

Title of Abstract: Interrogating the medicalization of mental health in higher education: A Foucauldian institutional ethnography project design

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In Ontario, mental health is ranked as one of the most common types of disability reported in post-secondary education. This is reflected in a 65% increase of the use of accessibility services by students with mental health-related conditions in the past five years. Relative to students with other types of disabilities (e.g., physical, such as mobility, etc.), students with mental health-related conditions have a lower success rate in completing their post-secondary studies. Moreover, the discourse that appears to frame such disabilities is largely biomedical, in that students' disclosure of disability is often required to be legitimized by a physician's assessment in order to receive accommodation. The insertion of the medical model into post-secondary teaching and learning accessibility work may be a cause for concern and a site for critical interrogation. While the number of nursing students seeking accessible learning accommodation for mental health-related conditions continues to rise, there appears to be little to no literature that critically examines the complexity of this issue and its implication on teaching, learning, and the making of higher education institutions equitable and accessible. In this presentation, we will argue that there needs to be a shift from individual pathology (biomedical and functional approach) to a social analysis model that emphasizes an environmental and rights outcome approach. We discuss a Foucauldian-framed institutional ethnography project design to critically examine the discourses and relations that might reproduce the medicalization of mental 'disability,' as we highlight the ontological and epistemological congruency between Foucault's theory of Governmentality and the selected methodology. The presentation will engage in discussions about the usefulness of critical theory to frame critical qualitative methods as a tool to explicate oppressive institutional practices in the context of accessible learning accommodation in higher education.

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