Access Opportunities and Issues for students with disabilities at one Ontario College

by Lori Kernohan

Abstract

The pilot research project reported on here was conducted between October 2005 and March 2006 on one campus of one of Ontario's 24 colleges. The college is located in an urban centre in southern Ontario. The main focus of this pilot study was the exploration of issues of accessibility and accommodation for students with disabilities as they engage in formal studies at the post-secondary level. The researcher has herself experienced education as a sightless student throughout her life. The overall objective of this pilot study was to explore the methodology and procedures used in this study in preparation for a full exploratory and evaluative research study planned at another post–secondary institution.

This was an exploratory descriptive study based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected with the informed and written consent of 20 participants who completed questionnaire surveys and 19 key informants interviewed on the issues explored, as well as my own non-participatory observations and reflections.

The findings are reported as they relate to the following research questions that drove the study:

1. What needs do the students with disabilities seek assistance with from the Accessibility Department?
2. How are the students with disabilities who seek assistance serviced?
3. What issues does the Accessibility Department deal with in relation to the diverse areas/schools/departments within the college?
4. How are challenges handled by the staff of the Accessibility Department?
5. What is the nature of the relationship between Accessibility Department staff and faculty, support staff and College administration/department heads?
6. What challenges do the staff of the Accessibility Department encounter when dealing with college staff outside the Department and how are these handled?
7. What challenges do college staff encounter when dealing with the staff of the

    Accessibility Department and how are these handled?

The findings indicate that the services to students with disabilities in the college studied are generally effective and provide good examples for other post-secondary institutions to consider. The report concludes with implications and recommendations for

enhancing the services to students with disabilities, based not only on the data collected in the study, but also the observations of the researcher herself.

The purpose of the pilot study was achieved in that valuable lessons were learned for implementation in the full study.

Introduction

At different times throughout history, aids, tools and strategies that specifically relate to the issues of accessibility and accommodations - the two main concerns of this pilot study - have been developed by and for individuals with disabilities. For instance, for the sightless, assistive inventions have been developed by persons such as Louis Braille who was himself sightless and who designed the foundations of the Braille code as well as the Music Braille code (Kugelmass, 1972; Henri, 1987; Dixon, 2000). Other important assistive resources such as the guide dog, (Putnam, 1979) were introduced by sighted individuals working together with people without sight who saw the potential benefit of the use of guide dogs. Additional significant advancements have evolved, such as the game of Goalball (Kearney & Copeland, 1979; Chamalian, 2000), invented for the rehabilitation and entertainment of World War II veterans who had lost their vision, and to help them continue to feel valuable as human beings. Similar advancements in medical treatments and assistive devices have evolved over time to assist persons living with other disabilities to enable them to function effectively and as independently as possible.

In my particular field of classical music, in which most renowned composers have possessed sight, some sightless musicians and composers, such as Conrad Paumann and Maria Theresa von Paradis (Sadie, 1991), have been able to produce repertoire that is recognized as works of high artistic quality or even masterpieces. As principal researcher for this pilot project, I investigated services offered to students with disabilities while dealing with my own physical challenges which include blindness, hearing impairment, and epilepsy.

The overall objective of this pilot study was to explore the policies and practices of an Accessibility Department within one post-secondary institution in preparation for a full exploratory and evaluative research study to be completed at another post-secondary institution. The pilot study attempted to assess the feasibility of the proposed research methodology and procedures to ensure they would generate meaningful findings that would assist other post-secondary institutions to adopt successful practices to assist students with a broad range of disabilities.

Background of the problem

My interest in this topic arose out of my personal experience as a student with life long disabilities. In developing the inquiry, then, there were specific issues concerning the post-secondary environment for students with disabilities that I wanted to examine. My goal was to explore the issues of accessibility and accommodation at the college level by drawing on my own previous experiences with

these significant factors as an undergraduate, masters and Ph.D. student in the university environment. The focus of my investigation was to explore if and how students with disabilities are respectfully and appropriately integrated into educational/training programs at the college level.

The research problem which I explored in this study arose from a number of sources and from my personal experiences. A primary source was my doctoral thesis titled, FINDING MY WAY: Experiencing Audition as a Sightless Musician (Kernohan, 2005). In my dissertation, I explored the value and use of audition to experience music and motion as a sightless musician. As well, I described practical implications in general, in social occasions and in educational contexts in order to raise the awareness of sighted individuals about how they can assist persons with disabilities in these or similar situations.

