

# ACCESSIBILITY IN RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

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## ABSTRACT

This collaborative and reflective inquiry-based paper critically examines accessibility within the research realm. We focus this inquiry on the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion and specifically address the challenges of establishing accessibility as part of the research enterprise. We acknowledge and reflect on the pivotal role accessibility for persons with disabilities play in an equitable research enterprise and reflect on how nuances in language, behavior, and power dynamics all play a role in creating inclusive environments. This reflective inquiry is a result of a facilitated workshop that took place at a conference attended by professionals working within research administration. Using an inquiry-based workshop approach, facilitators worked with workshop colleagues to discuss, regardless of job title, an ability to influence and shape a more inclusive and accessible system at all levels. Our desired outcomes of this workshop were to collate the collective experiences of our colleagues to uncover barriers and facilitators related to accessibility and to support and learn from our colleagues around ways to create an accessible environment that is a norm. What we find is that accessibility impacts everyone in some way, but it is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Collaboration and communication strategies present possible support pathways to more accessible environments.

### Keywords:

accessibility, inclusion, emotional intelligence

## INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Conference on Research Administration (hosted by the Canadian Association of Research Administration, or CARA for short) offers an opportunity to exchange knowledge and develop professionally in relevant areas of research administration and provides a unique platform to exchange and learn from our peers. In this reflective inquiry piece, we discuss the workshop “EDI, eh? How does accessibility factor in?” and the learnings generated from our peer group. These insights will resonate with the broader narrative of fostering a culture of accessibility and inclusivity within academia, where understanding and addressing academic ableism require a language and mindset shift that goes beyond the ‘duty to accommodation’.

The research administration profession endeavors for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), with the aim of fostering diverse representation encompassing individuals from various backgrounds and abilities within both academic and social settings. We commit to a more profound notion of inclusivity—one that transcends representation. One way to advance efforts is to embrace the power of accessibility, recognizing that through thoughtful design and meaningful conversations, we improve representation by dismantling barriers and fostering an environment where individuals with disabilities can fully engage and participate. We also believe that a more diverse profession is better for all professionals, not just those with disabilities. This emphasizes the need for a proactive approach, namely “accessibility solutions”, which embodies the idea of proactively ensuring access (Sukhai & MacDonald, 2021).

Academia has long viewed itself as an exclusive sphere, yet more recently, new perspectives encourage a more inclusive academy. Of note are the contributions of feminist and racialized scholars who have drawn upon their experiences within academia to expose and denounce the conventional role of knowledge production in society (Brown, 2020). These scholars have described modern academia as a neoliberal academy which marginalizes underrepresented groups, including people with disabilities (Dolan, 2023). In the neoliberal academy, universities compete for funding and prioritize the need for efficient administrators and scholars who can attract a large number of students, who ultimately are the main financiers of the university model (Brown, 2020).

It is in this context that multiple studies have shown the barriers faced by scholars living with a disability (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022; Dolan, 2023; Inckle, 2018; Lindsay & Fuentes, 2022; Waterfield et al., 2018) in a space that usually sees accommodations or any special need as an unnecessary allocation of funds unless proven the contrary (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022). In this situation, people will face the need to prove themselves, and in many cases mask their disability to fit expectations (Waterfield et al., 2018). Collectively, these actions are markers of ableism in the academy.

Ableism marginalizes or diminishes the participation of disabled people and takes away their agency (Wieseler, 2020). In essence, ableism denies the dignity of individuals with disabilities by impacting how they process the human experience and the level to which they can self-govern or assert independence (Frie, 2008; Wrenn, 2015). Academic ableism discriminates or prejudices against disabled individuals in academic settings (Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022). This type of ableism manifests in various ways, such as institutional and individual attitudes, policies and processes, inaccessible physical spaces, and a lack of accommodations (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2022; Peterson, 2021), impacting everyone from research administrators, students, professors, to community partners. Yet within the research enterprise, equity, diversity, and inclusion actions tend not to explicitly include accessibility as a key element. It is an important aspect of inclusion that requires intentional approaches and action. To combat ableism, it is essential to understand the impact of language, behavior, and power dynamics on creating inclusive environments. As research administration professionals, there is an opportunity to close the gap in academic ableism by considering our influence with colleagues and on institutional practices, policies, and procedures within the research enterprise.

