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Minding the Support Gap

Complementing Traditional Accommodations With Inclusive Classroom Assessment Practices

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Abstract: This article outlines a series of inclusive assessment practices to help mitigate the shortcomings of the academic accommodations system and support students with both documented and undocumented disabilities as well as their non-disabled peers. I argue that because of the inequities that characterize the accommodations system, including the barriers that prevent students from gaining accommodations, faculty members across the disciplines should develop inclusive assessment practices so that students do not have to depend solely on the formal accommodations system. The inclusive assessment practices detailed in the article provide students with autonomy, choice, and flexibility. As such, these assessment practices already have the potential to meet the needs of students with a range of disabilities and particularly those with disabilities that have been termed *invisible*, such as learning disabilities, ADHD, psychiatric disabilities, and neurodivergence. I contend that because writing program administrators have relationships with faculty across the disciplines, they are well-positioned to guide faculty in rebuilding their assessment practices. The article concludes by considering how these inclusive assessment practices may potentially enhance recruitment and retention efforts.

Keywords: alternative assessment practices, ungrading, disability, neurodivergence, academic accommodations

As the 2024–2025 school year was getting underway, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published a controversial article by Alan Levinovitz (2024) titled "Are Colleges Getting Disability Accommodations All Wrong?," which incensed a lot of people in and beyond the disability justice community (Aftab, 2024; Bolmarcich, 2024; Jones & Gauthier-Mamaril, 2024; Von Bergen, 2024; Wolf, 2024). In the article, Levinovitz criticizes the academic accommodations system, describing the central issue as follows: "The equity problem should be clear: If accommodations help everyone, and we relax the diagnostic criteria necessary for securing them, wealthier students will experience even more of an advantage, which is precisely what we are seeing" (para. 47). Other problems Levinovitz points out include questionable diagnoses; the use of generic, standardized accommodations; the arbitrariness of common accommodations; and the lack of data supporting the effectiveness of these interventions. Although I take issue with the call for increased restrictions within the accommodations process, Levinovitz nonetheless raises relevant equity issues, several of which are germane to my discussion below about the financial cost of accommodations, the labor involved in acquiring accommodations, and the generic nature of the most common accommodations. I am surprised, though, that Levinovitz thinks so narrowly about solutions, none of which involves his role as a teacher. There are pedagogical methods to address these concerns. If one begins with Levinovitz's (2024) premise that the accommodations system has become overly liberal and lenient, thereby blurring the distinction between students who genuinely need accommodations and those who have greater access to them, then the most productive approach, particularly in pursuit of immediate change, would be to develop pedagogies and assessment practices designed to support as many students as possible. Inclusive assessment practices, like those explored in this special issue, have the potential not just to fill the support gap that has emerged as a result of the current academic accommodations system but also to work toward creating meaningful access for all kinds of learners. Given the field's interdisciplinary nature, commitment to disability studies, and expertise in writing assessment, writing studies is positioned to take the lead on this issue. Writing program administrators (WPAs), in particular, are uniquely positioned to take this on, given their relationships across campus with faculty who teach writing courses in their respective disciplines.

This essay, then, details a crucial exigency for implementing inclusive assessment practices: the imperfect accommodations system. In what follows, I outline a series of inclusive assessment methods that WPAs can share with faculty across the disciplines to better support all students, including (but not limited to) those with documented and undocumented disabilities. I also detail how these inclusive assessment practices may even increase retention and recruitment rates, particularly for students suffering from psychiatric disabilities, such as anxiety.

The Imperfect Academic Accommodations System

Before focusing on how pedagogical practices, and writing assessment practices, in particular, can mitigate the equity issues that plague the current accommodations system, I want to spend some time detailing that system, including its shortfalls surrounding equity. I find these shortfalls especially worrisome because of the student population with which I work. I teach and administer the writing program at the Waterbury campus of the University of Connecticut, one of four regional campuses. This campus has recently been designated a Minority Serving Institution (MSI), both as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) and boasts an enrollment of close to 60% first-

generation students (Institutional Research, n.d.). These populations of students are hit hardest by many of the barriers that characterize the current accommodations system (Weis & Bittner, 2022). Still, these barriers have implications for the most vulnerable students across all campuses, including at two-year colleges, where the percentage of accommodations has remained stable among students for more than a decade while the country's most selective and expensive private postsecondary institutions have seen significant increases (Weis & Bittner, 2022).

The list of barriers is long. Not only are there often waiting lists to undergo the diagnostic testing required by most postsecondary institutions to secure accommodations, but the tests themselves "cost between $2,500 and $7,000—and health insurance rarely covers any of it" (Ezarik, 2024, para. 3). Contributing to the Student Voice section of *The Hechinger Report*, Jalen Woodard (2022), an undergraduate at Amherst College, recently described their experience navigating the expensive and frustrating accommodations system at their school:

> My college, like many others, requires medical proof of a learning disorder before providing extended time or any other academic accommodations. When I inquired, I was directed to the college's understaffed counseling center. After waiting two weeks for a response, I learned that staff were not qualified to conduct neuropsychological testing to evaluate me for possible learning disorders, such as dyslexia or ADHD . . . I also learned that despite my high-financial-need status, I would have to pay for my own evaluation, which averages $3,000 to $3,500 in my state. When I tried to make an appointment with a local specialist, I was told I would be added to a six-month-long waitlist. (para. 5)

Unfortunately, Woodard's experience is all too common. As is the case at my own institution and at Woodard's, the office to which students with disabilities are referred is often not the same office that does the diagnostic testing, thereby adding yet another step in the process that creates a second, very extended waiting period.