The study's research focus also arose from my experience as principal researcher in the prototype testing of a new product that I consider to be valuable for assisting those with impaired or no vision, with a hearing loss, or with epilepsy – each of which I myself also possess. Furthermore, I planned to conduct a research study related to my research questions at another post-secondary institution that currently does not have a full program of services for students with disabilities. I needed to conduct a pilot study to test the feasibility of the methodology and procedures I intended to use in that study in the future. I selected the college at which the study was completed, because of its reputation for providing excellent services to students with disabilities, and I received the approval of the college to do so.

Importance of this study

The findings of this pilot study and the planned full study will increase our understanding of services that are currently helpful to college level students with a variety of disabilities, as well as the challenges they and the service staff face and that still need to be addressed. These findings will be helpful to faculty and all staff who interact with students with disabilities or physical challenges at any level. The findings will also provide guidance to other post-secondary institutions who wish to enhance their service to this student population. The pilot study reported herein, will greatly facilitate the efficiency and effectiveness of the roll out of the full study.

Methodology and Procedures

Research Questions

The specific objective and research questions that were explored in this pilot study were as follows: To observe how an Accessibility Department functions at the college level with respect to the following research questions:

1. What needs do the students with disabilities seek assistance with from the Accessibility Department?
2. How are the students with disabilities who seek assistance serviced?
3. What issues does the Accessibility Department deal with in

relation to the diverse areas/schools/departments within the college?

4. How are challenges handled by the staff of the Accessibility Department?
5. What is the nature of the relationship between Accessibility Department staff and faculty, support staff and College administration/department heads?
6. What challenges do the staff of the Accessibility Department encounter when dealing with college staff outside the Department and how are these handled?
7. What challenges do college staff encounter when dealing with the staff of the Accessibility Department and how are these handled?

Research Design

The pilot project was an exploratory descriptive study based on both quantitative and qualitative data collected with the informed and written consent of participants through questionnaire surveys and interviews with key informants on the issues explored, as well as my own non-participatory observation of several discussions between department staff and students with disabilities, and department staff and college faculty/staff, regarding access issues and my reflections on these observations. As well, I observed daily routines and activities in the department such as, the interactions between staff, peer tutors and students with disabilities as they used the equipment (e.g., computers, scanners, and photocopiers) and services provided in the department.

Context

The pilot study took place in one of Ontario's 21 Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology. The College is located in a growing urban centre in southern Ontario and has more than 5,000 full time and 25,000 part time students enrolled in some 60 programs. The students are predominantly Caucasian. This college was chosen primarily because the effectiveness of this college's services to students with disabilities has been recognized in a previous and related study. I wanted to explore in depth the best practices that this college had demonstrated, and lessons learned that might be helpful to other institutions attempting to address similar issues.

In order to maintain anonymity, I refer in this report to the organizational centre whose core responsibility is to service the needs of students with disabilities at this college as the Accessibility Department. The study was conducted on only one of the several campuses of this College.

Participant selection

Participants were a sample of convenience and recruitments from random, stratified samples selected from categories of roles that had the potential to inform the study from a variety of relevant perspectives.

Data Collection tools and procedures

Survey Questionnaires

Questions asked in the survey questionnaires came primarily from my own personal experience as a post-secondary student with several physical disabilities, from the literature which I had researched and from listening to the discussions of Accessibility Department staff when I initially approached them for permission to conduct the pilot study at their college. The wording of the survey questionnaires was modified to capture the perspective of the various roles of participants (e.g., faculty, students and staff)

Interviews. Twenty individuals agreed and completed the survey questionnaire. In addition, 19 individuals agreed to and were subsequently interviewed. These included several students with disabilities; several peer tutors/note takers; a faculty member, some Accessibility Department staff and other college staff. One additional student agreed to be interviewed but because of a snow storm the day of the interview, the interview had to be cancelled and could not be re-scheduled at a mutually available time.

Interviews were conducted individually by me on the campus and at times and places mutually agreed upon; 18 of the interviews were face to face and one was a telephone interview because of a snow storm that day. The length of the interviews ranged from 15 to 50 minutes; most were around 30-45 minutes in length.

With the informed and written consent of all the participants, each interview was audio taped and later transcribed by me. It was my intent to validate the transcriptions with the interviewees. However, I found that it was not feasible to do so within the approved time frame for this pilot study. Eight individuals were re-interviewed to clarify or expand my understanding of their input.

The transcribed audio taped interviews were subjected to content analysis to identify the main themes that arose as they related to the research questions.

