Speaking Out: Perceptions of Students with Disabilities at Canadian Universities Regarding Institutional Policies

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Abstract

This article examines the perceptions of students with disabilities attending universities in Canada regarding the "fairness" of the institutional policies of the campuses that they attend. In general students rated the policies as <u>adequate</u> in meeting their own specific needs, however, in terms of satisfaction with the various institutional policies, students rated them as <u>only poor to good</u> Responses of students were examined to determine whether the degree of satisfaction was affected by the size of the institution in which the students were enrolled. Students attending small universities (i.e., universities in which the total student population was fewer than 10,000 students) rated their level of satisfaction with the policies in effect slightly higher than did students attending large universities (i.e., universities in which the total student population was greater than 10,000 students); however, the difference was not found to be significant. Many of the students were unaware of policies in effect. Recommendations are made to assist students to become aware of their rights and to promote understanding by institutional staff of the unique needs of students with disabilities.

The number of students with disabilities attending institutions of higher education has increased dramatically over the past decade in the United States (HEATH Resource Center, 1992; U.S. Department of Education, 1987) and in Canada (Fichten, 1988; Hill, 1992; Robertson, 1992; Wilchesky, 1986). Even though the number of students has increased in a manner that has been described as "meteoric" in nature (Wilchesky, 1986), there has generally been little attention given to this group by researchers in the field (Burback & Babbitt, 1988).

Most of the research to date has focused on the following areas: (a) attitudes of various groups, such as nondisabled students (Fichten & Bourdon, 1983), professors (Fonosch & Schwab, 1981; Leyser, 1989), and student services personnel (Kelly, 1984) toward students with disabilities; (b) availability of services to students (Marion & Iovacchini, 1983; Sergent, Sedlacek, Carter, & Scales, 1987); (c) the role of service providers (Michael, Salend, Bennett, & Harris, 1988; Norlander, Shaw, & McGuire, 1990); (d) issues related to accessibility (Hill, 1992; Stilwell & Schulker, 1973; Stilwell, Stilwell, & Perritt, 1983); and (e) factors that might contribute to the educational success of students, such as faculty attitudes and willingness to accommodate students with disabilities (Aksamit, Morris, & Leuenberger, 1987; Nelson, Dodd, & Smith, 1990).

Interestingly, missing from the literature are data gained directly from students with disabilities themselves; rather, researchers have focused their line of inquiry toward those individuals whose life may impact on the students (e.g., administrators, service providers, faculty members). There have been a few notable exceptions, such as the early works by Newman (1976), and Penn and Dudley (1980) and the more recent investigations by Burbach and Babbitt (1988), Patterson, Sedlacek, and Scales (1988), Fichten and her colleagues (Fichten, Bourdon, Creti, & Martos, 1987; Fichten, Goodrick, Tagalakis, Amsel, & Libman, 1990), and Kroeger and Pazandak (1990). The major weaknesses of these studies, however, were the small sample sizes, ranging from 35 (Penn & Dudley, 1980) to 119 subjects (Kroeger, Pazandak, 1990), and the focus on students with physical or orthopedic disabilities most often attending a specific institution of higher education (Burbach & Babbitt, 1988).

The purpose of the present study was to examine the perceptions of students with varying disabilities at the postsecondary level. Specifically, the following areas were examined: (a) the level of satisfaction of students with regard to the nature of institutional policies that could impact on their success in pursuit of higher education; (b) the services available from the Office of Students with Disabilities (OSD) that are required in order to benefit from instruction; and (c) the willingness of faculty to accommodate students with unique learning problems in their classes. By means of a detailed questionnaire, this study, which involved 264 students attending universities across Canada, endeavored to provide the reader with a greater understanding of how students view the attempts by others (i.e., administrators, service providers, and faculty) to welcome them to the institution and to assimilate them into the academic milieu. This study is limited to the perceptions of students attending universities; no attempt is made to examine the perceptions of students at other types of institutions providing a program of higher education (e.g., community colleges, trade schools). This article focuses only on the perceptions of students with disabilities at Canadian universities regarding institutional policies.

Institutional Attitudes

Fichten (1988) in her discussion of factors that affect integration stated that attitudes "can be a vital ingredient in the success or failure of students with a disability and in the overall success of the mainstreaming effort in postsecondary education" (p. 171).

Institutional attitudes are, according to Fichten, the most important, for without a favorable disposition students will perceive that they are "not welcome" on campus (p. 181).

