**At Arm’s Length: The Perils of Fat Individuals in Higher Education**

By Jennifer Argumedo

Fat people are hyper(in)visible (Stevens, 2018). This condition refers to the hyper-surveilled, yet underserved and neglected experiences of fat individuals. While literature is available to an audience of higher education professionals, rarely is fatphobia collectively discussed in the real world—let alone in the context of students or colleagues. Many higher education and student affairs professionals turn away or ridicule urgent calls for advocacy at best. When deemed unimportant, unnecessary, or too uncomfortable to discuss, student affairs practitioners create space for fatphobia to become a common tool for marginalization. While a panoply of daily circumstances target fat students and professionals, this piece will highlight a few pressing examples.

Physical environments created on higher education campuses most easily exemplify a general disinterest in accommodating fat people. Consider classroom seating options: the width between seat and desk, the length between the arms of a traditional classroom seat, the distance between desks, the moveable space in bathroom stalls, seating at the library and dining halls. Residence hall furniture maintains this standard by way of twin sized beds and narrow workspaces and seating. Beyond uncomfortable, some of these physical settings present hazards during active safety threats. Intangible environmental influences present added obstacles for fat people when stigma is appendaged to fat people’s diets, nutrition, and assumed health.

Besides physical barriers, the stigmatization of fat people’s eating choices, quantities, and pace matrices an irregularly uncomfortable public eating experience, including the elevated standard of cleanliness expected of fat people, their bodies, their presentation and general presence. The performance of eating is not concomitant with cleanliness and its public execution may force fat people in higher education institutions to experience a barrage of negative experiences. In consequence, fat people tend to eat less, monitor their eating, or restrict eating altogether in public settings (Zdrodowski, 1996). Where institutions’ dining halls do not provide take-out opportunities, fat students are forced to contend with anxiety around publicly eating. Institutions’ sustainable, healthy eating initiatives are undermined by fatphobia. Unexamined fatphobia is commonplace across campuses and fat people are often isolated in this understanding.

Fatphobic conditions do not languish outside of dining hall spaces. Campus-wide nutrition messaging, including flyers promoting physical wellness and/or eating often demonize fatness-- using fear-motivated language that prioritizes avoiding weight gain and a physical appearance of fatness rather than prioritizing healthy food relationships and overall wellness; think of the common phrases like the “freshman fifteen” and “stay in shape", for example. Body-positive education contributes elevated importance to the aesthetic condition of the body and accepts nothing beyond thin, straight sizes, and generally conventional bodily presentations. Other mental and physical health resources contain this underlying and frequently unaddressed education that sees fatness as an inherent problem. Aspiring mental health, counseling, and nutrition specialists may be encouraged to view fatness as the root of a problem, not an individual characteristic that may or may not be associated with health discrepancies. Healthcare professionals’ practices may neglect fat people’s needs in general which can lead to future or worsened health conditions. Health concerns for fat people can be daunting beyond usual health anxiety for this reason. Without proper training, education, and intervention, it can be assumed that medical fatphobia is deeply entrenched in student health centers. More than bothersome, a pattern of hyper(in)visibility is marked by this socially imbued disregard for fat people’s needs.

Hyper(in)visibility not only applies to the existence and appearance of fat people, but simultaneously to the perception of their emotions. Fat people’s emotions may be disregarded, devalued, and, paradoxically, exacerbated. It is normative to infantilize fat people, to associate characteristics such as laziness, indulgence, and emotional dramatization. This perception may fluxgate across anti-Black stereotypes but produces harmful and sometimes dangerous consequences for racially marginalized fat individuals. When fat people exhibit powerful emotions, such as anger, their emotions are amplified and perceived as a monstrous, child-like, yet masculinized and corollary threatening parody of an adult human (Dijker et al., 2017). Fat people’s emotions are too much and not enough, though both outcomes lead to a general disregard for fat students’ and professionals' needs. This attribution of uncontrolled bursts of emotion is married to a perceived loss of self-control—the inability to exhibit rational behavior, whether related to food or other human functions. Succinctly, fat individuals do not experience functions—such as hunger, bodily pain, or justified emotion-- the same as thin and straight sized folks.

Professionalism standards operationalize the conditions described above to exclude fat people from successfully inhabiting and thriving in these spaces. Most retail clothing stores carry only straight and thin sizing options; this issue is especially germane in the realm of professional clothing. At the intersection of fatness and low-income status, adhering to professional attire requirements becomes an impossible landscape to navigate. Clothing donation centers reflect limited sizing options and tailoring plus-sized clothing to small and straight sizes is practice among some non-fat shoppers. There is devastating irony in this issue, considering the heightened expectation on fat people to look presentable and put together; when unfitting this aggravated standard, fat professionals risk categorical subjugation of slobs who undermine the significance of professionality, devalue their role, and misrepresent their workplace. At the intersection of race and gender, BIPOC people with female reproductive organs encounter the risk of being criticized for clothing that does not fully conceal the chest or body’s silhouette.

Negative assumptions of fatness create character judgements for fat individuals in higher education. In the carousel of fatness are politics of acceptance, opportunity, and grace. Societal prejudice against fat people motivates non-fat people to prioritize other non-fat folks in their practice of all three categories. Fat people’s experiences in higher education are challenging and for many, can be worsened by lower standards of institutional physical and mental care. When organizing programming, leadership staff and peers may overlook the needs of fat students. Consider physical environments—the ability of students to move around and across spaces. Within the scope of your role, advocate for a change in wellness messaging, reimagine furniture options, and make accessible and not demoralizing the ability to request accommodations. Consider available attire resources for fat, low-income students and explore size-inclusive clothing initiatives. Advocate for fat-acceptance and welcoming environments in all spaces, including student health centers and public facilities. Learn about fat students’ needs. Hold critical conversations when you have gauged fatphobic environments, messaging, or rhetoric, especially as a thin or straight-sized person. Student affairs professionals should be urged to wonder about fatness and its intersection across a spectrum of identities.

Fat individuals are kept at arm’s length—a literal measure of the pain driven into a fat person’s side by the arms of a traditionally spaced seat and of the symbolic, unaddressed, marginalizing harm a fatphobic society imposes on an individual. Fat students and professionals deserve advocates by nature of their humanity and entitlement to a promising educational environment and professional experience.