In the context of this reflection, influence is “the effect that somebody/something has on the way a person thinks or behaves or on the way that something works or develops” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, n.d.). In short, how we show up influences how others will respond. This is an essential component that needs to be understood when talking about creating change, especially regarding accessibility. Influence and emotional intelligence are important building blocks when discussing a culture of inclusion. Influence allows individuals to use their power, skills, and expertise to motivate others and create spaces that support dignity. Using influence to promote inclusivity involves modeling behavior, active listening, and communication. By actively listening to others and leveraging their thoughts and ideas, individuals can promote an inclusive culture where all individuals feel valued, respected, and included (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013).

Moreover, emotional intelligence facilitates the ability to identify, understand, and manage one's emotions, while recognizing and responding to the emotions of others (Coleman & Ali, 2022). Developing emotional intelligence can enable individuals' emotional abilities in order to build more inclusive relationships, and regulate emotions associated with distress helping to recognize and respond to biases and microaggressions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). People who are emotionally intelligent can recognize their own implicit biases and work to remove them, fostering a culture of inclusion that promotes acceptance and belonging communicating effectively with colleagues. By actively listening, modeling inclusive behavior, practicing empathy, and recognizing implicit biases, we can create a culture that is more accessible and where people feel valued and respected (Lee & Wong, 2019).

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The exclusionary environment within academia requires individuals with disabilities to constantly prove themselves and, at times, hide their disabilities. The lack of intentional approaches and action to address inclusivity and accessibility in research support and administration contributes to the ableist system. It is crucial to understand the influence of language, behavior, and power dynamics in creating inclusive, accessible environments. Research administrators have an opportunity to influence change and create a supportive environment that ensures equitable access and opportunities for all individuals, including those within their departments as well as other parties invested in the research enterprise. By doing so, academia can become a safer and more welcoming space, fostering acceptance and belonging for everyone.

## OBSERVATIONS

The objective of the workshop was to examine the implementation of equitable, diverse, inclusive, and accessible (EDIA) practices in research administration, with a focus on influence and emotional intelligence (EI). During the workshop, three facilitators with experience in research administration and one facilitator who was an EI specialist guided the participants through an inquiry-based process to explore the topic. All four facilitators represented equity deserving groups including people with disabilities, racialized individuals, and the 2SLGBTQ+ community. The workshop was part of the Canadian Conference on Research Administration (CARA) held in May 2023. We asked attendees to reflect on what EDIA meant to them in their research administration practice. The goals of the workshop were to:

- Understand the skills that foster an EDIA mindset
- Identify barriers and enablers to EDIA in various roles
- Understand the actions that we take can affect change

## WORKSHOP MATERIAL AND DESIGN

We approached the workshop facilitation through the lens of accessibility (see Table 1 below for considerations). Considerations included ensuring session material was screen reader friendly, available for download in advance of the session, as well as incorporating multiple ways to engage with the material (e.g., think-pair-share, working with scenarios, small group work, and lecture-style with discussion). We incorporated technology, including posting PowerPoint slides, using microphones, and turning on closed captioning. Attendees could also engage via polling software accessed using a personal mobile device or tablet and other physical materials (e.g., sticky notes and pens). We also stayed as flexible as possible to meet the needs of our audience and committed to summarizing the collective experiences in the room by collecting any activity-related written material left after the session.

**Table 1. Accessible Practices in Workshop**

Accessible practice	Reasoning
Electronic materials were screen reader friendly	Facilitates access to print material for individuals who use screen readers (i.e., assistive devices), enabling independent information access.
Materials were available in advance of session	Addresses diverse learning barriers and enables personalized interaction with the material (e.g., reducing the impact of cognitive processing speed, physical speed, or auditory processing during the session).
Multiple ways to engage in the session	Accommodates different learning styles.  Helps improve understanding and recall of the information, as it utilizes different cognitive processes.
Use of microphones	Addresses sound or noise-related barriers by ensuring the projection of voices.  Helpful for many, particularly participants with hearing impairments and more generally, overcoming background noise or echoing sounds.
Closed captioning	Inclusive means of making auditory content accessible to everyone by translating audio into visual text through captioning. Captioning benefits many including those with hearing loss, ADHD, and those who benefit from visual cues or pacing of information (e.g., cognitive load).  *Even though this session was not conducted virtually, we did this using Zoom with captions enabled, which was projected on the screen with our PowerPoint slides.
Flexible mindset (e.g., Openness to adapt to the audience)	Allows facilitators to be adaptive to the needs of those in the workshop, ensuring that participants feel included and have an equitable opportunity to participate.
Providing a post-event summary	Assists in information processing and facilitates recall and comprehension for people whose disability impacts memory or attention.

