

Disclosure, Masking, and Passing: Graduate Student Experiences Navigating the STEM Academy

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This arts-based research composition explores the perceived imperative among STEM graduate students to pass as non-disabled and conceal their disabilities in order to survive and succeed in academia.

Abstract

In STEM graduate programs, survival can depend less on what one knows and more on how convincingly one can perform normalcy. This paper examines how disabled STEM graduate students with less apparent disabilities use passing, masking, and selective disclosure as survival strategies within ableist academic cultures. Grounded in disability justice and critical disability theory, this study draws on semi-structured interviews with disabled STEM graduate students and presents findings through a collectively authored narrative poem. Participants' narratives show that the labor of appearing "normal" accumulates over time, eroding wellbeing, identity, and belonging even as it enables short-term academic survival. The study reframes selective disclosure and attrition as institutional failures rather than individual shortcomings, informing policy, pedagogy, and accountability efforts aimed at creating more just and sustainable STEM graduate education systems. These findings provide actionable guidance for faculty, administrators, and disability practitioners seeking to reduce ableist barriers in STEM by normalizing access needs, redesigning evaluation practices, and creating environments where disabled students can succeed without hiding.

Keywords: disability justice, ableism, graduate education, STEM, passing, covering, disclosure

Problem

In high-stakes STEM environments, survival often hinges not only on academic excellence but on the ability to conform to neoliberal ableist norms that valorize productivity, independence, and hyper-competence. Within these cultures, disclosure of disability is not only discouraged but can be dangerous—inviting stigma, scrutiny, and professional risk.

Background

Across STEM settings, people whose body-minds fall outside dominant neoliberal ideals often feel pressure conceal, downplay, or compartmentalize stigmatized identities and/or experiences. This practice is classically described as "passing" [1], [2], [3]. In contemporary civil rights scholarship, toning down a stigmatized identity is known as "covering" [4]. These strategies are understood as responses to assimilation demands and stigma. Stigma is the discreditation of attributes in a way that makes the person with those attributes inferior or less than human [3]. Stigmatized individuals often carry similar beliefs about identity as society [3]. This is akin to internalized ableism whereby disabled people apply the negative societal beliefs of being inferior and deficient to themselves [5]. Navigating the stigma of disability can be dangerous [6], [7], [8], [9].

Existing in STEM spaces can force people with one or more nonnormative identities to “pass.” This demand to “blend in” intersects with ableism and neoliberal norms that privilege a narrow template of productivity and “normalcy,” aligning with critiques of compulsory able-bodiedness and neoliberal ableism in disability studies [10], [11], [12]. These structures encourage assimilation while obscuring the cumulative burdens borne by those at multiple axes of marginalization [13]. Over time, the “encouragement” to act as “normal” as possible is traumatic, especially for someone with multiple oppressed identities [13].

Queer professionals in STEM face multidimensional disadvantage despite similar training and commitment levels [1], [14]. This includes devaluation of expertise, harassment, health difficulties, and higher attrition intentions [1], [14]. In such climates, impression management can become a survival tactic. Identity management also appears as codeswitching—modulating speech, behavior, or presentation to meet dominant norms. Codeswitching can help navigate biased environments yet it imposes an “identity tax” and emotional fatigue over time [15], [16]. In STEM cultures, this often manifests as conformity to narrow professional styles that differentially burden BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ STEM professionals.

For disabled people, impression-management can become a survival tactic to preempt colleagues’ doubts about their competence [13], preparation [13], or capability to do impactful work [17]. Disability has been described as a liability [13] and even the “kiss of death” if disclosed in the graduate application process [18]. Employers may feel tricked or taken advantage of if an employee discloses a disability after the hiring process, leading them to doubt the employee’s credibility and trustworthiness [13]. Yet disability and neurodivergence research are increasingly exploring the range of assets that conditions such as Autism / Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) can impart in engineering education and more broadly, viewing educational environments as disabling rather than individuals as deficient [19], [20].

For many, passing or covering carries a significant cost, sometimes destroying the self it is meant to safeguard [5], [21], [22]. “Minority” stress research links concealment, expectation of rejection, and internalized stigma to adverse mental health and biological outcomes [23], [24]. Parallel findings in the neurodiversity literature describe “masking” (camouflaging autistic traits) as effortful and associated with stress, burnout, and decreased wellbeing—illustrating how normalization pressures operate similarly across disability and queer contexts [25], [26].

When disclosure is unsafe or passing fails, the outcome is frequently misframed as individual “dropout” [2], [11], [27]. Critical scholarship urges reframing attrition as “pushout,” highlighting how policy, climate, and accountability regimes eject underrepresented people from educational and professional pathways [2]. This lens better captures trauma and cumulative harm at intersections of race, gender, disability, and sexuality [28]. Taken together, intersectional theories emphasize that experiences at these crossings are not additive but structurally coproduced; analyzing the matrix of domination clarifies how multiple oppressed identities can amplify harm while masking makes that harm less visible to institutions [29].

