Navigating Academia

A Guide for Disabled Students Pursuing Graduate Theological Education

Izzy Frazza | Yale Divinity School

Faith Inclusion and Belonging



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## Foreword

RespectAbility is pleased to present “Navigating Academia – A Guide for Disabled Students Pursuing Graduate Theological Education.” We are committed to training disabled leaders in all aspects of community life, including congregational and faith-based organizations.

Izzy Frazza joined the Faith Inclusion and Belonging team in our partnership with Yale Divinity School’s internship program for second year graduate students. Izzy’s lived experience as a disabled theology student formed the basis for this guide. Interviews Izzy conducted with graduates of theology schools and seminaries and academics produced practical advice for those interested in graduate studies, current students, and people who lead or teach in these institutions. This guide is designed for use in any faith tradition.

RespectAbility helps companies, nonprofits and educational organizations reach a better future where disabled people’s authentic experiences, innovations, and dedication can flourish. Please email us at trainers@RespectAbility.org if you would like to arrange a customized training for your organization.

Shelly Christensen, MA, FAAIDD

Senior Director, Faith Inclusion and Belonging, RespectAbility

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the people who helped make this project possible. Thank you to the RespectAbility team, especially the Faith Inclusion and Belonging department, for supporting this guide from its existence as an idea to its fruition. I am immensely grateful for my supervisor, Shelly Christensen, whose mentorship has been invaluable throughout my time at RespectAbility. Thank you to Alison Cunningham and the YDS internship program for supporting my internship with RespectAbility over the past academic year. Finally, thank you to the individuals—the disabled, the mad, the chronically ill, and the crip—who spoke with me about your experiences, and who responded to the survey. I learned so much from the conversations we shared.

## Introduction

“Your institution can't love you back. The reason it feels so hard to be in academia is that it's not built for you. Really, it's not built for anyone. It is hostile to bodies and their needs and their messiness and their variability.”

—Disabled Yale Divinity School Alumni

In the fall of 2022, I began my studies at Yale Divinity School to pursue a Master of Arts in Religion. Academia is not built for disabled bodyminds. Theological education, religious studies programs, and seminaries are no exception. Navigating the past two years of my studies as a chronically ill autistic with ADHD, I have experienced this reality firsthand.

In an introduction to a 2021 special issue of *Disability and Religion*, Benjamin T. Conner [wrote](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23312521.2021.1895029):

What is true of the university is also true of theological institutions. Both the university and the seminary have an ideal learner in mind, and this learner is a quick processor of information, self-sufficient, and, most importantly for readers of this journal, able-bodied.

Graduate theological education programs are unique from other academic settings. They provide the training, knowledge, and certifications required to pursue careers in religious and secular settings where they have the power to help shape other people's understanding of spirituality, religious beliefs, and formation of their relationships to faith and God(s).

[According to the U.S. Census](https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html), disabled people form the largest minority in the country. Up to one in four adults in the United States have some type of disability. We need to educate and train more disabled theologians to write and teach about disability theology. We also need to prepare more disabled people in positions of leadership to serve in faith communities. Graduate theological education and training must be accessible to folks with disabilities.

In preparing this guide, I interviewed eleven individuals, all of whom identify as disabled and have completed graduate programs in theology and/or religious studies. These conversations were meaningful in ways I find myself struggling to adequately express in words. I also created a survey, which received a total of 24 responses, and included the following questions:

1. Did accessibility play a role in your decision to attend the school? How?
2. What did your school do/has your school done to create a more accessible environment for you or other disabled students?

What advice would you give to prospective graduate students with disabilities?

The survey responses reminded me of the simultaneously distinct, and yet often shared, nature of disability. I saw myself and my experiences in so many of the responses. Disabled students learn a great deal about themselves, their disabilities, and how to navigate academia while we are in the midst of these academic spaces. In both the one-on-one conversations I had, and the responses to the survey, I observed a common trend: While respondents benefited somewhat from resources provided by their schools’ accessibility support offices, institutional services like formal accommodations remained limited. Respondents learned the most from conversations with their disabled peers who entered these institutions before them.

In one survey response, an MDiv student who graduated from Union Theological Seminary wrote: “Being a disabled grad student was immensely challenging, and I only got through because of the support of my disabled peers.” Within academia, disabled people show up for one another in a way that is really beautiful. We take our lived experiences—the tricks and tools we are forced to learn in order to survive and thrive within ableist environments—and we share these lessons with others when we learn they need them.