We facilitated two main activities with our colleagues in the workshop. We designed the first activity to focus on the individual practices and mindsets related to EDIA. The second activity focused on a specific scenario a research administrator may encounter as part of supporting a research team.

### ACTIVITY 1

We explored barriers in our EDIA practice. For this activity, attendees worked individually or in pairs and provided answers to three questions by documenting their experiences on sticky notes. The facilitators then opened the floor up for sharing and discussion. Workshop attendees could relate to any part of their research administration practice, including engagement with researchers or even experiences in their own teams/departments. Responses were analyzed using inductive thematic coding to group the responses into categories.

#### Question 1: Is there a time when you had access to something you needed to succeed at a task/activity? How did that make you feel?

Twenty-five people responded to the question. To analyse the responses, we generated a word cloud, weighting words based on frequency of use. Examining the emotional aspect, the prevailing sentiments expressed were empowerment, support, and relief (Figure 1). This could indicate that access leads to an improved sense of agency and inclusion. A list of words in the word cloud can be found in the Appendix. This question allowed us to anchor our colleagues in their own experiences of inclusion and how that connects to emotional experiences that we have as humans. There was good discussion about how we each benefit from access in a broader sense.

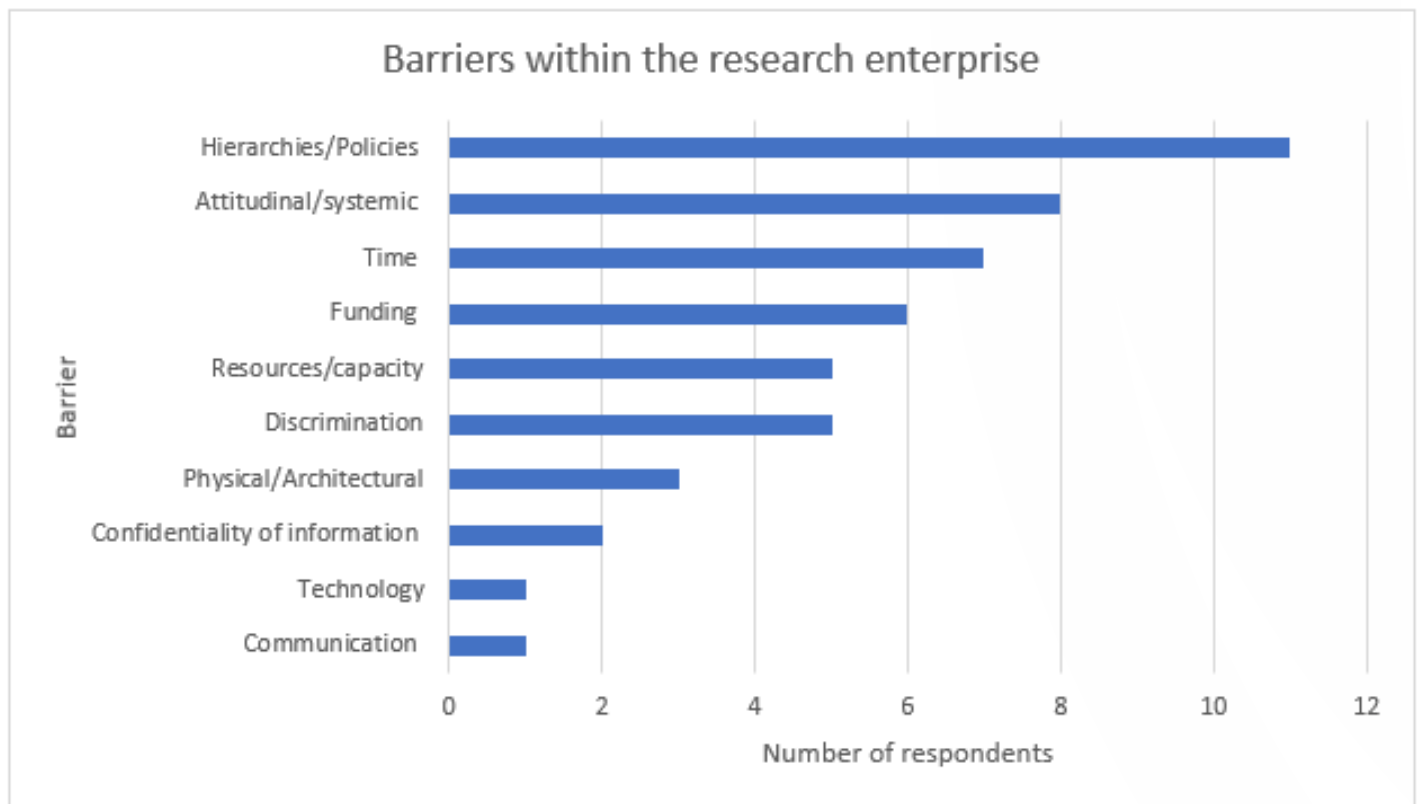
Figure 1. How Participants Felt When Having Access to What They Need (Presented in list format in Appendix)