Disability studies scholar Emily Krebs (2019) has provided a helpful overview of how these barriers are especially significant when we think in terms of students' intersectional identities, including their socioeconomic class, race, and disability:

> While some college students and/or their families can afford testing, others altogether cannot [so they cannot get accommodations]. This means that disabled students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to succeed than their wealthy peers, adding a layer of difficulty to the already dismal numbers of students with disabilities finishing baccalaureate degrees. Furthermore, being from a lower-class background means that poor students with disabilities are more likely to be seen as "moochers" on the system than their wealthy peers, thus making them more susceptible to scrutiny when they receive accommodations. ("Class and the Cost of Documentation" section)

The stigma surrounding accommodations, including this sense that students might be seen as "moochers," is enough of a deterrent for many students, and certain racial and ethnic groups are less likely to disclose a disability because of this and related cultural stigmas (Bailey & Mobley, 2019, p. 25). Additionally, as Pearson and Boskovich (2019) point out, "due to negative perception of disability" students with disabilities may choose to "assimilate in order to maintain a positive image and ensure smooth transaction with able-bodied individuals" (para. 10). Students with disabilities are concerned both about their appearance to their peers who might "think that having a disability is unacceptable in some way" (Marshak et al., 2010, p. 156), as well as the perceptions of their instructors and other adults on campus on whom they do not want to place "an extra

burden" (Lyman et al., 2016, p. 128). Some students don't disclose their disability because they do not want to seem less capable than their non-disabled peers and many have a "deep desire for independence and being self-reliant" (Hong, 2015, p. 218). This range of deterrents, including the cost of obtaining a diagnosis, the long waiting periods for getting that diagnosis, and the stigma attached to accommodations, lead many students who have accommodations in high school to go without them in college, whether a two-year or four-year college. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2022) reports that just "about one-third of students who did have a disability while attending college informed their college" (para. 1), which means that "the majority of eligible college students with disabilities do not register with their campus disability service to receive accommodations or supports" (para. 3).[1] All of this adds up to many students with disabilities but without documentation.

There are certainly ways to increase the effectiveness of the accommodations system and mitigate the equity issues that plague it. For example, expert in critical disability studies M. Remi Yergeau (2012), has pointed out that "our institutional conceptions of accommodation are predicated on problemed bodies and spaces rather than problemed infrastructures and practices" (para. 5). Yergeau critiques the accommodations system because "to accommodate is to retrofit; it is to assume normative bodies as default and to build spaces and infrastructures around those normative default bodies; it is to deal with deviant bodily and spatial conditions as they bubble out at the seams" (para. 5). Similarly, in her most recent book *Crip Spacetime*, Margaret Price (2024), a scholar of rhetoric, disability studies, and qualitative methods, encourages those at institutions of higher education to turn "attention away from individual disabled bodies and the obsession with 'accommodating' those bodies, focusing instead on relations, systems, objects, and discourses" (p. 5). Price clarifies that she is "not against accommodations as a present-day, practical measure" (p. 5), but rather the "*idea* of accommodation" (p. 6, itals. in original) because this idea depends on "being able to predict and fix one's disability" (p. 6). I agree with both Yergeau and Price regarding the problematic assumptions about disability that are built into the accommodations system. The kind of overhaul that the three of us might like to imagine is outside my area of expertise, though. Moreover, the sheer scope of this work is staggering precisely because it must address "problemed infrastructures and practices" (Yergeau, 2012, para. 5).

I am interested, instead, in what we can do now for the students currently in our institutions, students with disabilities, some with documentation and many without, who are struggling. As such, the remainder of this essay will focus on forms of assessment that have been developed by those in and adjacent to writing studies to address the inequities inherent in more traditional assessment practices, some of which have been outlined in essays such as "The Case Against Grades" (2011) and "From Degrading to De-Grading" by Alfie Kohn (1999), one of the most vociferous critics of traditional assessment practices. The ungrading practices discussed below are alternatives to traditional practices that Kohn's research shows do great harm to students. While these ungrading practices don't directly address the accommodations system, they can be harnessed to mitigate the support gap that is a result of the shortcomings of that system. These assessment practices not only emphasize flexibility, a key feature that Price notes is missing from the "*idea* of accommodations" (p. 6, emphasis in original), but also offer an alternative to retrofitting, which, as Yergeau points out, is the very foundation of the accommodations system.

1 As of March 2026, this NCES press release has been removed from its government website. *The Wayback Machine* recorded the last appearance of the press release as November 27, 2025.

