Hotline

Students with Disabilities Speak Out

BY NATALIE MARTINIELLO, MARIA BARILE, JILLIAN BUDD, MAI N. NGUYEN, AND CATHERINE S. FICHTEN

Introduction

There is a growing body of research concerning the experiences of students with disabilities at colleges and universities across Canada. Yet, little attention has been paid to the experiences of these students after they graduate or leave school without completing their studies. To provide an initial view of their concerns, here we present the findings of a recent study where three groups of individuals with disabilities participated: current students, recent graduates (from the past two years) who are no longer studying, and recent "leavers" (i.e., those who left their postsecondary program of studies without graduating). The goal is to identify factors that help or hinder the success of students with visible or non-visible disabilities pursuing a postsecondary education in Canada, and transitioning to employment. Based on the findings, we provide recommendations for student services professionals in an attempt to address the concerns highlighted in participants' responses.

Methodology and Participant Characteristics

Survey data was collected in 2010 and 2011 using an online questionnaire concerned mainly with academic retention. It yielded 973 responses. An open-ended question allowed participants to elaborate on up to three elements they felt facilitated or posed a barrier to their success. Almost 1/2 (n = 397) of the participants did so. About 2/3 of them were women (n = 265) and 1/3 were men (n = 131). 75% of respondents (n = 298) were current students, 20% (n = 79) had graduated and were no longer studying, and the remaining 5% (n = 20) had left without completing their program of studies. Since each respondent could provide up to three comments, the total number of comments received was 497. Comments were coded into 10 distinct categories by two coders. Here we report on the four most common categories of comments. Arranged in rank order of "popularity," these provide the focus for this article.

Rank 1 - Employment Concerns: Obtaining and Maintaining Work Upon Leaving School

"I am very concerned about having a job, because I don't foresee there existing any job flexible enough to accommodate me."

The topic of employment caused significant concerns for many participants, who worried about employment accommodations, disclosing their disability, whether they can obtain employment that is adapted to their health restrictions, and a perceived need for interview and job readiness skills. In sum, almost ¼ of the respondents (n = 91) identified employment concerns as an issue, making it the single largest category of comments, with 20% of current students, 38% of graduates, and 14% of leavers identifying employment related concerns. Interestingly:

- Employment worries (particularly those linked to employment discrimination and accommodation) were especially cited by those with speech or communication impairments and those with hearing impairments.

- While 33% of students with low vision expressed employment-related concerns, only 22% of those who were blind expressed similar concerns.

- Participants in career/technical programs and other traditionally "competitive" professional programs such as law, medicine, dentistry, and education were most likely to express employment related concerns.

- Slightly more female (25%) than male respondents (20%) identified employment-related concerns.

"I do not disclose my disability when I look for jobs or when I get them. My concern is that places do not like to hire people with disabilities because they are not aware of how high functioning we can be, and how we can be an asset to their team, not a hindrance."

One recurring theme is the perceived lack of job readiness skills, and the fact that so much time must be devoted to academic work, due to the extra strain of a disability. This leaves many students with little time or opportunity to develop or enhance non-academic skills, such as social interaction skills, interview skills and ways of communicating about their disabilities with others. This common comment is telling, and points to the need to provide such training and support to students with disabilities in transition programs while they are still at school.

Rank 2 - Workload Management Makes a Difference

Sixty-nine participants (20% of female and 12% of male respondents) provided comments which reflected difficulties managing their course load, making "workload management" the second most commonly reported negative concern overall - next only to employment related concerns. Workload management was a particular concern for current students: 21% provided negative comments about the way they were able to manage their workload, the highest of all of the "negative" categories. A mere 2% of respondents commented positively about their workloads.

Rank 3 - Disability Related Academic / Access Supports

In this study, "academic / access supports" were frequently mentioned, and touched on the services provided by campus disability services offices,

individual professors, and the university or college at large. Sixty-seven participants (19% of females and 13% of males) provided negative commentary about the academic supports available to them, noting, for example, that:

- Teaching assistants are often unequipped to address accommodation needs;

- Securing accommodations often requires multiple, repeated trips to doctors to seek documentation and letters. Supplying evidence of a disability to a centralized disability service office does not necessarily suffice for all purposes. One student noted, *"I was offered more time for papers etc. but required to submit a doctor's note. I wish that mental illness and other illnesses were considered a 'permanent' disability.'"*

- Professors sometimes perceive 'accommodation' as a kind of 'cheating' which is unfair to the rest of the class;

- *"Access to supports and services and inefficient bursary administration creates both time and financial issues"* (student);

- *"Lack of training about: assistive technologies and lack of high quality assistive technologies are also a problem"* (student).