## Question 2: Do you see barriers in your role that could impact others? Where or when do they occur?

Sixteen workshop attendees highlighted barriers that occur in systemic elements of the enterprise, as well as within functions of the role and within the built environment. A thematic clustering approach was employed to identify trends and emerging themes. While some participants addressed both the existence and location of barriers, the compiled responses were categorized based on recurring themes to capture the essence of the experiences shared. While this approach may have overlooked certain nuanced details conveyed in individual responses, it allowed for the identification of prevalent barriers (Figure 2). For instance, policies and hierarchies within institutions emerged as the most commonly mentioned barriers (n=11). Participants expressed challenges related to the absence of a safe space for raising issues and the need to enforce policies that could be perceived as discriminatory. There was a sentiment that the design of policies to be a one size fits all can be incongruent with the individualized approach often needed. Attitudinal or systemic barriers (n=8) were represented by a perceived lack of interest or flexibility from organizations particularly when there was a lack of trust in the work environment or the institution as a whole. Time constraints (n=7) were primarily attributed to the inability to adequately assist all individuals requiring support. This could disproportionately affect the staff ability to deliver services to researchers with a disability who might require more service for the same grant application. Funding (n=6) and resource and capacity limitations (n=5) were also identified as barriers to accessibility. Discrimination (n=5) included examples ranging from instances of tokenism in the workplace to encountering barriers when attempting to provide assistance to equity deserving groups.

**Figure 2. Barriers Within the Research Enterprise**



**Question 3: In your role, who might be impacted by the lack of access?**

In short, a lack of access impacts everyone, but some are more impacted than others. The discussion reveals that the lack of access can impact individuals across various domains. Many participating research administrators emphasized the potential ripple effect, where the absence of access not only affects them directly but also impacts others in their lives. Specifically, participants highlighted the impact on clients/partners, staff, researchers, support staff, and underrepresented groups. Additionally, participants focused on individuals who might require accommodations but chose not to disclose their needs, such as people living with disabilities and those from underrepresented groups.

**ACTIVITY 2**

We designed the second activity to specifically explore EDIA practice in support of research teams. To do this, we used a short scenario to elicit group discussion:

*A research team is applying for a grant related to urban transportation. The team is concerned about accessibility and wants to ensure that the study is inclusive and accessible to as many participants as possible throughout the process. This includes ensuring representation of a diversity of disabilities and intersectional identities (e.g., disabled students from underrepresented communities).*

Using the scenario method allowed us to anchor the attendees in a common future. The short scenario worked as an exploratory story that could highlight potential challenges and gaps in accessibility and inclusive practices. We then asked workshop attendees to work in groups to respond to three reflective questions. We analyzed responses using inductive thematic coding to group the responses into categories.

