

# Crossing Without a Bridge: Reconsidering Postsecondary Transition and Outcomes for Individuals with Learning Disabilities

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## INTRODUCTION

Individuals with disabilities (IwD) are enrolling in college at increasing rates, as nearly 11% of all college students identified as having a disability during the 2007-08 school year.<sup>1</sup> The largest increase in college enrollment among IwD was observed among individuals with learning disabilities (IwLD). Between 1998 and 2012, the percentage of IwD attending college increased from 6% to 11%, and the percentage of IwLD increased from 31% to 61%.<sup>2</sup> This trend is also evident at highly selective private liberal arts colleges, such as Occidental (16%), Dickinson (14%) and Smith (14%).<sup>3</sup>

Despite this marked increase, there continues to be important differences in college outcomes between IwLD and their nondisabled peers (hereafter, the college outcome gap). Studies have found that IwLD are more likely to require remedial coursework or tutoring to satisfy the demands of college courses, have greater difficulty understanding course lectures, completing coursework, and performing well on exams.<sup>4</sup> IwLD also tend to earn lower grades, are more likely to transfer and/or drop out, and take longer to graduate.<sup>5</sup> Overall, despite enrolling at comparable rates to their nondisabled peers, IwLD remain less likely to complete their college degree (36% v. 56%).<sup>6</sup> This gap becomes more significant if we consider that research has demonstrated consistent links between obtaining a college degree and better outcomes related to employment, income, access to health care and

social mobility.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, I will attempt to problematize two areas of concern related to the college outcome gap. The first area is the general disconnect between the separate policy contexts that govern secondary and postsecondary education settings. This renders the college transition process what I will characterize as a ‘bridgeless crossing’ that an increasing number of IwLD attempt to traverse each year despite the lack of a dedicated bridge. The second area is the role of secondary special education practice in preparing IwLD to make this bridgeless crossing and achieve successful outcomes in college. I will use select aspects from the work of Michel Foucault in considering the role of alternative placements, practices and relationships in affecting the development of IwLD. I will argue that both points separately represent sources of barriers for IwLD transitioning to college, as well as collectively contribute toward the production and maintenance of the college outcome gap.

#### EDUCATIONAL POLICY CONTEXTS AND DIFFERENCES

Secondary education settings are currently structured by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. ESSA is the most recent iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which has required schools to comply with increasingly rigorous assessment and accountability programming in exchange for federal funding.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, ESSA does not govern educational rights and protections for IwD in secondary education settings. Rather, the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 structures American special education by requiring schools that receive federal funding to provide a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for all students, regardless of disability status. Furthermore, all students that qualify for special educa-

tion services must also receive an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which amounts to a supplementary program that identifies student-specific learning and developmental needs aimed at facilitating participation in the general education curriculum and standardized assessments.<sup>9</sup>

These policies combine to produce highly structured and routine-driven educational settings. Some defining features include class time (6 hours per day), class length (60 minutes), class size (25-30), frequency of assessment (weekly), minimal study time requirements (1-2 hours per day) and adult supervision (constant).<sup>10</sup> Central to this structure is the policy-driven emphasis on the role of standardized assessments as the primary means of measuring student progress and outcomes. ESSA requires IwLD to participate in general education settings that are designed in both curricula and method to prepare students to be assessed through standardized assessments.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, IEPs are designed to support the inclusion and participation of IwLD within general education settings, curricula and assessments.<sup>13</sup> Educational support for IwLD is most commonly delivered via specialized personnel that monitors student development, as well as oversees the implementation of alternative services and settings. Taken together, secondary education policies require the inclusion of IwLD in all educational settings and assessments, while allowing for additional forms of structure, routine and supervision designed to facilitate academic outcomes.

Postsecondary education settings are governed by separate federal policies. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (hereafter, Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 collectively apply to colleges.<sup>14</sup> Section 504 establishes compliance standards related to school admissions, academic modification,

student housing, and university employment practices so as to ensure that colleges that receive federal money are prohibited from offering programs and/or services that either by their design or practice serve to exclude or discriminate against individuals on the basis of disability status.<sup>15</sup> The ADA extends these protections for IwD into the private sector by including mandates that apply to “places of public accommodations,” which applies to institutions that do not receive federal funding.<sup>17</sup> Notably, Section 504 and the ADA are civil rights legislation and are not explicitly designed to structure educational practices.<sup>18</sup> This represents an important difference from secondary education policies that are designed to promote and ensure student outcomes, whereas Section 504 and the ADA are designed to “ensure adults’ access to higher education, but do not guarantee successful outcomes.”<sup>19</sup> In a practical sense, these differences effectively discontinue policy-based special education, which eliminates forms of structure and supervision that were available to IwLD in secondary education settings.

