(In)Accessibility at UCLA
Tessa Fier

For months during my freshman year, I attended classes nauseous and shivering — or not at all. I spent the hazy mornings before school contemplating whether I had the mental and physical strength for classes or if it would make more sense to stay home. Much of my first winter at UCLA was spent in a corner of campus, fumbling with the child-locked bottle caps on medications that would mask my symptoms enough for me to make it through the next hour or two.

I was profoundly disconnected from my friends, clubs, and campus, fearful that if I didn't find a cure for my mysterious sickness soon, I might have to leave UCLA permanently.

I ended up dropping my winter courses halfway through the quarter due to exhaustion. During the first three weeks of the term it became more and more difficult to reach my classes each day, and I was so exhausted from the effort it was practically impossible for me to retain information and do homework. I could feel the little health I had regained during winter break slipping away, and I knew that if I did not withdraw from UCLA there was no hope of me receiving the accommodations I needed to stay. I was forced, by UCLA's inaction, to choose between my health or my grades.

When I first became sick, I registered for academic accommodations with UCLA's Center for Accessible Education (CAE) and was given a list of possible accommodations. My counselor and I met to select the ones that would help me, but when I scanned the list, I found none that would significantly change my ability to continue at UCLA. Even ones that may have made a difference were implemented with so little understanding of the way accessibility works that they
were essentially meaningless.

I am chronically ill, and that illness is unpredictable and out of my control. I may not have symptoms for weeks, or I might have a severe flare-up that requires days or weeks off from school to recover. Therefore, accommodations that attempt to regulate my illness, or expect it to operate on a predictable schedule, serve very little use to me.

For example, attendance adjustments were allocated differently depending on the class's duration and frequency, and required a form be submitted as soon as possible. Professors sometimes asked why I hadn't contacted them earlier to tell them I would be absent, as though it was laziness rather than grueling pain and mind-numbing drugs that had prevented me from alerting them. And while CAE may limit me to one attendance adjustment per quarter, I don't have the luxury of turning my illness on and off when it's convenient. If accessibility is the goal, what's the use of accommodations that have to be rationed?

The one thing that could have helped me was semi-remote schooling. I asked my CAE counselor if it was possible for me to watch recorded lectures on days I was too nauseous to come to class. I asked if I could take tests online since my symptoms are unpredictable and can make it

difficult for me to make it to the testing location or complete the exam in one sitting. In short, I asked for accommodations and was told it was logistically impossible.

Given my experiences with CAE, perhaps you can understand my anger when UCLA announced in March 2020 that it would be continuing all classes and most services (e.g., academic counseling) remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was clear that what my CAE counselor had told me was an impossibility was well within UCLA's abilities all along. It simply hadn't been worthwhile to provide virtual alternatives as accommodations. I wonder if it had ever been seriously considered. Was the cost too prohibitive? The extra training too burdensome? Was I simply not worth it?

What I have observed of UCLA's accessibility efforts and pandemic response leads me to believe that the disconnection I experienced so acutely during my first winter quarter was produced by UCLA itself. Given my illness, I couldn't reasonably be expected to attend all my classes, or participate fully in every discussion, or turn in each assignment on time. If I had the option to take classes and tests remotely or contribute to organizations and clubs without having to be physically present, then the burden of alienation would not rest solely on me; by failing to provide adequate accommodations and support, UCLA pushed me out of my campus, classes, and community. But in the face of an institution like UCLA, what power do I have to remake the system so that it suits my needs? And why should I have to beg for access in the first place?

I'm not naive enough to think that UCLA cares about true accessibility. Despite the manufactured narrative of disconnect between academia and the 'real world,' UCLA is firmly grounded in capitalist structures. And capitalism and disability are incompatible. An economic system that equates a narrow definition of productivity to worth, and which ties people's right to live to their ability to perform wage labor, is incapable of valuing those whose bodies and minds can't match these productive standards — that is, people with disabilities. The same economic system that allows disabled Americans to be paid subminimum wage [US Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division Fact Sheets] is apparent at UCLA in the rigid attendance requirements, overwork, and strict definitions of productivity. So, as a capitalist organization, it was never going to be in UCLA's interests to provide accommodations beyond those that could easily be integrated into the status quo.

For hope and guidance, I look to the disability justice movement. Founded by queer, disabled women of color, disability justice rejects valuing people based on what they can produce. People are valuable simply by being [The Body is Not an Apology, This is Disability Justice]. It celebrates the many different ways in which people exist, move, create, and interact. And doing this benefits everyone, not just people with disabilities. Patty Berne, one of the movement's founders, said in an interview that "people see disability justice as a framework and a praxis for disabled people. And it's not. It's for anyone with a body. Nobody is made to serve capitalism — not just people with disabilities. Our bodies are not controllable and define-able within the productive standards of capitalism." While disabled people may be more readily alienated by capitalist standards of productivity and efficiency, they impact everyone. No one I know, abled or disabled, is able to attend every class, turn in every assignment on time, and ace every test with no impact on their health and wellbeing.

I wonder how many of my fellow students at UCLA are disconnected by our school's policies, norms, and structure, whether or not they realize it. How many of them might benefit from being able to relax, take time off, and care for themselves when they need to? If we were each in charge of our own wellness, without surveillance and condescension from those assigned to 'manage' us (whether it be professors or trained accessibility staff), and trusted to care for ourselves, how much happier and freer might we be? What if, instead of limiting metrics of value, we were able to contribute in our own ways, and connect with each other wherever we are? What if we all had what we need to be equal members in our community?