

PRACTICE BRIEF

Transforming Barriers into Bridges: The Benefits of a Student-Driven Accessibility Planning Committee

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Abstract

The School of Social Work and Disability Studies Accessibility Planning Committee (APC) is a student-driven initiative that has been in existence for over 10 years. This practice brief looked at the committee through interviews with faculty and student members. The investigation aimed to determine whether the benefits of having a student-driven committee outweighed the challenges for the students, the faculty, the university, and the wider community. Outcomes indicate that student-driven committees, though faced with issues of recruitment, low membership, and reduced retention, also provide students with leadership and citizenship skills, promote dissemination of accessibility issues on campus, encourage personal growth, and serve as a tool for the consolidation of material learned in class to applications in the non-academic world. These outcomes indicate that continued support of student-driven committees on campuses has the potential of benefiting not only students, but also the university and the wider community.

Keywords: Accessibility, disability, post-secondary education, student-led committees

While other Accessibility Planning Committees have not been the focus of published literature, similarities might be extrapolated from research on student-driven committees in general. The literature notes that student-driven committees have benefits that impact a wide range of people, including the students themselves, the faculty associated with the committee, the university, and the wider community. One of the major advantages of student-driven committees is their potential in helping students link what they have learned academically to a practical, real world setting. Koulish (1998) notes that student-driven committees demand students be proactively involved rather than just engaged in passive learning because the students become stakeholders in the process. Such active involvement requires the improve-

ment of skills in project development, problem solving, activity planning, task delegation, communication with peers and the media, community outreach, critical thinking, leadership, and team work. These skills are not always well developed in the traditional classroom for a variety of reasons, including class size and time constraints. Student-driven committees provide students with the ability to practice a “learn by doing” approach (Koulish, 1998, p. 563).

Universities can also benefit from student-driven committees through the feedback they offer. Peterson, Wittstrom, and Smith (2011) found that involving sub-committees of students in curricular assessment led to increased quality improvement due to the availability of ongoing feedback of student experi-

ences. Student involvement through the student-led sub-committees enhanced the university's ability to identify and implement necessary changes to the curriculum as students were more likely to communicate with each other than with the faculty.

A further noted benefit to students is that the participation in student-driven committees allows them to develop and expand their own identities through personal growth and education (Koulisch, 1998). Public involvement allows students to expand their horizons and deconstruct their own stereotypes and biases of their committee/community partners. The community also benefits as it "bridges the gulf between self and other" through a process of "mutual teaching and learning" that empowers the community telling its story (Koulisch, 1998, p. 563). A connection to the wider community is especially important to students as it allows them to build on their social and professional networks. Mastran (2008) noted that student-driven committees can provide professional connections for students. These networks are particularly important as students leave school and enter the work environment because they provide students with additional experience regarding employment opportunities.

As outlined above, there are many benefits to student-driven committees; however, there are also many challenges. One of the biggest challenges is that such committees are hampered more by limited university resources than committees with faculty chairs who are able to promote the committee's needs to financial decision makers (Mastran, 2008). Other challenges include a lack of efficiency and direction in student-driven committees, particularly if meetings are not held regularly or lack good attendance by members (Koulisch, 1998). Mastran (2008), in conducting a survey of student committees, found that the best ways to move beyond the challenges noted above were to have regular committee meetings and a "clear path for student participation and recognition" within the committee and the university (p. 53). Thus, regular meetings and clear guidelines about student involvement encourage participation and address problems with attendance and retention.

Depiction of the Problem

The School of Social Work and Disability Studies Accessibility Planning Committee (APC) is a grassroots committee developed by Dr. Donald Leslie in conjunction with the emergence of the *Ontarians with*

Disabilities Act, 2001. Since its inception in 2001, the APC has grown into a student-driven committee that meets once a month and focuses on raising awareness about accessibility and discrimination and advocating for the removal of barriers for persons with disabilities within the School of Social Work and Disability Studies (The University of Windsor School of Social Work and Disability Studies Accessibility Planning Committee [APC], 2012a). During his interview, Leslie stated that he noticed a need for such a committee when assisting the University of Windsor in preparing to meet the mandates of the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2001*. He also mentioned that while the University of Windsor at the time had the Student Disability Services office, it remained difficult to encourage faculty and staff to engage in accommodation changes.

