**State of the Schools Report**

Report on the State of Canadian Post-Secondary Education and Accessibility

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**About NEADS**

The National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) was founded in 1986 with the mandate of supporting full access to education and employment for post-secondary students and graduates with disabilities across Canada.

NEADS is a consumer-controlled, cross-disability charitable organization that represents its constituents through projects, research, publications, resources, and partnerships. NEADS’ work is centered around three core strategic program areas: student debt reduction, student experience in class and on campus, and student and graduate employment.

To improve opportunities in higher education and the labour market for persons with disabilities, NEADS collaborates with post-secondary stakeholders, other non-governmental organizations, employers, disability service providers, and community members. NEADS provides ongoing advice to Employment and Social Development Canada and provincial/ territorial governments and works to promote government programs and services that support higher education for Canadians with disabilities.

NEADS also offers a National Student Awards Program in support of students with disabilities in undergraduate university, graduate university, and college level programs. The awards program consists of the $3000 NEADS National Student Awards Program, the $1000 Holly Bartlett Memorial Award, and the $1000 Christine Nieder Memorial Award. This program aims to address the financial barriers students with disabilities disproportionately face in accessing education and provides funding to students in all fields of study.

**NEADS Websites**

<http://www.neads.ca>

<http://www.disabilityawards.ca>

<http://www.disabilityrightsonline.ca>

<http://www.breakingitdown.neads.ca>

**NEADS Social Media**

@MyNeads on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/myneads/), [Twitter](https://twitter.com/myNEADS), and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/myNEADS)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/805448>

Mailing List Sign-Up: <https://neads.us3.listmanage.com/subscribe?u=2f5ea1e24363b139a88883ccc&id=3d194222db>

**Executive Summary**

Research on the disability landscape across Canadian undergraduate, graduate, and post-secondary institutions was performed to make discoveries on the following questions:

1. How can graduate students with disabilities navigate accommodations in the post-secondary setting?
2. How do accommodations differ between graduate school and undergraduate school?
3. How can students with disabilities resolve concerns if accommodations are not met?
4. What role does collective self-advocacy from student groups play in accessing accommodations?

The study found that disabled students across the university system are typically taught they must develop the capacity to discuss their disabilities and assert their rights if they want to achieve academic success (Bruce and Aylward, 2020). This individualized approach too frequently imposes anxiety and fear within the classroom setting as the act of claiming disability rights comes with a variety of complexities- some of which we will explore in this study.

**Introduction**

All publicly funded post-secondary institutions in Canada are required to have centers for accessible learning to coordinate academic support for students in need of disability support. Each college and university imposes its own guidelines for students when requesting academic accommodations and commonly has specific timeframes which must be met for individual arrangements to be made. Formal procedures often vary among individual institutions; however they generally require disabled students to take part in multiple interactions with faculty and staff related to providing proof of disability and developing a plan to address student accommodation needs (Bruce, 2020).

There are many barriers to self-advocacy that students may face which can prevent them from self-advocating effectively. They may struggle recognizing their own capacities and needs or the environments that best support their learning. Accordingly, some students may not know whom to speak with regarding assistance or adaptations, what to ask for, or how to best utilize supports set in place. Still others may lack the ability to articulate their own personal strengths and needs, have limited confidence in asking for assistance, or had previous negative results stemming from their attempts to self-advocate.

In graduate school, disability accommodations are necessary for tasks related to learning, networking, and performing research. However, these accommodations are not always sufficient in many situations as a result of uncertainty and spontaneity of the graduate experience. Many nuances and tensions of situations can arise when accommodations are not effective or not met at all (Jain et al., 2020). Success in graduate school is often contingent on the surrounding education community, access to information, and the establishment of relationships with peers, faculty, and staff alike.

Graduate students often receive ineffective and insufficient accommodations, including lack of support specific to graduate students - because disability services policies are shaped by undergraduate experiences. Typically, disability services offices’ responsibilities are shaped by legal requirements and undergraduate curriculum, not graduate-level research activities, creating a gap in graduate-level education for students with disabilities (Tamjeed et al., 2021). While university staff are responsible for providing and implementing accommodation needs, they may interpret accommodation policies incorrectly based on their understanding of specific student needs.

Accommodations specific to the research phase of graduate programs may be accompanied by more specialized areas of concerns, including issued related to laboratory settings, fieldwork requirements, graduate seminar participation and seminar leadership, the completion of exit projects such as theses and major research papers, and the expectation that part of the goal of accommodation at the graduate level is that graduate students should become more independent learners as time goes on. It is difficult to understand the complexity of accommodation issues related to work beyond the classroom for graduate students as the experiential dimension of graduate programs present particular challenges in relation to accommodating students with disabilities (Rose, 2010).

Disability offices may need to work with professional programs to determine specific protocols in terms of accommodation, process, expectation, and responsibilities. For example, field work required outside the classroom may require specific accommodations and require a level of awareness on the part of field supervisors regarding the capabilities of students with disabilities who are properly accommodated. Other graduate requirements such as experiential learning components, which can be truly inaccessible to students with disabilities, may need to be replaced with related work which can be completed at the university (Rose, 2010).