Establishing credibility of the data

I was acutely aware that my own past experiences as a post–secondary student with physical challenges might influence my interpretation of the data collected, particularly during the interviews and observation experiences. For this reason, the interviews were audio taped and the transcripts analyzed by myself and another researcher who has no physical disabilities and had no knowledge of the interviewees. Furthermore, because of my sightlessness, I have developed focused and sensitive listening skills over the years. I also have advanced interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences or intellectual abilities (Gardner, 1999). I drew on these skills to help me to maintain objectivity in analyzing the data.

Methodological assumptions

Participation in this pilot study was strictly voluntary; participants were assured anonymity and had nothing to gain or loose from their participation. Furthermore, as researcher, I was not in a line relationship or in a position to evaluate the performance of any of the

participants. For these reasons, it is assumed that the responses were accurate reflections of the perceptions of the participants at the time. However, the small sample size, while useful as a pilot study, does not permit generalization of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

All potential participants were provided with a Letter of Information and only those participants who signed the consent form were included in the study. All participants were informed that participation was voluntary; they were free to withdraw from the study or not answer any questions, without explanation or penalty of any kind, and they were assured of non-identifiability in any reporting of the findings.

Responses

The response rates were not high but sufficient for a pilot study. For instance, of the 100 students registered as having confirmed physical disabilities, only 10 (10%) consented to and participated in the questionnaire survey. Nineteen individuals agreed to be interviewed. Table 1 depicts the roles of individuals interviewed. A counsellor, a disability specialist and a student life advisor were clustered in the "other staff" category to ensure non-identifiability.

Table 1
Interviewees by position/role n=19

Number of Interviews	Role/Position the College
3	Students with a disabilities
4	Peer Tutors/Note takers
1	Faculty member
7	Accessibility Department staff
4	Other staff
Total: 19	

A total of 20 individuals (Table 2) completed and returned the appropriate questionnaires.

Table 2
Survey Questionnaire Respondents by Category - n=20

Findings

For ease of reading I will refer to all of the respondents as she to represent both males and females.

Research Question #1:
What needs do the students seek assistance with from the Accessibility Department?

The data to answer this question came both from Question 1 of the Student Survey Questionnaire and from the interviews. Students reported (Table 2) that all 10 of them had sought assistance from the

Accessibility Department; the disabilities they identified included visual impairment (n=1), mental illness (n=1), Attention Deficit Disorder (n=1), impaired hearing (n=2), brain injuries (n=2), and the largest number (n=4) had learning disabilities (one student had two disabilities). This supports the need for the services of Learning Strategists to assist these students who are representative of most of the disabilities that students deal with. The time of diagnosis of the disability ranged from 2 to 20 years with a mean of 8.6 years.

These students sought assistance for "counselling, scheduling, learning strategies, test centre and technology "as well as, "note taking service" and "tutoring", "to use Kurzweil 3000" and to arrange for accommodations such as additional time for test writing. The students expressed strong satisfaction with the services provided by the Accessibility Department and appreciation for the "very supportive and helpful" staff. One of the students had the following concerns and commented: "I have used the Accessibility Department's computer lab, private rooms or test rooms to work and write tests. I have seen (a staff person) to develop services and exceptions (extra time for tests, private room for work or testing when available, use of laptop in class, etc.) I find access to be very helpful most of the time but find it unfair that I can have a private room for tests only if people who need computers don't need it. I believe that just because I don't use a computer for tests (I don't need Dragon or Kurzweil) doesn't make my disability any less important. I have difficulties concentrating and dealing with distractions and believe I should get a private room for every test if I need one, even if that means using a large empty classroom".

One student with a learning disability stated in an interview that he has found the Accessibility Department helpful in enabling him to use Kurzweil with headphones which enables him "to read textbooks at a very fast speed - faster than I could if I were reading out of my book". He still uses the Dragon program (natural speech) occasionally but because of the precision required by this program he finds it frustrating at times. He also finds the use of a high speed scanner very helpful. Although he uses spell-check, he stated that he sometimes takes his papers to the department for the staff to "check his spelling and grammar and anything to do with APA that might be out of whack". He makes the corrections himself as the staff do not do that for the students. He reported that the staff are "all very competent people... (and provided a) quite useful service". He uses the Department to write tests as he needs more time than other students (sometime up to 3 times as long) especially if there are many essay type questions. He is also able to scan paper based tests into the computer and then use Kurzweil to read the questions more clearly. He does not own a computer at home and relies heavily on the technology provided within the Department to assist him with his disability. However, he did find that "the technology can be frustrating at time".