For more than a decade institutional attitudes have been recognized as an important aspect in the success of students with disabilities attending postsecondary institutions. As early as 1980, Penn and Dudley stated: " ... institutionalized prejudice and other factors still exclude many handicapped students from the mainstream of campus life at many institutions" (p. 355). As institutions grapple with the increased numbers of students with disabilities, administrators have attempted to develop policies that are fair and equitable to all students. However, there have been few efforts to examine the policies that have been developed and to determine if they are nondiscriminatory and meet the needs of students with disabilities. In addition, there does not appear to be any study that has examined the attitudes of students with disabilities towards these policies that could have a serious impact on their ability to access educational programs. Similarly, no study has examined the differences between the degree of satisfaction of students who attend small universities (i.e., total enrollment fewer than 10,000) and those who attend large universities (i.e., total enrollment greater than 10,000), even though it has been suggested that more students with disabilities choose to attend smaller institutions rather than larger ones (Bursuck, Rose, Cowen, & Yahaya, 1989; Hill, 1992; Sergent et al., 1987) and that the level of services vary widely on the basis of size of university (Hill, 1992).

The present study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1.	Are students with disabilities aware of the existence of written policies that may impact on their education (e.g., policies related to nondiscriminatory admission; physical access; modifications of academic requirements; provision of necessary services; provision of necessary equipment and training of staff)?

2.	In general how would students rate the institutional policies at the universities that they attend? What would be the basis for their judgments?

3.	Do students believe that the individual policies of the institutions they attend are adequate to meet their unique learning needs? If they are judged to be "not adequate," what is the basis of the students' opinion?

4.	Do students believe formal written policies are necessary and what are their reasons for their beliefs?

5.	Would certain institutional variables (e.g., size) and student variables (e.g., academic standing, type of program, gender, type of disability) impact on students' overall rating of adequacy of institutional policies?

Method

Participants

In Canada there are 69 public degree?granting institutions, however, only 46 of the universities met criteria for inclusion in the study (i.e., had an overall enrollment greater than 500 students;, offered a wide variety of programs to the general student population; had students with disabilities in attendance; and had a specific person designated to assist students with disabilities, either on a full? or part?time basis). Each of the coordinators of Services for Students with Disabilities (or their designate) at the 46 universities was contacted by mail to determine willingness to participate in the present study. Coordinators at 21 universities agreed to participate in the distribution of questionnaires, either by giving them to students personally or by sending them in the mail. One month after the original mailing, follow?up contact by telephone was made asking coordinators to encourage students to complete the questionnaires and return them promptly. Questionnaires were received from 264 students at 14 of the 21 institutions (66.7%) located in eight of the ten provinces in the nation.

One hundred and forty?eight students (56.1%) were enrolled in small universities. At the time of the study, there were approximately 250 students with disabilities enrolled in these eight universities; respondents therefore represent approximately 60% of those that may have received a questionnaire. The remaining 116 respondents (43.9%) were enrolled in large universities. Approximately 550 students with disabilities were enrolled in these six universities; respondents represent approximately 21 % of those that may have received a questionnaire. Although it is not known how many questionnaires were actually distributed, the response rate varied by institution from 7.5% to 95%, with a mean response rate of 66.7%. While the sample of participants was by no means randomly selected, the number of returns was judged to be reasonably large and came from a diverse population of students (e.g., males, females, graduates, undergraduates, and students attending small and large universities).

Instrumentation

A four?part questionnaire was developed, following a review of the literature on the needs of students with disabilities, with the intent of examining the opinions of students regarding their level of satisfaction with institutional policies, services available from the OSD, and willingness of faculty to accommodate their unique learning needs. The first section was designed to gather descriptive information about the respondent (e.g., institution attended, academic standing, program of studies, gender, nature of disability, severity of the disability). The second, third and fourth sections focused on institutional policies, availability and use of specialized services from the OSD, and perceptions of faculty willingness to make accommodations. The instrument included a series of forced choice questions (e.g., Yes/No/Don't Know; Adequate/Not Adequate/Does Not Apply), Likert?type items (e.g., Very Often, Often, Occasionally, Rarely, Never/Not Needed), and open?ended, short answer questions. To encourage responses from students, complete anonymity was assured in the cover letter sent with the questionnaire.

A pilot questionnaire was developed and sent for review and revision to the coordinators of disabled students at the 46 universities in Canada that met criteria for inclusion in the study. Feedback was received from 21 coordinators and minor changes were made to the instrument. The questionnaire was then field tested on five students who attended a community college. The students offered several valuable suggestions and modifications were made resulting in a final version which was used in the present study.

Results

A total of 264 questionnaires were returned. Even though the questionnaire was 12 pages in length, in all cases, at least 80% or more of the questions were answered; consequently, all returns were judged to be usable for the purpose of the statistical analysis.

