Facing Challenges: Experiences of Young Women with Disabilities Attending a Canadian University

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the perspectives of students with disabilities studying at a postsecondary institution in Canada. Seven female students, five of them with learning disabilities, participated in focus group meetings and shared their experiences of studying at a university. Both individual characteristics, such as disability-specific needs, and contextual factors, including attitudes of faculty members and peers, were reported as barriers affecting students' full participation to university life. Participants reported that the Office for Students with Disabilities acted as an important support mechanism at the overall school-level. Findings indicate that postsecondary institutions should support students with disabilities not only by providing accommodations but also by addressing hidden attitudinal barriers to enable equal participation opportunities for all. Some recommendations for creating a barrier-free school community are made based on the suggestions of the participants.

Increasing numbers of students with disabilities choose to pursue postsecondary education in North America (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005; Fichten, 1995; Fichten, et al., 2003; Roer-Strier, 2002). However, research show that university or college graduates with disabilities experience difficulty in finding employment, have limited independence and low standards of living (Doren & Benz, 2001; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002; Madaus, 2005). Transition to higher education, and later to work settings, present challenges for every young adult; however there is a rich literature particularly from the North American context suggesting that certain student populations such as students with disabilities and female students may experience more obstacles during their studies (Doren & Benz, 2001; Dwyer, 2000; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002). Studies reveal that students with disabilities are still an under-represented group and face several barriers which may limit their full participation to postsecondary education (Duquette, 2000; Fichten, 1995; Weir, 2004). Even though there is evidence suggesting that accommodations are provided to students with disabilities at the postsecondary level (Cox & Walsh, 1998; Duquette, 2000; Hill, 1992, 1996), some research findings show that students with disabilities have difficulty accessing and obtaining accommodations and supports (e.g. Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer & Acosta, 2005).

Even though the results of the National Longitudinal Transition Study II (NLTS2) of the U.S. Department of Education reveal an increase in the number of female students continuing higher education, girls are mostly attending 2-year colleges while boys attend both 2- and 4-year colleges (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005). Research on career development and transition for women also show that female students are less likely to find employment compared to male students with or without disabilities (Doren & Benz, 2001; Lindstrom & Benz, 2002). Additionally, young women who are employed tend to have lower incomes and work in low-status jobs compared to their male counterparts (Doren & Benz, 2001). Thus, the dual presence of gender and disability categories may cause limitations for pursuing higher degrees and career options for young women (Lindstrom, Benz & Doren, 2004).

There is limited research focusing on students' perspectives and experiences at the postsecondary level (Dowrick et al., 2005; Dwyer, 2000; Evans-Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Troiano, 2003). The following study aims to present voices of students with disabilities studying at a large research university in Canada. The participants of the study are Canadian young women with disabilities, majority with learning disabilities (LD), attending postsecondary education. Given that

there is research evidence suggesting that female students with disabilities may be at a greater risk of experiencing obstacles in higher education (e.g. Dwyer, 2000), we focus on the unique perspectives of this sub-group of students. We discuss both individual characteristics (e.g. disability type, severity, and gender) and context-related barriers to having a successful postsecondary education life.

Students with Disabilities and Postsecondary Education: A Canadian Perspective

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms has created a solid rights-based ground for which all provincial laws, policies, and institutions are developed (Roeher Institute, 1996). The following statement: "Equality of all people under the law and protection of individuals against discrimination on the basis of disability (Roeher Institute, 1996, Section 15[1])," protects people with disabilities from discrimination. According to this statement, legislation must be free from discrimination, and recognize that all people have the right to equal opportunities (Roeher Institute, 1996). Over the past decades, with provincial legislation acts, influences of the move towards inclusive education, and changes in the attitudes of the Canadian society, there has been an increase in the number of students with disabilities attending postsecondary education (Wolforth, 1998). Leitch (1998) reported that in 1995, there was a mere 0.25% of the population of students with disabilities in 47 Canadian universities. In 2003, the average percentage of students with disabilities registered to receive disability-related services in Canada's provinces and territories ranged from 1.92% to 5.67% and only 8% of postsecondary institutions reported not having any students with disabilities (Fichten et al., 2003).

Students with LD make up the largest proportion of this population of students with disabilities attending postsecondary education in Canada (Stewart, Cornish, & Somers, 1995). This is a similar pattern compared to the American higher education institutions (Hart, Mele-McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2004; Vogel, Leyser, Kwyland, & Brulle, 1999). Results of a Quebec-based study implemented as a part of a Canadian-wide study showed that there are significantly smaller proportions of students with disabilities in Quebec colleges and universities when compared to rest of the provinces (Fichten et al., 2003). Researchers suggest that provincial policies,

practices, and bilingual language system may be some of the factors contributing to this lower proportion of students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions of Quebec (Fichten et al., 2003).