The policies that govern postsecondary education settings produce different forms of organization and practice. College settings typically feature important differences in class time (9-15 hours per week), class length (75-150 minutes), class size (up to 300), frequency of assessment (2-4 per semester), required study time (2 hours per 1 hour of class), and offer a far greater degree of freedom that requires students to self-manage their time.<sup>20</sup> The design and delivery of college courses often requires students to independently adhere to a syllabus that outlines course expectations, assignments, and meeting schedules.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, college courses often require students to complete more complex assignments that require students to implement advanced reading and writing skills over the span of a semester.<sup>23</sup>

Another important difference between these settings is the general shift in overall responsibility from the institution and its practitioners to the individual that requires IwLD to navigate their educational needs and rights in college. This places an emphasis on what scholarship has characterized as self-determination and self-advocacy skills. Broadly, self-determination refers to skills associated with decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, and self-management. Self-advocacy refers to skills associated with the awareness of learning needs, legal rights, and institutional protocol and channels through which to pursue services and supports.<sup>24</sup> Notably, these represent skill areas that are highly supported by institutional personnel in secondary education settings, which requires IwLD to implement skills and competencies they did not need to develop prior to college.

My focus to this point has been to develop the role of education policy in producing the contextual and practical features that are important for IwLD in secondary and postsecondary education settings. That high school is different from college might rightly be considered a truism, or a simple product of common sense. While that logic is generally correct, I think it misses an important point concerning the college outcome gap, which is that policy does not produce anything resembling a bridge that might facilitate the transition to college for IwLD. It should be clear that the legal responsibilities placed on secondary education institutions are productive forms of organization and practice that are not implemented in postsecondary settings. This effectively removes the structure within which IwLD have been successful enough to be admitted to college. It might be argued that this point applies to all students that transition to college. I would respond that IwLD often have unique developmental needs that are not shared by all students, which were directly supported in

secondary education settings. The general disconnect between secondary and postsecondary education policy renders college transition for IwLD a ‘bridgeless crossing:’ that is, a site of perpetual traversal despite the lack of a dedicated bridge. This point also serves to raise the question of the role of secondary special education practice in preparing IwLD to successfully make this crossing. In the following section, I will draw on the work of Michel Foucault in considering secondary special education practice as a potential barrier to successful outcomes in college for IwLD.

### FOUCAULT OVERVIEW

The work of Michel Foucault has been widely used as a framework for interrogating socio-cultural and institutional structures. Central to his analysis was the conceptualization of power/knowledge and discursive systems as co-extensive elements through which historically contingent norms governed the organization and operation of social and institutional life.<sup>26</sup> He developed the split term ‘power/knowledge’ to conceptualize their entwined and co-generative function in establishing and maintaining discursive systems, which serve to disclose fields or domains of rationality that are productive of possible positions, perspectives, and modes of thought and behavior.<sup>28</sup> Discursive systems, for Foucault, are instantiated within discursive practices (or, ‘technical ensembles’) that take the form of formal systems of language and thought, as well as material modes of organization and practice.<sup>29</sup> Such systems are observable in institutionalized disciplinary fields, such as medicine, psychiatry and education.

Discursive practices are designed to produce subjects that embody the normative standards that govern a particular domain of rationality. That is, they are not neutral phenomena, but rather actively take up the individual in order to produce a particular kind of sub-

ject.<sup>30</sup> This is a process that Foucault termed ‘normalization,’ which he identified as the primary way that power/knowledge proliferated and was exercised in social and institutional life.<sup>31</sup> To achieve this, discursive practices were directed on and through the body in what Foucault termed ‘disciplinary techniques,’ which held a dual function within the context of the general process of normalization.<sup>32</sup> First, they functioned to individuate, evaluate and situate individuals within an existing domain of rationality. Second, they functioned to penalize and correct individuals that did not embody performative standards. Taken together, disciplinary techniques represent both “regulatory and corrective mechanisms” that cooperatively function in the normalization of individuals and populations.<sup>33</sup> Notably, both of these functions suggest that individuals can be subject to different forms of organization and practice depending on how they are evaluated and situated within a given socio-institutional domain (i.e. education).

