

Meet Aurora

How do our offices REALLY impact our students? How do we prevent or empower student agency and disclosure?

I'm Aurora. I'm 32, from Brazil — I came here in 2016. Back home I was just Brazilian; I didn't get racialized until I arrived in the United States. Here, when I fill out a form, my skin color is not there, because my ethnicity is mixed up. When I have to, I say Afro-Latina — that's not on the form either. I'm working on my master's in social work, and I registered with the disability services office for my low vision. I also live with depression and anxiety, but I didn't ask for accommodations for those. Honestly, the office felt like more of a disservice than a service — everything has to be requested, and my white classmates seem to know everything that's available from the get-go. If you come as an outsider from another country, everything is just so different; it's harder when you have to jump through a lot of hoops.

And when I do ask, it feels like my race comes in front of everything else — like being brown and having a disability is “too much,” so whatever's in the back isn't a priority. Nobody asks me, “What are your accessibility needs?” So I do a lot of self-advocacy, and it's tiring. When I meet someone, I'm not going to lead with what I struggle with — I'll tell you what I do best, that I'm from Brazil, Latina, Afro-Latina. That comes first. I'm already down on privilege. These days I mostly manage: friends in class fill me in when I miss something on the screen, and I bought a tablet so I can make the files as big as I need. My disability doesn't define me — it didn't stop me from being here. But I keep thinking: in Brazil, some of this just felt automatic.

Aurora is a research participant (pseudonym); quotes are verbatim from study interviews.

Exercise Instructions

How do our offices REALLY impact our students? How do we prevent or empower student agency and disclosure?

Your group's societal arena: _____

Round 1 — Map the pulls (10 min)

Name the pulls acting on Aurora in your arena. At least one must be something a disability services office itself produces or tolerates — a form, a phrasing, a delay, an eligibility gate. Write them on your worksheet; report out.

Round 2 — Reinforce (10 min)

What does — or could — your office do that builds counter-narratives in Aurora's arena? Remember: reinforcement doesn't erase pulls — it contests them.

Round 3 — The capacity lesson (10 min)

Name a push — a way Aurora acts on the system. Watch the model first: pushing without reinforcement will not move. Agency is capacity that practice either builds or starves.

After each round: Mark where Aurora sits on the dynamic salience spectrum on your worksheet.

Debrief — What about your office?

- What would Aurora say your office's sliders are actually set to?
- Which pulls on our list does your office have the authority to remove next semester? Are there places that your office needs to focus first?
- How might your office reinforce students' counter-narratives and resilience next semester, especially when pulls are not readily removable?
- Where do you see your students exercising agency and resistance? Are you ready to make changes in response to their advocacy?

My 1-1-1 commitment — what will you do, starting this semester?

One pull to remove, one reinforcer to add, one push to empower — write them on your worksheet.