Characteristics of Respondents

Information related to respondents, including actual numbers and percentage of respondents, is contained in Table 1. Fifty?six percent (n = 148) attended a small university; 43.9% (n = 116) were enrolled in a large university. Most of the students were in a degree granting program at the undergraduate level. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 62, with a mean of 28.8 years. The mean number of years in attendance was 2.99 (range:75 ? 8.25), whereas, the mean number of years completed was 2.47 (range: 0 ? 8).

Students in arts programs included those studying liberal arts, fine arts, religion, psychology, the humanities, and linguistics; students in education included those taking courses in elementary and secondary teacher training, physical education, recreation and leisure programming and educational psychology/counseling; students in social sciences programs included those in social work and child and youth care; and students in science programs included those in engineering, forestry, medicine, dentistry, nursing, and computer science, along with students majoring one or more of the natural sciences.

The largest proportion of students reported having a physical disability, followed closely by students with multiple disabilities and learning disabilities. Severity of the disability (self?reported) ranged from mild to profound. Over 60% of the respondents were females.

Institutional Policies

Knowledge of written policies. Students were asked to indicate their knowledge of written policies at the institution they attend. For each policy, examples were given to ensure accuracy of response. Table 2 provides a summary of responses according to percentages for two questions: (a) does your university have a policy on ... ?, and (b) is the policy adequate to meet your needs?

Responses regarding students' knowledge of specific written policies were analyzed according to size of the institution. No significant differences were found regarding students' knowledge of policies on nondiscriminatory admission, physical access, and training of staff. However, there were significant differences in the students' knowledge of policies related to modification of academic requirements (chi-square = 17.30, p =.0002); provision of necessary services (chi?square = 9.45, p =.009); and provision of necessary equipment (chi?square = 7.88, p = .02). Regarding these policies, students at large institutions reported in greater numbers than did students at small institutions that their university had such policies.

Rating of written policies. Students were asked to rate, in general, the policies of their institutions taking into consideration such factors as general attitude of administrators and faculty in encouraging students with disabilities to pursue a higher education. Responses were coded on a 5?point scale (1 = Poor; 3 = Good; 5 = Excellent). The mean rating of 2.86 (SID = 1.30) based on responses from 236 students indicated that, on average, students felt the policies were good. Twenty eight students (10.6%) indicated that they had no opinion. There were no significant differences in ratings based on size of the institution. The ratings, by group, are shown in Table 1. Students were also asked to explain their ratings and over 50% offered written statements. As there were no significant differences in the overall ratings on the basis of size of the institution, written comments were not examined separately.

For those students who rated the policies as being POOR, the following were typical comments: "They have very little, if any understanding of certain disabilities, therefore, any policies coming out of this ignorance are poor," "Administrators more often recognize what a student cannot do, rather than what they can do," "Students with disabilities are asking for modifications to the superstructure and for programs which will strain budgets. Naturally, we are a pain to administration," and "Administrators tend to be inflexible."

Table 1 Demographic Profile and Mean Ratings with Respect to Satisfaction with Institutional Policies

	Respondents Satisfaction Rating (N=264)				
Variable$_1$	n	%	M^a	(SD)	n^b
Size of University attended					
Fewer than 10,000 students	148	56.1	2.97	(1.34)	124
Greater than 10,000 students	116	43.9	2.75	(1.25)	112
Academic Standing					
Undergraduate	232	87.9	2.80	(1.24)	204
Graduate	28	10.6	3.00	(1.54)	28
Unknown	4	1.5			

Status of Program					
Degree	244	92.4	2.78	(1.29)	216
Certificate/Dipolma	12	4.5	3.67	(.98)	12
Unknown	8	3.0			
Program of Studies					
Arts	124	47.0	2.85	(1.33)	104
Education	56	21.2	2.77	(1.49)	52
Social Sciences	40	15.1	3.00	(.96)	36
Sciences	32	12.1	3.12	(1.29)	32
Business	12	4.5	2.33	(.98)	12
Gender					
Female	164	62.1	2.66	(1.19)	136
Male	100	37.9	2.33	(1.38)	100
Type of Disability					
Physical Disability	60	22.7	3.23	(1.13)	52
Multiple Disability	56	21.2	2.43	(1.41)	56
Learning Disability	52	19.7	3.08	(1.33)	48
Auditory Disability	40	15.1	2.44	(1.27)	36
Visual Disability	32	12.1	2.86	(1.14)	28
Chronic Health Problem	24	9.1	3.50	(.89)	16
Degree of Disability					
Mild	80	30.3	3.05	(1.06)	76
Moderate	96	36.4	2.71	(1.25)	84
Severe/Profound	88	33.3	2.84	(1.54)	76

a maximum score = 5 (Excellent)
b Actual number of respondents who rated their level of satisfaction with institutional policies