One of the students who has a visual impairment with some residual sight, expressed frustration during the interview because she was required to purchase text books (7 books last semester) for the courses she is taking and states that these are essentially "useless" after they have been taken apart for scanning. She has to use a high speed scanner after class to copy the textbook content onto a CD (it takes about 2 hours to do 2 chapters!) so that the content is

accessible to him/her through the Kurzweil program which reads out the content on the CD. An additional challenge is that she has to format the books for scanning and the diagrams are not accessible.

She does not have a scanner or the Kurzweil program at home (because "it costs around $3,000") and is completely dependent on being able to use them in the Accessibility Department at the College in order to access any of the textbook materials. She confided that she had told Accessibility Department staff that "it shouldn't be my responsibility to format (on the CD) the books that I cannot even read, that (the school) made me buy .... it is not fair to me that (the school) makes me spend all this money on books". She noted that her sister who has a similar disability was not required to purchase textbooks when she was in post-secondary education.

Both these students clearly identified their dependence on the technology being available for their use and functioning when they need it. This highlights the importance of ensuring that staff who can assist with technology challenges are readily available to them at all times.

Research Question #2:
How are the students who seek assistance serviced?

The data to answer this question were derived primarily from the 10 students, 2 peer tutors/note takers and the 8 college staff (Table 1) who responded to the questionnaire surveys. As there were such a small number of respondents in the staff categories, their responses they were randomly aggregated to protect their anonymity. The participant interviews (Table 2) contributed additional insights to this question.

Students' Perceptions reported in the Survey

In their survey response, all 10 students reported using the Library services was important to them for "books for research projects and to use the computers". However, one student stated "I find it difficult to use a computer in the library as it is crowded and noisy at times". All of the students agreed that the Library staff were very friendly and helpful.

All of the 10 students also reported using the services of the College Bookstore, primarily for purchasing textbooks but also writing supplies and clothing. One student commented that the "Textbooks were easy to locate". While the students found the staff "very friendly and courteous", one student pointed out that the bookstore was "expensive".

Only 8 of the 10 respondents (80%) stated they had used the services of the Registration Office to pay tuition, purchase parking passes and obtain class schedules. Three of the 8 students (37.5%) stated that the staff were friendly and cheerful, "knowledgeable and helpful". However, two students expressed some dissatisfaction. One student stated "It can get very crowded with long line ups in the office"; another student said "Staff was helpful but I received better service on different occasions. Staff seemed a little cold and distant when talking with them about my concerns".

Half (n=5) of the students stated they had accessed Financial Assistance services in applying for assistance through OAP, ODSP, CP and OSAP. Two of these students commented they would not be able to be in school without this assistance. One student stated: I am on OAP. I would not be able to be in school without financial assistance. Due to my disabilities, I am unable to cope with a full course load and OSAP cut my funds down substantially because of that. This is a huge challenge for me.

Nine of the students (90%) reported interacting with faculty and all of them commented very positively about the helpfulness of the faculty, and one student commented "My teachers are all very nice to me and don't treat me differently because of my disability".

Only 4 of the students (40%) reported interacting with administrators on issues related to their disabilities. While one student indicated that the "coordinator and dean" had been helpful, one other student commented: "OK but could have been much more courteous when discussing my concerns - I feel they tend to be cold and unwelcoming when I am in their presence".

The two peer tutors/note takers who responded to the questionnaire survey both indicated that hey had had some experience in dealing with students with disabilities in the past. These disabilities included "cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and behavioural disabilities such as Autism". Both of the peers stated they had not encountered any challenges in these interactions, and that they had gained "personal growth" and "learned that people with disabilities can be treated as equal".

Both of the two peers stated they had experience interacting with Accessibility Department staff and that the staff were "friendly" and helpful. They stated that their interactions with faculty were also positive and that "they treated the individual with a disability the same way they treated the other students".

Staff Perspectives as reported in the Surveys

All but 1 of the 8 staff members were experienced in working with students with disabilities directly related to their current roles within the college. One person stated that difficulty in fully accessing the campus by wheelchair and another stated that "technology limitations and personal limitations" were the main challenges they encountered in working with students with disabilities. Another person identified the main challenges as, "Misunderstanding of disability, learned helplessness, motivational issues, rigid application of employment skills (e.g., How are they ever going to be able to do the job?).

