

SUCCESS IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Hidden barriers and how to overcome them

Catherine S. Fichten, Ph.D.

Post-secondary education for people with disabilities is important for the same reasons as it is for non-disabled people: it helps fulfil personal goals, allows for effective competition in the job market, and contributes to independence and financial security.

There is one difference, however; research indicates that a college education is more important for people who have a disability. For example, while the employment figure for university graduates with disabilities is somewhat lower than that of their non-disabled peers, it is still substantially greater than that of students who did not complete university, who, in turn, fare better than those who never went to college. There is also evidence to show that once people who have a disability enter college, they graduate at the same rate (approximately 50%) as non-disabled students.

A college education has been shown to meet goals other than economic. For example, studies indicate that college graduates with disabilities experience greater job satisfaction, remain in their positions longer and spend less time finding employment.

While the employment picture for university graduates with disabilities is by no means rosy, since at all educational levels the jobless rate for people with disabilities is consistently higher than for the non-disabled population, nevertheless data on the effects of a college education are very encouraging.

The number of students with disabilities on campus has increased tremendously in the past decade. Although statistics on the percentage of college students with disabilities are notoriously vague, enrolment statistics from my own institution, Dawson College, can be used to illustrate this growing trend. In 1988, students with disabilities comprised .8% of the student body; in 1994, this rose to 2.4% — a 200% increase. Yet, there is a long way to go; changes are needed both within and outside the academic community before people with

disabilities have the same level of access as people who have no impairments.

A large variety of hidden barriers make it more difficult for people with disabilities to attend colleges and universities and to succeed once they are enrolled. There are several kinds of hidden barriers, both “systemic” and individual. These reflect attitudes, values, beliefs, thoughts, feelings and actions of various groups of people: administrators in institutions of higher education, professors, service providers, decision makers in government, publicly funded organizations and private industry, family members, and the medical community — and, of course, non-disabled students and student with disabilities.

Breaking down the hidden barriers requires expertise, effort and collaboration among many partners.

INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION



In many ways, “institutional” barriers are the most important. Institutions which discourage students from applying, which place insurmountable physical or admissions barriers to students with disabilities, and which fail to provide speedy access to equipment, services and facilities needed by students and by the professors who teach them can cause the most damage by creating self-fulfilling prophecies.

Often, the problem is simply institutional indifference. It’s just that students with disabilities are a low priority: administrators complain that it costs too much for so few students — there are other, larger priorities, they say, and with the scarcity of resources, their obligations are to the majority.

While the viewpoint may, at first, seem compelling, this line of reasoning is terribly short-sighted. The difficulty with this approach is circularity. If the services and facilities provided are poor, then few students with disabilities will enrol. Those who do so will have difficulty succeeding, thereby justifying the



original. Also, if there are few students, there is no need to make the effort to lobby government for funding or to approach industry for donations. This is a formula for maintaining the status quo.

Another example of institutional indifference is the appointment of someone who has little power in the organization to the job of providing services to students with disabilities. In some cases the job is given to someone who has several other "more important" jobs. Such institutional practices make it difficult for students to succeed and constitute important hidden barriers to the successful integration of students with disabilities.

And then there are the passive forms of discrimination. Instead of developing new structures or policies on student rights, some administrators urge proceeding on a case-by-case basis. Of course, certain student needs will always have to be dealt with on an individual basis. In the long run, however, services, facilities and equipment will have to be integrated into the regular service delivery system of the organization.

Similarly, certain accommodations designed to "level the playing field" will have to be considered rights, rather than mere privileges. Last, but not least, because it is costly to make architectural modifications, to provide services and equipment, to adapt existing routines and programs, and to pay the salaries for service providers and their staff, often students with disabilities are simply not encouraged to apply.

The best antidote for such institutional discrimination is to loudly, forcefully and repeatedly remind the decision-makers that the institution is there to serve the student, and not the other way around.

In Canada, there are only minimal legal safeguards against discriminatory admissions policies. In essence, these forbid institutions from asking about the presence of a disability. However, many students who have a disability contact the college prior to application, and a number of departments and faculties have pre-admission interviews. In such cases, one can only hope that the spirit of the law is followed.

This is one of the many areas where student services professionals can get involved and be effective in allaying fears and anxieties, and in combating prejudice, ignorance and discrimination.