From The Ground Up: Options for Proactive Rather than Reactive Assessment Practices

The contributions to this special issue value inclusive assessment practices that are proactive rather than reactive. More commonly, though, instead of building inclusive assessment practices from the ground up, faculty members retrofit their practices (Browning, 2014). Disability studies scholar Jay Dolmage (2008) explains that to retrofit "is to add a component or accessory to something that has already been manufactured or built. This retrofit does not necessarily make the product function, does not necessarily fix a faulty product, but it acts as a sort of correction" (p. 20). Retrofitting, by definition, is not sufficient. It may put a Band-Aid on the issue, but it's not a pedagogically-sound approach. "Rather than simply retrofitting our universities, our classroom spaces, and our pedagogies," explains Ella R. Browning (2014), "we must actively integrate disability, in thoughtful and critical ways, into all aspects of our teaching" (p. 100). Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann (2008) similarly describe the need to rebuild rather than retrofit.

In many cases, faculty are retrofitting because they believe this is what is expected of them and, moreover, they are unaware of any other options, such as "actively integrat[ing] disability in thoughtful and critical ways" (Browning, 2014, p. 100) or rebuilding rather than retrofitting. Faculty are doing precisely what they have been asked to do by the campus unit from which the request comes: make a change in response to a request to better support a student's needs. What most faculty don't realize, though, is that the accommodations system perpetuates the inequities that plague the education system, which means that only a small percentage of students with disabilities are able to secure accommodations while, as noted above, "the majority of eligible college students with disabilities do not register with their campus disability service to receive accommodations or supports" (Blasey et al., 2023, p. 1891). The significant and serious shortcomings of the accommodations system remain invisible to faculty at large who tend to have very little interaction with or understanding of the system.

This limited understanding of the accommodations system is at least in part responsible for faculty's widespread dependence on retrofitting their assignments and assessment practices as opposed to developing them with an eye toward inclusivity. If, after all, only a handful of students need accommodations each semester, then why create an entire course with these students in mind? This position is misguided, of course, because these students represent only the students with documented disabilities. I believe that faculty, however, are largely unaware that for various reasons, such as those outlined above, a huge swath of postsecondary students do not seek or secure accommodations. Comparing these ongoing attempts to accommodate individual students to Whack-A-Mole (the popular carnival game in which the player whacks each electronic mole that pops up as others continue to pop up around them), Dolmage (2008) captures the never-ending cycle of these retrofitted accommodations: "When disability pops up, we slap it with a quick accommodation, and we just hope it doesn't pop up again. The nature of 'retrofitted' accommodation requires that we make no lasting changes to our pedagogy or the culture of the university. Just whack it whenever it pops up" (p. 91).

Armed with this data about the inequities that characterize the accommodations system and the resulting support gap, as well as the problems with retrofitted accommodations, WPAs can introduce faculty across the disciplines to ways of making the kinds of lasting changes to their pedagogy to which Dolmage alludes. Building inclusive writing assessments and pedagogical

practices from the ground up, practices that anticipate the needs of students with both documented and undocumented disabilities, is a far more sustainable approach. In developing courses with these students in mind, faculty are also making their courses more accessible for students, generally, since multiple groups often benefit from practices initially intended for people with disabilities. A timely example of this is closed captioning, which was initially developed for deaf or hard of hearing viewers. A 2022 report by Netflix revealed that 40% of its global users use closed captions all the time, while 80% switch them on at least once per month (Cunningham, 2023). In fact, using captioning is becoming the norm for many younger viewers with 59% of Gen Z survey respondents and 52% of millennials indicating they use subtitles, according to YPulse (as cited in Rubin, 2023). Because of this demand, in 2023 Netflix introduced options allowing viewers to customize the appearance of closed captions, including the capability to adjust the size and style of the text. Closed captions make for a better viewing experience for many viewers beyond those who are deaf or hard of hearing, much in the same way that inclusive assessment practices benefit more groups than just those students with disabilities.

Mitigating the Shortfalls of the Academic Accommodations System Through Ungrading

The field of writing studies has a long commitment to student-centered pedagogies, including the development of equitable forms of writing assessment. When the COVID-19 pandemic underscored and exacerbated the racial inequities across our institutions, many postsecondary instructors sought to revise assessment practices that were impeding learning and disproportionately harmful to students of color and raciolinguistically diverse students. This attention to racial inequities laid the groundwork for attention to other inequities, including how the growing number of students with disabilities might be neglected by mainstream assessment practices.

One form of assessment that emerged before 2020 but gained much more traction because of the spotlight on racial disparities in America is labor-based contract grading. This form of assessment has been popularized most consistently by scholar-teacher Asao Inoue (2019, 2023). Labor-based contract grading falls under the larger umbrella of what is often called ungrading. Ungrading approaches to assessment don't do away with grades altogether, but rather "rais[e] an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice" (Stommel, 2024, p. 327) by minimizing or eliminating the use of *traditional* grades, such as the A–F scale. Ungrading practices focus, instead, on levels of labor and engagement, meaningful feedback from the instructor and/or other students, as well as self-reflective forms of assessment. These practices also often foreground compassion and empathy. Simply put, the premise of ungrading is that learning happens whether or not students are graded and, moreover, that learning is often deeper when traditional grades are minimized or not part of the equation at all. In addition to labor-based contract grading, other assessment practices that fall under the larger umbrella of ungrading include engagement-based grading; specifications grading; peer and self-assessment; and e-portfolio grading. As I describe in more detail below, each one of these forms of assessment has the potential to meet the needs of disabled students and particularly the increasing number of students with what are often called invisible disabilities, such as learning disabilities, ADHD, psychiatric disabilities, and neurodivergence.[2] Because these

2 Certainly, the needs of students with all kinds of disabilities cannot be addressed through any single approach to assessment, no matter how inclusive. Moreover, I do not mean to homogenize students with disabilities by referring

approaches to assessment foreground student choice, they proactively create space for students to meet their own needs within the structure of the course, replacing the need for many forms of reactive, retrofitted accommodations. The support students receive is therefore more meaningful, effective, and responsive than the formal, often one-size-fits-all, accommodations process.

