What We Are Learning About Learning, S2 E2

LIBBIE RIFKIN: There are more students with learning disabilities, or differences, or other forms of neurodivergence that come into somebody's classroom experience. There are more folks like that at Georgetown than faculty assume.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: That was Libby Rifkin, the founding director of the program in Disability Studies at Georgetown and a teaching professor in the Department of English. In our conversations with faculty and staff at Georgetown, this was an oft repeated theme. There are simply far more students on campus that fall under the broad umbrella of disability than is typically recognized. Here at Georgetown, 1,200 students, or 16% of the student body, have formal academic accommodations for disabilities. While the actual number is likely higher, it's on par with the 19% reported by the US Department of Education.

JOE KING: You're listening to What We Are Learning About Learning-- and I hope that doesn't surprise you-- a podcast about higher ed teaching and learning, created and produced by the Center for New Designs in Learning and scholarship at Georgetown University. For this episode, we spoke with faculty and staff who work on building awareness of best practices, as well as advocate for students with disabilities. I'm Joe King.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: And I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski. In thinking about disability, we often start with the legal framework for disabilities. We spoke with Joe Fisher, the executive director of the Academic Resource Center at Georgetown, who described the evolving nature of how we see and define disability, and how the American with Disabilities Act is applied at Georgetown.

JOSEPH FISHER: I say over and over again that we take the force of the ADA Amendments Act quite seriously. So we take a very broad definition of disability. And certainly, almost every day, we receive information from students that alerts us to new and emerging categorisations of disability. That it is a part of human diversity and perhaps a definition of human embodiment that is constantly subject to change.

JOE KING: Modeled after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the ADA was passed in 1990 to prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, and transportation. Its purpose is to ensure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The number of people whom this changing category may involve is large but also widely considered to be hard to pin down.

Libbie Rifkin, our colleague you heard at the top of the episode, describes the most common disability
identities at Georgetown and notes how the official number of students with disabilities may be underestimated.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: The vast majority identify as having a mental disability, or a mental illness issue-- a psychiatric disability-- which certainly can have implications for classroom performance and experience, even if it's not a diagnosed learning disability. So that if somebody has anxiety or depression, that can really contribute to who they are and how they behave as a student.

And then the next most common disability identity that our students hold is some kind of learning disability. Fewer actually register at the ARC because getting a diagnosis can be challenging, and expensive, and incredibly time consuming.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Another key piece of context as we began this conversation was exploring the language we use to describe individuals with disabilities. Some people prefer people-first language, such as people with disability. Whereas, others prefer identity-first language as in disabled people. Some see people first language as a way to reduce the dehumanization of disability. Quite often, identity first language is used to express pride and celebrate disability identity. Our conversations with our Georgetown colleagues capture the diversity of linguistic preferences. Here's Libbie Rifkin.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: The basic premise is that disability is not an identity or a social location that is necessarily negative. And so it does not require euphemistic language. I find that languages like differently abled, or even special needs, is sort of designed to kind of dance around that word disability. And in my own practice, both as a disability studies scholar, and thinker, and teacher, and as a parent of a child with disabilities, I say just that-- either, child with disabilities, person with disabilities, or disabled child, disabled person. I think there's a little bit of a debate about this question of person-first versus identity-first language in the extended disability community. And so I try to be flexible and sort of just go with the flow of the room that I'm in around that. Many people claim disabled identity with a great deal of pride, and so have no problem saying I'm an autistic person, for instance.

JOE KING: And here's Joe Fisher, sharing the practice of naming the disability first. From a sort of political standpoint, I was at a student presentation the other day-- autistic person, right? Not, person with autism. So I think again, the students from the ground up are pushing for disability first. This is certainly something that I would push for as well. Because I think trying to mask disability is doing exactly that. It's pushing it to the margins.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Ultimately, there's no monolithic or universal language shared across all people who have a disability. When interacting with someone who discloses their disability, we can show our respect for their language preference by asking them what their preference is. Here are Joe and Libbie again.
JOSEPH FISHER: As we always say, a human being has the right to insist on being referred to in a certain way, and we respect that. We would always do that.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: Obviously, people should be called what they want to be called and use language that's comfortable for them.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

JOE KING: Often, the discussion of disability in the classroom centers around accommodations. In other words, how do I accommodate students with different needs in my class, renovating what I've already built in order to meet those individual needs? We do, after all, have legal obligations to make accommodations for our students, so that they can participate fully in the learning experience. As we'll hear in a moment, we are in the middle of a shift away from solely relying on accommodations. But they're still important. Particularly given that, in many cases, we're working with structures that have problems and that have been handed down to us.

JOSEPH FISHER: I very routinely say that the accommodation model is always going to exist. And I just think that's true. I mean, if you just isolate this campus, we've got buildings that were built a very long time ago. So you are always going to need to add the ramp, right? That is the accommodation model. Building was not built with accessibility first. We would hope that new buildings are.

So the need to retrofit, I think, is always going to exist, whether we're talking about physical architecture or curricular architecture-- educational academic architecture. We're always going to need to retrofit. This is why people are running around now putting microphones in classrooms, so that we can record things that we hadn't thought about two or three years ago.