What about programs which specifically require either sensory or physical abilities? Can a student with a visual impairment become a doctor or an electrical technician? Can a hard

of hearing student or one who uses a wheelchair become a nurse? In spite of numerous documented instances of success, many colleges and universities are still grappling with such issues. Needless to say, it is not up to educational institutions to act as "gate keeper," denying people the opportunity to learn because of assumptions about their employment potential.



PROFESSORS

Institutional barriers are not the only ones that students must overcome. Professors, too, can pose a variety of problems. These range from the mundane to the exotic.

For example, because professors are members of the larger community, they have the same attitudes as the rest of society. Like others, when they first encounter a student who has a disability, many experience discomfort and anxiety.

Often, they don't know what to do, they don't know what teaching strategies are effective, and they are afraid to offer both too little and too much help. Some have problems adjusting to being audiotaped or to having an interpreter in class. Others feel pity, and agonize over failing a student who has a disability.

Also, some professors communicate negative messages which serve to discourage and dismay students. They may not believe the student and they may suggest that the student is using the disability as an excuse. This is especially common for students with invisible disabilities, such as a learning disability and non-visible medical conditions such as arthritis or epilepsy.

On the other hand, professors can accept substandard work, grade too easily, allow unreasonably lenient accommodations, or allow the student to skip certain course requirements altogether. Such actions devalue the education the student is getting.

Professors also have concerns about their other students. They worry that adaptations made to accommodate a student with a disability may shortchange other students. They are also concerned about being unfair to other students — that by giving a student with a disability extra time, they may, in fact, be depriving everyone else.

And, of course, professors can simply be bad teachers. They may mumble to the chalkboard, scribble illegibly on dirty overheads, or be chaotically organized and forgetful. While such poor teaching practices have adverse



**WE HAVE MET
THE ENEMY
AND HE IS US**

consequences for all students, these may be devastating for a student with a disability.

Finally, in spite of educational efforts, some professors continue to act on the mistaken belief that identical treatment is equal treatment, showing a dismaying lack of vision, creativity and imagination.

The solution to such problems is, of course, to educate the educators. Research conducted by the author, in collaboration with Professor Rhonda Ansel of McGill University, shows that both students and professors believe that the most appropriate course of action is for the student to discuss with the professor concerns and accommodations which can help them to succeed. Other findings show that concerns should be discussed well before problems arise; vague requests get vague responses; and the more specific and detailed the request, the more likely that both professors and students will be satisfied.

Student services professionals have a key role to play in educating professors and advocating on behalf of students. Service providers have much-needed expertise and are vital in providing information and reassurance, in mediating disputes, and in advising professors and students about available resources.

GOVERNMENT AND PUBLICLY FUNDED ORGANIZATIONS



The key to attitude change and to student success is often legislation. In the US, a major piece of ground breaking legislation, the Americans with Disabilities ACT (ADA) was enacted in 1990. Currently, there is a scramble going on to meet its requirements. In Canada, we have no such major legislation, although the ethos and prevalent attitudes and practices next door usually have an impact on what happens here. But it takes time.

Time is a very important concept for students with disabilities. Many things simply take longer — to read a book, to get to school, to transcribe lecture notes, to write papers. So students with disabilities have to work harder than other students. But organizations and structures set up in order to help often add to this time burden. Bureaucracy, red tape and the slow speed of getting things done can mean that needed support can simply be too little, too late. Equipment and texts needed now, if delivered in three months' time, can mean discouragement, failure and dropping out, obviating the need for the equipment in the first place.



photo courtesy of The Bay

And then there are financial schemes, policies and funding formulas that put up barriers and disincentives to attending college either part-time or full-time, to sharing living costs with someone, to undertaking paid work, and to remaining employed after subsidy programs end. There are inimical and short-sighted funding priorities in a variety of areas.

Although this is changing, in Canada there has been an overwhelming reliance on the "medical model" of service delivery. Benevolent, expert professionals making decisions in the best interests of their needy, dependent clientele. Well-meaning and diligent, people working within this model often fail to act in the best interest of people with disabilities by disenfranchising them and by failing to address those very issues which most matter. By failing to consult with the individuals on behalf of whom they are working and with groups which have a consumer approach to service delivery, the medical model approach disempowers and disenfranchises people who have disabilities, thereby fostering the very helplessness and dependency which are used to justify the model in the first place.

By acting on the belief that it is easier and cheaper to do things for people than to support them in doing things for themselves, service providers, governments, and various organizations and agencies whose mandate it is

to improve the lives of people with disabilities are trading short-term gain for long-term pain.

