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# Association pour la recherche au collégial

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## L'intégration d'étudiants handicapés en milieu collégial - une recherche fondamentale / Integration of Students with Disabilities in the College Milieu - Fundamental Research

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### Résumé

Depuis une dizaine d'années, l'entrée en vigueur de nouvelles lois et le développement de nouvelles technologies ont contribué largement à la présence de plus en plus grande d'étudiants handicapés dans nos CEGEP. Ces changements de société et technologiques ont permis à ces personnes de participer plus activement sur le plan communautaire, tant dans leur quotidien que dans le milieu de l'enseignement supérieur. Malgré ces gains, nos recherches témoignent d'une présence encore importante d'obstacle cachés, voire invisibles, qui jouent un rôle déterminant dans les succès et échecs que vivent ces étudiants. Pour pallier à ces obstacles, nos études présentent plusieurs méthodes intéressantes servant à remettre en question certaines attitudes négatives, à modifier des croyances erronées, des pensées irréalistes et des sentiments d'inconfort et finalement de changer certains comportements dont des actions discriminatoires et blessantes.

## Abstract

During the past decade, new laws and technological developments have contributed to a tremendous increase in the number of students with disabilities in our CEGEPs. These social and technological changes have allowed people with disabilities to become more active in all aspects of community life, both on and off campus. In spite of these gains, our research shows that many of the invisible barriers remain; these hidden barriers can be vital to the success and failure of students with disabilities. To overcome these obstacles, our research has suggested some promising ways to challenge negative attitudes, to correct mistaken beliefs, unrealistic thoughts, and troublesome feelings, and to change hurtful, disempowering, and discriminatory actions.

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## Introduction

The number of individuals with physical disabilities who reside in the community has risen dramatically during the Canadian Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-1992). Recently, people with physical, sensory, and medical disabilities have been entering the «mainstream» in increasing numbers. No longer segregated in special schools, residences and institutions, individuals who have physical impairments have become a common sight on the streets, in public places such as shopping areas and cinemas, in schools, colleges, and universities as well as in the workplace.

Legislation and advances in technology continue to provide better means to surmount environmental and physical barriers, allowing people with disabilities to become more active in all aspects of community life. But physical accessibility is only the first step. Full social integration means much, much more. Many of the invisible barriers remain, making it timely to address these "hidden" obstacles: attitudes, values, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Breaking down the invisible barriers and facilitating the social integration of people with disabilities has posed many challenges. Perhaps the most formidable obstacles encountered have been the attitudinal barriers. Able-bodied individuals behave differently toward those with disabilities (Gouvier, Coon, Todd, & Fuller, 1994). They are also often uncomfortable with those who have disabilities (Fichten, Amsel, Robillard, & Tagalakis, 1991) and many have negative attitudes (Westwood, Vargo, & Vargo, 1981); these can lead to problems in interaction and integration. In many cases, discomfort and negative attitudes have denied people with disabilities full access to the social and economic life of the community.

We have carried out over forty studies on the social integration of people with physical disabilities since 1982 with the help of research grants from F.C.A.R. (Fonds FCAR pour l'aide et le soutien à la recherche), SSHRC/CRSH (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada / Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada) and PSCC (D.G.E.C.'s Programme de Soutien aux chercheurs des collèges). For the most part, these studies have focused on interaction between college students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers and professors, although we have also explored topics such as job interview strategies for people with disabilities (Tagalakis, Amsel, & Fichten, 1988)

and the effectiveness of large scale advertising campaigns (Fichten, Hines, & Amsel, 1985). The main objective has been to investigate the nature of attitudes and behavioral, cognitive and affective factors which facilitate or hamper interaction between people with and without disabilities. An additional goal has been to design and evaluate interventions to eliminate social barriers to integration.