Interviewees' input

Staff in the Accessibility Department review the resumes of students who have indicated an interest in becoming peer tutors/note takers. These students are required to have an overall average of 75 - 80% or above in the courses in which they are taking notes for other students. They generally take notes for 3 courses and are paid by the Accessibility Department for doing so. Based on their resumes the

tutors are matched to the needs of the students with disabilities, that is, the strengths of the tutor are matched to the needs of the student. The note takers are enrolled in the same courses as the students for whom they are taking notes, but they often don't know the nature of the disability of the students they are taking notes for. Tutors are hired by the Accessibility Department to provide assistance to any students (not only those with disabilities) who come to the learning centre and/or computer labs for assistance.

The methods used by the note takers vary. For instance, one note taker stated she "take(s) a laptop to school everyday" types out the notes and emails them from home to the student. This saves the student having to photocopy the note taker's notes. She currently sends the notes to 2 students in the course. These students can't keep up with the speed needed to take notes in class. This note taker has received only very positive feedback and appreciation from the students and finds that taking notes for them is helpful to her as well, as it helps to "stay on top of things". This note taker also has had the experience working with a 5 year old child with autism, and with a 21 year old person who has severe Cerebral Palsy.

Several note takers indicated that they add their own explanatory notes based on class discussions to any notes that teachers have on handouts and PowerPoint presentations.

Several note takers take notes in handwriting, and place their notes in course specific folders where they are available for students with disabilities to photocopy for their own use. They don't always know the students who actually use their notes.

One peer tutor stated that she listens in to students when they are discussing things in the learning centre and tries to find the right time to include herself in the discussion so that she can offer her assistance. She also stated that most of her experiences in tutoring have been "good".

Student services for this campus include counselling, (accessibility) services, disability services, peer services; student life services which involve student government, athletics, business operations of student government (e.g., fitness centre, gym); housing service; student insurance; and a career development centre including job connect, and summer job services.

Students also receive assistance with resume writing and preparation for full or part time employment.

One of the note takers shared that on at least one occasion she was able to assist a student who was about to drop out of the course by helping her with a particularly difficult assignment. Another felt she had really helped an ESL student be successful in her studies by helping her to understand the terms used.

One of the peer tutors reported that "a girl came in with her same textbook every week and had review and study questions to do at the back of the books as homework assignments. Then they have a test on it. I helped her figure out the questions at the back of the book and she would get good marks on her tests". The tutor rephrased the

questions in simpler language so that the student understood them better. The tutor also helped one student draw pictures using computer graphics and the student was "excited and appreciative" of her help.

One of the students who has a visual impairment commented at length on some of the challenges she faces, not in relation to the staff of the Accessibility Department, but with other students. This student stated " people in my classes don't understand it. They wonder why I'm sitting at the front of class and make fun of it. I don't have my watch yet, so when I ask someone to tell me the time, they say "can't you tell time? it bugs me when people ask other people about me and I can hear them. I hear them whispering". She also commented on the difficulty navigating about the college at times because the lettering on the signs is too small or not legible, making it difficult to make out the signs because of her disability.

Another student expressed appreciation for the assistance she had received from the Accessibility Department staff when she found things very confusing when she first came to the college. The Accessibility Department staff helped her to focus on her learning. Several of the students also expressed appreciation for the assistance they received from library staff. The library staff "helped (the student) read schedules and looked up phone numbers " for her.

One of the peer tutors interviewed recognized the need for her to approach the students in the lab and offer them her help, rather than wait for them to approach her. She recognized that this was especially important for blind students who would not be able to see her and not know when to ask for help.

I wondered if the student were hearing impaired, how would the tutor know that the student needed help? And how would the student identify a tutor since all the tutors that I interviewed indicated they used verbal communications to identify and solve problems or visual and aural/oral communications and methods to identify barriers or difficulties, and people who were struggling with challenges.

I observed a number of physical, environmental obstacles that create challenges for students with some physical disabilities, which the department staff did not appear to be aware of. For instance, there were low tables in the department office that I personally collided with several times; the low location of the garbage pail in the washroom was distracting to my guide dog, and there were jagged walls, cluttered and cramped spaces which made navigating through the office difficult for someone with impaired vision.

Research Question #3:
What issues does the Accessibility Department deal with in relation to the diverse areas/schools/department within the college?

The data to answer this question were collected primarily in the interviews. Several Accessibly Department staff said that it is their perception that their College and one other college in northern Ontario were the most advanced of the Ontario Colleges in providing services to students with disabilities.