Table 2
Awareness and Adequacy of Institutional Policies: Percentage of Response According to Institutional Size

	Responses to Institutional Policy	Size of University

	Questions 1 and 2[a]	Large	Small	n[b]
Nondiscriminatory admission	Yes	21.6	31.0	69
(i.e., all qualified students accepted regardless of disability; no quotas; etc.)	No	13.5	6.9	27
	Don't Know	64.9	62.1	168
	Adequate	73.0	65.5	184
	Not Adequate	8.1	20.7	36
	Don't Know/NA*	18.9	13.8	44
Physical access	Yes	51.3	48.3	132
(e.g., provision of ramps, braille labels on doors, etc.; rescheduling of classes in accessible buildings; etc.)	No	8.1	13.8	28
	Don't Know	40.5	37.9	104
	Adequate	64.7	65.5	172
	Not Adequate	21.6	24.1	61
	Don't Know/NA*	13.5	10.3	31
Modification of academic requirements	Yes	10.8	31.0	52
(e.g., subsitution of courses; waiving foreign language requirement; granting full-time status/benefits even if part time, etc.)	No	21.6	13.8	48
	Don't Know	67.6	55.2	164
	Adequate	51.3	55.2	164
	Not Adequate	27.0	27.6	73
	Don't Know/NA*	21.6	17.2	51
Provision of necessary services	Yes	51.3	69.0	156
(e.g., notetakers; transportation; housing; etc.)	No	21.6	10.3	44
	Don't Know	27.0	20.7	64

	Adequate	70.3	69.0	184
	Not Adequate	24.3	20.7	64
	Don't Know/NA*	5.4	10.3	20
Provision of necessary equipment (e.g., adapted computers; tape-recorders; FM systems; etc.)	Yes	37.8	55.2	120
	No	18.3	13.8	44
	Don't Know	43.2	31.0	100
	Adequate	67.6	65.5	176
	Not Adequate	16.2	20.7	48
	Don't Know/NA*	16.2	13.8	40
Training of staff (e.g., providing inservice regarding accommodating students with disabilities; etc.)	Yes	29.7	41.4	92
	No	18.9	20.7	52
	Don't Know	51.3	37.9	120
	Adequate	48.6	58.6	140
	Not Adequate	35.1	20.7	75
	Don't Know/NA*	16.2	20.7	49

[a]Question 1: Does your university have a policy on . . .?
Question 2: Is the policy adequate to meet your needs?
[b]Actual number of respondents (small and large universities combined)
NA = Not Applicable

For those students who rated the policies as being **GOOD**, the following were typical comments: "Most administrators and faculty are encouraging students with disabling conditions to pursue a higher education. Some, however, discriminate against students who have disabilities and require special services by not cooperating with the requirements listed by the learning assistance centre, making discriminatory comments, etc." "The university is definitely improving (in flexibility of accommodation, in expenditures on improving physical accessibility) but changes are slow and bureaucratic. Certain outstanding individuals have been a great help where institutional policies and practices are often frustrating and slow to change" and "Faculty and administrators can be accommodating if approached with specific needs, but often do not know what is

required or causes problems for students with disabilities. The initiative must be taken by the student."

Those students who rated the policies as being **EXCELLENT** generally did not give a rationale for their ratings. Of those who did make statements, the following were typical: "The campus is very accessible, teachers and teaching assistants are helpful and student services is invaluable" and, "There is a friendly and relaxed atmosphere between students, teachers and administrators."

For students who indicated that they had NO **OPINION**, almost all stated that they were simply not aware of the written policies; several students indicated that they will be asking for a copy to "find out" what is, and is not, included.

Adequacy of specific policies. Students were also asked to rate the adequacy of specific policies, in terms of their specific learning needs, and to explain their ratings, if the policies were judged to be "inadequate." Information regarding these ratings is shown in Table 2. For each policy, 48.6% or more of the respondents indicated that the policy was adequate for their specific needs. In several cases, students indicated that they did not know if the policy was adequate or that the policy did not apply to their situation (e.g., a student with a learning disability may not require any accommodations regarding physical access).

The ratings of adequacy of the policies were similar when size of institution was investigated. In fact, the only significant differences found were in the areas of nondiscriminatory admission (chi?square = 9.09, p = .01), and training of staff (chi?square = 6.649 , p = .03). Twenty one percent of students at large universities judged the policy regarding admission as inadequate compared to 8.1 % of students at small universities; whereas, the opposite was found with respect to the provision of training. Thirty-five percent of the students at small universities judged the provision of training to be inadequate, in comparison to 20.7% at large universities.