With an increase in the number of students with disabilities continuing higher education, many Canadian postsecondary institutions have developed policies that respond to the individual needs of students with disabilities (Wolforth, 1998). By 1992, 30% of Canadian postsecondary institutions had disability-related policies, while another 15% were developing similar policies (Hill, 1994). By 1994, this figure rose to over 65%, and by 1997, 75% of Canadian universities reported policy development for students with disabilities (Cox & Walsh, 1998).

Hill (1992) surveyed the Offices for Students with Disabilities at 27 Canadian universities to ascertain the types of services provided to students with disabilities. This survey study revealed that although all participating universities attempted to accommodate the needs of students, some problems pertained in the following areas: (a) identifying those students who require special services, (b) making students aware of the available services, and (c) developing fair admission policies. An analysis of institutional policies for students with disabilities at 47 Canadian universities examined the types of academic accommodations provided to students with disabilities and found that academic accommodations and procedures show variation across provinces, territories, and institutions (Cox & Walsh, 1998).

In general, accommodations included extended time, special seating, the provision of visual language interpreters, change of test format, the use of adaptive technology, and the provision of alternative formats of print such as Braille or large print (Cox & Walsh, 1998). In a study on technology integration and utilization by students with disabilities, Fichten, Asuncion, Barile, Fossey, and Simone (2000) found that 41% of Canadian college and university students with LD, physical, and sensory disabilities required special accommodations and adaptations to use them effectively.

There is limited research on academic and social experiences of students with disabilities in Canadian higher education system (Dwyer, 2000; Jorgensen et al, 2005). In a longitudinal study extending over a period of 12 years, Jorgensen et al. (2005) compared the academic outcomes of students with and without disabilities attending a college in Quebec. Although students with LD had similar grades and graduation

rates, they required lighter course load and took longer to graduate (Jorgensen et al., 2005). In a recent online survey with 1,174 college and university students in Ontario, Tremblay et al. (2008) found that nearly two-thirds of a total of 72.9% female students and half of male students have experienced various kinds of negative social interactions during their postsecondary studies. These negative social interactions, although often very mild and verbal in nature, were experienced more by female students and students with LD (Tremblay et al, 2008) suggesting that these students may be at greater risk for experiencing obstacles at the postsecondary level.

Individual Characteristics: Challenges of Being a Female Student with Disabilities

Each disability presents different characteristics. Students with LD require unique accommodations at the postsecondary level as they may be at risk for experiencing difficulties in school (Trainor, 2007). Some of the unique characteristics of this life-long disability involve cognitive difficulties including solving problems, organizing thoughts, transferring previously learned information to new contexts, carrying out learning strategies, remembering, and integrating information from a variety of sources (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada [LDAC], 2002; Smith, Polloway, Patton, Dowdy, McIntyre, & Francis, 2010). Research shows that university graduates with LD may continue to experience difficulties in work settings particularly with writing skills, processing and organizing information, reading comprehension, computation, and time management (Madaus, 2005).

In addition to cognitive difficulties, several research studies revealed that students with LD may experience social-emotional difficulties such as poor self-concept, depression, and social isolation as a result of continuous academic failure (Heath, 1996; Roer-Strier, 2002; Shapiro & Rich, 1999; Smith et al., 2010; Troiano, 2003; Valas, 1999). Heath (1996) suggests that the underlying theory of how students with LD interpret continued school failure can be examined by the phenomenon of "learned helplessness." According to the learned helplessness theory, individuals may give up trying as a result of a misconception that every effort and trial will result in unsuccessful consequences (Paris, Byrnes & Paris, 2001; Seligman, 1975). Dwyer (2000) conducted a qualitative study to examine the experiences of eight Canadian female university students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) and found that when students did not have enough time to accomplish required tasks they often ended up blaming themselves for their difficulties. The author suggests that female university students with AD/HD may be at risk for experiencing barriers due to both gender- and disability-related characteristics (Dwyer, 2000).

