If You Build It They Will Come (and Persist): Exploring Learning Accessibility for Students with Disabilities in the Ontario College System

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Ontario's colleges accept learners with many backgrounds, experiences, and academic needs. Students with disabilities are a growing and diverse population. Is the Ontario College system providing efficacious and responsive support to these learners?

A growing number of college students require, access, and utilize disability support services in Ontario. In 2013-2014, 14% of Ontario college students reported using accessibility services (Colleges Ontario, 2014), and this number captures reported use of services, not the total percentage of college students with disabilities. The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (2014) has identified learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, and chronic illness as the three most common conditions

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This paper explores how Ontario colleges respond to the academic needs of students with disabilities. Its central inquiry is: Given the services and support systems in place are Ontario's colleges truly learning accessible for students with disabilities? Important theoretical variations in the conceptualization of disability are examined and current supports and instructional practices at Ontario's colleges reviewed through these lenses. Specific factors, identified both in the literature and through first-hand experience, which cast doubt on the sufficiency of our current support structures, are outlined.

This topic is important as there are many factors that can influence student persistence (Reason, 2009), either supporting, or detracting from, a student achieving their learning goals. Students with disabilities are at greater risk of leaving college before they graduate. In a survey by Sattler and Academica Group, 14% of applicants to Ontario post-secondary institutions with disabilities had withdrawn 1-3 years after entry compared to 8% of applicants without disabilities (HEQCO, 2013). Other researchers, controlling for institution and program change, found that 27% of Ontario college students with a disability and 17% of students without disabilities left their studies after 3 years (Finnie, Childs & Qiu, 2012). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011) has indicated that "…students with disabilities are less likely to persist in their studies, and if they complete, take a longer period of time" (In HEQCO, 2013, p. 23). With the goal of an accessible Ontario for all citizens by 2025, it is timely to discuss learning accessibility in Ontario's colleges.

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My experience as a faculty member and program coordinator at an Ontario college informs this discussion. For the past six years, I have coordinated Community Integration through Co-operative Education (CICE), an access program for learners with a variety of disabilities. CICE students have automatic access to unique academic and learning supports such as individualized learning accommodations and modifications. Tutor and small group support sessions also develop personal, learning, and adaptive technology (AT) knowledge and skills with the intention of increasing student independence, self-awareness, and self-advocacy. Support programs like CICE can improve "access to education and retention in education programs and subsequently may increase the employability of participants" (Unger, 1994, p. 117).

Defining & Conceptualizing Disability

How disability is defined, conceptualized, and perceived to affect students in higher education, are distinct but interrelated discussions. This paper provides a basic definition of disability, reviews prominent perspectives on disability, and then relates these ideologies to the current service and support provisions in Ontario's colleges.

Defining Disability

"Disability" encompasses a wide variety of conditions; ranging in severity and duration, which create impairment. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) provides a basic definition of disability that includes physical, sensory, learning, developmental, and mental health conditions as well as hidden and episodic conditions (Howard, 2004). Dietsche (2012) and the National Educational

Association of Disabled Students (nd) indicate that it is best to maintain a broad definition of disability to prevent exclusion from services, supports, and practices. As such, "students with disabilities" in this paper is an inclusive definition.

Conceptualizing Disability

How people think about disability influences how persons with disabilities are viewed, treated, and supported (or not) within our societal systems, including higher education. Conceptualizations are ideologies informing approach and practice.

For instance, applying the medical model of disability requires examining the signs, symptoms, and features of disabilities and outlining possible preventative measures, interventions, and treatments to enhance a person's functioning (Burchardt, 2004). The capabilities framework and the social model offer alternative views.

The capabilities framework, developed by economist Amartya Sen in 1979 (Reindal, 2009) can be applied to understand the experience of students with disabilities. The framework defines a person's capabilities (or capability set) as "...opportunities to achieve particular states of being or to undertake particular activities" (Burchardt, 2004, p. 738). Sen's focus is on what people with disabilities can be and do. These are called functionings.