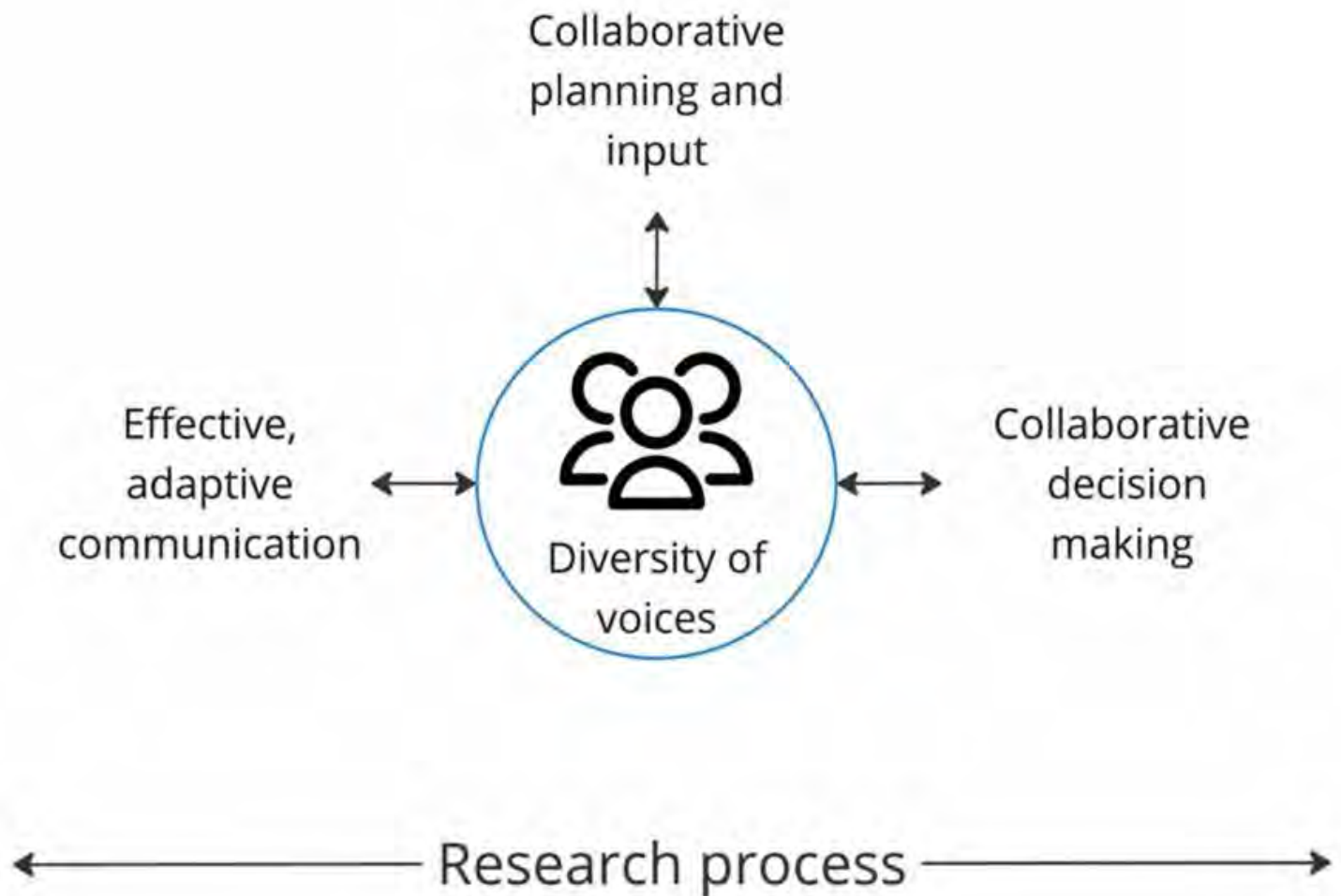
**Question 1: What can be done to address EDI concerns during the design proposal?**

A crucial step in incorporating diverse perspectives in project planning included diverse team members, partner organizations, or community engagement partners. Collaborative planning may help address the need to ensure diversity within the group. Many respondents emphasized the importance of soliciting input from team members to understand their specific needs and considerations. Examples of considerations included ensuring accessible transportation for everyone, utilizing multiple modes of communication, providing meeting transcriptions, and considering childcare requirements for participants. Also essential was continuous discussion around the team's needs throughout all stages of the project.

