

Hello everyone;

My name is Cara Purdy. I am a lifelong Maryland resident, and a member of the 'Invisible Wave'; a group of young adults with chronic conditions trying to spread awareness of our healthcare and social needs in the world. I would like to use my time to give a brief background of my chronic illness, and confront the discrepancy of university disability accommodations with accommodations available in the working world.

I have a rare congenital connective tissue disorder called Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. The symptoms of this disease include chronic pain, brain fog, heart issues, frequent joint dislocations, and chronic fatigue. As I grew up, my symptoms got progressively worse. During flare-ups of the disease, I had an extremely difficult time having energy to do the most basic tasks. I was diagnosed at 21 years old, a college senior, after seeing more than 10 different specialist doctors.

After High School, I went to the university of Maryland to study bioengineering in the Honors college. Without an official diagnosis for what I was going through, I was not able to receive any accommodations through the university. I was frequently unable to go to class due to chronic fatigue and my GPA suffered. Unfortunately, even after my diagnosis, I learned that the university accessibility & disability services do not provide accommodations for periodic absence, and I was left to plead with my teachers for their pity.

After college, working in healthcare, I applied for and received intermittent FMLA after a year of employment, which meant I could call out of work for periods of incapacitation without punishment or question by my employer.

Anyone who has gone to UMD knows that there are strict policies regarding attendance. Per university policy, students are given one opportunity a semester to use a "self-signed" absence note to get out of class. Past that, you will have to negotiate with your professors for their sympathy. The university health center is also notoriously averse to giving out absence notes. I came down with mononucleosis as a Junior, and was told to "take it easy for a couple weeks" but was not given any excuse note for class. I was expected to "power through" the fever, chills, fatigue, and body aches and continue with my studies without a break. Whereas if I got sick in the workplace, I would just use sick time to help take care of myself at home.

The College experience is supposed to provide students with a well rounded education and shape people for their lives in the workplace. If that's so, then why are the university disability services so different than what's available in the real world? Why does a student's health and recovery come second to attending a lecture that could be video recorded? We need to revise the abilities and focus of the university health center and disability services to more accurately focus on the unique health needs of the person.