The process and product of normalization as effected through disciplinary techniques centers on Foucault’s conception of the subject. A defining aspect of Foucault’s work is his resistance to positing a “general theory of the subject.”<sup>34</sup> The Foucauldian subject is “not a substance” that exists prior to or in distinction from discursive practices that subsequently act upon it, but rather “it is a form” that is both intelligible and performed within a given historical and material context.<sup>35</sup> Disciplinary techniques are a central way that he understood existing domains of rationality to work on and through people in the production of a certain historically and socio-culturally contingent range of subjectivities. That is, particular subject positions become “thinkable and livable” only within the context of a discursive system that discloses and locates such possibilities.<sup>36</sup> A normalized subject is forged through their ongoing participation in discursive practices that are designed to make them trained, pliable, manipulable and docile.<sup>37</sup>

## FOUCAULT AND SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION

Schools, for Foucault, are similar to other institutions in that they function as sites of normalization; this is evidenced in two related ways. First, schools are designed to produce homogenized student populations through the ongoing implementation of disciplinary techniques designed to condition students to internalize and reproduce institutional norms in material practices and behaviors. Second, the normalizing function of schools also serves to identify deviations to be targeted for correction. In being evaluated and hierarchized within schools, students are codified as a ‘type’ and subjected to placements and practices marked by differences in value.<sup>38</sup> My analysis will seek to situate current special education practice within Foucault’s analysis of schools, with a particular emphasis on how this might affect the normalization of IwLD within secondary education settings.

Secondary education policy can be read to establish and facilitate normalizing practices that closely resemble those identified by Foucault. These practices derive from the establishment of State-wide standards of performance that govern the evaluation of all students and are discernible in several ways. First, the organization of students by age and grade level connotes specific structural expectations regarding student behavior and performance.<sup>39</sup> Second, the organization of both modern classrooms and school buildings function to produce distinct and collective “spaces of surveillance and examination.”<sup>40</sup> Third, the periodized structure and flow of a school day is characterized by “ritualized behaviors and heavily bureaucratized practices,” which further serves to enable ongoing and continuous opportunities for evaluation.<sup>41</sup> Each of these aspects of school organization and practice are linked through their collective contribution towards standardized assessments. That is, they separately represent sites of



micro-assessment that aggregately effect a culture of normalization that culminates in a cumulative assessment. The outcomes of these processes are then preserved in the form of a network of documentation that serves to fix students in their truth, in their essential nature, as they have been evaluated and situated within a particular domain of rationality.<sup>42</sup>

In a Foucauldian sense, these forms of organization and practice place students in a state of ongoing visibility and evaluation and their aim is two-fold. First, they represent a constant policing and reinforcement of the normative standard through the positioning of means of surveillance in the form of material organization and strategic placement of technology and school personnel. That is, the seemingly distinct places and people that comprise a contemporary school function holistically in the sense of a general process of teaching and discipline.<sup>43</sup> Second, they function as a means of identifying deviations from the standard of normality, which engages schools in what Baker has characterized as “the hunt for disability.”<sup>44</sup> It is this second function that discloses the possibility of special education, which simultaneously constructs subject positions characterized by differences in value and licenses corrective disciplinary techniques.

Special education practices function to construct and differentially position IwLD within the context of a contemporary school. First, once identified with a disability, a student is rendered a “subject that can be acted upon” and prescribed alternative placements and practices aimed at remediation.<sup>45</sup> Second, special education practice is a public designation that is discernable to both educators and student peer groups. As a result, IwLD are subjected to multiplied forms of institutional surveillance and supervision and marked in relation to their social peers. Specifically, IwLD are situated in a pejorative and

marginalized subject position that connotes a sense of abnormality through the implementation of alternative placements, practices and relationships that cross academic and social boundaries. That is, IwLD are constructed as subjects and situated with a domain of rationality in a way that connotes a particular identity and relation to places and social others.<sup>46</sup> Considered together, the normalization of IwLD is differentiated from their nondisabled peers because it occurs from a distinct subject position that connotes differences in ability and value. That is, IwLD are normalized relative to their academic and social positioning within a school.

This point carries potentially significant consequences for the normalization of IwLD. In one sense, the construction and placement of the subject position occupied by IwLD is an effect of power/knowledge relations that produce and maintain discursive systems that govern contemporary schools. In another sense, IwLD are encouraged to internalize and replicate institutional norms, or enact a form of “autocolonization” in which the individual assumes the role of external disciplinary techniques.<sup>47</sup> It is this aspect of normalization that may be different for IwLD because their development occurs from a position of abnormality. In particular, this development may be productive of unique institutional competencies, by which I mean awarenesses, skills and strategies that are developed in relation to their subject positioning and deployed across school settings and relationships. Put plainly, I am suggesting that there is a hidden curriculum enforced via secondary special education practices that train IwLD to think, see and act in relation to a specific institutionalized subject position.