The list of assessment practices below is certainly not exhaustive, but it considers how some of the most common forms of ungrading can help mitigate the failings of the accommodations system. I focus on these practices specifically because they appear most regularly (although sometimes by slightly different names) across recent publications that focus on ungrading, such as Susan D. Blum's (2020) *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, the special issue of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* on alternative grading practices (Schwarz et al., 2024), and the special issue of *Pedagogy* on ungrading (Carillo, 2024). The assessment practices discussed below also reflect those that appear most consistently across the pedagogical support pages associated with postsecondary institutions, usually located on either the page for the institution's center for teaching excellence (or its equivalent) or on pages connected to an institution's library. A full-scale search of all of these would be impossible, so to determine patterns, I reviewed sites from institutions around the country, including those connected to small liberal arts colleges; large public and private universities, including R-1 institutions; as well community colleges. Instructors will ultimately need to decide which ungrading practice (or combination thereof) suits them, and they can do so by being sensitive to their local context, including the assessment parameters established by their programs and the student populations they teach. Whether an instructor values revision, extensive instructor feedback, regular peer-to-peer interaction, and/or transparency in grading, these choices should be intentional and align with broader pedagogical goals and the specific needs of one's student population.

Contract Grading

In the developing field of composition, Peter Elbow (1968) emerged as a pioneer, publishing "A Method for Teaching English," wherein he outlines an approach to including students in both the development of the curriculum and in assessment practices. Although grading contracts (sometimes called learning contracts) continued to vary widely over the next several decades, as they do today, it was not until the 1990s that instructors began to consistently and deliberately situate these contracts as "instruments of emancipation" (Cowan, 2020, "1991-2000: Contracts for Classroom Equality" section) and a means to more socially just and anti-oppressive teaching and grading practices. Perhaps the most widely discussed forms of grading contracts are Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow's hybrid contract, in which all students begin with a B grade (and can earn a higher grade based on the quality of their writing) and Asao Inoue's (2019) labor-based grading contract, in which students' grades are based solely on the amount of labor they put into the coursework with no attention to quality.

Inoue's earliest grading contracts, instituted in 2004, were based on Danielewicz and Elbow's (2009) hybrid contracts. Over time, though, Inoue (2019) found that the hybrid model did not work in his institutional context and he began exploring how to "use quantity judgments only in all contract grade distinctions" (p. 65), which led to his use of "a purely labor-based system that

to them as a group. There are, of course, important differences among students with disabilities. My focus in this article, however, is the increasing number of students with what have been termed "invisible" disabilities (Tobin & Behling, 2018, p. 65), which itself is not a homogenous group either.

only uses quantity of labor, no matter its products, as a way to calculate final course grades" (p. 73). This method, which brackets quality entirely, and for which Inoue is most well-known, is documented in the first and second editions of *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. In response to critiques of this assessment practice because of its potential negative effects on students with disabilities, Inoue (2023) followed up these editions with *Cripping Labor-Based Grading for More Equity in Literacy Courses* wherein he outlines a more inclusive labor-based contract approach. He writes that "one of the biggest and easiest ways of cripping labor in LBG [labor-based grading] can be to make the default grade in the contract the highest grade possible in your institution's system" (p. 115). This marks a revision of his earlier contracts, which always defaulted to a "B" no matter the institutional context. Inoue also describes other revisions he has made to his practices, such as the incorporation of more flexibility throughout, including in how contract negotiations work. While I appreciate these efforts, what emerges ultimately is a retrofitting of Inoue's original form of assessment rather than a new assessment practice that centers disabled students from the start.

Although scholars have raised questions about the effectiveness of Inoue's assessment approach for students with disabilities, many ungrading models extend the principles of contract grading in an effort to create inclusive assessment practices, as detailed below. At its best, contract grading can benefit students with certain disabilities because this assessment practice allows students to contract for a specific grade and clearly outlines what students must do to earn that grade. The transparency goes both ways: the teacher is clear about expectations, and the student is clear about the grade they want to earn. There are also options for negotiations built in that give students (and instructors) opportunities to change the terms of the contract, lending flexibility to the assessment practice without the need for external accommodations.