Given the fact that, overall, there were similarities between the ratings of students at small and large institutions regarding the adequacy or inadequacy of policies, the written comments of the students were not examined separately. Students who commented on the inadequacy of policies gave a variety of reasons. In regard to policies on , **NONDISCRIMINATORY ADMISSION**, the following were typical comments: "All they look at is our grade point average," "This institution categorizes everyone as disabled under one blanket title for admissions. They do not see that some disabilities are less severe than others. There is no individual consideration," and, "The university does not discriminate (any more) against women, blacks, native Indians, etc. ? in fact they recruit them ? Sure ain't the same with 'us folk'." More students at large institutions commented on the inadequacy of the policy regarding nondiscriminatory admission than at small universities.

Several students raised the issue of certain staff members (i.e., administrators, advisors) determining the students' choice of a program. They felt that their disability. not their

level of ability, was a determining factor in the advice they were given. One student expressed a concern as follows: "I [a student with a hearing impairment] was initially not accepted to the education program because someone, in their infinite wisdom, had decided that I would not be 'normal' in classroom situations. I complained, as I have an A? average. I ended up threatening discrimination charges and was admitted the same day by the coordinator who profusely apologized."

In regard to policies on **PHYSICAL ACCESS**, the following were typical comments: "I find it unacceptable that some events and services provided in inaccessible buildings are denied to me"; "There is little incentive to change classrooms if the classroom is not appropriate to student's learning needs (re: nonaccessibility or noise interference)"; and, "Accessibility is only looked at in terms of physically handicapped students. We have ramps and automatic doors .... but what about other types of students? We have very few rooms equipped with FM amplifiers and there are no TDDs [Telecommunication Devices for the Deaf] and none of our buildings have elevators with auditory output for the blind. The learning disabled student is the worst off ... nobody understands them .... nor do they want to."

With respect to policies on **MODIFICATION OF ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS**, the following were typical comments: "Every time you need something that's different from the norm (e.g., lessened class load) you must do a 'song and dance' in order to get what you want"; "They don't budge about requirements of GPA"; and, "The onus is on the individual to initiate and modify. The institution does not have time to 'cater' to the 'whims' of individuals."

Typical comments about **PROVISION OF NECESSARY SERVICES** included "Limited funding limits access to many services"; "Few services are offered and the university doesn't follow through on special requests"; "Housing is not adequate. I [a wheelchair user] have a big room but a big rate also!" and, "Many people have to wait months for services."

Policies on **PROVISION OF NECESSARY EQULPMENT** were viewed as follows: "Very limited equipment is provided so that students can be integrated into regular classrooms. The only adapted computers are in sealed, airless rooms in the library. No tape recorders, braillers or FM systems are available"; and, "Not enough $$$s. What is available is old and out?of?date. This is the age of technology, but you don't see any at my university!"

In regard to policies on **TRAINING OF STAFF**, typical comments included: "There is no training. The Coordinator of Services [for students with disabilities] learned about people with disabilities on the job. When they hired a Special Students' Coordinator, disabled students were not invited to participate in the hiring process"; "Training for staff is offered, but poor attendance is always the case"; and, "Most faculty are remarkably ignorant of disabilities. There are a few exceptions. I would like to see inservice as being mandatory for all faculty and staff . All must take simulation of disability training and be required to get in touch with their own personal biases." One student did not feel that

training was needed. S/he was quite emphatic when making the following comment: "I am quite capable of vocalizing for myself what I need."

Need for written policies. Most students (87.5%) responded to the question "Do you believe formal written policies are necessary?" in the affirmative. Size of the institution did not influence the response to this question. Typically comments included: "Students need a fair chance to compete. Formal policies provide rules for the university and needed information for students"; "When you put something in writing it is more binding than if you do not. If any problems arise it is easier to have something written, proof to back you up. It also enables both teachers and students to be aware of their rights and responsibilities"; "Yes, they are a first step in acceptance. The needs of the disabled are not always obvious to many able?bodied persons"; "Yes. Nothing can be enforced if no written policies exist. No accountability by the university, no enforcement, no monitoring = **NO** service to students"; and, "Other students [able bodied] have what they require. If library material is on microfilm, they have a microfilm reader. If classes are in a multilevel building, stairs are provided. There would be outrage if able?bodied students couldn't attend classes because there was no way to reach the classroom."

A minority of students indicated that they did not see a need for written policies or were undecided in their opinion. Typical comments included: "No, because they feel that once they have a written policy, their work is complete. I would rather see results of an enacted decision than words on a formal written policy"; and, "I don't know. Formal policies tend to set standards, but they are often only a minimum. The human element and the willingness to make things work often suffers." One person stated emphatically "I have been in situations where the professors treat me like everyone else and I like it that way, thank you!"