The job description of the administrative head of the Accessibility Department clearly identifies her responsibilities related to services for students with disabilities. The "college policy manual" clearly identifies the regulations and policies of the college and the specific responsibility of this position. The head of the Accessibility Department is a "member of the campus management team. That team is made up of administrators on campus who look at campus issues as a whole". The department head also regularly attends the monthly coordinators meetings where coordinators from all the different program areas discuss issues and challenges in general. These campus/college based meetings provide the opportunity for the department head to be a voice for the needs of students with disabilities within the strategic planning and management of the campus as a whole.

The College also has an elected student council that addresses issues that arise. One interviewee stated "we have had students (on the council) in the past that certainly have had some kind of disability but it wasn't a visible disability".

I had the opportunity to observe one class where one of the students had a severe visual impairment and I interviewed this teacher after that class to validate my own observations. The accommodation arranged for this student was that she sat in the front row of the class, near the teacher. This teacher had previously had another student with visual impairment. While the teacher used overhead projections, PowerPoint and the chalk board extensively to facilitate the learning of the other students, this was not beneficial to the student with the disability. However, the teacher also posted her syllabus and lessons on Blackboard which meant they were more accessible to the student through the use of assistive technologies. During the class time, the teacher also described the key points of the overheads and while she wrote difficult words for the rest of the class, she spelled these quietly for the student with the disability. Another accommodation this teacher made for the student was to permit her to do open book tests at home on her computer rather than in class as the other students did. The teacher identified the documentation that she received from the Accessibility Department as very helpful, as were the discussions with the student herself regarding her needs, strengths and accommodations that had been successful in the past.

One person interviewed identified insufficient funding for the services of the Accessibility Department as a major issue. She recalled that a few years ago, when government funding was unexpectedly withdrawn from the Accessibility Department program, the student council initiated a "student success fee" of $150 per student per year levied on every student in the college in order to maintain the services for students with disabilities, which included physical fitness programs. One of the students told me the fee goes directly to the Accessibility Department.

Research Question #4:
How are challenges handled by the staff of the Accessibility Department?

The data to answer this question came from interview responses. The staff of the Accessibility Department meet at least

twice a semester to discuss any ongoing issues, challenges and concerns. In addition, department staff consult regularly with the department head as needed. This administrator has "a very open door policy so that at any time (the staff) can drop by to see, email or phone him/her. And (the department head) tries to get back to (them) as quickly as possible".

One of the peers commented that she was frustrated when one "student cancelled our appointment often, (and) wouldn't show up". However, she recognized that there was little the College could do when students who were referred for assistance did not take advantage of the help offered.

A staff member indicated in the interview, that the Accessibility Department staff meet with students with disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, medical, hearing, vision, short and long term memory problems), do intake assessments, review their documentation and make sure all the documentation is on file.... then come up with a plan of what their needs are and what services and accommodations would best work for that student". They then work with faculty and other staff to initiate appropriate accommodations that are specified in letters of accommodation and shared on a need to know basis with the written consent of the students. Depending on the disability, the students" may be asked for a psycho-educational assessment "that has been completed within the last 5 years. First semester students often meet regularly with Accessibility Department staff to assess the usefulness of the accommodations agreed upon; as well, meetings with faculty are used as part of this assessment.

One of the Accessibility staff interviewed stated that "at times students fail to come to appointments" and that she "gets bothered when students do not come" because of the wasted time and concern about the student missing out on needed assistance. She "goes to look for these students" or calls them to follow up.

Another Accessibility staff person explained that she finds it helpful to ask teachers to sign acceptance for accommodations for testing to ensure the teacher understands and agrees to the accommodations. All the staff in the department "follow confidentiality policies", and use "vague language on any reports or files that are sent out to outsiders (i.e., teachers, other workers) regarding students", explained one staff member.

Research Question #5:
What is the nature of the relationship between Accessibility Department staff and faculty, support staff and College administration/department heads?

Five of the 8 (62.5%) staff respondents to the questionnaire survey commented on their relationship with Accessibility Department staff; all were very appreciative of the assistance they had themselves received, and the helpfulness extended to students with disabilities. They found input from Accessibility Department staff to an orientation session to be helpful; commented on how one department staff person had brought a student with disabilities directly to them, provided insight into services available to students with disabilities, and followed up with them after their interaction with the student.

None of the respondents identified any difficulties or challenges in their interactions with the Accessibility Department staff. Support staff were seen as "extremely helpful and very thoughtful" and "Library staff go above and beyond to be helpful".

"Most faculties" were also seen as "supportive of students. "They will (help) to make arrangements to level the playing field for students with challenges. They, for the most part, have very creative ideas in assisting students with disabilities" said one person, "and they treat individuals with a disability the same way they treated the other students". This last comment implied that the students with disabilities were extended the same respect as all other students.