Engagement-Based (Contract) Grading

While labor-based grading contracts have been put forth as a means to address racial inequities, some scholars have pointed out that in addition to falling short of this goal (Wolfe, 2024), labor-based grading contracts are detrimental to students with documented and undocumented disabilities (Zimmerman & Kryger, 2020). As such, I developed engagement-based contract grading, which I now call engagement based-grading (Carillo, 2024), as a response to the shortfalls of labor-based grading. Like labor-based grading, engagement-based grading brackets quality, but it offers a more inclusive approach to assessing students' writing because it does not depend on a single standard. As I have argued elsewhere, labor-based contract grading merely substitutes one standard for another—labor for quality—as if labor is a neutral measure, which it is not. People labor differently, and an assessment practice based on a single, static, normative, and neurotypical notion of labor is simply not inclusive (Carillo, 2021). Engagement is more flexible than labor. Rather than instantiating a single standard, engagement-based grading offers a range of ways that students might engage with the course material. Instead of being given a series of assignments and an estimated amount of time to spend on each, as is the case with many labor-based contract approaches, students choose their forms of engagement and are assessed on those. Students might choose to respond to an assignment by writing a traditional alphabetic response, creating an audio recording, or via an infographic, for example. Engagement-based grading not only recognizes the different ways students engage with course materials, as well as the different ways they create knowledge, but it assesses students based on the choices they make rather than penalizing them

for creating knowledge in the way that best suits them. Moreover, I don't assess students' ability to submit their work by a specific date. I honor crip time by allowing students to turn in their assignments until the final day of class rather than holding them to strict deadlines. Finally, in my iteration of engagement-based grading, I grade every assignment out of one-hundred points and weigh them all equally so that students' grades aren't brought down if they don't succeed in one of the course components. On each assignment students are graded on two forms of engagement. They are given fifty points for completion with the other fifty points based on what I call intellectual engagement. The intellectual engagement criteria changes based on each assignment, but I am more interested in whether I see a student addressing the criteria than the quality of their work. This more inclusive assessment practice, which entrusts students with autonomy and choice, honors crip time, and gives students credit simply for submitting their assignment has revealed its capacity to address some of the issues that formal accommodations are meant to address.

Since I have started using engagement-based grading, the most common feedback students share about this assessment practice is that it reduces their anxiety and stress levels.[3] The feedback I collected through an optional online survey, which was determined by my university's IRB to fall outside of human subjects research, is consistent across curricular levels and across courses in the English major and the General Education curriculum. One student explained: "This approach in grading helped me a lot. I currently work 40-60 hours a week. I take care of my siblings as well as help my mother who is on disability. I have to work to help maintain the mortgage. Having this flexibility and grading scale made me less stressed. I did not feel pressured at all." A student with a learning disability remarked on how this assessment practice was especially supportive: "It makes me motivated to do the work because I know I'm gonna get half credit for even trying. The flexibility in this class has helped me a lot with my learning disability. It reduces stress knowing that I don't have to rush to get an assignment done." A third student described how ungrading was useful later in the semester: "As the semester progressed, I was getting very burnout and exhausted. Therefore, the system of grading helped me to still contribute by having flexibility of deadlines." Within my engagement-based grading framework, students do not need accommodations for submitting work late or for extra time on in-class assignments. Neither do they need an accommodation asking me to develop an alternative assignment for them. All of this is always already built into my course via engagement-based grading.

Specifications Grading

Specifications grading, promoted most notably by Linda B. Nilson, Founding Director of Clemson University's Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation, includes three main principles, although Nilson encourages instructors to adjust this method to their needs. First, all individual assignments are graded on a Pass/Fail or Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory basis. Second, assignments are designed in bundles. Students demonstrate that they have achieved the course's specific learning goals by completing the related bundle. Third, final grades are determined by students' accomplishments in a hierarchy of these assignment bundles. In this schema, the completion of course bundles is linked to traditional course grades. Like other ungrading practices, specifications grading provides flexibility in how students demonstrate their understanding in that

3 As Tara Wood (2017) points out, "the connections between disability and anxiety are complex . . . For some students, anxiety is their disability; for others, it might be a symptom; and for still others, it might just be anxiety (unrelated to a diagnosed disability)" (p. 270).

they choose the bundles they wish to complete depending on the grade they want to earn. In specifications grading, mastery is central, and students are graded on the specifications associated with reaching mastery in relation to the material. Students are graded on whether they meet, didn't meet, or go beyond the specification, and are offered extensive feedback. Students are also given opportunities for revisions at regular intervals. As long as the specifications themselves are designed with accessibility in mind, this flexibility allows students to adapt the course to their needs often with no formal accommodations necessary.

Students tend to appreciate specifications grading. Emily Esola and Joe Packowski, for example, have reported positive reactions from students at Indiana University. One of Packowski's students noted that "It was so much more relevant than striving for a random number between 1 and 100" (para. 6) and Esola reports that "the most frequent feedback she receives is that students appreciated that this grading system prioritizes their learning over grades and that this system includes flexibility policies like revise and resubmit that support them in their progress" (Kurz, 2023, para. 7).

The fact that this approach prioritizes learning over grades is worth underscoring not only because it comes up throughout studies of students' perceptions of specifications grading (Elkins, 2016; Streifer et al., 2024) but because it addresses the concern that alternative grading practices like specifications grading undermine course rigor. In her book *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*, Nilson (2015) lists fifteen benefits of specifications grading, the first of which is "uphold academic standards" (p. 9). Faculty members often fear that moving away from traditional grading practices means sacrificing standards. For Nilson, these standards seem synonymous with "rigor," the term that appears in the title of her book and in the description of the standards themselves (p. 9). While the value of rigor is debatable, specifications grading and other ungrading practices do not signal a dilution of one's assessment methods, but rather an embracing of a more inclusive and transparent approach that has the potential to benefit all students.