We have assessed the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of able-bodied individuals as well as of people with various physical and sensory impairments in a variety of contexts. One series of studies focused on attitudes (Fichten & Amsel, 1986; Fichten, Goodrick, Amsel, & McKenzie, 1991; Fichten, Robillard, Judd, & Amsel, 1989; Fichten, Robillard, Tagalakis, & Amsel, 1991; Robillard, & Fichten, 1983). Another line of investigation explored social and relationship skills needed for effective interaction by students with and without disabilities (Fichten, & Bourdon, 1983, 1984, 1986a, 1986b; Fichten, Judd, Tagalakis, Amsel, & Robillard, 1991; Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, Wright, & Amsel, 1992). An additional series of studies explored cognitive and affective facilitators and impediments to successful social interaction between peers with and without disabilities (Amsel, & Fichten, 1990a; Fichten, 1986; Fichten, & Amsel, 1988; Fichten, Amsel, & Robillard, 1988; Fichten, Bourdon, Amsel, & Fox, 1987; Fichten, Amsel, Robillard, & Tagalakis, 1991; Fichten, & Martos, 1986). The focus in yet another series of investigations has been on techniques designed to change attitudes and eliminate discrimination and interaction difficulties (Amsel & Fichten, 1988; Fichten, Compton, & Amsel, 1985; Fichten, Lennox, Robillard, Wright, & Amsel, in press; Fichten, Lennox, Wright, & Amsel, 1993; Fichten, Tagalakis, & Amsel, 1989).

In addition, we have explored various facets of social integration into institutions of higher education. This series of studies, which are reviewed in detail below, have focused on institutional attitudes and on professor-student relations.

## **Integration of students in postsecondary education**

The focus on college students in much of our research was not accidental. We chose this context because of the substantial increase in the number of students with disabilities on campus (Lavoie, 1986; Louis Harris & Associates, 1994; McGill, Roberts, & Warick, 1994; Tousignant, 1989). Although accurate statistics on the percentage of college students with disabilities are notoriously vague, enrollment statistics from my own institution, Dawson College, can be used to illustrate this growing trend (Freedman & Havel, 1994).

## STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

DAWSON COLLEGE

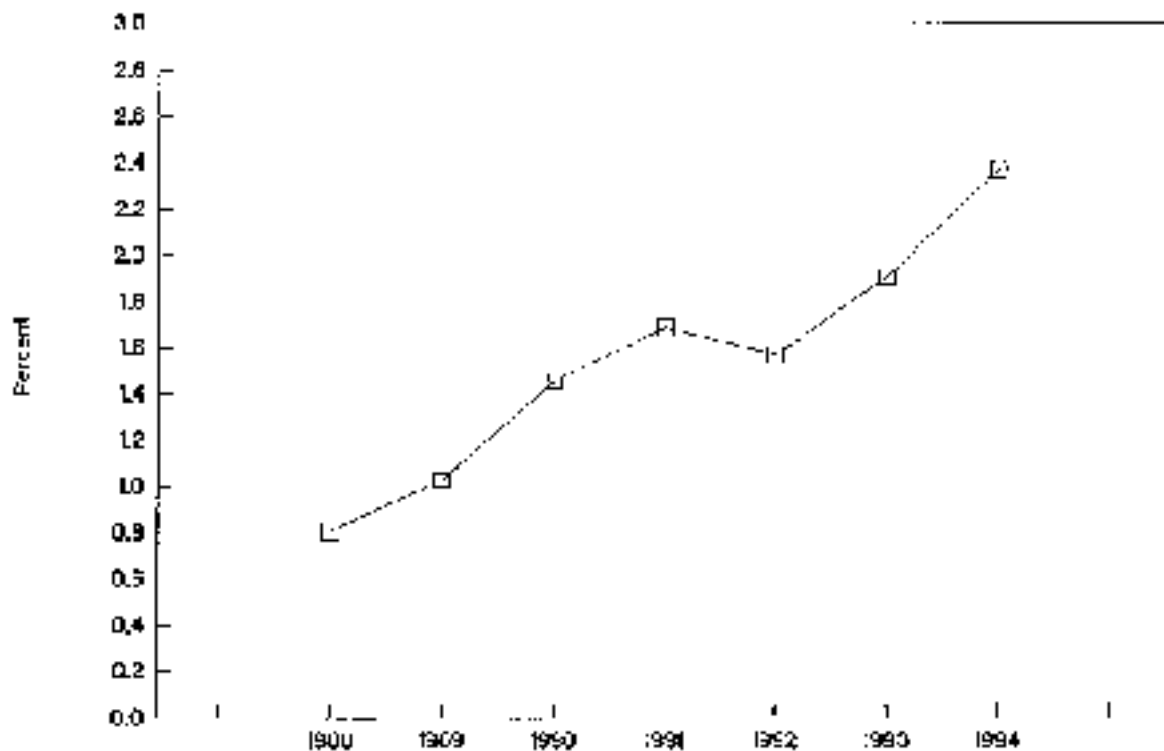


Figure 1

The academic context provides new opportunities for attitudinal and behavioral changes. It also provides challenges and obstacles for students with disabilities and for their able-bodied peers and professors. This makes it an ideal laboratory for the experimental study of attitudes and of factors which facilitate or hamper social integration.