**Question 2: How can the team address accessibility during the development of the project?**

The research findings revealed a unanimous agreement on the importance of engaging in multiple forms of communication to ensure effective communication among diverse parties. Respondents consistently stressed the need to involve diverse voices and seek their input to determine the most appropriate communication methods. Adapting communication strategies at different stages of the project to meet the needs of interested parties, by offering extended deadlines to participate for example, was also consistently mentioned as a crucial consideration (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Strategies for More Inclusive Practices Across the Research Process**



**Question 3: How can the team engage with diverse communities and voices and include their perspectives?**

Throughout the responses, a recurring theme was the inclusion of diverse members at all stages of the research grant from design to execution to evaluation, ensuring their perspectives and needs are considered. Empowering diverse voices needs to be authentic and involve living/lived experience in decision-making power and leadership positions. The research findings also emphasized the significance of considering intersectional identities (e.g., someone who is racialized and disabled), by offering translation options and reaching out through community engagement or partner organizations to ensure inclusivity. The onus needs to be on us as research support staff to proactively offer these, not on equity-deserving groups to ask for them.

These research results provide valuable insights into the strategies and considerations for incorporating diverse perspectives in research grant planning and execution, fostering effective communication, and addressing intersectionality in project implementation. The findings underscore the importance of active engagement, continuous dialogue, and tailored approaches to meet the needs of diverse individuals and communities throughout all stages of the research.



## EMERGING CONCEPTS

Accessibility is not a straightforward solution, as individuals may respond differently to gaining access. By acknowledging and addressing the diverse range of experiences, we can take steps to foster an environment that is more inclusive and supportive. Research administration involves managing various aspects of research projects from ideas to implementation and ensuring that research activities adhere to ethical standards and guidelines. This includes implementing inclusive and accessible practices to create an environment where all individuals, regardless of their needs or abilities, can fully participate in the research enterprise and in doing so, challenge ableism in academic environments. Individuals that benefit from accessible practices include colleagues in one's department, researchers, students, community members, and other people invested in the research enterprise.

It is important to note that when people disclose their limitations or disability, not all individuals may initially feel positive when disclosing their need for accommodations. They may experience emotions such as neutrality, embarrassment, or vulnerability. Research administrators need to be aware of these emotional responses and create an environment that promotes comfort and support, leaning into competencies like emotional intelligence. This means prioritizing the development of a safe and inclusive space where all people in the research enterprise feel at ease disclosing their needs and seeking accommodations.

Furthermore, to move beyond accommodations to accessibility, it is important to involve individuals requiring access in planning and implementing any accessibility measures. Collaborating with people with living experience allows for perspectives to be heard and considered. By incorporating their insights, research administrators can better understand the specific needs of individuals and ensure that the accommodations provided are meaningful and effective. Research administrators can collaborate with individuals and organizations to explore best practices and innovative approaches for promoting accessible practices and creating more inclusive research environments. This includes working with disability organizations to gain insights into the needs of researchers with disabilities, conducting community outreach initiatives, and working with experts in the field of accessibility. For example, research administrators can ensure that accessibility practices are integrated throughout the various stages of research projects. This includes designing research protocols and guidelines that are accessible to all members of the research community, irrespective of their physical, cognitive, or sensory abilities. This can also involve providing accessible modes of communication including alternative formats of materials, which meet the needs of all involved within their respective offices as well as with those invested in the research.

In Activity 1, several higher-level themes emerge from the results. These themes highlight the complexity and interconnectedness of access issues, the need for accommodations, and the importance of inclusive practices to ensure equitable opportunities for all individuals, especially those from underrepresented groups.

1. Accessibility impacts us all: The mentioned groups encompass clients/partners, staff, family members, researchers, HQP, support staff, team members in research support roles, people in a hospital or institutional setting, faculty members, students, employees, and colleagues.
2. Inclusion and accommodations: The need for accommodations and the importance of inclusion emerge as recurring themes. Individuals who require accommodations, including those with disabilities, neurodivergent individuals, and non-native English speakers, face barriers in accessing resources, grant criteria, or other documents. The emphasis is on creating inclusive environments and providing necessary support.
3. Barriers and constraints: Several themes highlight barriers and constraints that hinder access and opportunities. This includes financial constraints, recurring barriers due to policies or hierarchies, limited support for specific areas of expertise, physical barriers on campuses due to budget limitations, and inaccessible IT platforms or websites.

