

## The No-Policy Policy: Negotiating with (Neurodivergent) Clients

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*Fall 2019: I glance over the appointment schedule, noticing that Abdul and Emma,<sup>1</sup> two of our regular clients, each have multiple appointments scattered across the week. Despite our policy that clients can have only one appointment a day, Abdul has booked two back-to-back appointments for several days during the week and Emma has three appointments in one day. I suspect they will not show up to some of those appointments and that their tutors will express concern that they are doing more writing than the clients. Sighing with frustration, I ask the receptionist to call Abdul and Emma, remind them of our policies, and cancel the appointments that violate our policies. If Abdul doesn't show up for any of his appointments this week, he'll end up banned from making appointments for the rest of the semester. Emma is a week or two away from such a reminder.*



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In January 2020, I shocked my writing center staff and colleagues by eliminating all our policies governing the number, frequency, and duration of appointments that clients could make. These types of policies are so standard that WOnline, one of the most frequently used writing center scheduling platforms, has built in prompts related to them. And indeed, the policies are so standard that when clients occasionally pushed back against them, rather than reflecting on the policies themselves, I reacted by identifying the clients as the problem.

My elimination of the policies was triggered by an employee's observation that in reviewing client report forms, she had noticed that most of the clients who wanted policy exceptions had disclosed being neurodivergent; that is, their brains process in a way considered atypical. Autism and OCD are two common examples of neurodivergence. When I wondered why those clients wanted exceptions, I realized that the policies themselves hindered our access to that information; instead of asking about clients' needs, staff and I fell back on the phrase, "That's our policy." While I recognize these types of policies can assist in setting healthy boundaries for both consultants and clients, in practice, the policies were short-cir-

cutting conversations. I was engaging in classic ableist thinking, assuming that a set of policies that seemed reasonable to me and *many* of our clients worked for *all* clients.

The new no-policy policy acknowledges that the assumptions baked into the previous policies about why students don't show up for appointments or make more or more frequent appointments than I see as ideal are faulty, as I will discuss below. The no-policy policy also redirected energy from enforcing policies to enforcing boundaries.

## THE POLICIES

The policies were all implemented because of problems I perceived: clients not showing up for appointments, clients making multiple appointments in a day, and clients asking for appointments that ran very long.

### THE NO-SHOW POLICY

When I became director, I was amazed that as many as 40% of appointments resulted in a client not showing up. I put practices in place to reduce the no-show rate, such as calling clients to remind them of their appointments the day before, but the rate remained in the double digits. A few years later, when I adopted an online appointment system, it was easy to implement the pre-loaded script that automatically blocked anyone from making an appointment after three no-shows. The rate was cut in half, which seemed to indicate the policy was a success.

### THE ONE APPOINTMENT PER DAY POLICY

The “problem” that precipitated the policy was clients spending hours in the Writing Center with one or more tutors. Several tutors told me they felt anxiety about back to back sessions with challenging clients. We sometimes had a waiting list and I heard from clients who couldn't get appointments because another client had taken all the available slots. After putting the one-appointment-per-day policy in place, the number of students with multiple appointments in a day plummeted to zero, so I judged the policy a success.

### THE 50-MINUTE APPOINTMENT TIME

The “problem” that precipitated the policy limiting appointments to 50 minutes was hearing from tutors that long sessions were tiring. They said that sometimes it seemed that they had done everything they could for a client and yet the client didn't want to leave. They worried that some clients were getting them to do too much of the work for them. Once I put the policy in place limiting appointments to 50 minutes, the “problem” disappeared, implying a successful policy.

## EVALUATING THE EFFECT

In all three cases, I judged the policies to be “working” because the “problems” that precipitated them were reduced after implementation. But, as the following discussion will demonstrate, the problems themselves were misidentified; the problems did not in fact go away—they simply became less visible to me.

In creating these policies, I failed to do what Sue Jackson and Margo Blythman recommend in their chapter, “‘Just Coming in the Door Was Hard’: Supporting Students with Mental Health Difficulties,” in the Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels edited collection, *Writing Centers and Disability*. They mention a client who is perpetually late for appointments and suggest talking with the client about what is behind their lateness, allowing that they might be struggling to get adequate sleep because of mental health issues (245). This seemingly innocuous suggestion is actually quite radical. Writing center employees very seldom engage the client who is late or doesn’t show up in conversation, in part because the client isn’t there to have the conversation. I used the client’s lateness or non-presence as justification for not having a conversation with them, thinking, “If they don’t care enough to show up or be on time, I am not going to invest any of my time and energy in following up.” My attitude as director trickled down to tutors, as I coached tutors to match their effort to the client’s, making ableist assumptions about how effort is demonstrated.