Attitudes can be a vital ingredient in the success or failure of students with a disability and in the overall success of the mainstreaming effort in post-secondary education. Attitudes and behaviors of nondisabled students, faculty, the administration and student services personnel as well as those of students who have a disability can all have profound effects on the social and educational integration of students with disabilities into the college community (Nelson, Smith, Appleton, & Raver, 1993).

Architectural barriers are slowly disappearing (Marion & Iovacchini, 1983; Hill, 1992), but many of the invisible barriers remain (Fichten, 1995). Therefore, it is timely to conduct research on how to effectively and aggressively tackle these remaining hidden obstacles: negative attitudes, mistaken beliefs, unrealistic thoughts, troublesome feelings, and hurtful, disempowering, and discriminatory actions.

## Importance of a college education

Postsecondary education for people who have a physical disability is important for the same reasons as it is for non-disabled people; it helps to fulfill personal goals, allows for effective competition in the job market and contributes to independence and financial security. In fact, a college education is more important for people who have a disability. It has been shown, for example, that although employment figures for university graduates with disabilities is somewhat lower than that of their nondisabled peers, it is still substantially higher than that of students who did not complete university, who, in turn, fare better than those who never went to college (Government of Canada, 1994; Louis Harris & Associates, 1994). College graduates with disabilities also experience greater job satisfaction, remain in their positions longer and spend less time finding employment (Helten - cited in Perry, 1981).

