Reference letter–writing season is upon us, and you may be wondering how to approach writing about the disabilities of students and colleagues you are recommending. Letters of reference are critical components of admissions, hiring, and promotion. But because letter readers tend to read between the lines, even just mentioning a disability can be a red flag, as Amy Vidali [1], an associate professor at the University of Colorado at Denver, has noted.

As a part-deaf full professor who has navigated her entire career with a disability, I’ve been on all sides of the desk. I’ve been the mentee cringing at the misrepresentation of my disability, I’ve been the mentor wondering how to frame my mentee’s skills in the best light and I’ve been the letter reader assessing strengths and weaknesses. Here, I offer some suggestions.

You should never disclose someone’s disability without their approval. Even if someone has a visible disability, the letter readers may not yet have met your mentee. Please don’t presume that disclosing disability benefits candidates because “the committee likes to see disability for diversity.” Committees committed to equity are still vulnerable to the pervasive ableism that drives discrimination and harassment of people with disabilities within academe and our society. Admissions and hiring committees are much more likely to admit/hire an abled person.

For example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics reports [2] that, in 2020, only 26 percent of disabled people with bachelor’s degrees were employed, compared to 72 percent of able-bodied people with bachelor’s degrees. Asking your mentee for approval to mention their disability need not be awkward if you are prepared to explain why you think that mentioning their disability in your letter would be beneficial.

Guidelines for Having the Conversation

If you haven’t already, ask how the person requesting the reference letter describes their disability. Do they use person-first or disability-first language? Some folks prefer medical based terms like “hearing impaired,” while others prefer culture-based terms like “Deaf” (with a capital “D”). In my case, I prefer “part-deaf” or “part-Deaf” to either “hard of hearing” or “deaf,” because it expresses that while I have residual hearing, my hearing loss is significant enough that just speaking a little louder is not going to accommodate my disability. The descriptor “part-deaf” is not yet standard, so I greatly appreciate it when folks check in with me about how I describe my disability.
Please don’t guess the preferences of your mentee. Also, consider that some people may not want you to describe them as disabled and would prefer other labels such as “neurodiverse,” “having chronic illness,” “Deaf” and so on.

When explaining why you want to mention their disability in your letter, share with your mentee specific character traits that you notice them employing as they navigate challenges associated with their disability. Are they a problem solver? Do they show resilience? Are they a great self-advocate?

My advice is not to mention any accommodations that your disabled mentee uses. While you might be tempted to show that accommodations “fix the disability,” the deficit framing doesn’t center your mentee’s skills and provides the letter reader with ableist reasons to rank your mentee lower than other abled applicants or nominees.

We don’t often get opportunities to tell people about the strengths that we see in them, and this conversation with your mentee is a great opportunity to do just that. Because of the widespread stigmatization of disability, we also rarely talk openly about it, so you might feel uncomfortable bringing up this topic.

My advice is to keep the conversation authentic and very specific. Drifting away from authenticity leaves you vulnerable to casting the disabled person as inspirational; such casting is othering and harmful. Stella Young called this phenomenon “inspiration porn,” because it serves to make the abled feel good while objectifying people with disabilities. Additionally, saying that a person inspires you centers your experience and not your mentee’s. Yes, this is tricky ground! You may, in fact, find someone inspiring. Yet keeping your characterizations authentic and specific helps avoid inspiration porn.

For example, instead of saying, “It is incredible how Michele managed to advance to full professor while disabled,” you could say, “Michele’s experiences as a disabled academic contribute to her success, as she has developed exceptional problem-solving skills, resilience when faced with inaccessible situations, self-advocacy to adjust to inaccessible situations and time/energy management to prioritize important tasks.” For your letter to be effective, you can also provide specific examples of those skills. You could follow up with, “For instance, in noisy settings that present a challenge for part-deaf folks, Michele either extracts critical information using visual cues or, if the conversation is lengthy or particularly important, she effectively self-advocates by adjusting the conversation toward a quieter setting and/or harnessing technologic solutions.”

Last, ask your mentee what they would like you to emphasize in your letter. This is a good practice for any letter of recommendation, and Julie Posselt of the Inclusive Graduate Education Network offers other helpful equitable best practice for reference letters.[3]

Guidelines for Writing Your Letter

Unless we use template letters of references with standard language, our letters will be subjective and vulnerable to either our own biases or the biases of the letter readers. But template letters don’t
provide the rich information that guides hiring, admission and promotion decisions. What we can do instead is take a thoughtful and critical look at how we frame difference and disability in our letters of reference, as Vidali and Posselt have recommended. Here are some first steps.

Please don’t say that the person has “overcome their disability.” We live with our disabilities; we can’t erase them. We don’t say that first-generation college students overcome their families. Why say this about disability? In addition, the framing of the disabled person as an overcomer steers you well into the inspiration-porn minefield.

Instead, you can acknowledge that the disabled person faces disadvantages (describe specifics) with (insert adjective) skill and self-advocacy (followed by specific examples). This framing acknowledges that navigating life with a disability requires constant effort and draws attention to valuable skills.

Unless they say so, avoid writing, “Despite her disability …” or “You would never know that he has a disability.” Such phrases have strong ableist undertones. While your intention in writing those phrases is to ease concerns of the letter reader, this deficit framing does not center the skills of your mentee, which is the goal of your letter of reference.

Finally, in your mentee’s conversation with you, they may say that they don’t want you mentioning their disability because either they don’t want to disclose or they plan to disclose in some other way. They know best how to present themselves.

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