As one can imagine, there are many challenges in having students run a committee, however, there are also many benefits. This paper seeks to trace the history and progression of the committee through an informal qualitative analysis of committee members' experiences with the committee in order to determine the practical social work implications of student-driven committees.

Participant Demographics and Institutional Partners/Resources

In order to examine the specific benefits and challenges of the APC since its implementation, we employed one-on-one interviews to collect data. The results of seven interviews with three women and four men are outlined in the next section. Individuals interviewed included Dr. Donald Leslie, a faculty member involved in founding the committee; Dr. Karen Roland, a co-chair with Dr. Leslie on the University of Windsor's campus-wide accessibility committee; Mr. Frank DiPierdomenico, a former member of the APC; Mr. Anthony Gomez, a staff member of the University of Windsor's Student Disability Services who has assisted as a consultant to the APC; Dr. Irene Carter, a current faculty chair of the APC; Mr. Cameron Wells, who hosts a radio program on accessibility and disability issues for the University of Windsor's radio station CJAM; and a member of Students for Barrier-free Access at the University of Toronto.

All participants who have been quoted here consented to the use of their real names in the article; those who wished to remain anonymous have had their names withheld. These findings will be used to promote the continued support of student-driven committees by universities.

Description of Practice

The Accessibility Planning Committee was created through the input and participation from students in the School of Social Work. The APC focuses on raising awareness of issues concerning disability and accessibility throughout the university campus through monthly meetings. A brief presentation on the committee is given at orientations for incoming undergraduate and graduate students, and also in School of Social Work and Disability Studies courses during the first month of classes. Students have been members from anywhere between one semester to the length of their undergraduate and graduate programs. Leslie mentioned during his interview that student members of the APC collaborated with the social work field placement office and the Department of Human Resources to create student placements in what is currently the Student Disability Services office and the Employment Equity office. Leslie stated that during these placements students engaged in attending meetings, counselling students, and program development research. When interviewed, DiPierdomenico mentioned that students involved with the APC also initiated a weekly radio program called Accessible Communities to raise awareness of accessibility issues and various disabilities. He also mentioned that in order to address knowledge and attitudinal barriers towards disability issues, the students also conducted a presentation for the faculty members of the School of Social Work to educate them on various disabilities as well as barriers and misconceptions faced by individuals with disabilities.

Committee members meet once a month during the school year and the agenda is formed through collaboration between committee members, the graduate assistant and the faculty advisors (APC, 2012a). While discussing the committee, Carter mentioned that the APC does not receive any direct funding to operate, but the Graduate Assistant is paid by the School of Social Work and faculty members contribute their time as part of their service. At the same time, Carter mentioned that members of the committee have worked towards the creation and implementation of an accessibility plan for the School of Social Work and the Disability Studies program by researching accessibility plans and committees at postsecondary institutions throughout Canada and the United States. Carter stated that as students conducted the research, they realized that while other postsecondary institutions had campus-

wide accessibility plans and committees, they could not find evidence of any accessibility plans or committees rooted solely in a specific department or school at any institution, further indicating to them the importance of their work. The accessibility plan was approved by the School of Social Work in 2012 (APC, 2012b).

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

Participants frequently mentioned that the APC allows students to gain experience as social workers and hone their skills in a safe environment. During his interview, Leslie stated that he found that the committee offered real life development of leadership, administrative, organizational, and capacity building skills while also offering experienced faculty support should it become necessary, and through this experience students developed high standards around accessibility and began to raise these issues with faculty and staff. Carter noted during her interview that some of the skills and material students developed resulted in publishable research that students had gathered in a systematic and scholarly method and disseminated to the wider university. As well, Carter mentioned that the students are now learning to support their advocacy work with hard data that they have collected, allowing them to be more successful in promoting their message to stakeholders.

Another positive change brought about by the committee was the voice it gave students. DiPierdomenico noted during his interview that a “PhD doesn’t transcend or give you an understanding of everything” and that having committee members with a disability advocate for themselves and discuss their needs and personal experiences is necessary in removing some of the barriers faced by students with disabilities. In the area of accessibility, Leslie stated that he found the committee to have helped raise awareness of the issues on campus and in the wider community that impede accessibility. Gomez found that the student committee members were demonstrating civic engagement with the issue of accessibility, something that he finds is often not present in most students’ experiences at university.