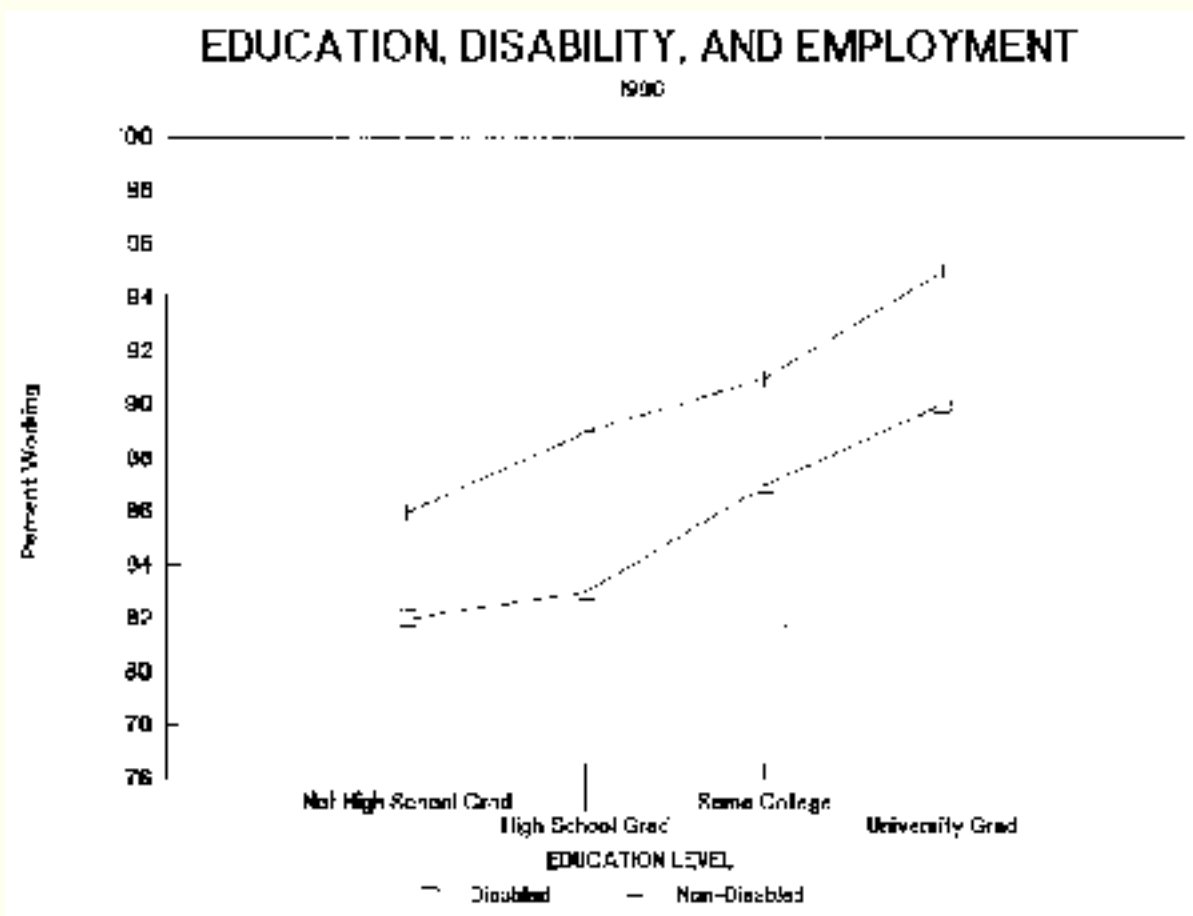


Figure 2

## Hidden barriers and how to overcome them

### What Students with Disabilities, Their Professors, and Institutions of Higher Education Can Do

Institutional barriers may cause the most damage. Institutions that discourage students who have disabilities from applying, place insurmountable physical or admissions barriers, and fail to provide speedy access to equipment, services, and facilities needed by students and by the professors who teach

them cause much damage. They create self-fulfilling prophecies and send the message to the academic community that students with disabilities are not welcome on campus.

But what institutional factors are most important, and to whom are they important (c.f., Hill, 1994)? To examine institutional factors, we explored recommendations made by students with physical disabilities and by the professors who taught them about what people and institutions can do to facilitate teaching and learning in higher education. Thirty-seven college and university students with various physical disabilities, 74 professors who have taught students with disabilities and 17 professors who have not done so answered 5 open-ended questions concerning what professors, students who have disabilities and institutions of higher education can do to make teaching and learning easier and more effective. The 1056 recommendations were grouped, categorized, and ranked in order of frequency. Recommendations were made under the following headings: facilitative actions by professors, facilitative actions by students with disabilities, needed services, facilities, and equipment, and other recommendations.

The results, which are detailed in Fichten, Bourdon, Creti, and Martos (1987) indicate that while there were many commonalities among the three groups of participants' views, there were also a number of interesting discrepancies; both the similarities and the differences have implications for students and professors alike.

**What professors can do.** The most remarkable aspect of the recommendations made concerning what professors could do to make teaching and learning easier and more effective for students with a physical disability is that most of the suggestions apply equally well to the teaching of nondisabled students; such findings have also been reported for accommodations helpful for students with learning disabilities (Smith, 1993). For example, in our study the most frequently made recommendations in response to the question about what professors could do to facilitate learning were: flexibility with the content and format of assignments, delivering lectures clearly, and making effective use of the blackboard or over-head projector.

Discrepancies among the responses of the three groups of participants show that what is important to members of one group is not necessarily so for members of another group. For example, the most frequent responses of students concerned lecture style, written handouts, permission to audiotape lectures, and blackboard organization. Professors, on the other hand, especially those who have had no experience teaching students with a disability, did not consider these to be key issues. While many professors in both groups recommended that teachers meet with students who have disabilities regularly outside class time and that they inform themselves about how the student's disability affects learning in their courses, few students felt that this was important. Similarly while the suggestion that professors should arrange for able-bodied classmates to help the student with the disability ranks in the middle for professors who have taught students with a physical disability, not one of the student participants made this recommendation.

**What students with disabilities can do.** Consistent with reports from others (e.g., Moore, Newlon, & Nye, 1986), the most frequent recommendation of all three groups of respondents to the questions which dealt with what students could do to facilitate teaching and learning concerned educating the professor about the needs of students with physical disabilities. However, in many of their recommendations concerning what students with disabilities could do to improve the process of education, students and professors differed substantially. For example, while the students recommended working harder, planning ahead,

and obtaining good lecture notes, few professors made these suggestions. Many professors, but few students, recommended that students give specific suggestions and feedback concerning their courses, that students meet with professors before the beginning of term, and that they identify potential course problems before they arise.