Studies have specifically explored issues of passing, covering, masking, and disclosure of disability in STEM and higher education. Studies have found that undergraduate engineering

students may be hesitant about disclosing due to concerns about stigmas from faculty and peers, and challenges with campus disability services offices, sometimes electing not to disclose nor pursue formal accommodations [30], [31], [32], [33]. Carter [34] found differences in how students with so-called invisible disabilities viewed STEM and non-STEM courses, and specifically the attitudes of STEM faculty as being less accommodating or dismissive. Actively masking or concealing body-mind differences among STEM students has been associated with fearing negative consequences [31], [35], [36]. Studies of masking among neurodivergent STEM graduate students contributed to both emotional and cognitive loads and negatively impacted their mental health [37], [38].

The goal of this paper is to reveal the lived experiences of masking and passing among STEM graduate students with non-normative body-minds. The use of a poetic form was chosen to disrupt normative ways of sharing academic findings and embrace the notion that different ways of doing and being have unique value. The poetic form can provide a compelling means of revealing the true costs of masking and passing.

Approach

Grounded in disability justice and critical disability theories [39], [40], this study draws on two phases of semi-structured exploratory qualitative interviews with seven STEM graduate students who self-identify as disabled or having one or more less apparent disabilities. The methodology and participants of the larger study are described in [20]. During initial thematic coding [39], [40], of interview transcripts, the authors identified “passing” as a theme. This paper explores that theme.

Rather than presenting findings through conventional academic prose, this composition employs poetic prose—weaving together paraphrased participant narratives into a collective poem. This approach safeguards participant confidentiality [40], [41], [42] while honoring their voices as arbiters of knowledge [43]. Presenting results in the form of a poem is an established method in the body of knowledge [42], [44], [45]. Following Yergeau’s theorization of neurological queerness, we position this form as a challenge to academic norms that equate credibility with linearity, clarity, and smooth prose [46], [47], [48]. Drawing on autistic poetics, poetic prose enables fragmented, iterative, abruptly shifting, and emotionally dense lived experiences to be presented without translation into smoothed academic prose [49, pp. 31–76; 179–192]. By embracing poetic form, the research counters dominant norms of academic writing and affirms the value of neurodiverse, “Mad,” and “Crip” ways of knowing [46], [47], [48].

The first author reviewed the interview transcripts identifying quotes that related to “passing.” The first author then wove the quotes into a narrative poem. The second author reviewed the poem and the interview data to assess if there were any gaps or misrepresentations. The authors then met for a negotiated process [50] where the authors arrived at a consensus on which quotes to include in the narrative poem, achieving Inter-coder agreement [51].

Results (The Poem)

I’ve had all these weird situations,
where I used really roundabout approaches to deal with my disabilities.

I can talk my way out of things...

so I am able to cover up my ADHD and pass.
I use it to get away with things all the time.
They thought I was just a bright child—I was struggling in a lot of ways.
People think I understand. I don't.
I don't always correct them.
Sometimes I just feel really dumb or bad...
because I don't understand things people think I understand.
God, this is kind of weird...
am I evil?

Women are expected to be dumber...

It's kind of a weird privilege, being a woman in engineering.
You're expected to be a little bit dumber.
If you're dumb but nice, they'll let you at it.
It's really fucked up,
but I use it to my advantage.

I use facts to hide...

I use the fact that I'm in school to hide how bad I am at work.
I use the fact that I'm working to hide how bad I am at school.

I was super sick. I came in sounding awful.
Rather than explain my disability,
I convinced them I had been getting sicker the entire semester.

It's *totally intentional*...

Last semester I basically only ever did projects about 30 minutes before they were due,
but my Professor really liked them.
He said they were such "beautiful little micro projects that just explored an aspect."
Yeah, *totally intentional*.

I've given excuse after excuse for not getting things done...

If I explain why, that feels icky...
because it feels like I am using my disabilities as an excuse.
I've been given the benefit of the doubt way too much.
I get what amounts to special treatment.
The extensions and alternatives I have been given are definitely a part of privilege.
I think about it a lot and I feel a lot of guilt about it.
But also the points I make,
the stuff I create,
they are usually good.

I have to rationalize hiding my disabilities a lot to not feel bad about it.

I was gone a lot.
I felt like I owed it to my friends to tell them what was going on.

Hiding in my own skin...

I often feel like an imposter.
I just live inside of my own skin.
It is the *truth* that I have a super hard time with.
I just feel like I'm the only one who doesn't get this.
I'm the only one who isn't prepared.
I'm the only one who's dumb.

I started reading people's stories online.