Self-advocacy and determination skills become essential skills in overcoming barriers, particularly at a postsecondary education setting where there is less direct guidance and greater expectation to achieve individually, compared to the earlier schooling levels (Evans-Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Dwyer, 2000; Field & Hoffman, 1994; Thoma & Evans-Getzel, 2005; Trainor, 2007; Troino, 2003). Self-advocacy or self-determination refers to an individual's ability to make decisions, establish goals, and assume responsibility for outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In a series of focus groups conducted by Thoma and Evans-Getzel (2005) with postsecondary students with disabilities in Virginia, self-determination skills were reported as one of the most important factors contributing to students' academic achievements. When students had an understanding of their needs, they asked for appropriate support services and created opportunities for their success (Thoma & Evans-Getzel, 2005). Likewise, Evans-Getzel and Thoma (2008) examined experiences of students with disabilities through focus groups and found that self-determination skills were the most important student-related factor that helped students in obtaining appropriate support services. Roer-Strier (2002) conducted a six-year case study of social work students with LD in Israel. Questionnaires, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and other documentation methods were used to learn about students' experiences. As an alternative to individual therapy, participants worked on empowerment and advocacy skills training in small groups. At the end of this training period, dropout rates amongst students with LD reduced from 20% in the first year to 0% in the sixth year and more students with LD started to receive recognition for their success by receiving scholarships and academic awards (Roer-Strier, 2002).

Contextual Barriers: Attitudes Towards Disability

Students with disabilities attending colleges and universities can face challenges not only due to limited accessibility and delivery of support services but also

due to negative attitudes of peers and faculty members (Duquette, 2000; Tremblay et al., 2008). Faculty attitudes towards students with disabilities are found to be one of the most important factors affecting their academic achievement (Cox & Klas, 1996; Fichten, 1995; Hart et al., 2004; Hill, 1996; Duquette, 2000; Rao, 2004). Hill (1996) found that students' academic achievement was negatively affected when professors did not provide appropriate accommodations. In another study examining perceptions of students with disabilities in a Canadian university, Duquette (2000) found that professors were one of the most important sources of either support or barrier affecting students with disabilities' success at the postsecondary education level.

How students with disabilities are perceived in the school environment may affect their participation. In traditional models of service delivery, students with disabilities are viewed as passive recipients of services (Danforth, 2001). This model, also referred to as the medical model, functions on the basis of diagnosing disability categories and ascribing any characteristic of a disability to the whole individual (Danforth, 2001; Söder, 1989). Labeling or categorizing an individual with a particular type of disability may affect an individual's self-worth (Söder, 1989; Troaino, 2003). In contrast, the social model focuses on the role of society in creating the notion of disability (Söder, 1989). According to Oliver (1990), any kind of disability is a result of social exclusion and creates barriers to people who do not conform to the society's norms. Thus, the social model views disability as an equal opportunities issue, similar to race, social class, and gender, and requires the removal of barriers for full participation to society (Danforth, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn about the experiences of students with disabilities studying at a large research university in Canada. We aimed to present voices of students with disabilities. Specifically, we addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences and perspectives of students with disabilities regarding access to and participation in university life?
2. How can postsecondary institutions address the unique needs of students with disabilities?

Method

Participants

In this study, we used *purposeful sampling* which is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight from a sample one can learn the most (Patton, 2002). Participants were seven undergraduate and graduate students from various programs and faculties studying at a large research university in Canada. All participants were registered at the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and were receiving support services from the OSD. Three participants studying at the graduate level were receiving additional services from their faculties such as writing exams in a room designated by their departments. All seven participants were female. The most common type of disability was LD with a population of five out of seven students. Table 1 provides an overview of participant characteristics.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study was composed of three stages: recruitment of participants, focus group meetings, and data analysis. The primary researcher approached the OSD to recruit participants for the study. In this particular university, it is voluntary to request services through the OSD and students need to self-identify to the OSD to receive support services. Self-identification to the OSD is sufficient to access accommodations and students have the option to choose disclosing their disabilities to their course instructors. This is a common approach to access disability services in Canadian higher education institutions (Cox & Walsh, 1998). All instructors and faculty members are required to inform and invite students with disabilities to contact the OSD by stating this information on course outlines. In the beginning of the study, all students registered with the OSD received an information flyer published in the electronic newsletter of the center, explaining the purpose of the project and inviting them to participate. A poster version of the same flyer was displayed on the bulletin boards at the OSD for two months.