Post-secondary students with disabilities frequently receive ineffective accommodations due to inefficient systems and procedures, including a lack of support for graduate specific activities such as Teaching Assistant and Research Assistant roles. Research indicates graduate student research work and assistant roles outside of a specific class can be categorized as personal study and therefore able to be rejected for accommodations. However, the definition of “personal study” varies depending on the accommodation requested, and provision or denial of accommodations can depend on how staff interpret requests. In these instances, disabled students are expected to seek help from outside for research or assistantship related activities.

Additionally, confusion may arise regarding to accommodations related to conferences and events, such as who is responsible for accommodation costs associated with activities outside of the university campus. If neither the organizers of an event or conference nor disability services offices provide any accommodations for the event the tasks falls upon students to resolve in a manner that is effective to their needs. This disproportionately effects disabled graduate students in a negative way as they may be expected to attend and present their research at conferences. While some disability services offices provide partial accommodation to students for travel and events, support services do not always follow students outside of their home university events by default and accommodation requests are frequently rejected. Instead, alternatives such as hiring a tutor or relying on a peer for support may be suggested (Tamjeed et al., 2021).

Now more than ever, the number of students with disabilities registering with campus accessibility offices for accommodations is increasing at universities across Canada (Anderson, 2022). Given this, the increased diversity in the demographic make-up of post-secondary students, the diversity that occurs within types of disability, and the potential impacts on academic success that comes with these factors, students need to be met with diverse service offerings rather than a one-size fits all approach to accommodations. The objective of this study is to explore the complexities of navigating accommodations in the graduate school setting.

**The Nuance of Self-Advocacy and Accommodation**

Disabled students are attending post-secondary institutions in rapidly growing numbers, the number of disabled students graduating is not rising at the same rate (Woolf and de Bie, 2022). This can be attributed to barriers including physical inaccessibility, attitudinal barriers like discrimination and a lack of awareness of disability, a lack of programming to support the secondary to post-secondary transition, financial and transportation barriers, and inaccessible curricula (Woolf and de Bie, 2022).

For many students with disabilities, the medical level of disability does not determine the options of accessibility solutions offered to them. Students in higher education settings are required to advocate for their own needs and rights by registering with disability services and requesting accommodations. The process of disability disclosure is oftentimes overwhelming and disheartening- stemming from the negative stigma surrounding disability and concerns of bias from others. Non-disclosure is particularly a concern for students with non-visible disabilities, such as learning disabilities, whose disabilities may be misunderstood (Jain et al., 2020).

Since each student’s disability and circumstances are highly individualized to their own experiences, standard accommodations do not work for all situations within the classroom setting. Disabled students organizing their own learning support are typically taught they must be able to discuss their disabilities and to assert their disability-specific learning needs and rights. Institutional expectations that students continuously seek out the recognition and protection of their educational rights to learn under equitable conditions can be viewed as demeaning, frustrating, and exhausting, and the depth of self-understanding that is required to effectively self-advocate is frequently perceived as arbitrary or reductive (Bruce, 2020).

While self-advocacy within the framework of post-secondary disability support can foster positive and empowering student/faculty relationships, it most frequently generates academic and interpersonal uncertainty for disabled learners. Ableist terms such as independence, productivity, self-sufficiency, and compliance are seen as desirable traits that define who is a good fit for post-secondary education and who is not, ultimately excluding the tasks associated with accessibility on university campuses. Student self-advocacy requires repeated additional labour that leaves disabled learners responsible for arranging their own access by requesting something which should be a right (Bruce, 2020).

**How to Effectively Self-Advocate**

The skill of self-advocacy is not only useful for supporting changes students want to see in their institutions, but it may also be the most important foundational skill for success in post-secondary academia. Practicing self-advocacy includes obtaining what one needs in an educational setting as well as understanding one’s own diagnosis, knowing the legislation surrounding disability, requesting appropriate accommodations, and knowing how to take effective action when difficulties arise (D’Alessio and Osterholt, 2018).

Disabled student self-advocacy literature, including those cited in this paper, pinpoints the instruction of self-advocacy skills to disabled students as vital to their success within the post-secondary setting with a widely proposed solution as being the provision of skills-based training. However, self-advocacy training commonly emphasizes individual student attributes with little recognition of the wider social context in which self-advocacy occurs (Woolf and de Bie, 2022). D’Alessio and Osterholt name the key attributes of successful student self-advocacy to be goal orientation, reframing, persistence, goodness of fit, learned creativity, and a positive social network, but none of these elements recognize the institutional context in which students self-advocate.

There is a significant lack of attention to the conditions which make self-advocacy necessary, as well as the barriers that shape whether or not student self-advocacy will be effective (Karpicz, 2020), including the role and responsibility of faculty and staff. Success in graduate school usually depends on the relationships cultivated amongst people in positions of power, such as professors, administrators, and senior graduate students. This power differential can cause reluctance in asking for accommodations (Jain et al. 2020).