A minority of respondents (7% of females, 6% of males) offered some positive commentary. One student noted, for instance, "I was offered computer equipment to assist me. This really helped me out a lot - I will never forget this gesture of assistance."

Rank 4 - Financial Concerns: Meeting the Extra Burden of Disability-Related Expenses

"I have taken 13 years of classes to graduate with my BA... with a 110,000 dollar student loan debt. What do I do now????"

Finances are a concern for any student. But for students with a disability, concerns over money may lead some to abandon their studies. Thirty participants (7% of current students, 8% of graduates, and 14% of those who left their program of study without graduating) cited disability-related financial concerns as an obstacle. Students with a learning disability, a chronic medical or mental health condition, psychological issues, or other "non-visible" disabilities were more likely than others to report these financial concerns. This may, in part, be due to the fact that funding and recognition for these non-visible disabilities are often more limited than for other disability groups.

Of particular interest is the fact that leavers expressed the most concern about financial burdens caused by their disability. Their comments suggest that they withdrew from higher education in large part due to the financial burden their disability created. It should be noted that a disability can necessitate additional time to complete one's qualification or degree.

Recommendations

The comments of participants in this study raise concerns about how students with disabilities perceive their academic experiences. Attitudinal barriers, and a lack of understanding of disability and accommodation in the academic milieu remain challenges, especially for those with non-visible (e.g., learning, psychiatric, chronic medical) disabilities. Student services professionals who provide employment, financial aid, and disability related supports need to collaborate and work with the college/university community as a whole to address these issues.

With course loads and academic requirements posing major challenges, the message from students is that they need more assistance, better time and course management skills, and the opportunity to take a reduced load of courses and still be considered full time students. Student services professionals may consider working jointly with financial aid offices on campus, to ensure that students with disabilities are aware of the financial assistance and disability-related bursaries available to them. Moreover, there may be a necessity for information sharing about individual needs to gain a better understanding of what *students* require from academic support services. The challenge for student services professionals is to find ways to bridge the gap, and to sensitize professors, students services professionals and other staff about students' rights, concerns, and needs. Additionally, specific workshops and mentoring opportunities for students with disabilities to enhance job-readiness and improve interview skills could provide students with additional strategies for attaining satisfying employment upon graduation. To this end, student services professionals can introduce students with disabilities to other organizations that provide workshops, conferences and other programs related to job-readiness (such as the National Educational Association of Disabled Students). The comments from our respondents shed light on the barriers that are perceived to be the most worrisome, and will, we hope, provide disability service / access providers and other student services professionals with ideas about how best to address these concerns in Canada's colleges and universities.

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Dalhousie Welcomes New Assistant Vice-President, Meri Kim Oliver

Meri Kim Oliver joined Dalhousie University on July 18 as Assistant Vice-President, Student Academic Success Services. Meri Kim will provide leadership and direction to the enrolment retention units at Dalhousie comprised of the following units: Academic Advising, Accommodation Services, Black Student Advising Centre, International Centre, Multifaith Centre, Studying for Success, and Writing Centre. She is also the student services liaison with the College of Continuing Education's academic support programs, the Transition Year Program, the Women's Centre, the Allies at Dalhousie group to support the GQBLT student community, and the Native Student Education Centre. Meri Kim brings a wealth of experience, including her previous roles as AVP of Student Affairs and Acting Registrar at Trent University, Manager of Residence Services at the University of Calgary, and Assistant Director of Residence Life at the University of Windsor.

Meri Kim joins a student services leadership team at Dalhousie also comprised of Bonnie Neuman, Vice-President, Student Services; Verity Turpin, Director, Finance and Administration; Asa Kachan, Assistant Vice-President (Enrolment Management) and University Registrar; and Marc Braithwaite, Assistant Vice-President (Student Affairs) who is responsible for Athletics and Recreation, Leadership and Career Development Services, Non-Academic Discipline, Personal Counselling, Residence Life and Student Health.

Dalhousie Appoints New International Centre Manager, Pam Williams

A warm welcome is extended to Pam Williams, formerly of the College of Continuing Education, who on March 1 became the new Manager of the International Centre (previously ISES: International Student and Exchange Services). Pam will lead an expanded team to improve and enhance services