Three weeks following the advertisement of the study, four students responded by sending an e-mail to the primary researcher. First a focus group meeting was held with these four students. One month after the first focus group meeting, three more students came forth and wished to participate in the study. For that reason, a second focus group was held with new participants.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Name	Age	Type of Disability	Level / Major
Terry	27	LD	Graduate / Medicine
Francesca	22	LD and ADD	Undergraduate / Arts
Laura	28	Mobility and cognitive difficulties	Graduate / Anthropology
Victoria	23	LD	Undergraduate / Arts
Sarah	24	Mobility Difficulties and LD	Undergraduate / Engineering
Claire	27	Chronic Health	Graduate / Education
Sophie	24	LD	Undergraduate / Arts

The facilitator of the focus groups was also the principal researcher who was a graduate student completing her Master's Degree in Educational Psychology. The primary researcher did not have any disabilities but she was interested in inclusive education issues. She did not work at the OSD, did not know the OSD staff, and did not know any of the participants. Rapport with participants was established solely for the purposes of this study through e-mails and telephone conversations involving the purpose and nature of the research. Participants and the researcher met in person for the first time on the day of the focus group meetings.

Focus groups are a form of group interview where participants engage in a discussion on a topic guided by a facilitator (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999; Krueger, 1994). Focus groups allow respondents to hear each others' views thus providing a context for participants to express feelings or opinions that may not emerge during individual interviews (Gall et al., 1999). The following questions were asked during each focus group meeting:

- How do you identify with your disability?
- What is the major challenge of being a university student with a disability?
- What are your professors' and peers' perceptions of your disability?

- What do you think about university's support services?
- How would you define your ideal university? What do you think could be done to improve these issues?

Both of the group meetings were facilitated and audiotaped by the primary researcher. The transcriptions were used as the only source of data. Every participant received a copy of the transcript of the focus group session by e-mail within a week following the meeting. This procedure served as *participant verification*, which is a procedure to ensure reliability and to ensure that the researcher has captured the intent of participants carefully (Krueger, 1994). During discussions, participants had every right not to reveal information that they found private and intimate. They chose what to discuss and share during the group meetings. Each focus group meeting lasted about 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Given that conducting focus group interviews is a qualitative technique for generating data, we followed *interpretive data analysis* which is about identifying and analyzing specific words, phrases, or concepts (Newby, 2010). Data were divided into segments and coded by categories. The aim in categorization was

to discover some patterns (Gall et al., 1999; Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997; Newby, 2010; Patton, 2002). A second researcher coded the segments separately from the primary researcher. Coding data with multiple-raters increases the trustworthiness of qualitative analysis (Newby, 2010; Patton, 2002). For ethical considerations, identities of participants are not revealed throughout reporting of this study. We use pseudonyms instead of the participating students' names. Likewise, any information that could reveal the identity of the individuals has been modified accordingly.

Results

Disability Identity and Attitudes of Peers and Professors

All participants reported that they had accepted their disabilities early in their lives. Five of the seven participants reported that they had LD, which created difficulties particularly in their academic lives. Terry, who is a graduate student with LD in the School of Medicine, shared that her disability had been part of her identity for as long as she could remember:

> I started having difficulty in reading when I was six. It hasn't been anything new. So as long as I can remember, this has been a part of me. It's something I am very open about; it's not something to be embarrassed about. I do things differently.

Francesca, an undergraduate student in the Faculty of Arts with LD, realized that she might also have Attention Deficit Disorder (AD/D) last year after consulting her advisor at the OSD:

> It kind of explains why I have so many problems in school and it's not like my fault because I have always known that there was something wrong and I've always kind of wondered…I guess when you are a girl, and you are quiet and you are a good student what I hear is that is the most under-diagnosed for ADD.

Laura, a doctorate student in Anthropology with mobility and cognitive difficulties, expressed that being identified with her achievements rather than her disabilities was very important for her:

> For someone with a disability it's not like you want

to raise your hand on the first day and be like 'Oh I just want to let you know.' No, it's definitely not the first impression you want to give someone. You'd rather give the first impression with the essay you write or the test you have written with appropriate accommodations. So you want to avoid being singled out because you have a disability.

Victoria, an undergraduate student with LD, compared her academic success with her best friend. She stated that even though they followed the same steps while studying and getting ready for the same exam, her best friend still received higher grades. Victoria stated that this difference in their grades was a result of her LD:

> It wasn't for a lack of studying. We'll discuss the material, and I'll know the answer to something she doesn't. It's not like I didn't know it. I just have a problem remembering stuff. We'd study the same amount, the same amount! But I just don't do as well on the test.