4. Underrepresented and equity-seeking groups: The mention of underrepresented groups, equity-seeking groups in job positions, researchers from equity deserving groups, marginalized groups, and individuals in rural communities signifies a focus on addressing the specific needs and challenges faced by these populations.
5. Ripple effect and interconnectedness: The interconnected nature of the impact is evident through the references to the potential ripple effect on staff, students, visitors, and faculty. It is important to recognize the impact on family members and the wider community, emphasizing the broader implications of access barriers.

In Activity 2, the higher-level themes may guide a team on how to address EDIA concerns during the design proposal and throughout all stages of the project. The themes include:

1. Importance of diversity and inclusion: Diverse team members and other parties are critical at all project stages. This includes diverse perspectives, needs, and considerations, which can contribute to more comprehensive and effective project planning and implementation.
2. Collaborative planning: It is important to use collaborative planning, where the team directly addresses diversity. By actively engaging team members and soliciting their input, the project can benefit from a wider range of ideas, expertise, and insights.
3. Communication strategies: Effective communication is identified as a key factor to address EDIA concerns. Engaging in multiple forms of communication and adapting communication strategies to meet the needs are crucial considerations. This ensures that information and engagement opportunities are accessible to everyone involved.
4. Empowerment and intersectionality: The research findings highlight the significance of empowering equity-deserving groups by involving them in decision-making processes and leadership positions. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of considering intersections, such as language barriers or community-specific needs, to ensure inclusivity and meaningful engagement with diverse communities.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is evident that accessibility is not a one-size-fits-all solution, as individuals may respond differently to gaining access. This mindset helps combat ableism by challenging discriminatory beliefs, respecting individual needs, and promoting inclusive practices. Reflected in this is the recognition that individuals with disabilities encompass a diverse and varied population, where even within those who share a common disability identity, other aspects of identity give rise to distinct and unique lived experiences (Whittaker et al., 2019). By using emotional intelligence and influence, we can acknowledge and address the diverse range of experiences. Taking this step helps foster an environment that is more inclusive and supportive. It is important to recognize that not all experiences related to inclusion and accessibility elicit positive emotions, as some individuals may initially feel neutral, embarrassed, or vulnerable when disclosing their needs. Therefore, creating an environment where individuals feel at ease and supported is essential. To ensure the effectiveness of any accessible practices, it is crucial to involve the individuals requiring access in the planning and implementation process. By collaborating, actions may be more meaningful and efficacious, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and equitable environment. Through the lens of emotional intelligence, our audience collectively reflects on the influence we may have as research administrators to support and reshape academic settings into spaces where diverse voices are heard, barriers are removed, and a genuine culture of acceptance and belonging is cultivated, thus paving the way for a more welcoming and accessible academic community.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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## APPENDIX

### Question 1: Is there a time when you had access to something you needed to succeed at a task/activity? How did that make you feel?

List of words and frequency count and weighting noted in word cloud:

- Empowered, 7 (28%)
- Relieved, 5 (20%)
- Supported, 5 (20%)
- Happy, 3 (12%)
- Effective, 3 (12%)
- Grateful, 3 (12%)
- Heard, 3 (12%)
- Set Up For Success, 3 (12%)
- Confident, 2 (8%)
- Seen, 2 (8%)
- Embarrassed, (4%)
- Capable, (4%)
- Safe, (4%)
- Relieved, (4%)
- More Productive, (4%)
- Competent, (4%)
- Appreciated, (4%)
- Neutral, (4%)
- Positive, (4%)
- Real (Vulnerable), (4%)
- Courageous, (4%)
- Supported, (4%)
- Encouraged, (4%)
- Less Anxious, (4%)
- Less Stressed, (4%)
- Regarded, (4%)
- Inspired, (4%)
- Bolder, (4%)
- Supported, (4%)
- Understood, (4%)
- More Energy, (4%)
- Healthier, (4%)
- Able To Keep Up, (4%)
- Confident (4%)