Margaret Price acknowledges this line of thinking when she says “presence is the sine qua non of learning in higher education,” highlighting the common assumption that students who don’t show up simply lack motivation or discipline (65). But as Catherine Prendergast observes, when a student doesn’t show up to a class or a client doesn’t show up to an appointment, we don’t ask them why; we feel comfortable making negative assumptions about them. In effect, she says, “to be disabled mentally, is to be disabled rhetorically” (202) because when the student or client doesn’t show up, we also stop communicating with them, reasoning that their not showing up constitutes their withdrawal from communication, which justifies our termination of communication. Price points out that many neurodivergent clients don’t show up, are late, or need more time with a tutor for reasons that go far beyond motivation and discipline and notes that many people with mental disabilities fall off the radar, simply disappearing from a school because they failed their classes (6).

## ABLEIST ASSUMPTIONS

Being a disabled person who lives with low vision and cognitive

processing delays myself hasn't protected me from internalizing the ableism embedded in academia. When an employee initially called my attention to the fact that the clients most often resisting our policies were neurodivergent, my perspective on the policies shifted. Suddenly, the ableist assumptions behind the policies seemed glaringly obvious to me:

- Clients who don't show up for appointments are lazy, inconsiderate, or poor planners. It's easy to call and let us know you need to cancel or reschedule. Banning them from making appointments is a reasonable consequence of their poor behavior or inability to plan.
- Clients who need more than one session in a day are trying to get the tutor to do their work. They are lazy or devious. Prohibiting them from making multiple appointments in a day is either a reasonable consequence of their poor behavior, or in their best interest as it will force them to start doing the work themselves.
- Clients who can't learn what we want them to learn in a 50-minute session aren't putting in enough effort or have needs beyond the capacity of what the writing center offers. Not being allowed to have a longer appointment will force them to put in more effort or seek out more appropriate resources.

Once these ableist assumptions became clear to me, I realized I had misidentified the "problems." The problem wasn't clients not showing up to appointments; the problem was that our appointment system hinges on clients having predictable lives. The problem wasn't that clients were making too many appointments but that I hadn't adequately taught the tutors how to pace and structure long appointments to meet both the client's needs and their own self-care needs. The problem wasn't that clients weren't putting in the effort to learn everything they needed to learn in 50 minutes but that the Writing Center was taking a one-size-fits-all approach to tutorial time.

### **THE NO-POLICY POLICY**

I replaced the three policies with what I called "the no-policy policy," which is actually a protocol:

Any client can make as many appointments as they want, whenever they want (as long as the Writing Center is open and a tutor is available). Clients who want a two-hour appointment can simply make two back-to-back 50-minute appointments. If any staff member feels that the number, duration, or frequency of a client's appointments is not meeting the needs of that particular client, challenging

our ability to meet other clients' needs, or producing anxiety in tutors, I have a meeting with the client to assess the situation and collaboratively work toward a solution. The new protocols embrace a spirit of "nothing about us without us" and are designed to reduce access fatigue, the emotional exhaustion of having to constantly ask for accommodations, for clients with disabilities (Konrad); normalize and value neurodiversity for both clients and staff (Price); and push back against the idea that disability must be "overcome" (Dolmage).

To illustrate how this plays out in practice, I want to come back to the two clients, Abdul and Emma, who were constantly at odds with the original policies, and discuss how the shift to the no-policy policy changed my approach with them.

Abdul was a graduate student who had appointments nearly every day, often multiple times a day. He disclosed that he was registered with our disabilities services center but did not indicate why. He regularly made three to ten appointments a week but didn't show up to half of them. He tried to make multiple appointments in a day. Every semester, he was the first client who got banned from making appointments under the old no-show policy, which led to him calling the front desk regularly to complain and try to secure an appointment anyway.

After the no-policy policy took effect, I asked Abdul how we could help him avoid making appointments he couldn't keep. He explained that he shared a vehicle with others and couldn't always get to our commuter campus when he expected; his anxiety over transportation led to him making many appointments so that whenever he could use the car, he would have an appointment. He suggested that he be allowed to make as many appointments as he liked and then each morning, he would contact the front desk to indicate which appointment for that day he would keep, if any. This system worked well for the two semesters he had left before graduating.