Disability justice organizer Stacey Park Milbern coined the term “crip doula” or “disability doula” to describe the work of disabled folks providing support to those who are newly disabled or have recently discovered their disabilities. A doula is someone who provides support to an individual before, during, and after childbirth, and [disabled doulas support](https://19thnews.org/2023/07/disability-doulas-support-newly-disabled-people/#:~:text=The%20term%20%E2%80%9Ccrip%20doula%E2%80%9D%20or,through%20their%20lived%20experiences%20with) “people rebirthing themselves as disabled or more disabled.” The motivation for this guide is indebted to disability justice advocates and movements, especially queer and trans disabled activists of color like Milbern, who have helped to frame how I think about disability justice and community care.

This guide aims to serve as a resource through which current and former graduate students in theological fields, including myself and the 36 individuals who shared their experiences with me for this project, along with each disabled person who has helped us learn to better navigate these spaces, can serve as *disabled doulas* to future generations of disabled students. Applying to and then deciding to attend graduate school is a huge undertaking for anyone, and there are many things to consider. For disabled students, not only is there more to consider, but the questions we have can be quite different. The guide intends to provide disabled people who are interested in applying to graduate programs in theology and religious studies with the questions we wish we had asked, and the tips we wish we had known prior to beginning our studies.

## About This Guide

If you are wondering for whom this guide was written, the answer is, **you!** This guide is meant to be a resource for anyone who is curious about the process of applying to graduate programs in theology or religious studies. It is written primarily with disabled prospective applicants in mind, paying special attention to our diverse questions and concerns.

For the purpose of the guide, "disability" is broadly understood to include neurodiversity (e.g. Autism, ADHD, etc.), chronic illness, physical and learning disabilities, mental health conditions, non-apparent disabilities, and more. I hope non-disabled students, faculty, and staff studying and working in these environments will learn something about our experiences as disabled students and faculty too. I invite you to move around the various sections of the guide in whatever order feels right to you.

“Ask for what you need, take it if you can without asking, assert your boundaries, and remember your well-being is more important than any assignment or piece of paper.”

—Disabled Yale Divinity School Alumni

## The Program

### Finding the Right Place for You

Finding the most accessible graduate school program may not be the priority for every disabled person. When I spoke with a graduate of Union Theological Seminary, I was reminded of the diverse interests and needs of disabled and nondisabled students pursuing graduate education in theology and religious studies. In many ways, Union was not the most accessible place for this person, but they were determined to study there because of the faculty and the alignment with their personal and academic interests and goals. This person advised prospective students with disabilities to “figure out what you care about.”

Make sure you can answer this question early in the application process: *“What matters most to you?”*

In another conversation, a disabled scholar who completed her studies at The Jewish Theological Seminary and in the Religious Studies department at the University of Michigan stressed the importance for prospective students to decide early in the process the type of environment they want in a graduate program. She described the experience of attending an admissions event at a school she did not end up going to. A representative of the department she was interested in said, “We are not going to hold your hand here.” She knew this school was not the place for her. She was looking for a school where faculty with greater experience and knowledge *were* going to hold her hand along the way. This person also noted the difference between programs and departments that were more competitive in nature, and those that emphasized collaboration among students and faculty alike. Determine what *you* want and need from a graduate program.

**Activity: Make a list of the 3 most important qualities you are looking for in a graduate program.**

These qualities may or may not have to do with access needs. Decide what matters most to you. Keep this list nearby as you explore programs and return to it when you are making your decision.

### In-Person or Online Learning

“I wanted to make sure every class was offered in a hybrid or entirely online format, and offered flexibility in grading, due dates, and general patience for disabled folks.”

—Disabled Graduate Student, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities

Many students, especially those with disabilities, have benefited from the ability to complete their studies remotely because of the flexibility provided by online learning. Survey respondents who benefited from remote learning noted a diverse range of reasons as to why it worked best for them. One physically disabled student who is currently enrolled in an online graduate program noted that remote learning has been “especially helpful with [their] fatigue & mobility.” If you are interested in exploring the available options at the graduate level, visit the [Association of Theological Schools (ATS) Approved for Online Delivery.](https://www.ats.edu/Member-School-Distance-Education) These schools are accredited members of the ATS Commission.

### The Accommodations Process

“Academic accommodations have been vital to my success.”