Effects of certain student variables. Several additional analyses were conducted to determine whether other specific program variables (i.e., academic standing, status of program, program of studies) or student variables (i.e., gender, nature of disability, severity of disability) had a significant impact on the overall rating for the adequacy of written institutional policies. Given the nature of the data (e.g., unequal sample sizes), both parametric tests and nonparametric tests were used in the analyses. The mean values regarding level of satisfaction for each group are shown in Table 1.

Using the Mann?Whitney U Test, it was found that students in diploma programs rated the policies significantly higher than students in degree granting programs (z = ?2.20 p < .03). The small subsample of students in the diploma programs, however, limits the external validity of this finding. The type of program (e.g., education vs. social sciences) that students were enrolled in did not yield any significant differences in responses nor did the academic standing of the students (i.e., graduate vs. undergraduate).

Male students reported a significantly greater degree of satisfaction with written policies than did female students (1 (234) = 3.05, p < .003). Interestingly, type of disability had a significant impact on ratings, whereas self?reported severity of disability did not. In terms of nature of the disability, students with chronic health problems rated the adequacy of

policies at a significantly higher level than did all other groups (H = 16.88, p < .005). Even though students with mild disabilities rated the adequacy of policies higher than those with moderate or severe/profound disabilities, the difference was not found to be significant.

Discussion

Even though students generally appeared to be satisfied with the adequacy of institutional policies, it was obvious that, in many cases, students were actually **unaware** of the existence of written policies. Morethan 60% of all students (i.e., those attending small and large universities combined) lacked knowledge regarding policies dealing with nondiscriminatory admission and modifications of academic requirements (63.6% and 61.2% respectively). Twenty-four percent of students were unaware of a policy on provision of necessary services, 37.9% were unaware of a policy on the provision of necessary equipment, 39.2% were unaware of a policy on physical access, and 45.4% of students lacked knowledge regarding a policy on the training of staff. In every instance, students at larger universities were more knowledgeable of the existence of written policies than students at smaller universities. While it is recognized that students' self?reported knowledge of policies may not reflect actual institutional practices, an earlier survey examining accessibility issues for students with disabilities in universities in Canada showed that out of 27 institutions surveyed, only 30% had written policies that dealt with issues regarding students with disabilities on campus, while another 15% were in the process of drafting such regulations (Hill, 1992).

In some cases it may be that a student was unaware of the existence of a particular policy because of lack of need for accommodation in that area (e.g., a student with a physical impairment may not need modifications in area of academic requirements); however, based on an analysis of the written comments, it would appear that some students are satisfied with what they see as the "status quo," when in fact, there may be room for improvement. For example, one student with a learning disability commented that s/he had never considered pursuing a waiver for a foreign language requirement, even though repeated failure in a French course was jeopardizing graduation. The student reported never having been told that this was an option at some universities in Canada.

It was not surprising that the majority of students, both at small and large institutions, were unaware of policies on nondisciminatory admission as such a policy, if available, is not commonly written in the university calendar. Most often, the only comment is a statement to the effect that "disabled students are encouraged to apply"; however, it was interesting to find that 20.7% of students at large institutions indicated that this policy was inadequate to meet their needs. This finding may not solely reflect the presence of a disability, but rather the notion that larger universities are, in general, perceived by a majority of students, both disabled and able?bodied, to be more discriminating on the basis of scholastic excellence (i.e., setting higher GPA requirements foradmission) than smaller institutions. Widespread lack of awareness regarding policies related to modification of academic requirements was unexpected, given the fact that the majority of the students indicated that they required one or more specific modifications to meet

their unique learning needs. Interestingly, in terms of adequacy, the policy on modification of academic requirements was deemed to be adequate by only slightly more than half of the respondents (53% of students at small and large institutions combined).

In terms of adequacy of policies (as compared to knowledge of policies), a different picture emerged. Regardless of the size of the institution attended, less than 30% of respondents indicated that specified policies were **inadequate**. The policy on nondiscriminatory admission was deemed inadequate by 13.6% of the respondents (small and large universities combined); provision of equipment by 18.2%; provision of services and physical access by 22.7% and 23.1 % respectively; modification of academic requirements by 27.6%; and training of staff by 28.4%. Size of institution did not contribute significantly to adequacy of policies or lack of same, except in the areas of nondiscriminatory admission and training of staff. As mentioned previously, the perception that large institutions are more discriminatory in nature than small universities may simply reflect the reality of the competitiveness of larger institutions. The fact that students at small institutions were less satisfied with the level of training offered to staff than students at large institutions was interesting to note. Thirty?five percent of students at small universities responded that they were not satisfied with the level of training in relationship to their own particular learning needs) in comparison with 20.7% of those at large universities. This finding may reflect the fact that large institutions generally have more staff in the Office for Students with Disabilities than small universities and that fewer types of services (perhaps including training activities) may be available at smaller institutions, a dilemma that has been recognized in earlier research reports (Hill, 1992).