The number and variety of programs which foster participation, empowerment and self-determination are on the rise. The consumer movement is alive and well in the disability community. But like administrators, professors, students and service providers, consumer groups, too, lack expertise, resources and skills in many areas. A truly constructive approach is to form partnerships between consumer groups and other organizations whose objective it is to provide better, cheaper and more responsive services.



SERVICE PROVIDERS

Service providers in colleges and universities tend to be decent, hard-working people who are

devoted to promoting the welfare of students. Almost everyone agrees that life on campus would be much, much more difficult without service providers. Some students would simply not be able to attend. Facing pressures from multiple sources, some service providers perform delicate balancing acts on numerous academic tight ropes. Most do what they can in order to help students to succeed.

Some get a little overzealous in this endeavour, and simply do too much, thereby contributing to the invisible barriers facing students with disabilities. Students can feel stifled, lack self-determination, fail to develop self-advocacy skills, and develop false expectations of what it's like in the real world.

And then there is the opposite — doing too little. This may be due to an ideological "tough love" approach, or to service providers who are "burned out," ineffectual or powerless in the system. Whatever the reason, service providers who do too little go a long way to setting up formidable invisible barriers.

This is where student organizations come in. They can offer back-up and support for service providers who go out on a limb on behalf of students, and help them to obtain needed funding or services. Students can say and do things which service providers, as employees of the organization, cannot.

It may also be helpful to canvass the student body and provide feedback and recommendations to service providers: a report card which indicates what sorts of things are working well and where improvements could be made. This need not be adversarial — many service providers will appreciate the information.



NON-DISABLED STUDENTS

As in the case of professors, non-disabled students in general have the same attitudes as the rest of society. Like others, when they first encounter a student who has a disability, many experience discomfort and anxiety.

Our research shows that there is a substantial invisible internal dialogue going on when a non-disabled person meets someone with a disability. This relates to curiosity, not knowing what to say and do, anxiety, and faulty assumptions and beliefs about peers with disabilities. Most of these reflect a lack of familiarity with students who are different.

Often, non-disabled students hold stereotypic beliefs — both overly positive and overly negative — and fail to see the person

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behind the disability. Some students make themselves uncomfortable by reflecting on what their lives would be like if they were to become disabled. Others, when they see a student with a disability do well, are effusive in their praise: such overly favourable feedback can feel patronizing.

Meaning to be kind, many students try to be helpful, but do not know how to help effectively. Unsure about the sensibilities of their fellow students, they fail to offer help. Others give help, whether this is wanted or not. Occasionally, this leads to nasty accidents and ill tempers.

Some students have had contact with people with disabilities, but in a different context. They may have worked as volunteers with children who have intellectual impairments or in hospitals with elderly wheelchair users. Their experiences, in many cases, have been in unequal relationships. Research shows that such experiences do not foster favourable attitudes in peer relationships.

Of course, many students do have positive attitudes and make a genuine effort to get to know their classmates. The majority of such students are female.

Our own studies, as well as reports in the social psychology literature, suggest that there are numerous things people with disabilities can say or do to make non-disabled people more comfortable. Tactics shown to be effective include putting the non-disabled person at ease by being the first to acknowledge one's disability, legitimizing curiosity, stressing some positive elements of having the impairment, and suggesting that it is appropriate to use terms related to the disability such as walk, see and hear.

Another approach is to demonstrate that one has attitudes and values similar to those of non-disabled peers. For example, expressing interest in the other person or discussing one's participation in typical college activities (e.g., buying tickets for a performance, partying, studying for exams) results in favourable impressions and attitudes.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Last, but not least, students with disabilities also contribute to the hidden barriers. Some students so very much want to "be like everyone else", to not stand out, to fit in at all costs, that they expend a great deal of energy and effort in trying to make it without any special accommodations. Some students succeed admirably — but usually at a considerable cost

in time and energy. Others simply fail.

Certain students — and these are usually the exceptionally good ones — spend lots of time worrying whether their high marks are deserved or whether they are being graded overly generously. They want to make it in spite of their disability, not because of it. While not using one's disability as an excuse for poor performance is one thing, second guessing professors' grading practices is another. Inadvertently, these students are setting themselves up never to feel good about their achievements.

Some students come from settings where many things were done for them. When they arrive in college or university, they have many unfulfilled expectations, and can be angry and bitter about the perceived lack of support. Some take considerable time to adjust to the new realities. Some students never do.

Most students who put obstacles into their own paths do not fall into any of these categories. Most contribute to the invisible barriers because they are not good at letting others know what they need in order to succeed. In today's jargon, these students have poor self-advocacy skills.