A college student may feel confident, secure, and/or welcomed (states of being), and elect to make an appointment with an accessibility advisor to discuss her disability and classroom accommodations (doing/activities). In this example, the opportunity to

approach accessibility services is available to the student because the two integral parties (the student and the institution) have the required components for action and are effectively interacting. The individual has the ability, resources, means, and knowledge required to achieve the combination of functionings, and the external circumstances are positioned in such a way that she could do so (Burchardt, 2004).

However, we know not all students with disabilities who need support seek out and access the resources and services provided at Ontario's colleges. This is disconcerting as success and persistence may be impeded. To gain insight into if this is a product of student choice or a lack of capability for the students based on individual factors and/or external institutional factors we would need to assess the capabilities (opportunities to achieve functionings) of our students both with and without disabilities.

In analyzing data from a study utilizing the capabilities framework as its lens, this model could assist in understanding issues with student well-being and inequality between groups of students. As Burchardt explains, "...disadvantage experienced by people with impairments is best understood in terms of a limitation of capabilities,...to do or to be various things in life, which may be constrained by personal characteristics and/or the social, economic and physical environment" (p. 742). Within the capabilities framework, both the individual and society are interacting and the quality of that interaction determines whether the individual experiences equality of opportunity and well-being or discrimination.

Terzi (2014), who has applied the capability framework to inclusive primary and secondary education, argues that the model's focus is equality through the provision of quality educational opportunities. Students with disabilities, "...if their capabilities are limited, should receive appropriate resources in order to enjoy equal, effective opportunities to achieve the functionings they have reason to value, thus to achieve well-being, as a matter of justice" (Terzi, 2014, p. 486).

The social model of disability takes issue with the use of the term "disability", clearly separating and defining two concepts. "Impairment is a condition of the body or mind...Disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the life of the community on an equal level with others" (Burchardt, 2004, p. 736). This model argues that when people with impairments are in an environment that limits them they experience disability. Environments that are responsive and accommodating to peoples' impairments do not create the experience of disability. " Disability is the result of inappropriate fit between the person and the environment. If a particular environment offered all of the resources to a particular individual required to perform a task or activity, no disability would exist" (Putnam, 2005, p. 189). Disability in this model is external to the person and essentially a social construction. If students with impairments experience limitations or the loss of opportunities in our colleges, it is our institutions effectively creating disability for these students; because the focus is on the environment inadequately meeting the needs of persons with impairments, the experience of disability can be eliminated through environmental design. The social model believes change is most likely when persons who have experienced disability, the experts in their

impairments and subsequent needs, organize and act as the voice of change (Burchardt, 2004). Although I do believe society plays a very large role in the experiences and opportunities of those with disabilities, and that the impact of the label "disability" is largely socially constructed through stigma, lower expectations, and ignorance, I feel the social model's assertion is far too simplistic.

The social-relational model builds on the social model. In this revised model, impairment in and of itself has potentially negative effects or implications on the individual. For example, if a person has a learning impairment, even if they receive adequate support and accommodation, they will experience their class material differently than those without impairment. For instance, if they have an auditory processing deficit, they will struggle more with spoken and written material than their peers and have to work harder and longer to obtain the same level of understanding and performance as their peers. "However, a disability is contingent upon sufficient conditions brought about by social, cultural, environmental, and religious mechanisms that restrict and hinder the individual's pursuit of vital goals and achievements in life" (Reindal, 2009, p. 162). In this perspective, impairments are themselves potentially limiting and, like the social model, a person is not "disabled" until external forces create negative conditions that drive the person into a disadvantaged position.

The above perspectives are included in the discussion that follows pertaining to the experiences of students with disabilities in the Ontario college system.

Reflecting on the Current System of Support in Ontario's Colleges

Chang, Chang & Ledesma (2005) argue that higher education institutions need to design supports and services that socially and academically engage their learners. In terms of academic and personal supports, these are available to all Ontario college students through student success and access centers. For students with disabilities, under the Ontario Human Rights Commission, post-secondary educational institutions in this province are to ensure that "...appropriate, effective and dignified accommodation processes are in place; and that students who require accommodations because of their disabilities are accommodated to the point of undue hardship" (Howard, 2004). The colleges' access centers are responsible for fulfilling this role.