What institutions of higher education can do. In response to the questions concerning what institutions could do to facilitate teaching and learning the most frequent recommendation made by both students with disabilities and by the professors who taught them was that the institution establish and maintain a center for students with disabilities; this should serve as a drop-in center, provide services, disseminate information, and sponsor "awareness" programs. Other frequently made recommendations concern physical accessibility, availability of volunteers (or paid personnel) as readers, note takers, etc., and availability of equipment such as tape recorders and computers for student use.

For the most part, there was reasonably good agreement between students with disabilities and the professors who have had experience teaching them concerning what services, facilities, and equipment are needed. Suggestions made by professors who have not taught students with disabilities, however, were often unrelated to recommendations made by the other two groups. This was especially true in the areas of services and equipment.

As for needed facilities, while everyone agreed that campuses should be accessible, professors were more likely to focus on specific architectural modifications for wheelchair users while the students were more concerned about adequate table heights, a place to locate wheelchairs when these are not in use, and about physical changes to accommodate students with sensory impairments.

Implications of the findings. Our results show that, not surprisingly, both students and faculty alike proposed changes which would make their own lives easier. The discrepancies among the three groups of participants underscore an axiom which many espouse but few follow. First of all, professors and students need to be informed about each other's concerns and needs. Because of their different vantage points, these do not always coincide. Second, professors who have not taught students with disabilities are often unaware of what is actually needed by disabled students and their professors. Third, students with different disabilities have differing needs and concerns. Our results suggest that institutions planning changes to better accommodate and educate students with disabilities should involve and listen both to students with various disabilities as well as to the professors who have taught them.

### **Appropriate and Inappropriate Professor and Student Behaviors**

There is relatively little research on attitudes or practices of college and university professors toward students with physical disabilities, or indeed, on nondisabled student-professor relations (Amsel & Fichten, 1990b). To add to the knowledge base, we conducted an investigation to explore the nature of appropriate and inappropriate interaction behaviors between professors and college students who have physical disabilities (Fichten, Amsel, Bourdon, & Creti, 1988).

College students with various disabilities (9 wheelchair users, 9 who had a hearing impairment, 7 who had a visual impairment, 7 who had cerebral palsy, and 5 with other neuromuscular impairments), 45 college and 29 university professors who had taught students with disabilities, and 8 college and 9

university professors who had not done so rated the frequency and appropriateness of a variety of interaction behaviors by both professors and students. Professors also rated their level of comfort with disabled and with non-disabled students and indicated how interested they were in teaching students with specific disabilities in the future.

Overall, the results show that (a) approximately 75% of professors surveyed had taught at least one student who had a disability, (b) professors were more comfortable with able-bodied students than with students with disabilities, and (c) that professors who had taught students with disabilities were more comfortable with such students and more interested in teaching them in the future. Appropriate behaviors were more frequent than inappropriate behaviors and student initiated behaviors were rated as more desirable than professor initiated ones. Nevertheless, students with disabilities rated most student initiated actions as less appropriate than the professors believed them to be.

Comfort and interest in teaching students with disabilities. Professors who had not taught students with disabilities were less comfortable with students who had a disability than were their experienced colleagues. They were also less comfortable with disabled than with able-bodied students. These findings are consistent with the results of a number of studies which show that prolonged contact with people who have a disability results in less anxiety and greater ease (e.g., Fonosch & Schwab, 1981; Rowlett, 1982) and that teaching students with disabilities results in more favorable attitudes (Schoen, Uysal, & McDonald, 1987).

The beneficial effect of contact with students who have disabilities is also suggested by the results on professors' interest in teaching students with disabilities in the future; these indicated consistent differences in favor of the experienced professors. As suggested by Alexander (1979) long ago, the experience of teaching students with disabilities appears to promote willingness to interact and to teach other such students.

Frequency and appropriateness of behaviors. Students with disabilities indicated that students typically initiate contact more frequently than do professors; professors also tended to see themselves as being the more frequent initiators. Such findings are hardly surprising given the different types of information available to people concerning their own and others' behaviors and the differences in vantage points (Fichten, 1984; Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, Wright, & Amsel, 1992; Fichten & Wright, 1983a, 1983b).