Both my research and my experience as a student, teacher and psychologist converge on one theme: all students need special consideration at some time in their academic careers. When this happens, students, whether they have a disability or not, feel tense and uncomfortable. What is also abundantly clear is that when students need assistance from their professors, they feel more positive about themselves, their professors, and their chances of doing well after discussing problems with the professor.

It is important to bear in mind that when one asks professors to make adjustments in their teaching styles, these changes are probably helpful for the whole class. Everyone benefits from lectures which are audible, clear and well-organized, and from readings and assignments which are specified early.

Perhaps the most important hidden barrier, in the long run, is that students with disabilities are just like other students. Like everyone else in society, they know little about impairments other than their own. Many share the dominant societal attitudes and values, and want to distance themselves from others with disabilities. Symptomatic of the times are apathy and a reluctance to get involved.

Students with disabilities can do many things to help overcome such hidden barriers. Why



would students want to bother? For themselves and for the generations to come. And it need not be hard, or boring, or time-consuming. Here is a list of possibilities:

1. Form a student group. Organize and get together to have fun, to get better informed about issues and practices which affect you, to get validation — or disconfirmation — for your gripes, to profit from self-help, to get practice in leadership roles, and to lobby and advocate for needed changes.
2. Invite professionals with disabilities to a meeting and ask them to talk about what it takes to make it in the field.
3. Develop a speaker's bureau.
4. Run candidates for student government or for student seats on institutional governance bodies, such as senates and boards of governors.
5. Develop some "causes". Advocate for better support and accommodations. For example, you may want to lobby your textbook's publishers to make their books available on disk. Talk to your bookstore about whom to contact. Approach the textbook representative. Send a delegation to the publisher's office and meet with some of the higher-ups. Write your MP or MLA to lobby for changes.
6. Hold debates or invite guest speakers to discuss current topics of interest. There are many controversial issues, such as employment equity and ethical issues related to sexuality and abortion. Get informed. Keep up-to-date.
7. Get together with others of similar persuasion and run for office or membership on the board of governors of institutions which exist to serve people with disabilities. Take them to task if you find that such organizations do not employ people with disabilities.
8. Stop complaining about accessibility problems in certain buildings and do something about it. Get some people who use wheelchairs or have guide dogs, or whatever, call a reporter and a photographer from the student newspaper, and take everyone on a guided tour. Make sure the pressure stays on until something is done.

Clearly, there is still a lot of work to be done in making colleges and universities fully accessible to students who have physical disabilities and in persuading administrators and other influential people and structures to make changes which will make the day-to-day lives of students, teachers and service providers easier.

I urge students with disabilities to work hard at overcoming the hidden barriers. Learn to love technology. Get together with others, both

formally and informally. Form partnerships with people and organizations from other milieus: there is power in diversity and strength in numbers. Be creative and exercise your ingenuity. Enjoy the process of getting involved. Even if nothing comes of your efforts, you will still have learned a lot and obtained broad exposure to differing viewpoints. And as a bonus, all of this activity will look good on your CV when you look for a job.

Today in the classroom, tomorrow in the boardroom, college students with disabilities are transforming the way things are done and paving the way for the generations to come. Get involved, and contribute to student solidarity and to empowerment, self-determination, advocacy and action on behalf of students with disabilities.

It's your life, after all.

This article is an excerpt from the keynote address presented by Catherine S. Fichten, Ph.D., at the November 1994 annual conference of the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS), held in Montréal. Dr. Fichten is a clinical psychologist at the Jewish General Hospital, and a professor in the Department of Psychology at Dawson College in Montréal, Québec. She has been conducting research on the social integration of people with physical disabilities since 1982 with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and from Fonds FCAR pour la formation de chercheurs et l'aide à la recherche.

Resources

Fichten, C.S., Goodrick, G., Amsel, R., & Libman, E. (1989). **Students and their professors: A guide for the college student with a disability**, (36 pages). Montreal: Dawson College. (Winner of an AHEAD Award).

Fichten, C.S., Goodrick, G., Amsel, R., & Libman, E. (1989). **Teaching college students with disabilities: A guide for professors** (42 pages). Montreal: Dawson College, (Winner of an AHEAD Award).

Single copies are available free of charge (in regular print, large print, computer disk and on audiotape) from: Catherine S. Fichten, Ph.D., Psychology Department, Dawson College, 3040 Sherbrooke St. West, Montréal, Québec H3Z 1A4 Canada.