Students may experience challenges with processing information, finding information about disability support services, evaluating opportunities, and making decisions when it comes to determining which accommodations are needed for each class and how to actively request those accommodations. The first step to effective self-advocacy is understanding how the individual thinks and recognizing their strengths and weaknesses. By assessing how they process information in and out of the classroom, students can further strategize and discover what accommodations work best for their needs.

By understanding their own strengths and weaknesses, students become more comfortable in individualizing their learning experience according to what they can achieve within their capacities.

Self-advocacy gives students the confidence to speak up for themselves, make decisions about their own life and education, and reach out to others when they are in need of assistance. It is a vital component in helping students gain the knowledge needed to succeed while becoming an active participant in the decisions that are being made in their own lives.

Students should plan to meet with their professors prior to requiring accommodations for testing and instruction, as well as for planning on how they intend to ask for the necessary accommodations. By submitting official documentation, including any documents regarding their accommodation approval from student disability services, as well as outlining their accessibility needs the possible accommodations they may benefit from, students may feel empowered through their ability to communicate their needs.

Through knowing what resources are available, students can identify their own education goals and desired outcomes. They should also be prepared for alternate outcomes to ensure they receive as much support as possible. The possibility of learning about new or better accommodations available always exists by posing questions. Students can limit themselves from accessing comprehensive wrap-around supports when only asking for one specific accommodation.

**When Accommodations Are Not Met**

Every accommodation is individualized based upon the student, their demonstrated needs, and the nature of the courses in which they are requesting accommodation. Accommodation is necessary to address barriers in education that would otherwise hinder equal opportunities, access, and benefits for disabled students. Both private and public universities must provide equal access to education for students with disabilities; yet disability accommodations are readily denied.

Despite legislation set in place to protect the rights of disabled persons, sometimes professors and administrators may refuse to implement approved disability accommodations. Under these circumstances, students should be prepared to ask why their request was denied to determine whether or not there is any recourse for receiving a reasonable accommodation. Oftentimes, asking the reason for the denial can help motivate students to change the outcome of the situation. When possible, students should follow up in writing to formalize their effort to request further information to ensure they have documentation of their request and denial.

If a professor or institution cannot provide the requested accommodation, they still have a responsibility to work with the student to explore alternative methods that are reasonable within the education setting and effective for the student. If the student believes the denied request for accommodation is reasonable, or the reason for the denial is not valid, the possibility exists to appeal the decision. Disability services should be able to provide information on any policies or procedures for an accommodation appeals process. In the event that no formal process exists, the decision can be escalated to a higher level if need be.

The ability to understand your rights and communicate them greatly contributes to the ability to self-advocate effectively. Schools have a legal duty to accommodate under section 5 of the Canadian Human Rights Act and many universities have specific accessibility policies to reference. Escalation is an ideal step when a student feels unsafe or uncomfortable advocating for their own accommodations or when they have been met with ableist stigmas by service providers. All disabled students have a legal right to accommodations and many student unions have legal services or accessibility service liaisons available to assist disabled learners. If a student cannot achieve a positive outcome or reasonable compromise for their accommodation, or in times of a retaliation or discrimination issues, the final option for resolution is to file a formal complaint under the Accessible Canada Act.

**Collective Self-Advocacy**

Mutual support is empowering for all students, disabled and non-disabled alike, and many students draw on social support in their process of gaining knowledge of self. Specific to the isolation that can come from being a disabled person in post-secondary education, finding the support of other disabled students who are in similar positions can be critical to success. These shared experiences can bring offerings of advice, knowledge, or simply someone who can listen and relate to ones experiences. Disabled student groups and student unions can provide peer support and the ability to utilize the larger disability community to mobilize necessary change within the post-secondary setting.

Having to justify accessibility needs can be emotionally draining at best to downright traumatic for some disabled students. With the ongoing support from disabled peers, students can develop self-advocacy through trial and effort and this support can act as a role model for initiating self-advocacy and a source of encouragement for persistence in self-advocating behaviors (Kimball et al., 2016). Through this type of support, students are able to reach out to others who can assist in guiding their self-reflection and self-advocacy strategies.

Community participation has become an important way that people with disabilities develop disability identity, connection, and solidarity with each other toward making change in the world. More than advocating for accommodations, this kind of community participation also includes activism and advocacy for the broader disability community that results in systematic change. Identity development, self-advocacy, and community connection are fundamental to the experience of having a disability and are strengthened through bonding with others who have shared experiences, goals, and histories (Smith and Mueller, 2021).

**Conclusion**

Seeking disability accommodations in graduate school can vastly differ from undergraduate schools as the skills seen as necessary to succeed in post-secondary settings are often assumed regardless of ability or disability. Through knowing their rights, building the confidence to effectively self-advocate, and finding the support of the larger disability community, disabled students increase their likelihood of success through understanding their needs as a disabled learner and having those needs met.

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