Here I will attempt to provisionally develop what I mean by institutional competencies by offering examples and contexts in which they may be discernible. Awarenesses represent an institutional at-

tunement in which IwLD perceive the valuative significance bound up with educational labeling and the alternative practices that flow from it. These can inform how students reflexively understand themselves, as well as their relationships with peers and teachers. Skills represent forms of interaction and non-interaction in the sense of what to do and what not to do across educational settings. Possible examples include how IwLD orient and comport themselves within different types of classrooms that may be comprised of peers and teachers of various social and institutional status. Strategies represent the combination of context-specific awarenesses and skills that inform modes of comportment that IwLD deploy across educational settings. These may inform how IwLD strategically navigate both general and special education settings that are comprised of peers and personnel of various social and institutional status. Considered together, institutional competencies denote the aggregation of social attunements and performances as they are structured and normalized within secondary education settings. I have argued that IwLD are differentially positioned within schools, which is productive of a differential normalization that includes the development of unique institutional competencies that are not shared by their non-disabled peers. Moreover, these competencies may not be recognized by school personnel, nor accounted for within policy that governs educational practice and curricula.

If correct, this can affect transition for IwLD to postsecondary institutions that are organized and operated according to different policies. Specifically, the constructed and marginalized subject position that determined the normalization of IwLD in secondary education settings no longer exists in college. That is, the alternative placements, practices and relationships are no longer enforced by the institution in a way that would mark and differentially position IwLD. A further consequence is that the institutional competencies that IwLD de-

ployed toward successful outcomes in secondary settings may no longer be effective in college. That is, the awarenesses, skills and strategies that were developed and deployed from a marginalized position to navigate settings and people of various social and institutional status in secondary settings may not facilitate similar outcomes in college. Put another way, the hidden curriculum that trained IwLD to be successful students in K-12 settings may not transition effectively to college because the institutional structures and conditions of success have changed.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have attempted to problematize two related areas in relation to the existing college outcome gap. First, current educational policy that separately governs secondary and postsecondary institutions are productive of radically different practical and legal contexts that can affect the outcomes of IwLD. I have characterized this context as a 'bridgeless crossing,' which is meant to connote a sense in which it represents a point of continual traversal despite the lack of a policy-based bridge that would facilitate this process for IwLD. Second, the work of Foucault was used to argue that secondary special education practices function to construct IwLD within a marginalized subject position from which they are differentially normalized, which includes the development and deployment of unique institutional competencies. Taken together, I have argued that both points contribute to the production and maintenance of the existing college outcome gap.

I think both areas function together to make the college transition process difficult for IwLD in unique ways. The legal and practical structure of secondary education is designed to facilitate student development and achievement outcomes in narrowly prescribed areas

(e.g., standardized assessments), which arguably does not include the practical knowledge and experience required to navigate environments and relationships in college settings. I have noted already that transition to a postsecondary policy context effectively removes the legal and practical structure in which IwLD were successful enough to gain admission to college. Moreover, it effectively removes the institutionalized subject position from which IwLD have learned to orient and comport themselves within a school. The significance of this change is amplified by considering that IwLD potentially develop unique institutional competencies that facilitated successful outcomes in secondary education settings that are rendered obsolete and/or ineffective in postsecondary settings. That is, the removal of an institutionalized subject position (e.g., IwLD) alters how colleges evaluate and engage with such students which, by extension, alters how such students must comport themselves to achieve successful outcomes. Taken together, the institutional structures that IwLD have learned to successfully navigate from a marginalized position in secondary education settings radically changes when they transition to college. Specifically, the relationship between institutional positioning and competency have both been changed as they concern IwLD. Collectively, these points suggest that the policy disconnect and secondary special education practices represent an aggregate source of barriers to successful college outcomes for IwLD.

If accepted, my position might contribute toward the development of scholarship and policy that address college transition for students with disabilities. Scholars might give greater attention to the materiality of schooling as it is effected through education policy that concerns students with special needs: that is, the material arrangements and practices that inform sociological dimensions of education that are often omitted from the conceptualization of student devel-

opment and college preparedness. In particular, empirical research concerning how special education practices differentially position and normalize students with disabilities would be valuable in fleshing out the position developed here. Furthermore, it would contribute toward nuancing our understanding of how students with disabilities are affected by policy-based environments and practices as it concerns the college outcome gap.

Scholarship along these lines may facilitate a reconsideration of policy that governs the role of special education practice in differentially positioning students with special needs in secondary settings: in particular, the use of pre-established standards of age-appropriate student performance as the primary mechanism through which the identification of IwLD and their subsequent remediation is mobilized and effected.<sup>48</sup> In a Foucauldian sense, such standards function to ascribe value to human difference, thereby delineating the “external frontier of the abnormal” that constructs and positions IwLD within an educational institution.<sup>49</sup> Reconsidering how institutions interpret and act upon human variation might contribute toward transforming current practice and, by extension, affect what I have argued to be the differential positioning and development of IwLD.

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