In fact, several studies, many of which focus on students' writing and communication abilities, indicate that students achieve more in courses across the curriculum wherein specifications grading is used. In a comparative study of a specifications-graded and traditionally graded biology courses, Robin Pals-Rylaarsdam and Cheryl Heinz (2016) reported increased student achievement as it related to content and skills-based course objectives. Similarly, Sanft et al. (2021) found "evidence for improved student outcomes, especially among middle to low performing students" (p. 34) in five sections of undergraduate computer science courses, and Grace M. Mirsky (2018) noted that computer science students in two sections of a technical writing course "responded very well to this grading strategy . . . by significantly improving their writing quality over the course of the semester" (p. 104). Additionally, Priya V. Prasad (2020) found improvements in students' development of mathematical thinking skills and their ability to communicate these ideas in writing when specifications grading was used as the course's assessment method.

Studies have also shown that specifications grading helps to motivate students (Vitale & Concepción, 2021) and reduce their stress around grades (Henriksen et al., 2020). A course that uses specifications grading is already built to adapt to individual students' needs at least in terms of the course's assessments. As discussed above, students choose how they will demonstrate their learning by choosing the bundles they wish to complete. Students also have ample opportunities to revise and resubmit their work, and students receive regular, extensive feedback from their

instructors, all important features of an assessment practice for disabled students, as well as their non-disabled peers.

Self-Assessment and Peer-to-Peer Assessment

While self-assessment and peer-to-peer assessment approaches can certainly stand on their own, I pair them because they complement each other, which is why many instructors incorporate them into a single class. These forms of ungrading admittedly put more of the work of assessment in students' hands, which may create additional stress or barriers for some students, depending on their disability, but these assessment approaches, especially when taken together, underscore the value of collaboration. In so doing, the close-knit classroom community that is created as a result can help mitigate the onus put on students. Moreover, students who may feel isolated in the classroom because of a disability feel more included because everyone's abilities are valued and everyone is participating in the assessment process.

While Cathy Davidson introduced the concept of what she called peer-to-peer assessment almost fifteen years ago, in the last few years other teacher-scholars have returned to the concept of peer evaluation and have combined that with contract grading assessment approaches. In "Contract Grading and Peer Review," for example, Christina Katopodis describes her use of grading contracts that are focused on peer review (Katopodis & Davidson 2020). She incorporates what she calls "self-evaluations" and "peer evaluations" into an American literature course (p. 117). The close relationship between the self and peer forms of evaluation is evident in the questions appearing in the self-evaluations, which focus just as much on the individual as the individual's role within the group: "How prepared were you to work in groups? Were you a good listener? Were you a good volunteer?" (p. 118). Katopodis situates these kinds of surveys as opportunities for "self-discovery" and reports that they "helped students realize that judgment and feedback are not criticisms but the beginning of really learning" (Katopodis & Davidson, 2020, p. 118). Moreover, explains Katopodis, "These insights about themselves helped prepare students for evaluating their peers thoughtfully, generously, and fairly," which was done through a template that "depersonalized their evaluations and make them part of the collective learning process of the class" (p. 119). Katopodis notes that students worked with the same five or six students in static groups throughout the semester to foster community and allow students "to give more detailed qualitative feedback in their evaluations" (p. 117). Another benefit of the static groups, explains Katopodis, is that "students are given more flexibility (one bad week is not enough to condemn a student when a good week can offset the bad)" (p. 117). All students have the potential to benefit from this assessment structure, but such a structure is especially helpful to students with certain disabilities, documented or undocumented, that would otherwise depend on formal accommodations to provide a safety net. In this case, the safety net is already built into the course through this form of assessment wherein "one bad week is not enough to condemn a student" (p. 117). Moreover, such an approach that decenters an instructor's authority and foregrounds the role of peers and community can reduce students' anxiety whether that anxiety is their disability, a symptom of their disability, or anxiety that is unrelated to a diagnosed disability (Wood, 2017, p. 270).

Cheryl Hogue Smith uses what she calls "self-guided labor-based contracts," which, like Katopodis' approach, is a self-assessment practice with labor-based contracts as its foundation (Gabay & Smith, 2024, p. 400). In Smith's first-year writing class, students can choose this self-

guided labor-based (SGLB) option or specifications grading. If they choose the self-grading option students grade themselves on all components of the course (e.g., homework, projects), and "if they minimally completed all assignments for the class and provided at least one revision for the unit papers/project (regardless of quality), their grade would be a C" (p. 400). If they do more than the minimum, students earn a higher grade. Smith explains that "students didn't need to choose which grading option they wanted until the end of the semester. Ultimately, these two grading options seemed to work because *having the option to self-grade* helped reduce the anxiety students often feel about making a decent grade in the class; they knew they had the choice to remove the teacher-as-evaluator from the equation, which afforded them the space to focus on something other than their grade" (pp. 400–401). One of Smith's students indicated as much in their survey, noting that "just having a choice can be 'stress relieving'" (p. 403). While ungrading approaches tend to have flexibility built into them, Smith builds in even more flexibility, giving students the opportunity to choose between two forms of assessment. Although Smith concedes that some students are not entirely comfortable taking an active role in determining how they will be graded, calling it "a bit strange" (p. 401), Hogue reports that, overall, the options she gives students in her classes "seem to reduce the stigma of grading that students often experience throughout the semester" (p. 402). Hogue explains further, "we discuss the two grading options all semester so they never lose sight of the fact they have control over their grade. And that alone helps alleviate grading anxiety" (p. 402).