It was encouraging to find that, generally, appropriate behaviors by both professors and students were more common than inappropriate behaviors and that professors and students agreed on the nature of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors by both groups. Both professors and students indicated that student initiated behaviors were more desirable than professor initiated ones (e.g., the student should approach the professor to tell him or her about needed course adjustments rather than the professor approaching the student). Given these results, it was rather surprising to find that while professors and students agreed on what are and what are not appropriate behaviors by each group, students with disabilities rated most student initiated behaviors, but not professor initiated ones, as less appropriate than the professors believed them to be. It appears as though the students are in a bind; on the one hand, they feel they should initiate most of the contact, on the other, they underestimate the appropriateness of their behavioral alternatives.

Professors, however, did not follow this pattern, suggesting that the role and normative behaviors of "the



professor" are more clearly defined than those of "the student who has a disability." Professors, while they may feel uncomfortable with students who have a disability, have an extensive storehouse of experience relating to students in general. This can make them feel more confident about the appropriateness of behaviors they initiate. After all, a student with a disability is, in the final analysis, just another student. Students with disabilities, lacking extensive experience and appropriate role models, may underestimate the appropriateness of student initiated behaviors which involve the impairment. Since having an impairment is not positively valued, students with a disability often do not wish to be singled out as different, a "handicapped student." This can make students with disabilities view behaviors which involve the impairment as less desirable than others believe these to be.

### **Are Students with Disabilities Too Hard on Themselves or Are Their Professors Too Easy?**

According to our findings, professors and students with disabilities agree that it is desirable that students initiate contact concerning needed course adjustments. Yet, students with disabilities rate these student initiated behaviors as less appropriate than do professors. The result of this dichotomy could be that students with disabilities request fewer adjustments than their professors would be willing to grant, perhaps even fewer than their nondisabled peers request and are granted. To investigate this issue, we obtained appropriateness ratings for identical student and professor-initiated behaviors, from 37 disabled and 62 nondisabled students and from 74 professors of disabled students and 96 professors of nondisabled students (Amsel & Fichten, 1990c).

Students with disabilities and their professors made ratings with reference to professor-disabled student interaction while nondisabled students and their professors answered questions concerning professor-nondisabled student interaction. Appropriateness was rated according to a scoring manual developed by our team (Fichten, Bourdon, Creti, Amsel, & Martos, 1986).

Results indicate that (1) students with disabilities felt that it is less acceptable to request or be accorded special consideration than did nondisabled students, and (2) that they felt that it is less appropriate for professors to single out a student for special attention. Data reported in the literature show that professors are quite likely to make adjustments to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities (Leyser, 1989; Matthews, Anderson, & Skolnick, 1987). consistent with such findings, our results indicate that professors believed that it is more appropriate to accord special consideration to a student with a disability than to a nondisabled student. However, they, too, felt that it was less acceptable for a professor to single out a student who has a disability for special attention.

Because students with disabilities also evaluated special treatment as less appropriate than their professors believed to be the case, it appears that it is the students with disabilities, rather than their professors, who misperceive the appropriateness of requesting or accepting special considerations.

### **Tips for College Students with Disabilities and Their Professors**

The findings of our studies suggested that both college students with disabilities as well as the professors who teach them need to be educated about what are appropriate and effective ways to relate to one another. Before making concrete recommendations about effective behaviors, we conducted an

additional examination of behaviors which promote effective teaching and learning and facilitate problem-free interaction between professors and their students with disabilities (Fichten, Goodrick, Tagalakis, Amsel, & Libman, 1990); 75 college students with disabilities were interviewed, along with 57 professors who were nominated by one or more of these students as one of their outstanding teachers. On a structured interview, participants indicated their feelings and actions in a variety of commonly occurring situations where professors and students with disabilities might interact. They also indicated their thoughts and feelings before and after taking action and rated the effectiveness of each of their behaviors.

Students' perspective. The results indicate that, in general, students with disabilities were reasonably comfortable with their professors. However, when they encountered problems or when they had concerns related to their disabilities which required approaching their professors, students were less comfortable and experienced a variety of negative thoughts. The most distressing situations for students occurred when they were failing and when students and professors were having difficulty communicating because they could not understand each other's speech.

