Exploring the definition of disability within post-secondary institutions and barriers to accommodation within education.

Event Date: April 01, 2019
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What accommodations are available at your institution? How does one access these accommodations? On a base level, who is able to access these accommodations?

At SFU Semester in Dialogue, we noticed a trend: students whose needs are not met by standard educational practices also face barriers in accessing accommodations.

On April 1, 2019 we organized a public dialogue to encourage conversations between students, professors, administrators, and community members around campus accessibility. Our aim was to provide the opportunity for those who's needs are not being met by the current system to share their lived experience, identify barriers and make suggestions for improvement. This report contains the opinions expressed by the participants at the event as well as suggestions for how to improve accessibility at post-secondary institutions.

Eight primary barriers emerged during the dialogue:

- Accessing accommodations is time consuming
- There is a lack of information around how to get accommodations
- Receiving a diagnosis can be challenging
- Accommodations are not well funded
- Accommodations are standardized
- System is not trauma informed
- Process design lacks community consultation
- Lack of consistency across institutions

Navigating the current system was highlighted as challenging for students who must meet criteria and advocate for themselves - sometimes for the first time but more often multiple times in various ways both inside and outside the institution. Lack of information and guidance as well as a one-size fits all model means many students' needs aren't being met.

Centres for accessible learning are currently limited in their ability to address these barriers. A suggestion for post secondary institutions is to better fund these centres and provide more information for students, faculty and administrators. Ensuring the criteria includes invisible disabilities as well as allowing students to receive accommodations that are flexible and tailored to their individual needs is also necessary.

The system should be changed so that it is more accessible to a wider range of abilities. This report should act not only as a record of the dialogue, but as a call to action for institutions to create real change. Throughout the dialogue, it became apparent that accessibility centres at post-secondary institutions must become more accessible.
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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We acknowledge that Simon Fraser University Harbour Centre and the Morris J. Wosk Centre are located on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territories of the x̱məθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səl̓ilwətaɁɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. Through our dialogue and beyond, members of our cohort live with an awareness that this is not our land, and that while we are here it is our responsibility to learn about our First Nations and to work towards right relationships with them and their land.
OVERVIEW

WHAT IS SEMESTER IN DIALOGUE?

Semester in Dialogue is a one-semester, full-time program that brings together students from a variety of backgrounds to learn about and tackle large and small-scale societal problems. Rather than a traditional lecture format, learning is done through dialogue - the sharing of stories and perspectives surrounding a question or topic, and the formation of a common understanding.

In dialogue, everyone participating holds a piece of the answer to the question at hand, and all perspectives are valued. Learning through dialogue broadens our understanding, seeks to create common ground, and promotes an interdisciplinary approach towards solving complex problems.
WHY IS (DIS)ABILITY AMBIGUOUS?

(Dis)ability describes a large breadth of lived experience and ways of being; including some conditions that are visible and others that are not or chronic conditions and mental illnesses that can be episodic in nature. These concepts are often reduced to conventional categories, and considered to be fixed, stable and distinct, when the reality is much different. While categories have provided institutions with a frame of reference when discussing (dis)ability, the language often overlooks the complexities of an individual. Individuals that may have the same medical diagnosis, might require very different accommodations.

WHO ATTENDED?

Our event represented both stakeholders and students from the following institutions:

Simon Fraser University
University of British Columbia
Vancouver Community College
Vancouver Film School
Langara College
Douglas College
University of the Fraser Valley
British Columbia Institute of Technology
Camosun College
Capilano University
Okanagan College
University of Victoria
BARRIERS TO SEEKING ACCOMMODATIONS

To provide guidance during our dialogue, participants contributed to a visual representation of the process students must navigate when seeking accommodations at most post-secondary institutions. The sticky notes represent barriers to seeking accommodation and were written by our participants.

We asked the following question to prompt the creation of the visual:

'What are existing barriers in seeking accommodations?'

The following are the major themes that our participants identified as barriers during our dialogue.

TIME CONSUMING

Participants told us that seeking accommodations is a lengthy process. Whether it be applying for accommodations for the first time or seeking renewal, individuals must apply months before the beginning of a semester. Students seeking accommodation must engage with several offices and professionals in order satisfy the criteria outlined by accessibility centres. Engaging with physicians and mental health clinicians often takes place outside of the educational institution and becomes a break in the line of communication in addition to being time consuming.
LACK OF INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE

There is a disconnect between highschool and post-secondary accessibility offices. Several participants shared stories about accommodations they received at the high school level not following them into their post-secondary careers. Information about accessibility services is not readily available or isn’t made clear in syllabuses, online or during academic advising appointments.

RECEIVING A DIAGNOSIS

Receiving a diagnosis can be time consuming and also cause extreme financial stress. Depending on an individual’s income level or socioeconomic status, the accessibility of receiving a diagnosis can vary. Participants mentioned the financial barriers that exist in obtaining the required documents for accessing accommodations. International students who represent a significant number of SFU’s undergraduate and graduate populations, also experience additional barriers as they may not have access to a local family doctor.
LACK OF FUNDING

Lack of funding for accessibility resources was one of the most frequently cited barriers by attendees. This is evident in the ratio of accessibility centre advisors to the total number of students on campus, the types of accommodations that are funded and the programs that are eligible to receive funding of accommodations.