Additionally, for Sarah who has mobility difficulties and LD, getting around campus and getting to the school is a very important issue: "Mobility issues are really tough at the school because of the hill, ice and weather." In terms of time management, students mentioned having difficulty balancing their school lives and coping with the problems of their disabilities. Sophie, an undergraduate student with LD in the Faculty of Arts, shared her frustration: "Time and exhaustion and pain and maneuvering!" Sarah also put forth the issue of understanding as a difficulty for balancing their personal lives:

> I would also say understanding, just in terms of balancing family and friends. I think there is a real gap in people's understandings. If you are a successful student people don't seem to be able to comprehend that you can have a learning disability, and still be quite successful. And they think that if you are successful it means your disability is not really a problem; it must be very mild and they don't realize how tiring it is and how much you work.

Laura agreed with the issue of understanding:

> My experience with disabilities is obviously an

invisible one which is a strange thing to cope with in terms of having people understand. If you don't look disabled then people have a really hard time internalizing or understanding at all. I definitely feel misunderstood, for sure. I feel it is difficult to explain disability to people who don't have sensitivity to it. That's something that I have to come to find strategies to cope on my own so that I don't feel upset.

Participants reported that they felt misunderstood by their peers who did not have disabilities. They found it difficult to explain having a disability. Laura said that she felt misunderstood by her peers even though she felt completely comfortable with her disability:

In terms of the people, my peers, I really feel misunderstood. I feel it is difficult to explain disability to people who don't have sensitivity to it. Even when I do make it apparent to my friends that I have these limitations, people just can't seem to internalize it or remember it.

Francesca addressed the general lack of awareness towards individual differences:

I find people are judgmental. You don't really think they would be [judgmental] at some recognized institution but I find people are generally less inclusive. I think there is a real lack of awareness among students; that difference is not equal to good or bad; that you can't just put people into categories.

Sarah stated that students in her program did not understand what it meant to be a successful student with a disability:

I think they minimize what you've gone through if you succeed. I am told I am lucky all the time because I am doing a program part-time. Are you kidding me? I am working twice as hard as other people and I pay twice the tuition, that's lucky? I don't think so!

In addition to their peers who do not have disabilities, students also reported that they felt misunderstood by their professors. For the most part, professors provided accommodations because it is a regulation of school policy. However, students also reported that professors' attitudes and lack of understanding about the accommodations they needed, seemed to affect their full participation in the university community. Regarding attitudes of professors, Francesca stated:

I find professors for the most part are understanding because the labels must be adhered to but it's kind of more like the deeper understanding of what it means to be dealing with this everyday and what does it mean to be always struggling.

Sophie added that some professors failed to understand that certain disabilities may prevent students from sitting for three-hour lectures or that some students with LD and AD/HD may not remember any formulas for an economics course:

I think there is an assumption with people with disabilities that you need to slow down. I feel like it does not mean that. Sometimes it means speeding up, or doing things differently, that's how I feel.

Sophie also talked about the legitimacy of accommodations from the professors' point of view:

I notice that among a lot of professors there is a bit of unawareness; especially about how OSD operates. I have taken a lot of care to inform them about the process that exam is sent to the OSD and that I am supervised when I write the exam, that it's a comfortable place, when I need to take a break, I can. There is no inappropriateness so I think that sometimes lack of awareness can lead to assumptions about the legitimacy of the way OSD functions.

Sarah mentioned that some professors' attitudes changed as they became more familiar with her:

Just total resistance with some of the professors.. but others have really changed as they knew me. Several were convinced that I would fail and now that they've gotten to know me and that I am actually a good student and that I actually understand the information, their attitude and understanding have really changed. But their first impression was that I was wasting their time by being in the program. They didn't say it straight out but they were assuming I was not going to be able to handle the program. There was a very clear unsaid message.

Upon listening to the comments of one of the group members regarding how professors in her program changed throughout the years, Francesca shared that it had been rather different for her:

You said that your professors have been changing as they got to know you, I find that also but I also find as professors get to know me they get more hardened with disabilities too because it is almost like you are reaffirming some of their stereotypes that you don't even know what they are.

Claire, a graduate student at the Faculty of Education with chronic health problems, added that professors should be even more sensitive to disability and inclusion issues:

In education that's how we have been taught; to accommodate and to learn about children with differences, right? But they are not practicing what they preach to a large extent.

Laura agreed with Claire: "It's one thing to understand something theoretically; it's another thing to deal with a person one-on-one."