Additionally, tutors were concerned that Abdul was getting them to write his papers for him. They had noticed that when Abdul had three appointments in a day with three different tutors, he would suggest that the tutor heavily edit one paragraph of the essay to model how to do it. After three appointments in a day, he would essentially have three paragraphs of his paper written by others.

I called a meeting of all the tutors who worked with Abdul to talk about concrete strategies they could use to avoid such heavy editing of Abdul's work. We agreed upon some boundaries that ev-

everyone would consistently enforce with him, such as rewriting only one sentence per session, and resisting pressure to get more “done” in each session. I then met with Abdul and told him about the concerns of the tutors. He agreed to try the new strategies. After two weeks, I checked in with the tutors by email; they agreed that when they all consistently held the boundaries around only doing extensive rewriting of one sentence, Abdul stopped pushing them to do more.

Emma was an undergraduate education major who also disclosed that she was registered with the disabilities services center. She came in for help with sentence structure and grammar. Tutors were concerned that she wasn’t applying what she was learning in one session to the next because she appeared to make no progress between sessions. In addition to being a regular no-show, she complained that 50-minute sessions weren’t long enough. Tutors suspected that Emma was having one tutor edit a few sentences and then meeting with another tutor who edited a few sentences and so on, until her entire paper was edited by tutors.

When I spoke with Emma, I learned that she had a hard time remembering from one session to the next what had been covered.

I called a meeting of tutors who worked regularly with Emma. I discovered that because tutors were simply noting in their client report forms that they had worked on grammar with Emma, it was difficult for one tutor to avoid repeating the lessons of the past tutor. The tutors agreed to write more detailed notes in the client report forms so the next tutor could begin their session by recapping what had been covered previously. In practice, this helped jog Emma’s memory of what she had learned in the last session and allowed tutors to feel confident that they were not inadvertently doing her writing for her.

Both clients were combative under the old policies; under the no-policy policy, the Writing Center staff found them to be cooperative and pleasant.

My approach to no-shows also changed significantly. Now when a client doesn’t show up for a session, they automatically receive an email that says

I noticed that you missed your Writing Center appointment scheduled for [date] at [time]. I’m reaching out to make sure you are OK. Please feel free to get in touch with me or anyone on the Writing Center staff for support. We can point you toward campus and community resources if you need help. And of course, we can get your appointment rescheduled if you want.

Our no-show rate remains unchanged, but now I regularly get emails from students who missed an appointment thanking me for checking in and sometimes giving me a glimpse into the complicated lives they lead that caused them to miss an appointment: childcare fell through, they were up late because of a chronic health condition and overslept, they got called into work unexpectedly, adjusting to a new medication has caused disruption. Sometimes the information they give me provides an opportunity for me to refer them to offices on campus that can help; sometimes all I can do is convey my sympathy for their situation.

The no-policy policy embraces “crip time,” a concept in disabilities studies that Alison Kafer describes as “requir[ing a] re-imagining [of] our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (27).

## RESULTS

There have been four significant results of the shift to the no-policy policy:

1. Staff and I question what is behind the behaviors we’re seeing rather than assuming it is laziness, lack of discipline, disengagement, and all the other negative traits that are euphemisms for “someone who has a complicated life that I don’t understand.” I have more conversations now with both clients and staff, negotiating what they want, what the writing center’s capacity is, and what we can all agree to be held accountable for.
2. Tutor education focuses more on practicing boundary-setting during back-to-back sessions with the same client. For example, I explicitly encourage tutors to give the client a freewriting exercise to do for ten minutes while the tutor takes a break.
3. I have more meetings with groups of tutors to talk about consistent practices and boundaries to set for specific clients.
4. It is never necessary for a client with disabilities to disclose their disability or that they are registered with the disabilities services office to get a longer appointment time. This enables any client, disabled or not, to schedule as much time as they want with a tutor.

## CREATING AN ANTI-ABLEIST CULTURE

Our no-policy policy is one way my staff and I are building an anti-ableist culture that seeks to make accommodation and disclosure

unnecessary. Committing to creating an anti-ableist culture doesn't mean my staff and I don't fall victim to ableist logics and assumptions, but when we recognize that we have done so, we hold ourselves accountable. Indeed, the reason the employee I mentioned at the beginning of this article felt comfortable sharing their observation with me that it was mostly neurodivergent clients who ran afoul of the original policies is that in the writing center's anti-ableist culture, the employee knew I would welcome the observation and hold myself accountable.

## NOTE

1. These are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the students.

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