STANDARDIZED ACCOMMODATIONS

Many participants highlighted that the accommodations most commonly offered seemed to be ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution and not specific to their particular needs or diagnosis. One of the most common accommodations provided is the allotment of extra time to write an exam or a separate room for a student to write an exam in.
NOT TRAUMA INFORMED

Due to societal stigmatization, self-identifying as ‘disabled’ is challenging. Some participants described feeling ‘not disabled enough’. This is a challenge in self-identification. The silo'd nature of the system requires individuals to explain their situation multiple times at appointments with their doctors, advisors, professors, and accessibility centres - who may or may not be trauma-informed and receptive to the student’s needs. Even the requirement of individuals to retell their stories so often and ‘prove’ their (dis)ability repetitively indicates that the process itself is not trauma-informed.

PROCESS DESIGN

Accommodation policies are generally designed without consulting students. Including people with lived experience in process development of policy and procedures would build trust and improve user experience helping to create a system that is accessible. Participants suggested that a community consultation may be useful in process design.
Inconsistency across Institutions

Accommodation policies and procedures vary from institution to institution, making it difficult to both govern and navigate. For students who have transferred from different institutions who look to seek accommodations, it can be especially difficult to adjust to the different processes right away. The process of accommodation rests on the assumption that all students are able to navigate it, but participants expressed the barriers such as lack of knowledge, language, and the flexibility of the system.
RECOMMENDATIONS

We asked the following question to prompt discussion surrounding how we can improve our system to be more accommodating:

‘How can we create a more accommodating system?’

The following recommendations have been developed around the major themes that surfaced during the dialogue.

REVISE THE LANGUAGE USED TO DESCRIBE (DIS)ABILITY

Participants discussed what it means to have a disability, and expressed frustration that ‘disability’ is often assumed to be something physical or otherwise obvious. There is a lack of shared understanding surrounding the definition of (dis)ability, and what conditions deserve accommodations. Post-secondary institutions should explicitly define the term (dis)ability in order to appropriately accommodate visible, invisible, temporary, and static (dis)abilities.
ENCOURAGE OPEN DIALOGUE AROUND STIGMA

Stigma surrounding the term ‘disability’ can be a barrier to students who need accommodations. Students may not self-identify as, or be identified as ‘disabled’. Participants emphasized the importance of de-stigmatizing (dis)ability. We all have different abilities, and should not feel shame. Addressing the feelings of shame surrounding disability could help students feel more comfortable in their self-identification journey.

INCREASE AWARENESS OF (DIS)ABILITY RESOURCES

(Dis)ability resources are not widely publicized on campus. Participants suggested that post-secondary institutions should put more energy into promoting accommodations. Social media campaigns may be an effective way to reach students who would otherwise not be aware of what resources exist. Campaigns should also promote awareness of student-lead (dis)ability support groups and/or clubs (e.g. SFU’s Autistics United Club).
Accommodation policies and procedures often vary widely between post-secondary institutions. This lack of uniformity can make it difficult for transferring students to navigate the system. As such, some participants suggested that post-secondary institutions should work together to harmonize their policies and procedures surrounding accommodations.

All post-secondary institutions should implement a rights-based model of accessibility. That is, policies and procedures must reflect the reality that accessibility is a right, not an afterthought. Participants noted that this could be accomplished by including more people (e.g. staff and students) with lived experience on administrative boards relating to accessibility and accommodation. Collaborating with these individuals on the reconfiguration of old policies or the designing of new ones could help make the system more efficient and accessible.

Some participants suggested that accommodation policies should be more preventative rather than reactive in nature. As one participant noted,

'We don’t have to focus on a time of crisis.'

Our policies need to be preventative in the sense that they prevent potential accommodation needs from arising in the first place. This type of system must include the voices of those with lived experience.
CHANGE THE DOCUMENTATION PROCEDURES TO RECEIVE ACCOMMODATION

Many of the barriers discussed revolved around the documentation process for getting accommodations. Most participants felt that documentation for disabilities should be recorded and accessible for faculty and school staff to see rather than the students continually having to disclose it. This may be problematic as new privacy protocols would have to be developed; however, the fewer times those seeking accommodations have to fill out the same or similar forms, the better.

TRAIN FACULTY TO ADDRESS ACCESSIBILITY CONCERNS

Professors hold a lot of discretionary power in terms of what resources they mention in class, and what accommodations they make for students. To address this concern, participants suggested that the delivery of courses should be modified so that professors are required to address (dis)ability resources. Staff and faculty members should receive (dis)ability sensitivity training so that they provide a safe space where students needs will be understood and appropriately addressed.
CALL TO ACTION

People with (dis)abilities are experts in their own needs and thus possess valuable knowledge that post-secondary institutions can use when designing accommodations.

Through this report we hope to bring about awareness of the need to better address both visible and invisible (dis)abilities and to consider our recommendations in the design of accessibility centres.

Our goal is to see post secondary institutions become more accessible and accommodating for more students.

How can you help?
APPENDIX

SFU SEMESTER IN DIALOGUE COHORT 2019

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