Accommodations Provided by the University

Laura explained why receiving accommodations were necessary: "The point of accommodations is so that you can be treated equally and operate as any other student." Sarah brought up the issue that receiving accommodations sometimes is viewed as having privileges:

It is just so funny that it is perceived as privilege, when even it isn't equal. It just kind of helps you a little bit more, it helps you stay in float, express what you know and what you have done.

Although they are aware that they needed accommodations such as taking exams outside of the regular classroom or getting extra time for writing, Victoria and Terry also felt that such accommodations created a feeling of social exclusion from their classmates. This physical and psychological separation made them question their status within the student community.

You miss the better or worst, you miss the anxiety. I leave thinking that was the worst exam ever, but did everybody else feel the same way, I don't know. (Victoria)

It does cause physical separation in that respect. You don't get to do things the way everyone else does. Writing them with extra time and not writing them with class. You can't fix that but it's always a little frustrating because you don't want to be 'abnormal,' you want to be 'normal.' You want to fit with the rest of the class. (Terry)

All of the students stated that throughout their university years, the OSD had been the most distinguished source of support. The OSD acted as a mediator and helped them manage their lives more efficiently. After going through several incidents both at departmental and university levels, Sarah was very close to dropping out of school: "If it wasn't for [the OSD staff], I definitely would have left this university because I think there is a lot of ignorance." She added that with the help of OSD professionals, she managed to create a life outside of the campus where she felt safe: "The more I started spending time outside of school and the less this institution became the focus of my life, the happier I became." Laura added:

I think it is important for people with disabilities to have resources like the OSD here. Raising general awareness in society is a really slow process it's a hard thing to do but I think as more students become more successful students in the university then more powerful people with disabilities become because power is so associated with education in our society.

Looking into the Future: Recommendations by Students with Disabilities

All participants agreed that students, staff, and faculty members needed to be more sensitive towards disability issues. Accepting differences and treating all students equally by breaking free from certain prejudices and stereotypes were seen as crucial points that needed to be addressed to overcome hidden attitudinal barriers. In order to create this disability awareness on campus, participants proposed sensitivity training workshops. Laura stated that educating faculty members and instructors could be beneficial in terms of moving towards changing negative attitudes:

I guess ideally professors would have to go through a mini-education course or something like that to prepare them for the fact that there are many students with disabilities and you should be sensitive about this issue.

Both Claire and Sophie stated that these educational seminars on disability awareness should not only focus on disability but look at a spectrum of individual differences:

> I wouldn't want the seminars to be; here is your stereotype of a person with a disability and here is your stereotype for this kind. That's what you constantly run into. (Claire)

> When you introduce it as disability issues you are creating a binary category of 'normal' students and the 'abnormal.' It can be looked at as students on a continuum. I think that would be a lot better. (Sophie)

Francesca added:

> …to actually have professors explore what their biases do to other people and their lack of insight to stuff like time management and the accomplishments of the students, and what students with disabilities actually have to do above and beyond their academic performance.

With respect to Claire's suggestion, Terry proposed other ways of creating disability awareness amongst faculty members and students:

> In terms of educating –this is what I did in my undergrad- we had a panel of students with disabilities who would talk to groups. This could be a group of students talking to professors to just give voice and give it a human face.

Terry also mentioned that having a *mentorship experience* with professors can be a support mechanism especially for new students: "Having a role model or someone to look up to with that respect could be very beneficial." Laura suggested that all professors should make an announcement in class at the beginning of the semester and say: "If you are a student with disability of any kind I encourage you to contact the OSD. Here is the phone number and you can receive the accommodations you need."

Having *support groups among students with disabilities* was another recommendation. Claire said that sometimes students may not want to elevate every issue to the OSD:

> There were several times when I wished that there could be some sort of a group for students with disabilities of who are having a hard time to share solutions with each other..if there were other students who have same types of problems, some sort of support group where we can share that kind of information, share solutions, when we are stressed whatever it is. Especially if you are the only one in your program it's so frustrating to deal with stuff… on those days when you're just tired of it, all you really need is to have someone understand and next day you carry on as you always do.

Participants also talked about how professors and instructors should change their traditional methods of teaching. They emphasized the need for a *variety of instruction methods* targeting all learning styles. Students said they wanted professors to find more creative teaching methods and added that using different instructional approaches may end up being effective for all students. One participant shared that her peers without any diagnosed disabilities would benefit from sensory presentations as opposed to lectures.

Victoria shared that if the purpose of a higher education institution is to make sure that students successfully obtain their degrees, the *assessment methods* should be changed: "We shouldn't have to be asked to memorize. Especially students with disabilities can't deal with that, you just can't. You need the concepts to understand." However, Laura was skeptical: "I think it's difficult to transform the way the curriculum has been set up. This has been like this for years. That would definitely be a hard angle to take."