Courses that incorporate peer and self-evaluations give students a great deal of flexibility in terms of the choices they have throughout the course. Students often choose how they will be assessed, including the criteria for that assessment, as well as how they will assess each other's work. Students can choose how they will share and receive feedback from their peers and even which peers they work with. If students are working in groups, they often have the opportunity to choose their roles in those groups. As mentioned above, students who may feel isolated in the classroom because of a disability feel more included because they are a valued member of the class community and contribute to this assessment process. Ultimately, not only are there opportunities for all students to feel like a valuable part of the assessment process but there are many choices for students, which provide students with ways to accommodate their needs.

(E)Portfolio Grading

The final form of ungrading that I will address is (e)portfolio grading. Portfolio grading has a long history that initially involved collecting and grading students' work as they presented it in a tangible portfolio at the end of the semester. The *e* in *eportfolio* stands for *electronic*, marking that students' portfolios are now created in a digital environment. Most recently, portfolio grading has been brought back into discussions around assessment by Susan D. Blum (2020), a professor of anthropology at the University of Notre Dame. She has edited the popular collection titled *Ungrading*, which includes chapters about incorporating various forms of ungrading across the disciplines, and in so doing provides an important resource for WPAs who will undertake this work. In Blum's own chapter in the collection, she describes e-portfolios as an assessment practice that decenters individual grades in favor of the assessment of an entire portfolio of students' work at the end of the course. Blum also details how she integrates opportunities for students to evaluate their own work, as well as meet with her regularly in "portfolio conferences" to discuss their progress at different stages of the course and address their ongoing self-assessments (p. 59). Once students have experienced the full course, put together their portfolio, shared ongoing self-

evaluations, and met multiple times with her, students "suggest" the grade they think they earned (Blum, 2020, p. 59). Like student perceptions of the ungrading practices described above, Blum reports that students appreciate how this approach reduces stress while keeping them motivated, ultimately "allowing them to relax and focus on learning, perhaps for the first time" (p. 60).

In addition to the long history of the use of portfolios in so-called mainstream classrooms across the disciplines, portfolios have a history of providing students with IEPs and those in special education courses with an alternative way of demonstrating their learning (NASET, 2024). For students who cannot adequately demonstrate their learning through an exam or single writing assignment, for example, portfolios offer a more capacious and forgiving approach. However, many of the benefits that portfolios provide for disabled students extend to their nondisabled peers. Portfolios provide a more comprehensive view of a student's learning than do discrete assignments. Moreover, because students arrive at their postsecondary institutions with a range of preparations, evaluating students' growth based on where they began—rather than the student next to or across from them—is important. Portfolios, therefore, allow for differentiated assessment because the instructor can track and grade students on their individual progress. Regular meetings with and feedback from the instructor support this process as do opportunities for revision throughout, two components that are valuable to all students—disabled or not.

Some may object to the student's role in determining their portfolio grade, a role students play in some iterations (such as Blum's) of portfolio grading. While there is a lot at stake here because students' portfolio grade is often synonymous with their final course grade, Robert Talbert (2023) reminds us that "the portfolio must make the case for a certain grade, that is, it needs to include concrete evidence of meeting the criteria for a grade. This is not 'letting students pick their grade' as though they were given access to the registrar's database . . . Grades are not merely 'picked' but are based on a portfolio of work that addresses clear requirements and is the result of multiple iterations of feedback and improvement ("What are some misconceptions about ungrading?"). Moreover, a highly common requirement across portfolio assessment practices is the assignment of a cover letter wherein students draw their instructors' attention to specific elements of their work. In doing so, students engage in metacognitive work that has the potential to foster the transfer of learning, a component of this assessment approach that is valuable to students with and without disabilities.

As noted above, Blum's (2020) chapter on eportfolios in her edited collection *Ungrading* and the collection itself are valuable resources for WPAs interested in introducing inclusive assessment practices to writing faculty across the disciplines. Another noteworthy resource that focuses on e-portfolios, specifically, is the collection titled "E-Portfolios in Higher Education: A Multidisciplinary Approach," edited by Tushar Chaudhuri and Béatrice Cabau (2017). In the foreword, Chaudhuri and Cabau underscore the value of this assessment approach not just as a means of supporting our commitment to diversity, but to stemming attempts to undermine it:

> Education must make room for students' pre-existing diversities . . . diversity is not a given, but rather is contested terrain. Today, we see many attempts by political, social, religious and military leaders to build barriers to stem human migration, reduce human contact offline and online, and relegate human otherness to the far side of newly constructed, or reconstructed, walls. And at all levels of education, we see attempts to standardize, 'templatise' and circumscribe learning, reducing it to testable, measurable, reportable outcomes linked to the basics of literacy and numeracy. While some standardization in

> education is inevitable, and while the basics remain important, this cannot be the whole story of learning in the twenty-first century. (p. vii)

All of the inclusive assessment methods I have described above push back against the drift toward standardization that Chaudhuri and Cabau (2017) outline in this excerpt from their introduction. Most faculty have the freedom to "make room for students' pre-existing diversities" (p. v) in their assessment practices and honor Price's (2011) call to understand human minds "in terms of variety and difference rather than deviations from an imagined norm" (p. 4).