—Disabled MDiv/STM Student, Yale Divinity School

The process of obtaining academic accommodations at the graduate level requires a great deal of self-advocacy. Many of the current and former students who spoke with me individually, and those who responded to the survey, emphasized how much they benefited from access to accommodations. Some of the accommodations offered at the institutional level include extra time on exams, flexibility with due dates for assignments, and access to technology such as screen readers and note-taking devices. While accommodations like these are vital to many students’ success, they are rarely handed out lightly. It is true that schools sometimes lack the resources or knowledge needed to provide accommodations in the classroom. However, even when these resources are available, students may struggle to access even the simplest accommodations without first jumping through the required hoops. Students often need to obtain documentation from medical providers, attend meetings, and fill out paperwork to receive accommodations.

“Make sure you are clear on the university's accessibility policies and ask plenty of questions. It is their job to inform you about how they will support you.”

—Disabled Graduate Student

One individual offered this advice: “Try to advocate for yourself in a way that is brave and courageous and not apologetic.” They emphasized, “Accommodations are negotiable! Speak to your professors early on in the semester. Name the things you need from your professors, and work *with* them to figure out what they can do to help meet your needs.” Of course, to be successful, your instructors must be willing to work with you. When they are not, these interactions can be incredibly frustrating.

It is important to have people in your life to support you in the aftermath of difficult interactions. Having individuals you can lean on emotionally, especially those with disabilities who may be able to relate to your experiences, will be vital to your success in your studies and in life.

**Strategy #1:**

Knowing the answers to the following questions will help you better understand who *you* are as an individual learner. It is important to know for yourself. You will be a better advocate for accommodations you need when you share them with course instructors and accessibility services staff.

1. What are the ways you are able to best demonstrate your knowledge?
2. What are your strengths from your disabilities and how are you best able to demonstrate these strengths?

What do you need to support your learning needs and style?

“No accommodation or access need is too small. Most institutions are going to be resistant to providing access needs—know that going in.”

—Disabled Yale Divinity School Alumni, MDiv ‘22

**Questions about Accommodations:**

1. Is there a well-established disability support team/office on campus?
2. Is there a peer-mentor support group?
3. What documentation is required for receiving accommodations?
4. What types of accommodations are available?

How much freedom are faculty and staff given to support or refuse to support your requested accommodations?

### Disability in the Classroom

“The things that the school did to create a more accessible environment were all done at the prompting and insistence of disabled students. Professors began including more information about disability in their classes (mostly because I and other disabled students volunteered to lead class sessions on these topics). The school hired an adjunct professor to teach a course on Disability Theology (because many students advocated for it).”

—Disabled Union Theological Seminary Alumni, MDiv

With the presence of more disabled students in graduate theological education, disability has become more visible in both in-person and online classroom environments. Some students reported a sense of hope in these changes, such as increases in the presence of openly disabled faculty, increasing support for disability scholarship researched by and for disabled scholars, and courses on disability theology and related studies being offered at more schools. A disabled graduate of Union Theological Seminary has seen progress. With the presence of disability in the classroom, disabled people are less likely to experience harm and isolation. There are more honest and visible representations of disability due to the tireless advocacy of disabled students who want to see themselves and their communities represented in their educational institutions.

One survey respondent noted about their institution, “Several professors expressed interest in wanting to learn from students how to make their classrooms more accessible.” Yet, even when there is interest in learning how to increase accessibility within the classroom, the support to educate faculty and staff and the tools to make classrooms more accessible are not always available in higher education. A disabled PhD candidate I spoke with expressed frustration in the difficulties she experienced as an instructor who was attempting to make her classroom more accessible for disabled students like herself. This was especially true for those with less experience, she noted, because the institutional guidelines for how flexible instructors were allowed to be when assessing students’ knowledge were unclear.

### Finding Community, Building Community

“Being in community with other disabled people is necessary for your survival.”

—Disabled Yale Divinity School Alumni, MDiv ‘22

Disability student groups can be incredibly helpful in bringing disabled students together and are a vital source of support for many graduate students with disabilities. In “Additional Resources,” you will find a non-exhaustive list of disability student groups currently active at theological graduate institutions.

“Be prepared to advocate for yourself. Build a network of allies who can help in your self-advocacy.”

—Disabled Union Theological Seminary Alumni, MDiv

Many disabled students I spoke with are, or were, involved in community organizing and advocacy on their campuses. They emphasized the importance of cross-community organizing and building relationships with other marginalized students—beyond just disabled students—on campus. A disabled Union Theological Seminary alumni stated: “Find other disabled students and organize with them to create a more just and accessible environment. Organize across causes with BIPOC students, queer and trans students, neurodivergent students, immigrant students, older students, etc. Our causes are ALWAYS related.”

