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Critical Disability Studies

Professor Kristin Lindgren

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### **Course Reflection**

For as long as I have been at Haverford, I have had Joanna Gengo in my ear saying how amazing Kristin Lindgren is and how important it is that I take one of her courses. I feel so grateful that, after 3.5 years, I finally listened. Few courses that I have taken over my tenure as a Haverford student have impacted me in the way that this course has, and even fewer will stay with me throughout my life and future career. Through our work in the classroom, in out-of-class assignments, and in our work with CCW this semester, I have developed a toolbelt for looking at the world with a disability justice lens that I hope to incorporate into my future career as a healthcare professional.

The first change that I noticed in myself as a product of taking this course was my attention to language. While I had always vocally advocated against the use of the R word, I never knew the damage that could be caused by the casual use of other ableist and discriminatory terms. I didn't know how harmful it is to jokingly call a person on crutches a "cripple," and it was only this Spring during lacrosse season where teammates were frequently injured and put on crutches that I started to understand how pervasive this language is. I also became aware of how frequently I said that things were "lame" without having any understanding of the connection to disability. Not only did I learn to notice these things, but I also was driven to correct my language and educate others about the effect of their words. While people were generally receptive, I find it surprising at a place like Haverford, where the student population is generally

in touch with social justice causes and rhetoric, that disability justice standards were so poorly understood. This underscored the importance of this course and the role that an expanded Disability Studies curriculum could play on this campus.

The next mentality shift that I tracked from this course was that I have started to investigate accessibility everywhere I go. I say this while typing this essay at a Starbucks wheelchair-accessible table that is directly adjacent to the inaccessible entrance door. I noticed inaccessibility at Church, and this observation directed me to my midterm and final projects that investigate disability and different religions. I found this topic to be really interesting at a base level, and I enjoyed learning the historical and social implications of disability in religious spaces. But more than anything, I was really excited to investigate a topic that pertains to an important part of my life and identity. Through this work, I realized that disability is everywhere and that everything that is important to me is intersectional with and can be better understood in the context of disability.

I could not have taken this course at a more valuable moment in my life, as I begin my full-time job as a spinal cord injury clinical researcher in just three weeks. This is the same job that I have worked for multiple summers and that I commented on in class many times. I will be returning to this job as a new person. The rhetoric around spinal cord injury and neurorehabilitation is often centered on curing. My research, in particular, is centered on regenerative neuroplasticity and trying to regain volitional movement. This research is important, and I have seen how it is being used to improve participant's quality of life. However, after taking this course, I have a drastically different understanding of how to communicate the goals and value of this work. Participants often come into the research center praying for a miracle that their injury will be reversed and that their lives will go back to the way they were before injury.

However, now I have strengthened my ability to help these individuals find value and meaning in their lives with a physical disability, not just in spite of it. While all of the work we did in this class was useful in developing this framework around disability, I believe that the Harriet McBride Johnson readings were particularly useful for informing my future work. Disabled people do not need to be fixed, they need to be supported and understood, just like everyone else.

I feel so grateful to have had the opportunity to learn these lessons in a friendly classroom environment. I learned so much from the readings, assignments, CCW, and projects. However, I learned the most from my classmates and our discussions. I feel so grateful that people were willing to share their personal experiences both in the classroom and on Serendip. Listening to these experiences and reading about people's lives taught me so much and emboldened me to share my own experiences. I hope that I was able to positively contribute to class discussions and the class dynamic. I felt as though the understanding environment helped me to feel comfortable and contribute more in class as the semester went on. I will carry this confidence with me into the rest of my life, where I will remain a student—always eager to learn and better myself—while recognizing the power in my disabilities studies education and how I can spread this knowledge.