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The rush to 'back to normal' at college and work is ignoring disabled people

It's a phrase repeated everywhere as people long for the old way of doing things. For me, the old way of doing things was a nightmare.

By **Shruti Rajkumar** Updated May 6, 2022, 2 hours ago



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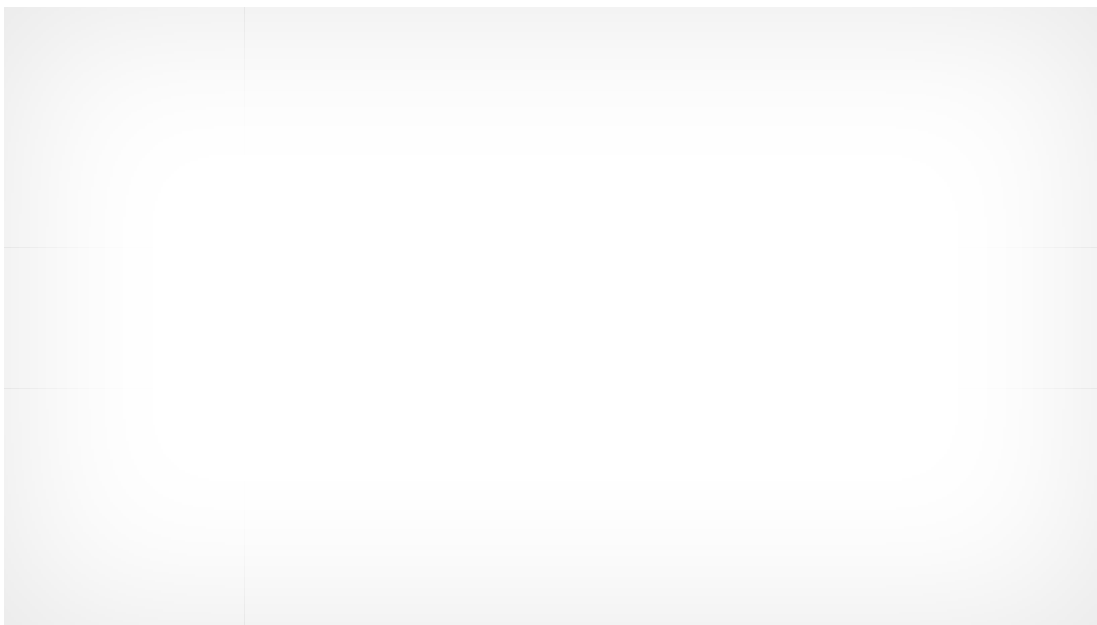
When the pandemic first brought Zoom learning to my college education, I had no idea how much I'd come to value it. Starting in fall 2020, my junior year at Emerson

College, I took hybrid classes, attending virtually one day a week and in person a second day. For a physically disabled person like myself, the format made the college experience far more accessible — and far more effective.

My professors were also very accommodating to my needs; on rainy or snowy in-person days, they would let me Zoom into class, sparing me from trying to manage unsafe conditions with my crutches. As someone who gets nervous speaking in front of people — especially in spaces where I'm one of only a few students of color — I took advantage of opportunities Zoom classes offered to work on my confidence, and participated more than ever before.

Now, as I finish my final year at Emerson, accommodations such as hybrid classes are disappearing. This is happening at colleges across the country in an effort to get “back to normal,” a phrase that seems to be repeated everywhere as many people long for the old way of doing things. But for many students with disabilities, the old way of doing things was a nightmare.

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For me, “back to normal” means trying once again to avoid being knocked over by classmates bolting down a hallway, or navigating the push buttons that are supposed

to open doors but are often unreliable. It means struggling to keep up with my nondisabled peers on a campus and in a city not built for people like me.

Instead of returning to traditional practices, college administrators and faculty should be taking the innovations they've developed over the last two-plus years — hybrid classes, flexible in-person attendance policies, new ways of delivering material with online tools — and committing to doing them even better. We can't miss this opportunity to reimagine a truly accessible future for higher education, one that takes all access needs into consideration.

This won't be easy, of course. Professors will need to find new ways to measure engagement rather than just looking around the room, for one. But doing so would serve the large community of disabled people — [19 percent of US undergraduates report having a disability](#), according to 2016 data from the National Center for Education Statistics — and aid people who learn differently, have child care responsibilities, or are in other situations that require flexibility.

Some might argue that those who learn better in remote environments should simply enroll in online degree programs, but that could, in effect, segregate disabled students while ignoring urgent issues of inaccessibility.

Although colleges are already required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, inaccessibility often persists on campuses. In a January TikTok video that now has over 35,000 likes, Mya Pol, who is a wheelchair user and student activist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, [pointed to snow-covered streets and sidewalks](#) that made it difficult for her to access her dorm.

“If I can go to class in person, I want to go to class in person,” Pol told me recently. “But because I can't so frequently, remote access makes it so that I can still maintain the level of academic success that I want.”

Many [students struggle to acquire the accommodations](#) promised by federal legislation for various reasons, such as lacking the required medical documentation of their disability. This problem — difficulty gaining access to the medical system, and sometimes not being believed even when you do — is amplified for Black and brown students and low-income students.

Innovative colleges across the country are showing what's possible, however. Odessa College in Texas [offers courses in face-to-face, hybrid, and online formats](#). UMass Amherst has [modified some of its classrooms](#), adding cameras, speakers, and microphones to let professors (who opt in) teach simultaneously to students in the classroom and those online. These implementations take time and resources, but they are not impossible.

“Instead of doing the bare minimum for compliance and cutting corners, [colleges] could have things be a little more accessible,” Pol says. “Show students right now that yes, we can be an inclusive society. We don’t have to treat disabled students like second-class citizens, and we can actually make things accessible.”

Pressure from students, parents, and others can help. Take the University of California, Los Angeles, where the Disabled Student Union recently spent eight months advocating for remote access to classes, among other changes. Their activism, which built on the [early work of disability rights leaders](#), included a 16-day sit-in at the chancellor’s office. In response, on April 4, UCLA administrators supported [a commitment to provide accessible options](#), and promised continued study of what the future could look like.

A “return to normal” on college campuses is a return to an ableist system that privileges nondisabled people, while compromising the education of everyone else. All students deserve better.

Shruti Rajkumar is a journalist who completed her undergraduate degree at Emerson College this month. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

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