Comments from non-department staff about interactions with Accessibility Department staff were also very positive: "I think we do a very admirable job of assisting students with learning disabilities" said one. Based on my experience with the staff and students with disabilities, I think that (this College) offers a great support system to the students. Based on these services I think that many students have been successful at completing their programs and feel more confident about their achievements.

Research Question #6:
What challenges do the staff of the Accessibility Department encounter when dealing with college staff outside the Department and how are these handled?

None of the data identified any serious or pervasive challenges encountered by department staff in dealing with college staff outside the department. One department staff member commented on the survey questionnaire that they had found "some of the administrative assistants are rigid and do not seem to understand disabilities and particularly in areas of social skills and organization. In my opinion students with disabilities are expected to be much more organized in order to get accommodations".

The main challenges college staff in general identified were related to the insufficient resources - the "shrinking pots of funding" needed to enable them to provide essential services. As well, one person commented, "Sometimes faculty and staff are not fully aware of the disability and feel students are accommodated too much with their academic studies" , and that "some faculty seem rigid in their expectations. They are concerned about (how) students with disabilities (will be) accommodated in the workplace".

Research Question #7:
What challenges do college staff encounter when dealing with the staff of the Accessibility Department and how are these handled?

The questionnaire survey asked the participants to comment on policies/ procedures and practices with respect to the Accessibility Department that they felt needed to be addressed to improve service to students with disabilities. Responses to these questions were generally very supportive and appreciative of the existing services. One person who was not a staff member of the Accessibility Department provided a typical response: "(This College) is one of the leaders of the colleges that offer disability services. Funding could

provide better services for our students. The building itself needs to be adapted to provide greater access for students who encounter physical or sight challenges. All in all, I feel the staff are wonderful and do the very best that they can with what they have to work with".

Another employee stated "I personally feel that (this College) is exceptional in providing supports to students".

What was somewhat surprising was the fact that 3 of the 4 staff (75%) who responded to this question indicated a lack of or insufficient knowledge about college policies, procedures and practices related to services for students with disabilities. Suggested improvements in service included: "From my experience, I think the college could do a better job of making the physical building more accessible to students with physical disabilities. We have one accessible washroom upstairs; however, we need one downstairs. We need better signage for people in wheelchairs to make them aware of the best entrance. Currently a person in a wheelchair cannot enter the front entrance, as there are stairs that go up or down". On the other hand, all of the students were very aware of college policies and identified many of the services that are currently provided for them.

Implications/Recommendations

People with disabilities have special needs. However, they are also human beings that are "just like you and me." A student who attends an educational institution also engages in other activities of daily living, such as eating in restaurants, watching TV, driving a car, buying fuel, playing golf, fishing, cleaning their apartment, raising children as single parents, using a fitness centre. They may be observed and cheered when competing as amateur athletes at special Olympics or Paralympics. They may also be spectators of such games or other athletic events as well as artistic events or shows such as a variety of musical concerts. They should not become the spectacle because of their disabilities. Moreover, they deserve to be treated with the same respect as any individual who does not have any disabilities. Such treatment requires the serious consideration of accessibility and accommodation issues to ensure an environment that enables the individual with disabilities to function effectively within their capabilities.

The findings of this pilot study suggest that at the College where this study took place, students with disabilities are well serviced. This College made a strategic decision in the past to take responsibility for providing the services needed to enable students with disabilities to succeed in their post–secondary education. Regrettably, not all post–secondary institutions have made this same commitment as yet. The findings of this study can inform these institutions of services and practices they need to consider providing for their own students.

The following implications/recommendations are based primarily on my own observations and my life-long experience of living with several disabilities.

Implications for Service to Individuals with Disabilities

1. Continued and increased advocacy for sustained and

sufficient funding to enable a full range of services available to those students who need these is a priority. The student council of this College created a best practice in establishing the student success levy but additional funding is and will be needed.

2. My interview discussions with the students with disabilities were very interesting and informative. The students spoke freely about some of the challenges they face within the post-secondary environment that went way beyond the services they received from the Accessibility Department. While they expressed appreciation for the assistance they received from the College and the accommodations made, without which they could not hope to succeed in their studies, they were also aware that their relationships with their peers in particular were not always supportive.

For instance, a student who is legally blind but has some peripheral vision, stated, "Many people perceive me as weird". Raising the awareness of the college community at large through education on disabilities may reduce this.