**Questions about Supportive Community:**

1. Does the school currently have an established, active disability student group?

What types of programming and events has the disability student group held in recent years?

“Find contact info for a disability student group prior to going to the school, and test out their space. Is the space safe? How do you feel in that space?”

—Disabled Union Theological Seminary Alumni, MDiv

**Strategy #2:**

Try your best to visit the school in person. Connect with as many people who will be involved in your education (current students, faculty, staff) as you can. Pay attention to how your bodymind feels on campus. If you are looking at online programs, pay attention to your comfort level when interacting with representatives from the school over the phone or on Zoom. Talk about these feelings with someone you can trust, whether that be a family member, partner, or friend.

### Vocational Support

Whether you are interested in pursuing ordination, working in an academic field, finding a job in the nonprofit world, or have absolutely no idea what you want to do upon completing your degree, your program should help you with this discernment. When I spoke with a 1979 graduate of Perkins School of Theology who has epilepsy, he shared that his initial motivation for attending seminary was to seek ordination in the United Methodist Church. However, as he struggled with the inaccessibility of seminary, and especially with the ordination process, he changed course. To disabled students who are seeking ordination now, he stressed: “Be transparent straight off the bat about what you need.”

Reflecting on his own experience, he wished he had been more honest about what he could and could not do, but acknowledged how difficult it is to know how much to reveal about your disability and access needs, when to reveal that information, and to whom.

#### Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE)

Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) is a requirement for some graduate degrees in religion, particularly the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree. It is often a requirement for ordination in a number of faith traditions and denominations. Whether or not CPE training is required for your individual interests and goals, it may be something you are interested in participating in. In my conversation with a blind graduate from the Jewish Theological Seminary, she emphasized how inaccessible CPE was for her and many other disabled students.

The Association for CPE (ACPE) provides accreditation for CPE programs, and because it is the only agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education for accreditation, many graduate programs require that students completing CPE for credit do so at a program that is ACPE-accredited. [San Francisco Night Ministry](https://sfnightministry.org/cpe/) is an organization that disabled students have found to be more accessible due to its online CPE program offerings. You can find more online CPE programs using the ACPE [online directory](https://profile.acpe.edu/accreditedcpedirectory) by selecting “Online Options” under the “Units Offered” filter.

### Community and Practical Considerations

“As a blind person, learning new locations is often challenging for me, and I wanted to know that I would be able to get to my classes, workplaces, pharmacy, grocery store, and other needed locations with a fair degree of independence. I also had questions for my mental health care providers about whether they could continue to provide care for me while I went to school in a different state.”

— Disabled Union Theological Seminary Alumni, MDiv

There are many logistics to consider when exploring graduate programs, especially for those of us with disabilities. If you are looking at programs located in a different climate than you are used to, it can be helpful to spend some time in that environment prior to beginning your studies. A physically disabled student who I spoke with benefited from attending an in-person site visit on her school’s student preview day because it helped her get a feel for how her body would react in a colder climate.

Housing, healthcare, and transportation are a few of the major logistical concerns for prospective graduate students in any field. The individuals I spoke with during the research process and those who responded to my survey emphasized three areas as particularly important for consideration by disabled people interested in pursuing graduate theological education.

**Questions About the Accessibility and Flexibility of Program Requirements:**

1. Are there physically accessible sites for internship and CPE requirements?

How much flexibility is available to students who may struggle—for a variety of reasons—to fulfill degree requirements through traditional (often inaccessible) internship and CPE sites?

#### Housing

“The on-campus housing ended up being even more inaccessible than ‘not accessible’ made it sound, but it worked well enough for me as someone with a walking disorder.”

— Disabled Yale Divinity School Alumni

If you plan on moving to attend a graduate program in-person, you will need to consider your options for housing. Many disabled people have access needs which relate to our living environments. Graduate schools are much less likely than undergraduate schools to provide accessible housing options, often because they are less likely to guarantee housing to graduate students. The most consistent piece of advice from former and current students to pass along to future disabled graduate students was to look early. Start looking at your options for housing even before you make the decision to attend a specific graduate program. Ask current disabled students where they live, on or off campus. Know that accessible housing can often be more costly, so budget accordingly.

**Questions About Housing:**

1. Does the school provide graduate housing?
2. Is graduate housing ADA compliant?

Are there accessible housing options located off-campus?