In examining the written comments regarding the adequacy (or inadequacy) of policies, several themes emerged. The first related tothe perceived inflexibility of decision makers. Students commented that each student is unique but that administrators, staff, and faculty tend to see them as a "homogeneous" group, all requiring the same rules and regulations. An example concerned the endurance level of some students. Several students commented that due to their inability to pursue a full?time program of studies, they had to pay a higher tuition fee for part?time studies, even though their reasons for part?time study differed from those of most other students. One student stated: "I am taking a reduced load because I need to rest throughout the day but I pay the same as a friend of mine who is taking the same load and earning $35,000 per year. She can afford to pay more than me ... but nobody takes that into consideration! That's unfair!" Another student raised concern regarding policies on absenteeism: "The absences policy is tough for disabled students because many disabled students cannot prevent being absent from school due to medical reasons and some teachers will be very harsh and drop the student a letter grade after a small [5] number of absences. There needs to be much more leeway." Inflexibility, according to many students, resulted from lack of knowledge.

A second theme that appeared in the students' opinions was the power of others to make decisions for them. As in the case of inflexibility, the power of others to make decisions was, according to many students, a result of lack of knowledge. As one student stated: "Administrators more often recognize what a student cannot do rather than what they can do." Many students stated that they felt powerless (e.g., one student stated, "Odds against

successful completion of a degree are VERY HIGH!") in making choices that affected their own lives. Students reported, for example, that they were: (a) discouraged from following their own career choices or advised to take courses or programs they did not want to take; (b) not allowed course substitutions or waivers when the disability could seriously impact on the grade obtained (e.g., a biology course requirement for a blind student pursuing a psychology degree); (c) required to take classes at times that did not fit their schedule (e.g., because the preferred course was in an inaccessible building); (d) told certain modifications could not be made (e.g., extended time allowance on exams) because of the perceived "advantage" it might give the student with a disability when compared to the nondisabled student; and (e) repeatedly made to feel responsible for convincing or proving to others (particularly administrators) that they did in fact have a disability and therefore were entitled to certain accommodations. One student recounted an incidence with one of her instructors: "One prof told me if I missed anything, I could borrow his notes. When I asked for them later, he refused to let me see them." In another case, a student with a hearing impairment made the following comment: "An English prof refused to wear my FM system on three occasions in front of witnesses. My complaint went to the President, who told me it was a misunderstanding!"

Several students suggested that the policies that were in force were only there to "protect" the administration and staff, not the student. One student, referring to a meeting with a faculty advisor, described the situation as an "interview/interrogation." Another student stated: "Formal written policies should have been written and become policy many years ago so that disabled students have rights that will be validated and if infringed upon, the disabled student will have recourse. The problem is that too many disabled students accept the imposed rules (not legislated policy) without challenging them. When someone comes along and challenges, everyone does not know what to do." This perceived lack of power may be the reason for the majority of students (87.5%) reporting that formal written policies are necessary.

A third theme that emerged in the written comments concerned how personnel viewed the various "groups" of students (i.e., based on the presenting disability orthe level of disability), as well as how the various "groups" of students viewed each other. The issue of "inequity" was raised frequently by students. Many suggested that "more" was being done for those with a mobility impairment (e.g., provision of special parking, ramps, automatic doors) and for the visually impaired (e.g., provision of braille labels, special equipment), whereas other groups were not being afforded the same degree of accommodation. This perception was most evident in the comments provided by students with "invisible" disabilities, especially those with learning disabilities. The following comments were typical: "Staff are suspicious of us with learning disabilities"; "Faculty do not take learning disabilities into consideration, all they look at is the GPA; "Although my university's policy on physical disabilities is rumored to be extensive, its policies on learning disabilities is [sic] still young and not very comprehensive"; and, "They do not allow me [a student with a learning disability] to use a dictionary during an exam, but a blind student can use his own computer (which probably has a Spell?Checker installed!)."

The final theme had both a negative and a positive aspect to it: the issue of funding. While students recognized that monies were limited and that modifying buildings, providing services (e.g., sign language interpreters), and purchasing equipment were costly, they also acknowledged that changes were occurring, albeit slowly. One student stated: "I feel most policies and practices are good, but there is always room for improvement." This attitude of staff being reactive versus proactive is reflected in the comments by the following two students: "Physical Plant people will only change a 'perfectly good' door if they meet the person without the strength or dexterity to turn an ordinary one"; and "[The policy on physical access is] very poor in many areas, despite $12 million 'in the bank' to be used to improve access. My university just does not want to spend the money."