To meet these needs, one of the primary functions of college access centers is to provide students with official accommodations letters for use in their classes. Accessibility advisors draft these letters in consultation with the student following a review of the student's formal diagnostic history and consideration of the student's current support needs in the college classroom. Students with disabilities also have access, through the same on-campus resource, to assistance with bursary applications, training and support with adaptive technology, and a Summer Transition Program. Although each of these supports is available at all Ontario colleges, how they are offered may differ by institution. In addition, the extracurricular programming targets specific groups. For example, the Summer Transition Program (STP), a Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development initiative, was

developed for students with learning disabilities and designed to provide them with essential skills for post-secondary success (HEQCO, 2013).

In wide-scale survey research; the first to explore use of campus support services in a sample of over 62,000 Ontario college students, it was found that "...a "need-use gap" exists between students and support services in Ontario colleges" (Dietsche, 2012, p. 82). Service usage was lower than anticipated across all student demographics when compared to self-reported need. From 2006-2008, Ontario college students were not utilizing campus services as they indicated they should (Dietsche, 2012). Both Dietsche and Sattler & Academica Group (HEQCO, 2013) have found that service usage by college students with disabilities is higher, but the gap still exists. In questioning why, Dietsche points to two possible barriers; student-related and institutional, the latter of which he indicates may require a new model of delivery for services across the college. The capabilities framework applies well to his discussion; he analyzes what action is required from both the students and institutions to increase support usage by students in the colleges. From the capabilities perspective, there are factors interfering with students' functionings; in this case, an activity; accessing support services, which could affect their overall capability of success at college.

In *The sociopolitical construction of identity: A multidimensional model of disability*, Kraus (2008) argues that placing the onus on college students to initiate and maintain their own learning accommodations (the practice in Ontario colleges) is a passive and reactive institutional response (In Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012). The institution isn't taking an active

role in ensuring accessibility for its students. In my opinion, a primary concern in our current system is that we expect students to self-advocate and initiate their own access and accommodation/support processes at college from the start; ideally months before classes commence. For many students with disabilities, whether direct entry or mature students, this sudden autonomy can be a real shift following years of assistance with advocacy and/or support.

The capabilities framework would likewise critique this accommodations method as a barrier in the external, or institutional, circumstances preventing students from achieving functionings and detrimentally affecting overall capability at college. If students are unaware of services, hesitate to self-identify, do not understand the process, lack self-advocacy skills, and/or do not have access to acceptable and required psychoeducational assessments/medical documentation (the individual ability, resources, means and knowledge so crucial in the capabilities framework model), they will not be able to receive the institution's supports and accommodations. In the social model, this structure of support in Ontario colleges is actually creating disability for people with impairments.

The power imbalance between students and institutional staff and faculty can also act as a barrier to student self-advocacy. Murray, Lombardi & Kosty (2014) describe the process for requesting accommodations as one that "... can lead to stigma, conflict, and deter students from future accommodation requests (p. 32). Students are in positions of lower power when compared with college faculty and those in the institution who make decisions. Several critical disability theorists believe that power

relations are quite evident in students' reluctance to self-advocate (Atkins, 2008). Traditionally, persons with disabilities have experienced discrimination and marginalization, holding far less power and agency in society than those without disabilities.

In capabilities language, persons with disabilities experience fewer possible functionings through societal oppression that limits their capabilities. As such, there is the potential for a striking power imbalance between students with disabilities and those with whom they are required to interact (faculty, accessibility advisors, administration) to have their disability-related needs met. In a recent research report by Kell (2012), discussed in Kraglund-Gauthier, Young & Kell (2014), student participants reported fear or hesitation in approaching professors, capturing this power differential. One student stated "I didn't know what to say to them. I didn't want them to get mad at me because I heard that you had to be very formal with them" (p. 4).