I have some problems with the term accommodation. But I don't think that it's wrong. But I do want to get the language of accessibility first and foremost into everyone's thinking to the best extent that I can. I think we should be talking about access-- accessing classes, accessing campus, accessing dormitory spaces, access, access, access.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: And here's Libbie who discusses some of the challenges and solutions in creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: Accessibility is a goal that we're always imperfectly approaching. And part of what I try to establish in those access needs check-ins, as well, is my own imperfection and my genuine desire-- but my inevitable failure-- in creating a perfectly accessible classroom space for everyone.

One thing I talk about a lot and think about a lot is this concept of access intimacy, which Mia Mingus, who is a queer, disabled activist of color, has developed. And it feels like a really necessary companion to something that's more like a universal design approach. This idea that I can design for maximal
inclusiveness. That I can kind of think about all of the different ways my students might kind of manifest in the classroom. I think that wrapped around that needs to be this willingness to kind of find your students where they are, and be open, and actually even ask about their accessibility needs, and build that kind of encounter into the beginning of all your classes if possible.

JOE KING: In other words, what we really need is a paradigm shift from accommodations to accessibility. Building courses that anticipate and remove barriers to access before our students even arrive. Here's Libbie Rifkin.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: I think the distinction has a lot to do with time. When you are thinking about disability? Are you thinking about it at the outset of a project? Or are you thinking about it after the fact, when someone comes to you and says that something you've built or made needs to be altered? So I think about accommodation as something that we are legally bound to do after the fact, or when somebody discloses that they have some form of disability. We are bound to make our spaces, and in this case our classroom spaces, accessible to those people. Often, we're told how to do that in a kind of legalistic way. But when we're designing for access and thinking about access, what we're really thinking about is inclusion and belonging. And that requires forethought, and planning, and an orientation toward maximal openness.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Activist, artist, scholar, and Georgetown professor Mimi Khúc talked with us about creating a culture of access in the classroom, which goes beyond striving for accessibility before the semester begins by staying open throughout the semester.

MIMI KHÚC: I talk about creating a culture of access in the class. I actually don't use the language of accommodation. I use it in terms of referring to what the University language and policies are. But in the class itself, I talk about wanting to build access and less so accommodation.
And the difference that I like to point out to students is something I learned from a scholar named Margaret Price. And she helped me identify how accommodations tends to assume that your needs are stable, predictable, don't change over time versus access, which requires us to be much more creative. If we think about, what do you need to succeed in this class? What do you need to feel like you can participate in this class? If the question is more open-ended like that, then we become much more creative in answering that question.
And so I want to create a culture in my classroom that students feel like they can talk about their needs, not feel ashamed about having needs. And then figuring out together, collectively-- because access is a collective, community project-- we figure out together how to meet everybody's needs as best as we can and to be flexible throughout.

JOSEPH FISHER: What we see from faculty is a not unreasonable trepidation about talking with students about these things. So they will get an accommodation letter from the ARC. It'll have accommodations listed. And they think, I must do these things. I have no idea how to do these things. But I'm going to find
some way to make it work. Which is good, but it doesn't really get to that understanding of what the need is.

And then there might be other instances where we get— I can't believe you would recommend these things. I'm not doing any of this. What do you mean? And the person who's left out of that conversation is the student.

And that's what we really try to foster as professors— talk with your students. You don't need to talk diagnostically. You should not ask for personal information. But the question, how can this class be accessible to you? I have seen your accommodation letter and know you're working with the ARC. How can I make this class accessible to you? That is the kind of question that I think can establish that kind of intimacy. And I know it's challenging. I know there are limits to what professors can do, particularly in large classes. But any progress that we can make toward these kinds of conversations, I think is good progress.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

JOE KING: As it happens, many of us got a crash course in accessibility during our remote teaching experiences during the height of the pandemic. Joe reminds us that many of those practices extend accessibility to a greater number of students.

JOSEPH FISHER: I think what's missing there is, again, thinking about how the recording can facilitate or build universal design for everybody. And that's part of this too. It's not just about the one student who might need the recording. It's that everyone benefits from it. And the more we think in that way, the less the need for the one accommodation— that that need decreases.

MIMI KHÚC: Some responses to the pandemic have been to become more flexible, to think about needs, to everyone learning how to use Zoom, everyone learning how to provide new ways of accessing material, accessing the teaching, new ways of connecting with each other. Those have been the good things.

But I feel like now that we are moving towards back to in-person, there's a little bit of rolling back some of those gains of accessibility. Punitive attendance policies, punitive participation policies— those are some of the main ones that I'm seeing. So not only can they not Zoom in during class, but even afterwards they can't access anything. And they have no way of making up that material.

Fixed deadlines. I know that's a big— that's something people fight me on. People fight me on attendance policies and deadlines, because I don't take attendance in my classes. And I don't have fixed deadlines. And that freaks a lot of faculty out. But I need flexible deadlines all the time, as a worker, as a person. And I've never had my students exploit flexible deadlines to the point where I feel like they're lying or they're all taking advantage of me. I think they have a fear of being taken advantage of by students.
And what I've noticed is, if you create a classroom space that's mutually respectful and that thinks about everybody's needs, students buy into that. They totally buy into it. And they totally will try to meet the norms of the class and take care of each other. So they will super apologetically ask for an extension. And they feel so bad about it. And when I'm like totally fine-- I'm still grading. You know, it takes me days to grade. So a couple of days is not a big deal at all, because it's not going to create a burden on me to wait a couple of days.

Now, if 80% of my students are asking for like a three week extension, then that becomes a burden on me that doesn't meet my needs. I can't meet that. So we have to negotiate and figure something out. But the willingness--