Participants suggested that those professors who had been supportive of students with disabilities and who had changed their teaching styles should receive *recognition*, such as awards, to create awareness amongst other faculty members. Although there seemed to be agreement that changing traditions is difficult to achieve, students were optimistic about what future held for next generations. They expressed that after coming through an education system and work environment where differences among people are welcomed, future generations could create a new society.

Discussion and Implications

For the participants of this study, it was a combination of disability- and context-related factors

that created barriers to full participation in university life. Students in this study focused on disability as the only individual characteristic that affected their participation. Being a female student with disabilities was mentioned only once by a student regarding her AD/D diagnosis. She stated that females with AD/D may often get under-diagnosed. Indeed, there is a large body of research evidence showing the predominance of males in special education services (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001). Because gender was not identified as a limitation by the participants, we focused only on disability as an individual characteristic.

The purpose of higher education is the same for everyone: fulfilling personal goals, finding employment, and building financially secure lives (Fichten, 1995). Likewise, for students with disabilities, postsecondary education is a means to having independent and productive lives (Canadian Association of Disability Service Providers in Postsecondary Education [CADSPPE], 1999). Literature suggests that self-determination is essential for student involvement at the postsecondary level given that students need to become more independent by setting personal goals and assessing outcomes (Evans-Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Field & Hoffman, 1994; Thoma & Evans-Getzel, 2005; Trainor, 2007; Troino, 2003). Almost all of the participants reported that at some point in their postsecondary degrees, they needed assistance from the OSD to act as a liaison in approaching course instructors. Support services and disability centers in university settings have crucial roles in terms of accommodating students, educating professors, and encouraging students to become self-advocates (Dowrick et al., 2005; Fichten, 1995). The results of the present study show that all of the participants found the support services provided by the OSD very helpful. On the other hand, some of the students stated that the OSD should always play a mediating role between the faculty and the student, while others believed that students should also learn to advocate for themselves.

Students shared that they worked on effectively managing their times, but could not meet the expectations and requirements that resulted in academic problems. According to the students, this challenge was both due to their unique disability characteristics and context-related factors such as a lack of understanding and negative attitudes of course instructors towards disability. Learned helplessness theory suggests that students with disabilities may give up trying as a re-

sult of a misconception that their every effort will be unsuccessful and become passive, unmotivated, and depressed (Field, 1996; Heath, 1996; Seligman, 1975). In this study, we did not observe any evidence of such negative affections as the learned helplessness theory suggests. Some of our participants were at the graduate level which may indicate that they were motivated to continue their education. Nonetheless, we need to be cautious that the phenomenon of learned helplessness may exist for different individuals in other contexts.

Similar to previous research findings, the importance of faculty members and their attitudes towards students with disabilities emerged as an important theme in this study. Research suggests that students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions face problems not only regarding service delivery and accessibility but also due to hidden attitudinal barriers (Duquette, 2000; Hill, 1992, 1996; Rao, 2004). Similar to findings of Cox and Klas (1996), Duquette (2000), Fichten (1995), and Hill (1996), students in this study reported that professors' attitudes and their lack of understanding about accommodations affected their full participation to campus life. Students stated that they felt misunderstood by some of their peers and professors. In general, peers and professors knew the labels of their disabilities but they did not know what it meant to live with the challenges of that disability. This was a major issue for particularly hidden disabilities such as LD. Since LD is a common type of disability in postsecondary institutions (Stewart et al., 1995; Vogel et al, 1999), faculty members should understand that LD is a real and life-long condition and that those students with LD have adequate intellectual capacities that have enabled them to get accepted by postsecondary education institutions (Rose, 1993).

Attitudes are embedded in society and can only be identified by individuals who are willing to examine their own conceptions (Söder, 1989). One of the ways of working with negative attitudes towards students with disabilities that create significant barriers to equal educational opportunities is to educate instructors and faculty members about disability and individual differences in general (Fichten, 1995). The presence of negative attitudes may be related to the fact that often faculty members have less contact with students with disabilities in large institutions (Fichten, Amsel, Robillard, Sabourin, & Wright, 1997). One of the participants proposed the idea of having student panels to give voice to students with disabilities. Becoming more

familiar with students' experiences can help focus on the person rather than the disability category (McConkey, 1996). By walking in the shoes of people with disabilities, faculty members can understand in what ways having a disability can affect students' academic achievement (Rose, 1993). Participants in this study also suggested that people who have experienced a change in their attitudes can share their own experiences, which would help to create awareness according to McConkey (1996).

