also need to approach conversations and challenges head on. It's better to be imperfect and apologize than to not try at all and make someone feel invisible or uncared for.

Mike Liemohn:

Okay, onto the lever of modeling. This is about how our behaviors serve as guides for others. So for our topic today, this is how we should display a positive attitude towards accessibility in our daily lives, specifically because we're watched by others who might follow our lead. Can you give us an example or two of using the lever of modeling?

Amy Hughes:

This is one of my favorites because it's so accessible to me. I am a professor. I give presentations. I have so many opportunities to intervene through this lever. The first thing that I would say is talk about it just as I did at the beginning of this podcast. When faculty openly discuss disability, students are more likely to seek support for the disabilities, so might their colleagues, who knows who might benefit. In my syllabi, I have a quote I love by Brea M. Heidelberg, who is an Arts Management professor at Drexel University. She wrote a book chapter in 2020 about how to be a culturally responsive and inclusive teacher. She wrote "In the higher education setting, which is still largely white and heteronormative, culturally responsive teaching requires consideration of the voices that are not represented in the room until such time that the sociopolitical factors preventing them from being there are addressed." And what this means for me is that we are actively in every space we're in creating an environment where anyone is welcome when they get here because honestly, folks with disabilities avoid certain spaces because they've heard through the disabled, the grapevine of disabled folks that this is not a place that's good for me.

Mike Liemohn:

That.

Amy Hughes:

We will never see those folks until we create the conditions where they feel welcome. And this is something we do primarily through modeling. Another person I am really inspired by is Nicole Brewer, who is a social justice activist and educator in the theater space. She suggests this very simple question at the beginning of any meeting, does anyone have access needs that we should keep in mind today? An access need is broad and it doesn't apply to only folks who are disabled. Do you have a need today that will help you do better in this room? Give it space, but a simple question like that becomes a habit. Folks begin over time to feel they can disclose and have their needs met.

Mike Liemohn:

In doing that regularly perhaps normalizes that question so that people will want to speak it more. I can see how there could be some stigma to being the one to say, "I need to stop the agenda. We aren't going to go on yet. Let's talk about my need".

Amy Hughes:

And so just hypothetically, imagine that you are in a room and someone says, "You know what? I need to stand up from time to time. I can't sit for long periods." And so now everybody knows that nothing is wrong if that person stands up and you as the facilitator can be like, "Great that I might also do that." "Thanks for saying that because now all of us have permission to do it. That was awesome." Always make your materials screen reader friendly because people who are low vision or no vision obviously benefit, but so do other people who are commuting or walking to the bus and can listen to rather than read something that's in writing. We have tools like Panorama in Canvas that I've used that are really helpful to make things accessible and to be an assistant in creating best practices in your course. You can turn on live captioning when giving a PowerPoint presentation. You can say your name before speaking in a meeting. Those are my favorites.

Mike Liemohn:

Another lever is routines and structures. Routines are the informal, often unwritten practices of a group. While structures are the formal policies, bylaws, and regulations of a group. This is definitely a lever that can and should be used for creating a workplace supportive of a disability. Amy, can you give us some examples?

Amy Hughes:

Yes. Yes. So I just wanted to start by saying I think about routines and structures as norms and cultures because those things like policies and so forth, create culture, sustain them, keep them from being changed. So this is where the concept of culture of access feels really important and relevant because we're supporting people with disabilities as a community in that framework and taking communal responsibility rather than leaving the responsibility to the individual. Of course, self-advocacy is important. It's a muscle all of us need to exercise, but again, we don't want to put the onus only on the folks who are experiencing the disability and whose lives are most affected. No matter your role, whether you're department chair or a professor or a colleague, a staff colleague, you can identify pressure points in your routines and norms that might be relieved, like just do a little audit. Just to give an example of what this might look like, I'm a teacher, right? And so when I was thinking about norms and cultures in my class, I noticed that a big pressure point was simply deadlines.

So instead of having a hard fast deadline, I started to ask myself, are there alternatives? Talk to my colleagues about it. And I instituted something called the "best by date" for an assignment, the "late date" and the "expiration date." So there's no deadline by the way. I hate that "dead" part and deadline, right? Already sort of unmerciful and unkind. So the best buy date is for full credit. The late date is a week later for partial credit, and the expiration date is, sorry, that's just how it is. It's expired. So that was a simple pressure point I could relieve, and I've gotten such great feedback from students of all backgrounds and experiences on that intervention. And in the RISE climate study, I really liked this idea of the anonymous survey. So there's a suggestion there to anonymously survey the faculty and staff for ideas to make the workplace more accessible and incorporate them. That's a crucial thing. This idea of the anonymous survey acknowledges that every unit is different. We often learn through these conversations that it's the people who are most affected, who are the experts, and if we just listen to their ideas, they're going to be the best solutions. Ask, how will we keep accountable for these wonderful generous offerings and ideas and make that a part of the discussion from the beginning before you give the survey, how are we going to act on it?

Kelsey Arras:

How do you approach if somebody who wants to participate in the survey has questions about the post part of the data?

Amy Hughes:

That is such an important question. Thank you for asking it, Kelsey. And I will say I'm not an expert in giving surveys, but based on my experience with such surveys, I would say that transparency is key. That you say in the survey itself, how the data will be used, where it'll be stored, who will have access to it, be very specific and thoughtful and intentional about that. Make sure those promises are kept and do the groundwork that's necessary for folks to feel safe and supported in order to give you their best work and their best ideas without fear. Thank you, Amy.