While negative comments were made regarding institutional policies, it should be noted that many students, across the nation, had a positive outlook. Comments such as the following were common: "For my hearing loss, I have found [my university] is well suited and prepared for students like myself for continuing learning without any discomfort at all. It has been a complete and easy transition [from high school]"; "Faculty have never seen me as different and have been very supportive"; and, "I have no complaints. Staff and students are very accepting."

In examining overall satisfaction (see Table 1), while it was found that students at small universities were more satisfied than those at larger institutions, graduate students more satisfied than undergraduate, diploma students more satisfied than degree students, males more satisfied than females, and students with chronic health problems were more satisfied than all other groups, it was discouraging to find that regardless of the affiliation, the highest mean rating given by students was 3.67 (from students enrolled in a Certificate or Diploma program) on the 5?point scale (1 = **Poor**; 3 = **Good**; 5 = **Excellent**). The overall mean, based on the responses of 236 students, was 2.86 (**5D** = 1.30). Although the lowest rating (2.33) was given by students in Business and the highest rating (3.67) given by students in Certificate or Diploma programs, it should be noted that the extreme scores may reflect the small sample size of each group (n = 12 respectively). It is unclear why generally students rated policies in a **poor** to **good** range yet 62.9% of them indicated that policies were **adequate** to meet their specific needs.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are derived from the findings of the present study, the comments offered by the respondents to the survey, and a review of related literature on higher education of students with disabilities.

1. Universities are urged to develop written policies to ensure equal access by qualified students with disabilities to postsecondary programs and to enable students to participate fully in the educational experiences offered by the university in a manner that will not jeopardize the academic standards or integrity of the programs offered by the institution. Similarly, the policies developed must not be too lenient so that students with disabilities, accepted into the institution, are placed at risk for failure. Brinckerhoff, Shaw and McGuire (1992) in their discussion of open?admission policies or special admissions procedures have suggested that such procedures may have a negative consequence by setting a student up for failure if the student is underprepared or has certain skill deficits. Scott (1990) has proposed a set of guidelines that may be of assistance in developing equitable policies that are nondiscriminatory in nature.

2. Specifically, each university should develop policies that address the following: nondiscriminatory admission; physical access; modification of academic requirements; provision of necessary services; provision of necessary equipment; and training of staff. The need for formal written policies was endorsed by almost 90% of the respondents in order to ensure that the rights of students are not abrogated.

3. Copies of written institutional policies should be made available to students with disabilities so that they are aware of their rights. They should be included in the university's calendar (catalog) and in materials distributed to students through the OSD so that all students will have ready access. For students unable to read regular print, the policies should be made available in an alternate format (e.g., audio tape, braille, large print).

4. Similarly, copies of written institutional policies should be made available to all staff. In particular, the policies should be included in the university's faculty handbook and distributed to all instructors at the time of appointment. For staff unable to read regular print, the policies should be made available in an alternate format (e.g., audio tape, braille, large print).

5. Inservice programs should be made available on a regular basis to all university staff (e.g., faculty, administrators) so that personnel are sensitized to the needs of students with disabilities. The perceived lack of training at smaller institutions also needs to be addressed by staff from the Off ice for Students with Disabilities. If lack of staff limits the availability of training, OSD staff should investigate the possibility of other persons in the community (e.g., qualified staff from the Special Education Department in the Faculty of Education) providing the necessary inservice programs.

6. Given the diversity of student needs, administrators, faculty, and staff must recognize that each student is unique and that what may be required by one may not be needed by another. To this end, universities should attempt to be as flexible as possible and willing to examine situations as they arise on an individualized basis, as mandated in the United States by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) [P. L. 101 ?336], and not on the basis of the presenting disability alone. Each university should have a special committee whose responsibility is to examine specific cases (e.g., regarding admissions, accommodations). The composition of this committee may be variable dependent upon the case under discussion. Possible members could include the following: Director of Admissions; Registrar; Academic Vice?President; appropriate Dean or Chair of subject area; staff person(s) from the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities; faculty member(s) with expertise in the specific disability area (e.g., from the Department of Special Education); and, subject area Instructor(s).

7. While funding is always a concern with respect to the availability of services, the provision of equipment and the retrofitting of existing buildings, university staff should attempt, in a systematic manner, to examine the needs of their particular community and to develop long range plans that will address the priorities that can be met as funds become available. University staff should proactively attempt to secure additional funds from a variety of sources (e.g., foundations, Government agencies) that can be used to improve access to programs for students with disabilities.

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