In addition to the services provided by the OSD, students with disabilities need support and accommodations directly from their professors (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). When discussing accommodations as personal needs, participants of this study felt that it was necessary to discuss what equal access to participation meant for them. Students mentioned that their course instructors sometimes lacked the necessary information and sensitivity towards their disability-specific needs. This lack of awareness sometimes affected their access to support services and accommodations. The faculty members and course instructors are responsible for understanding the purpose of each accommodation and how they should be provided (Dowrick et al., 2005; Hodge & Preston-Sabin, 1997). Postsecondary institutions should recognize the unique characteristics and needs of each student and design student-centered programs (Weir, 2004). Differentiated instruction practices should be provided at the postsecondary education level instead of traditional forms of teaching such as lecturing (Dowrick et al., 2005; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). In another issue regarding school-level support, students expressed that it often took them longer to complete their course load and degrees similar to other research findings (e.g., Jorgensen, 2005). Students' concerns of rights and equity are particularly important for policy agendas aiming to increase the educational participation of all (Stowell, 2004). School policies need to ensure that students with disabilities do not face any administrative discrimination (Jorgensen et al., 2005).

Breaking down barriers for participation requires expertise, effort, and collaboration among many partners and institutional units (Fichten, 1995). Since postsecondary education policies are regulated at the provincial level, there is no national research initiative for each Canadian institution to investigate and report on the academic and social-emotional outcomes of students with disabilities (Jorgensen et al., 2005). This lack of systematic national research agenda makes it

very difficult to gain a whole picture of students' experiences. To promote equal educational opportunities for all students, Tierney (1999) states that universities must be open towards systematic organizational changes. Universities may be viewed as organizations with strong traditions and values that are resistant to change (Stowell, 2004). Nevertheless, universities are "the greatest centres of intellectual power in history" (Katz, 1987, p. 183). University campuses are places of powerful intellectual exchanges and welcome discussion and debate on moral and social issues (Katz, 1987). Thus, generating a dialogue on disability issues across campus can have powerful educational and social outcomes (Rund & Scharf, 2000). Through dialogues on disability issues, university campuses can create diverse communities and become more inclusive where all students feel accepted and supported (Rund & Scharf, 2000). As people with disabilities struggle to overcome social exclusion, the importance of restructuring policies and sources of support services within postsecondary settings becomes inevitable.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study provides insights into the experiences of students with disabilities, particularly those with learning disabilities, studying at the postsecondary level in Canada. Nonetheless, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all women university students with disabilities. Although we report some invaluable student voices and perspectives, several methodological limitations exist in this study. The small sample size is one of the most important limitations. There were very few participants in this study. In the first focus group meeting there were four students and in the second meeting, only three students. Another limitation is that the sample only consisted of students who volunteered to participate in focus groups advertised through the OSD. Furthermore, they were all female. Students who participated in this project may have a special interest in discussing disability issues including their own experiences. They may also have more self-advocacy skills and personal will to create disability awareness in school community. Additionally, the data collected for this study is rather limited in its nature. Participants' comments were not triangulated by other data sources. One-on-one interviews, observations of these participants on campus, surveys or discussions with other students or significant people who knew

the participants such as disability service providers, and a review of students' GPA would have provided more in-depth examination. Hence, the experiences of participants in this study may not be generalizable across different populations and settings.

More research is needed to further validate the information gathered from this modest qualitative study. This study can provide a modest example to building more comprehensive research agendas. Future research can examine larger numbers of students to reflect a more comprehensive picture of the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education. Mixed methods design can be used to look at an issue both on a large scale and also in depth. Focus groups can be used as an initial step of a broader quantitative research agenda. Following focus groups, surveys can be administered to all students, not simply those with disabilities, to learn about the level of awareness and knowledge regarding disability. Likewise, similar surveys can be given to faculty members and instructors to learn about their attitudes towards students with disabilities in their classes.

This study provides an opportunity to learn about the perspectives of a small group of young female students with disabilities in a large research university in Canada. Although the findings cannot serve as generalizations, the findings of this small-scale study can assist educators in improving services at the postsecondary level. The voices of our participants can inform postsecondary institutions about issues that need to be addressed to maximize the learning potentials of all students. Postsecondary education institutions of higher education need to be aware of the unique needs of particular student populations including women students with disabilities.

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