However, regardless of these highlighted concerns, to access disability supports in college, and achieve faculty support in class, students are required to be able and willing self-advocates. Murray, Lombardi & Kosty note, "...the ability of students with disabilities to self-advocate may be a particularly important individual skill within these settings" (p. 32). Students must know what they need and politely and clearly communicate it. Due to important privacy legislation, faculty are not aware of a particular student's learning challenges unless disclosed by the student. "Studies of highly successful adults with learning difficulties have identified the ability to self-advocate as an important factor contributing to success both in post-secondary education and the workplace"

(CanLearn Society, Take Ten Series, p. 1). Unfortunately, Lynch & Gussel (1996) found that students lack necessary training in self-advocacy skills before entering post-secondary. Student respondents indicated that they struggled with how to approach and explain their specific learning and academic support needs to faculty.

Additionally, deficits in self-advocacy may be exacerbated by a poor self-concept held by many students with disabilities. Orr & Goodman (2010) studied the self-concept of college students with learning disabilities. 93% of those polled indicated feeling "stupid"," embarrassed" and/or "ashamed" of their learning challenges (p. 217). College applicants who identified having a disability were also more likely than applicants without a disability to indicate that they applied to college to help increase their confidence (HEQCO, 2013).

Also important are faculty perceptions of students with disabilities. How faculty, as a group, view disability and perceive and implement teaching and learning principles that can create more inclusive classrooms (e.g. Universal Design), has been the subject of research. Of course, it is important to avoid generalization and recognize the variability in faculty; their experiences, attitudes, and understanding of disability.

Even though "faculty should make every effort to understand the higher education experience of all students and in particular those who are marginalized and struggle to succeed" (Orr & Goodman, 2010, p. 214), I am aware that this is not always achieved. For example, there is consternation created by the letters of accommodation. A common criticism includes not

understanding the purpose, intent, and benefit of the letters and feeling inadequately prepared to assist students with disabilities. This sentiment is supported by research that indicates even when students choose to disclose their disability and share letters of accommodation, the faculty may not know how to apply the recommended accommodations in their teaching and learning practice to support the students (Kraglund-Gauthier, Young & Kell, 2014). Other criticisms include the accommodations on the letters seeming generalized, wanting to know a student's disability identification (contrary to privacy legislation), feeling that students use letters to unfair advantage, and concern that other students will feel an inequity in treatment. The latter two concerns may be a reflection of how hidden disability can affect faculty reaction. According to Stevenson, Barnard, Stevens, Siwatu & Lan (2008), faculty "may experience a cognitive dissonance regarding students with hidden disabilities, as these students do not initially appear disabled and do not fit the faculty members' schemata of disability" (p. 169).

It is disconcerting that some faculty may "buy-in" to societal stigma around disability as this only serves to perpetuate prejudice, discrimination, and ignorance, but there is evidence that this is the case. Stigma is pervasive and ableism exists in all facets of society, even in institutions of higher education. In a study of 201 faculty in a US university, researchers investigated how faculty's diversity beliefs acted as a mediator of their attitudes toward students with disabilities. The researchers conclude "faculty members may have deficit views of disability while having more ability views of diversity" (Stevenson et al., 2008, p. 173). This means that faculty seemed to view disability as a problem or additional work

and that, even though disability is a form of diversity, it was viewed as separate, and distinctly negative. It would be interesting to replicate this research in Ontario's colleges to determine if there are similar concerns.

According to Marquis, Jung, Fudge-Schormans, Vajoczki, Wilton & Baptiste (2012), the staff perspective and experience regarding teaching and accessibility in Canadian institutions needs much greater research. In addition to institutional and pedagogical barriers, they found both knowledge and attitudinal barriers regarding disability in faculty that could infringe on learning accessibility for students. In a study which captured student voices, one student relayed "I think when people are uncomfortable around me (laughs)...it's a funny case of dual disability. It's like...they're seeing a disability, but they become disabled by that disability...and they don't know how to act, and they are uncomfortable" (Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012, p. 45). This is an interesting statement as it reflects how the reaction to a student with a disability can itself intensify the impact of the disability; creating a disabling interaction. Both capabilities and social models of disability account for the importance of the environment in the experience of disability. In the social model, this interaction itself is what creates the disability. If those who work in our colleges do not know how to assist and interact with students with disabilities, could gaps in knowledge, and negative attitudes, be countered through expert training and education by persons with disabilities and experts in the field?