So many were experiencing what I was.
Without their stories,
I would have never thought this could be something other than me just being dumb.

People don't talk about disability...

Talking about our disabilities, well that's a conversation we keep between ourselves.
We find each other.
We sit closer,
and closer.
It's been helpful in coming to terms with my disabilities:
when I tell someone and they don't even flinch.

But talking with others about disability...
it just isn't talked about.
It feels taboo.
It is just something we shouldn't do.

Some of the faculty started sharing they go to therapy.

To see them be successful, with their own struggles,
that is so empowering.
They made it.
The more open the faculty can be with students,
the better it will be for us.

Don't ask for help...

If you do, you will single yourself out.
Keep a stiff upper lip.
Just try to push through.

Let's counter the narrative.

Professors, admit you are fragile, frail, imperfect human beings.
Tell us:
not to be hard on ourselves,
why what we are doing matters,
"You might feel like an imposter but you're not and I believe in you."

...I never see that in Engineering.

I feel trapped...

No matter what I do it feels like the wrong time to tell someone I have a disability.
If I tell them right off the bat, they make all sorts of judgments.
If I wait, it backfires. It causes angst.
They assume I am only doing it because I want something.

When I tell them I have a disability...

They think I'm doing it to hide my "incompetency."
They think I made it to grad school, so it must be an excuse.

Instead, why not ask:

"If this person is struggling, how can I help?"

It terrifies me...

I really do care what people think about me.

It's all the negative stigma.

They...
think I'm incompetent, fragile, and broken.
assume I wouldn't make a good project partner.
see me as a liability.
think they need to take extra time and care explaining things slowly to me.
keep vital information from me because they thought I'd "go off the rails" if I knew.

They told me...

"If you needed help you wouldn't burden others. You would solve the problem yourself."
"Don't worry kids. Nobody ever failed this test that didn't have a major mental illness."

I was ostracized.

Even my family... are just not ok with disabilities.

My parents wanted what was best for me...

They thought if I was diagnosed with a disability,
I couldn't be successful.
I kept my disabilities silent. I didn't tell anybody.

He believes if he ignores it, my disability will go away...

In a lot of ways, it is great.
My advisor doesn't treat me differently.
He doesn't talk down to me.
But if I have another crisis, he won't understand.

When I tell them I have a disability...

they don't acknowledge me.

They tell me I don't have it.
It is frustrating having to convince them.
They don't believe ADHD or mental health conditions exist.
I just have to live with it.

They say:
"Big pharma is swindling you."
"Your meds are no better than sugar pills."
"Therapy is a waste of time."

They didn't believe me...

they said "prove it."
It's demoralizing.
If all they wanted was just a letter from the doctor that would be different.
They wanted extensive documentation to ensure I wasn't getting more than I "deserved."
I'm tired of having to prove things.
I just want to be believed.

But on one hand I understood...

they say students are abusing accommodations.
It seems commonplace that people claim disabilities for extra time or whatever.

For fucks sake, believe us.

Don't make us jump through hoops.
What's on the surface isn't necessarily what's going on below.
We need to do our due diligence to support students in whatever form they come in.

I don't want to disclose. I'm tired of it...

I'm queer and present in a different way, all the time.
Usually, I present very masculine.
So having PCOS, having women innerparts, and saying I have this very feminine disability...
it throws people through a fucking wild loop.
I'm tired of dealing with it. I don't want to talk about it to most people.

I developed a complex about my invisible disabilities...

I felt like I could never ask for help.
It was a sign of weakness—of failure.
I don't want to inconvenience anybody.
I don't want anybody to know what I'm going through.
I wanted to pretend it wasn't happening
I didn't want to live through that shame.

She asked if everything was ok.
I broke down so hard.
No, things have never been ok.

In some ways, I'm behind in coming to accept my disabilities...

Disability is such a term...
a term with so many different meanings to different people.
Society tells us, "It's something abnormal that needs correcting."

Who I am and what's going on with me is constantly changing...

This is where all the thorny, internalized things come up.
It's embarrassing to ask for help.
I feel so bad.
The guilt.
the shame.
the vulnerability...

When I ask for help, I apologize:
"This isn't who I normally am."
I don't even recognize myself.
I feel like I'm just so fake.
None of this can be real.
All my suffering is my fault.
I just kind of believe I am lesser.
I really try to push away those thoughts.
I don't want others to feel that way.

But deep down I just feel like
wallpaper on a rotting house.

I live in a world that sees what I do as "not as good as what others do"...

but that doesn't mean that it's true,
all the time,
every way,
or maybe any way.

Despite my historical embarrassment...

my drive to be successful in this program forced me to have conversations about disability.
It is more so than I've ever done in the past,
so I consider that a win.

