



SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Joan Wolforth, Counsellor and Catherine Fichten,
Psychology

One of the major ways in which Dawson College has served its community is by providing quality education to English speaking students with physical, sensory, and learning disabilities. For the past six years, Dawson has directed considerable effort and resources towards developing a comprehensive service for these students. It is an effort which has involved the entire College community under the direction of the Academic Dean and the Director of Student Services.

The success of the program is reflected in the number and diversity of students. We currently have 100 students registered in both the day and Continuing Education divisions, students who are using some part of the support service. These students are visually impaired, hearing impaired, mobility impaired (both ambulatory and in wheelchairs), or learning disabled, (usually dyslexic or with attention deficit disorders) or suffering from chronic medical conditions.



The Service for Students with Disabilities is headed by Joan Wolforth, a counsellor. It employs ten people and manages an operating budget in excess of \$150,000.00 (a direct grant from D.G.E.C.). The Service also coordinates the efforts of a large number of volunteers from within Dawson as well as volunteers from the larger community. It maintains a store of specialized equipment for the use of students - such as F.M. sound amplifiers for deaf students, talking portable computers, special tape recorders, a variety of magnification devices, and a braille printer.

The Faculty Development program has provided workshops for Dawson teachers who wish to become more proficient in educating students with disabilities, and more comfortable with them. Joan also provides individualized assistance, where needed, to students and their professors.

Another positive element at Dawson is the presence of an active research program on the social integration of people with disabilities. Catherine Fichten, a psychology teacher, has been conducting research on this topic in collaboration with her colleagues and students. Her research endeavours (funded by FCAR and SSHRC) have resulted not only in numerous scholarly publications and presentations but also in two award-winning guides designed to help students with disabilities and their professors to relate better to each other.

Through the interplay of service and research at Dawson, the faculty and the student body are continually being "sensitized." Dawson faculty and students have served as experimenters and as participants in the research program; they have also served as volunteer service providers. Indeed, the service and research emphases strongly complement each other. Because of the necessity

of dealing with actual students and teachers, the research can never get overly "ivory-towerish." Because of the academic and research approaches, the service can never get too "clinical"; there is healthy balance between thinking and doing at Dawson.

The College receives high praise from its disabled students, not only for its accessible building but also for its accessible attitudes. Students feel that the entire Dawson community accepts and values them. Our teachers in particular have been overwhelming in their support of students with special needs. They have been willing to adapt teaching styles, course materials, and examination formats to accommodate special requirements. They have spent extra time making sure students understand course material, and they have become used to sign interpreters, notetakers, tape recorders, talking computers, and students who use respirators in the classroom. In the process, they have developed skills which can be used as a resource by their peers in other Colleges.

Students are registered in a wide variety of programs. Their records show them to be extremely motivated and successful. They have graduated from most of the pre-university disciplines as well as from several career programs. Many of our graduates have gone on to become active participants in the university community and several have received scholarships and awards from both local and national bodies.

In summary, providing services to students with disabilities has become an integral part of the College. It is not seen as a frill, or a luxury, or as something we do with reluctance. It is seen as part of everyone's responsibility, and everyone can take pride in it. There is no doubt that here an entire college community is responding to the needs of a special population. And the Dawson experience clearly shows that the effort spent in providing quality education to students with disabilities has clear, observable, and measurable benefits - for people with disabilities, for those involved in the education of disabled students, and, in the long run, for society in general.

A MULTIETHNIC COMMUNITY

Dawson College is working towards a better understanding of different cultures and facilitates this understanding by holding activities with several groups and ethnic associations. The college has a Hellenic Studies Centre and a Centre for Jewish Studies, both closely linked to their respective communities, which in turn offer yearly scholarships to outstanding students. In addition, the non-credit division of Continuing Education has developed a program of courses in Chinese and Japanese Studies in coordination with these communities.

Dawson's InterCultural Centre organizes regular activities celebrating the ethnic groups of Dawson - more than 38 different mother tongues are represented in the student body.

The College also acts as the host for international conferences. For example, a "Youth Leadership" conference for about 100 students from across Canada will be held at Dawson on May 3-5th 1991 - in conjunction with the National Association of Japanese Canadians, the Hellenic Canadian Congress, and the Federation of Ethiopian Canadian Associations.