The adoption of teaching methods that meet the needs of a wider variety of learners has great utility in assisting students with disabilities. In a study by Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes (2011), college faculty (n=233) were

asked about their attitudes and actions related to universal design for instruction, learning, and assessment. Universal design is a theory and practice that when applied makes learning more accessible to all learners; therefore, it is naturally more inclusive. It does not label learners; instead it seeks to reach, and maximize the learning experience of all learners regardless of learning style or challenge by ensuring accessibility of the environment, material, activities, etc. The study findings indicated that even though the majority of faculty indicated acceptance of specific inclusive teaching practices, with regard to accommodations and learning assessments, the actual practice of these strategies was not always congruent with self-reported acceptance. The study authors indicate "assessing college faculty teaching practices is an important first step to ensure diverse learners receive and equitable and quality higher education experience" (p 260).

Post-secondary students with disabilities, when compared with students without disabilities, have reported greater difficulties with completing coursework in the allotted time, literacy, taking notes, hearing the instructor, reading and comprehending course material, accessing buildings and classrooms, and having appropriately formatted handouts for their needs (Madriaga, Hanson, Heaton, Kay, Newitt & Walker, 2010). "Sen maintains that social and institutional arrangements should seek to equalize people's capabilities, or their effective opportunities for functionings" (Terzi, 2014, 486). If one group of students can access the resources and tools they need for success and another group in the same classroom cannot, this is discrimination. If college students with disabilities are

not provided adequate institutional supports, as basic as physical access to our buildings and classrooms, or handouts and notes posted online so that students can utilize a screen reader or other assistive software/technology, our institutions must be accountable and recognize how they are creating or contributing to, not breaking, barriers. Walker (2005) states, "Ideally, educational organisations ought to equip people with the capabilities to pursue opportunities they value. How valued and valuable opportunities and capabilities are distributed through formal education, and to whom...is a matter of social justice in education" (p. 109).

Looking Forward

For students with disabilities to experience equal opportunity to persist in their college studies and experience success they must receive suitable support. Institutional systems, practices, and approaches must be responsive to their needs. Applying the capabilities framework, educational institutions must ensure that they do everything to maximize the capabilities of their students. Systems, processes, and personnel must not create additional barriers to student success. Students, faculty, support staff, and administration, must bring their expertise and experiences to the table to ensure a design that is utilitarian, functional, and responsive.

The insights and literature reviewed in this paper have identified several areas that require our focus and further research. A review of: accommodation processes currently in place, transition programming for students (with emphasis on self-awareness and self-advocacy training), and faculty training to enhance disability awareness, understanding, and the application of

inclusive pedagogy are all warranted.

Future research could also investigate how variations in the CICE program's supports might be integrated college/system-wide, to benefit all students. The additional supports; particularly that of the Learning Facilitator (LF), academic support professionals who work with CICE students both in and out of classes, help both students and faculty. The LFs assist faculty in understanding student needs, provide classroom support to their students as required, and tutor their students to review, reinforce, and plan learning activities and assessments.

The way in which Ontario's colleges conceptualize and perceive disability must be examined and "…existing barriers to teaching and learning accessibility in Canadian educational institutions must be fully enumerated and strategies must be developed to eliminate or reduce these barriers" (Marquis et al., 2012, p. 2). There is work to be done. If we build better colleges, more responsive to the learning needs of all students, I believe students with disabilities will not only attend in greater numbers but they will also be more likely to persist in their studies; experiencing success and achieving the goals they have defined for themselves.

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