Many teachers would benefit significantly from in-service education to increase their understanding of specific disabilities and strategies (beyond accommodations) that would assist these students in the teaching/learning environment.

For instance, a student with visual impairment commented in our interview, "I can't see him (the teacher) in class when I put my hand up, he just nods at me, gestures with his face - this is too slow for me to notice that he is asking me to speak now". While the student has some responsibility to discuss these difficulties with the teacher and together they can develop strategies that will address these challenges, a clearer understanding of the nature of specific disabilities will likely assist the teachers to recognize the important role they can play to assist these students.

3. It will be beneficial for all if there is a concerted effort made to make all faculty, additional staff and students aware of the College's policies, practices and services available for students with disabilities.

4. In the interviews, students with disabilities were occasionally referred to as having "diagnoses". It would be more helpful if the term "diagnosis" and any labelling of students with disabilities were avoided because they are associated with medical terms and disease processes and emphasize the disabilities rather than the person. These practices may even stigmatize the individual and may be perceived as disrespectful of the individual's worth as a whole human being.

5. Telephone access to college services at this college currently requires individuals to remember the phone numbers to reach specific persons. Phone lines are closed after 4:30 in the afternoon and although campus connections are open until 7 p.m., there is no operator assistance. Also, while the Accessibility Department is open until 7:00 p.m., the students must be able to recall the precise extension number if they wish to contact anyone in the department.

This may create difficulties for students with memory challenges.

The ability to connect with an operator who could assist these students would be very helpful to them, particularly if they are continuing education students who are enrolled in evening classes.

6. Use of the term "services" in the title of a department that offers assistance to students with disabilities would focus the department and especially others on the service mandate of the department rather than disabilities or challenges (such as access).

7. An uncluttered physical design (in a department that services the needs of students with disabilities) that is stable and easily and safely navigated along with appropriate signage that is responsive to the needs of students with disabilities would enhance significantly the value of those services to these students.

8. It would be very motivating if hiring practices included the selection of qualified individuals with disabilities as faculty and/or staff. This may facilitate educational success and encourage students and attract potential students with disabilities. If students with physical challenges knew that some instructors/ trainers/coordinators (those with whom they would be dealing during their educational pursuits/activities) were also living with physical challenges while acting as their educators, this would cause potential students to seriously consider applying to the school and, once accepted, be intellectually (i.e., emotionally and psychologically) encouraged while continuing their studies, preparing for careers, working in field placements, the work force, and in applying for part-time and full-time employment. Similarly, it would be useful to include staff with disabilities in any department that services students with disabilities. Hiring faculty and staff who themselves live with disabilities, will not only encourage the students, but also assist the college to understand and meet more fully the needs of students with disabilities.

9. Changing the use of the label "disability" in reporting and discussions to "physical challenges" would also be beneficial. This would differentiate students with visual or hearing impairments or brain injury from those with intellectual challenges. The term "disabilities" has a negative connotation whereas "physical challenges" emphasizes the concept of being challenged and therefore deserving of assistance, service, accommodations and adaptations, to the college environment.

10. Given the extensive dependence of students with physical disabilities on the use of the assistive technology and related services, and the reliance of students with learning disabilities (who comprise the largest number of students seeking assistance from the Accessibility department) on learning support, it would be extremely helpful to these students if the department were able to increase its support services through increasing their full time staff complement and by providing services on weekends, when these students are studying but the department is currently closed.

Implications for further research

As the principal researcher, the findings from this pilot study provided me with very valuable insights. In this study I sought to explore the research design, data collection tools and procedures and

data analysis that I hoped to use in the full study. The interviews raised other important questions that were not directly relevant to the research questions that were the focus of this study, but that are very relevant to the topic. I soon came to realize that the research questions for the full study needed to include more specific questions related to the challenges faced by the students with disabilities themselves, and approaches that have been helpful to them in the past.

I also became painfully aware of the onerous and very time consuming task of transcribing the lengthy interview data. Although I had intended to validate the transcribed interviews with the participants, this was not feasible within the time available. For the full study I will explore additional and more efficient instruments and procedures (such as focus group discussions, more focused survey questions) for collecting the rich data from participants who have intimate knowledge of the subject, and limit the individual interviews to those who may be able to provide a deeper understanding that may be lacking in other data collected.

Conclusion

This pilot study was very useful in exploring the issues addressed. With the revisions made based on lessons learned, a subsequent full study has the potential to identify policies and best practices that other post–secondary institutions may implement to enhance their service to students with disabilities and the academic success of this often talented but ignored segment of the population.

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