It would have changed everything...

if I had known a professor also experienced this.
I have no model for what it is like to be a STEM professional with a disability.
It's very hard to chart a path without any role models.
I would pay a lot of money to hear a professor talk about their disability...
for a professor to talk about the importance of asking for help.
I want to be that person for others.
I'm here. I exist. I am successful. You can be too.

Discussion

Findings reveal a profound psychological and emotional toll of passing—concealing or downplaying aspects of one’s identity to meet institutional expectations. The participants describe relentless pressure to perform “normalcy” to avoid being labeled as “broken,” “incapable,” “not good enough,” or “a burden.” This compulsion extends beyond disability to include race, gender, and sexuality, illustrating how multiply marginalized students must navigate intersecting demands to pass—to succeed. While some students wanted faculty to openly disclose disabilities, mental health difficulties, and differences, faculty experience similar challenges related to so-called “concealable stigmatized identities” [52].

For the participants, passing is not a choice but a survival strategy—one that offers temporary protection while simultaneously causing physical and psychological harm and eroding the self. Disclosure, while potentially liberating, can invite stigma, exclusion, scrutiny, professional risk, academic consequences, loss of employment, and basic needs insecurity. These findings underscore how systemic ableism contributes to the erasure of certain bodies and experiences in academic discourse and institutional policy, perpetuating cycles of marginalization and attrition in STEM graduate education.

Yet, not everyone who is disabled can pass, mask, or cover their disabilities or is able to do so all of the time. The level of apparentness (identifiability) of a disability can vary from person to person and is sometimes fluid [12], [20], [53]. While the participants in this study did not describe experiences related to permanent readily apparent disabilities, they did describe situations or periods of time when a disability was readily apparent. During these times participants were no longer able to mask or cover a disability. An example of this was when a participant had a relapse of PCOS and collapsed on the floor and could not get back up in front of a professor as alluded to under the “I developed a complex about my invisible disabilities” header of the poem and further described in Beardmore [20, p. 192]. The participant in this situation chose to disclose that the pain and blood loss from a PCOS cyst rupturing was the cause of their collapse. Even then they had a choice. They could have chosen to not explain the reason for their collapse, downplay it, or blame it on something else. In fact, they describe trying to pretend like nothing was happening, not wanting to be an inconvenience, and not wanting anyone to know what they were experiencing.

Choosing to disclose can have significant consequences. Asking for accommodations could reflect negatively in an evaluation. It could lead to the loss of opportunities and resources, such as education, employment, income, and basic needs. People may be outed to others. It may cause resentment. People may even try to dictate a person’s healthcare. Each of these consequences and the roles staff and faculty mentors have in such consequences are further discussed in [20], [45].

Inclusive teaching practices including universal design for learning (UDL) implementation may remove the need for students to disclose neurodiversity or disabilities, as there are not differential accommodations needed for individual students [54], [55], [56], [57]. Whitwell and Clarke [58] describe how inclusive teaching practices in online courses can support student privacy and remove the need for students to disclose personal information. Further, it has been

argued that all students have access needs and that clearly articulating those needs should be normalized in all education spaces in STEM [59].

There is likely a large portion of people in STEM who are neurodivergent or disabled [19], [20]. However, there are many barriers to disclosure including shame, stigma, not being aware of differences in how oneself and/or others participate in environments or activities, and even the cost of diagnosis [20], [57]. Without these barriers disabled students, staff, and faculty may feel safer expressing their needs. Representation matters. If discussing neurodivergence and disability becomes more normalized we as a community can work toward shifting the perceptions of disability, neurodivergence, and other non-normative forms of diversity through an asset perspective. This might help some individuals to more fully accept their own differences and reject self-stigma and shame. Witnessing many students with forms of neurodivergence or other forms of disability succeed might also reduce stigma over time and increase the number of faculty, staff, and other students who more accurately recognize both the challenges and assets of these differences. If more faculty were aware of the prevalence of forms of disability that may not be readily apparent or obvious to them, they might be more motivated to embrace Universal Design for Learning or other neuroinclusive practices.

This paper centers experiences of passing, masking, and covering disabilities in STEM graduate education. At the same time, these narratives point to the broader harms of ableist normativity for students with readily apparent disabilities—those who do not have the option to avoid disclosure. Additionally, participants described intersecting dynamics of gender and disability. Neither of these themes are discussed in this paper; however, the Authors' broader work does examine disability, gender, and power in STEM graduate education in greater depth [20], [60].

Concluding remarks

This paper contributes to ongoing discourse about equity and social justice in STEM education by interrogating ableism as a form of normalized violence. It identifies strategies for resistance and transformation, including peer support networks, claiming space for disability in academic discourse, advocacy for inclusive pedagogy, confronting complicity, and ensuring institutional accountability. Ultimately, this work invites educators, administrators, and researchers to co-create academic spaces where disabled students can thrive without having to hide.

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