Mike Liemohn:

And it is possible to keep the questions set so that you can go back to it and ask it again later and ask if you are regularly wanting to be proactive about this, you might want to use that survey again and again, but responses that you got from that, you can process them that particular year and then move on. Sometimes it's good to keep those, sometimes maybe not. Yeah, that's a question that every group would have to wrestle with.

Amy Hughes:

Yes, 80% of any good project is preparation.

Kelsey Arras:

I love that

Amy Hughes:

Right? Being super intentional is a way that we can express care and respect folks.

Mike Liemohn:

The last lever is time, which simply refers to how individuals allocate the hours of the day. For us right now, discussing disability accommodations, this means being sensitive to the commitment that required activities entail and to encourage flexibility in the schedule.

Amy Hughes:

I worry, I've said this already, but this is my favorite lever. Have either of you heard of "crip time"? This phrase "crip time"?

Kelsey Arras:

I have not.

Mike Liemohn:

No, I don't think I have.

Amy Hughes:

Okay, so in brief, I think it's a liberatory framework that can be helpful in all kinds of contexts, especially this one. It can be something we can aspire to keep in mind, even if we don't name it because it's not appropriate maybe to name it in every context. But keep in mind, in classrooms, meetings and projects, again, I want to say that when you really begin listening to folks who experience, write, teach, or talk about disability, it's easy to see how their wisdom has a positive impact on everyone. And "crip time" is one of the examples. Ellen Samuels, who wrote an article called Six Ways of Looking at "Crip Time" in Disability Studies Quarterly in 2017.

So thank you so much, Dr. Samuels. The article begins with this wonderful statement: "When disabled folks talk about 'crip time', sometimes we just mean that we're late all the time, maybe because we need more sleep than non-disabled people, maybe because the accessible gate in the train station was locked. But other times when we talk about 'crip time', we mean something more beautiful and forgiving." And then they go on to quote fellow disability scholar, Alison Kafer, who said, rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, "crip time" bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds. I just love that

Mike Liemohn:

Again, that universal accessibility theme coming up, right? If you plan for it for everyone, then it's just built in

Amy Hughes:

And we're centering the person rather than the clock. And that's important because the clock usually belongs to the corporation or the institution when what we are aspiring to be is a community. A community of people working together to do good things together. That's one reason why I love this concept of "crip time". I want to note though that this neologism "crip", which some of us may not be familiar with, is similar to the reclamation and reanimated word queer for some members of the LGBTQIA+ community. So it's a word not to throw around lightly, just saying, but this concept is one that I find really helpful because it is such a beautiful and forgiving concept, and it's important I think, because the dominant culture in academia is busyness, productivity, efficiency, which is very impressive. And indeed, when people don't follow these norms, I think all of us have been in meetings where

someone is getting tense or rolling their eyes when someone isn't speaking quickly enough or shuffling through papers to find something. That tension is the result of not necessarily an individual failing, but a cultural failing that insists that everyone should be busy at all times. "Crip time" denies the importance of that. That's one thought I had when thinking about this lever, but there's also a couple of things in the case study that are beneficial for all of us, like build in time and flexibility so that members of your community can travel and prepare for meetings.

If our meetings were 50 minutes instead of 60? What if you just tried that out? Would something break? I doubt it. Time is something that's precious. It's the only thing we can't buy. It's the resource that we are most limited by. Of all the levers, I would say that is my favorite.

Mike Liemohn:

Amy, this was such a wonderful conversation. I love working with you.

Amy Hughes:

I love working with you, Mike and Kelsey. Thank you.

Mike Liemohn:

Do you have any final words on this topic?

Amy Hughes:

My word is gratitude, y'all. I'm so grateful to you as someone who cares about disability, as someone who experiences disability for doing this podcast, for your work on RISE, for the wonderful resources that you've generated and shared with our community, which have also helped my own navigation of classrooms and meetings and so forth. So I would say that, and then for anyone listening as well as for myself, because I'm always working on myself, don't forget, this is deep personal work. It's bound up in interrogating and examining the reasons why we make certain decisions and we have certain beliefs. Disability is one of those areas where constant attention needs to be paid to how we relate to it personally, regardless of our disability status. And once we do that work, my experience is, I begin to feel more free.

Mike Liemohn:

That was Professor Amy Hughes from the Department of Theatre and Drama and like me, a fellow faculty Associate Director of the U of M ADVANCE Program who talked to us about creating a climate that is supportive of disability. Thank you, Amy, for being on the show. This has been an episode of the Advancing Faculty Excellence Podcast, a product of U of M's ADVANCE Program. The views expressed in this episode are those of the guests and hosts and do not reflect official positions of the University of Michigan. I'm Mike Liemohn, the host of this episode. This podcast was produced and edited by Kelsey Arras of U of M ADVANCE. Please join me extending to her a huge thank you. This podcast would not exist without her. We want to give a special thanks to our musical crew composition by WP Norton and performed by So Say We All with WP Norton on lead guitar and University of Michigan, professors Alaina Lemon on Rhythm guitar, and Denise Sekaquaptewa on bass guitar. We also thank the Shapiro Library Design Lab team for production support, including usage of their sound studios. Please rate review and subscribe to this podcast. Thank you all for listening.