As the APC has grown and evolved over the years, Carter and Leslie have noted that student recruitment has proven to be a challenge. Leslie stated that low recruitment may have resulted from the fact that many of the students involved with the committee had personal experiences in the area of disabilities, either experiencing a disability themselves or having

a close connection with an individual diagnosed with a disability, and were very close-knit and passionate about disability and accessibility issues. As a result, he theorizes that it may have been difficult for new members to become integrated into the committee. When asked about student recruitment during his time as a student member on the committee, DiPierdomenico stated that there were enough students engaged in the committee that recruitment was not necessary.

Scheduling conflicts among members is also a challenge that the committee faces, as mentioned by Carter during her interview. In order to counteract this challenge, Carter stated that meeting agendas and minutes are compiled by the graduate assistant assigned to assist the committee and placed on the committee's members-only website which also includes resources on accessibility and disability issues and a discussion board for members to communicate with each other between meetings. This allows absent faculty and student members to remain informed of the work of the committee.

Another challenge faced by the APC noted by both Carter and Leslie was the effort to keep the committee student-driven. The high turnover caused by graduation made it difficult to maintain a sense of direction for the committee without increased faculty guidance during times of change in leadership. During her interview, Carter mentioned that the graduate assistant hired to handle the administrative aspect of the committee has been noted to be helpful in ensuring some continuity. Roland also noted during her interview that the presence of faculty liaisons can help to keep the committee on track and that faculty and staff members increase the network of supports that students have to rely on and allow the committee's issues to be raised with university decision makers to whom students would not otherwise have access. For example, the committee members could ask for funding to place Braille signs on all doors in the School of Social Work and Disability Studies locations.

Implications and Portability

The participants interviewed offered a broad range of experience in disability and accessibility initiatives and were able to provide a variety of suggestions to assist the APC as it looks towards the future. One suggestion that was frequently mentioned in the interviews was the need to further network and form partnerships within the university and the wider community. Roland suggested that the APC select a member to act as a liaison between

the APC and various departments of the university that focus on disability and accessibility policies and services. During their interview, a member of Students for Barrier-free Access discussed supporting other accessibility groups to create a greater support network.

Another essential factor for the APC to consider as it moves forward is determining the implementation and measurement of the goals stated in the recently completed accessibility plan. One way to accomplish this, as mentioned by Dr. Roland, would be to have a student representative on the University of Windsor campus accessibility committee. Roland stated that this would allow the APC to become more involved with the entire university campus and would encourage members to make reports regarding their progress to educate the wider university about the developments occurring within the APC. Gomez also stated that involvement in the wider committee would allow the APC to align their goals with the goals of the university.

The need to increase funding is also a consideration for the APC. Mastran (2008) wrote that although funding is often an issue for student-driven committees, the presence of faculty on the committee can increase the chances of receiving university funding. Gomez discussed creating a proposal and meeting with the University of Windsor Student Alliance to obtain funding, as a portion of tuition fees are allocated through the alliance for accessibility concerns and initiatives. A project which could be implemented to increase funding was suggested by Wells, who hosts the radio program *Handi-Link*, funded by the University of Windsor. He suggested creating a survey that focuses on disability satisfaction and recommendations which could be distributed among faculty, staff, and students of the School of Social Work and Disability Studies program and used as a measure of the effectiveness of the implementation of the accessibility plan.

A final future direction that was mentioned by a number of participants was assisting students with disabilities to access resources and supports to gain employment. The member of Students for Barrier-free Access who was interviewed stated that transitions for graduating students are often neglected by postsecondary institutions, and relationships should be formed with organizations and agencies that work with and assist individuals of various abilities. DiPierdomenico discussed his work with individuals with disabilities and stated that, while individuals with visual impairments have an extremely high unemployment rate,

employment is seen as a challenge for any individual diagnosed with a disability.

Formal research is needed to develop a more complete understanding of the committee and its work. More interviews with current and past student members of the committee are needed to better understand the experiences of student members and whether or not the committee has helped them. A quantitative survey of all current and past members of the committee could provide useful data for determining how satisfied students were with their involvement in the committee and areas where the committee can continue to improve.

In conclusion, as supported by the literature, the interviews revealed that the APC has many benefits to offer not only to its student members, but also to the faculty, university, and wider community. The individuals interviewed expressed pride in their involvement. They believed their efforts have helped raise awareness of accessibility issues and challenges and fostered hope in a future where accessibility becomes an automatic consideration. Though it has faced challenges, the APC remains in existence and can, through the steps mentioned above, continue to grow and spread its message of accessibility by giving students a voice.

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