#### Healthcare

When I became a student at Yale Divinity School, I enrolled in the student health plan. As a chronically ill and disabled person who takes multiple prescription medications and requires regular care from specialists, this decision was not one I made lightly. Being under the age of 26 and attending graduate school close to my hometown, I was fortunate to have options. I could remain on my parents’ insurance plan and continue to see my same doctors, or I could choose to enroll in the health plan with Yale. I was also fortunate to be accepted into a program at a divinity school that is attached to a university, and therefore offers health insurance to its students. With more options came more things to consider. I chose to enroll in the Yale student health plan because it was more affordable and covered more services than my previous plan.

**Questions about Healthcare:**

1. Does the school offer health insurance for graduate students?
2. If so, what is the annual cost of student health insurance? How does the cost compare to the cost of the insurance you have now?
3. If you enroll in the student health plan, will you be able to see all of the specialists that you need? Will your medications be covered?
4. Regardless of which health insurance plan you choose, do the necessary medical specialists practice locally to the prospective school? If not, would you be able to travel if needed?

#### Transportation

Transportation is an important factor to consider when deciding where to attend graduate school. One student I spoke with benefited greatly from access to accessible parking that was provided through her school’s Student Accessibility Services (SAS) office. It was difficult and time consuming, but once she went through the process and was able to receive the accommodation, it was incredibly helpful for her. Larger institutions may offer accessible transit vans, which bring disabled students to and from locations on or near campus. At schools where these accessible transit options are available, students are often required to submit an application and medical documentation to receive this accommodation.

## The Application Process

If you are considering applying to a graduate program in theology or religious studies, you have likely spent time in a higher education setting. If you are disabled, you might have some knowledge or experience with the accommodation process at the undergraduate or high school levels. If disability or identifying as disabled is new for you, you may not know what processes and procedures are available. The experience of being a disabled student varies across schools and graduate programs in theology and religious studies.

“Find other students with disabilities who have experience navigating your school/program and learn from their experiences about what works.”

—Disabled Yale Divinity School Student

**Questions About Disclosing Your Disability:**

1. Should I disclose my disability and accommodation needs during the application process?

When and with whom?

The answers to questions around sharing your disability and accommodation needs during the application process are dependent on many factors, which will differ depending on your individual needs and concerns. On many graduate theological school websites, you will find language similar to what is on the [Duke University Divinity School’s website](https://divinity.duke.edu/admissions/how-apply):

“Our office is prohibited by law from making inquiries about a student's disability in the admissions process. We will not require you at any point in the admissions process to disclose if you have a disability.”

It can be helpful to meet with a current student to discuss the accommodations process. Try to meet with a student who is disabled and is unaffiliated with the school’s admissions office to learn about their experiences.

## Resources

“Be sure to take care of yourself first and foremost. You may be tempted to compare yourself to your classmates or be persuaded by staff/faculty to take on more work than you’re comfortable with, but don’t! Work at your own pace and trust that you’re the expert on your needs.”

—Disabled MDiv Student, Iliff School of Theology

### The Association of Theological Schools

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) is a collective of more than 270 graduate schools of theology in the United States and Canada. ATS provides an alphabetical, searchable [directory](https://www.ats.edu/Member-School-List) of its member schools, which might help you during your search for the program that is right for you. Learn more at [www.ats.edu](http://www.ats.edu).

### Disability Student Groups at Graduate Theological Schools

Does your school or alma mater have a disability student group that is not already listed here? Please reach out to help us grow this resource.

* **Yale Divinity School** in New Haven, CT – [DivineAbilities](https://yaleconnect.yale.edu/osayds/student-groups/)
* **Union Theological Seminary** in New York, NY – [Disability Justice Caucus](https://utsnyc.edu/life/senate-caucuses/)
* **Princeton Theological Seminary** in Princeton, NJ – [Association for Disabled Seminarians and Allies](https://www.ptsem.edu/campus-life/communities-and-groups)
* **Fuller Theological Seminary** in Pasadena, CA – [Faith & Disability @ Fuller Seminary](https://www.facebook.com/groups/faithanddisability/about)

**Iliff School of Theology** in Denver, CO – [Iliff Disability Coalition](https://www.facebook.com/groups/961550049097962)

## About The Author

Izzy Frazza (she/they) is a 2024 graduate of Yale Divinity School (YDS), where she received her Master of Arts in Religion with a concentration in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. As a 2023-2024 Faith Inclusion and Belonging Volunteer Intern, Izzy’s work at RespectAbility was supported by the YDS Internship Program. As a chronically ill and disabled person, they are passionate about increasing the accessibility of graduate theological education for disabled people, having experienced the inaccessibility of academic spaces firsthand.