By valuing "variety and difference" (p. 4), e-portfolios often mitigate the need for official accommodations. As noted above, portfolios allow for differentiation because students' individual progress can be tracked. Moreover, this tracking happens over time since e-portfolios constitute an ongoing form of assessment. Students can, therefore, demonstrate growth over the course of a semester without being penalized if they are struggling early on or at any single point. A related benefit of e-portfolios for students with disabilities (and those without) is that they also allow students to work at their own pace, which means there is no need for extended time accommodations. Neither is there the need for accommodations for assistive technology since e-portfolios are often flexible in terms of the modes and formats in which they can be created. Students might choose a mode or format the mitigates their need for assistive technology. Or, if students need this technology, which sometimes increases the amount of time they must spend on a project, they need not request extended time since e-portfolios are developed over time and students can move at a pace that suits them and their assistive technology needs.

Although not exhaustive, the above list of widely circulating forms of ungrading demonstrates the myriad ways in which these assessment practices help to fill the support gap that the current accommodations system has created. As noted in the introduction to these ungrading practices, instructors will ultimately need to decide which practices are most appropriate within their contexts and adopt those practices that embody their own values, whether that's an emphasis on revision, extensive feedback, transparency in grading, and/or differentiation.

The Potential Relationship Among Assessment, Retention, and Recruitment

Although valuable in and of themselves, ungrading practices may have the potential to help students reach graduation, suggests the Lumina Foundation and Gallup's (2023) State of Higher Education study. Overall, 41% of the 6,008 enrolled students that participated in the study "say they have considered stopping out in the past six months, up from 37% in 2021" (p. 5). Additionally, the study explains, "more than half (55%) of students who have considered stopping out cite emotional stress as a reason they considered leaving, and almost half (47%) considered it due to mental health reasons" (p. 27).

While some early, more targeted studies indicated an increase in students' stress levels as a result of particular ungrading practices, such as contract grading (Inman & Powell, 2018; Thelin & Spidell, 2006), with the influx of attention to ungrading in writing studies since the pandemic, recent studies of undergraduates consistently report more favorable responses, particularly in terms of reduced levels of stress (Gabor, 2024; Larson, 2024; Nastal, 2024; O'Meara, 2024; Ubbesen et al., 2024). Students with psychiatric disabilities, for whom stress is a significant barrier to student success and degree completion, would benefit from ungrading as would their nondisabled peers.

Ungrading practices, like those used in many first-year writing programs, might also help ease the transition into postsecondary institutions and potentially lower levels of stress not just for

disabled students beginning their postsecondary careers but for all new students. If WPAs were to bring this to the attention of faculty across the disciplines and those faculty adopted ungrading practices, students could experience an even easier transition.

In addition to surveying currently enrolled students, as discussed above, the Lumina Foundation-Gallup study (2023) surveyed unenrolled adults: 3,004 adults who were previously enrolled in a postsecondary program but never earned their bachelor or associate degree and 3,003 "never-enrolled adults" (p. 2). The study reports that "about 3 in 10 unenrolled adults [including previously enrolled and never-enrolled adults] say emotional stress (30%) or personal mental health (28%) are very important reasons why they are not currently enrolled" (p. 14). In addition to retaining students, then, ungrading practices may also help to recruit students who anticipate that their mental health or emotional stress would be negatively affected by enrolling in a postsecondary program.

Final Thoughts

This essay has argued that to best serve all of our students, including those with documented and undocumented disabilities, we need to create inclusive assessment practices that already accommodate a range of students through the choices and flexibility embedded in these practices. In fact, these assessment practices can be more meaningful, effective, and relevant compared to the often one-size-fits-all accommodations (e.g., extended time) that students are often given through the formal accommodations process. "We need to imagine what happens when disabled students are in our classrooms, and this imagining needs to happen before someone actually discloses a disability," Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, a scholar who works at the intersection of writing studies and disability studies, reminded us as early as 2015 ("On Creating New Anecdotal Relations" section). We would be wise to heed Kerschbaum's call and commit to supporting all students through inclusive pedagogies and assessment practices. WPAs can take the lead by informing faculty across the disciplines about the support gap that exists because of the accommodations system. This recognition must lead to the development of assessment practices, like those detailed above, wherein students can readily find meaningful accommodations within already established assessment practices.

The only other option is to depend solely on an inequitable and unsustainable accommodations system that is increasingly unable to serve the needs of students as disabilities are becoming increasingly varied and often invisible, such as mental health issues, neurodivergence, learning disabilities, ADHD, and autism spectrum disorders (Tobin & Behling, 2018, p. 65). Many groups of students, including those with undocumented disabilities, would benefit from more inclusive assessment practices. Moreover, instructors would ultimately save time by not having to engage in the "ad hoc process of retrofitting, repeated each semester, for each course, for each individual student making a request" (Tobin & Behling, 2018, p. 64). Although it requires a significant time commitment up front, rebuilding assessment practices to fill the support gap caused by the accommodations system is the only sustainable approach. We owe this much to our students.

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