Students generally felt good when they were able to handle problems themselves. When they believed it necessary to talk to professors about difficulties with course requirements, however, they frequently felt inadequate and different from other students. They wondered whether they belonged in the course. Most commonly, they had a variety of concerns about their professors - whether they would be helpful and able to treat the student fairly, what the professor thought about the student and the disability, and whether the student would burden the professor. Students also worried that professors would think that they were lazy or stupid and that they were not trying hard enough. For many students, especially for those with non-visible impairments, the issue of credibility also arose.

Nevertheless, most students knew that it is a good idea to talk to their professors and they sometimes encouraged themselves by thinking about how much better they would feel afterwards. In fact, students did feel better after talking to their professors. They reported feeling more at ease with professors and discovered that many of their initial concerns were unfounded. They believed that having initiated dialogue was the appropriate action, talking to professors was helpful, problems were resolved, and they were better able to succeed in the course. It appears that students' apprehensions about approaching their professors were not justified and that the experience of talking to professors was not as negative as students had expected.

Student responses indicate that when trying to resolve problems by oneself was unsuccessful, talking to professors, especially after having thought about what to say, was an effective way of coping with course concerns. Talking to professors early, justifying the need for special consideration, and making concrete and specific requests were all considered effective ways of behaving. Making suggestions about how problems could be solved and putting professors at ease were also rated as effective strategies. Doing nothing was seen as the least effective option available to students.

Students with disabilities also made numerous valuable suggestions in the following categories.

- what to do during the first few days of classes
- talking to professors outside of class time about course materials, problems, and special

consideration

- what to do when a student needs help from classmates
- when a student notices that the professor is uncomfortable using everyday words related to the disability such as "see" "hear" and "walk"
- when a student is failing because the disability makes course requirements impossible to meet
- when the final grade is a failure but this is not due to the student's disability

Too numerous to list here, these suggestions were summarized in a guide for students with disabilities (Fichten, Goodrick, Amsel, & Libman, 1989a). Single copies of this manual are available free of charge from the authors in regular or large print, on audiotape or on IBM or Macintosh diskette.

Professors' perspective. The data show that a key characteristic of professors nominated as outstanding by their students with disabilities was their perceived comfort in student-professor interactions. As was the case for students, professors were least comfortable when a student was failing and when students and professors had difficulty communicating with each other because they did not understand what the other was saying.

Professors in our sample reported few negative thoughts about their students or about making adjustments to their teaching and evaluation methods. Professors preferred that contact be initiated by students rather than by themselves and they were more comfortable when students initiated. Nevertheless, only a few professors (11%) waited indefinitely for students to approach them. The rest initiated contact if students had not done so, especially when they foresaw problems. This is in marked contrast with our data on "average" professors who were found to be particularly reluctant to approach students with disabilities (Amsel & Fichten, 1990). Not surprisingly, professors in the "outstanding" sample were quite satisfied with their actions and felt quite positive about their efforts to teach students with disabilities effectively.

Professors considered outstanding by their students with disabilities took an active role by engaging their students in dialogue, discussing how problems could be resolved, and talking about how they might help students to succeed. Perceived effective strategies included keeping in touch with students and making accommodations in teaching style as well as in evaluation techniques. Passing students merely because they tried hard or because the professor felt sorry for them was not considered effective.

**Professors also made numerous valuable suggestions in the following categories.**

- when professors find out about the presence of a student with a disability in one of their classes
- if a student is often absent
- using everyday words related to a disability
- when a student with a disability is failing
- teaching students with different disabilities

Too numerous and detailed to describe here, these suggestions are summarized in a guide for professors

(Fichten, Goodrick, Amsel, & Libman, 1989b); single copies of this guide are available free of charge from the authors. The manual of recommendations, based on this research, provides concrete suggestions about what kinds of behaviors are likely to enhance the teaching-learning process.

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## Conclusions

The late 1990s are likely to be characterized by positive trends in the attitudes of various groups in post-secondary education. Changes in the United States brought about by the far-reaching Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) are likely to be reflected in Canada. This makes timely a number of interesting and promising avenues of research and practice. As I suggested several years ago (Fichten, 1988), these include: investigation of attitudes toward professors, college professionals and staff who have a disability, examination of interpersonal behaviors of various groups both before and after attitude change attempts, and the study of the types of contact and experience which facilitate interaction between students with a disability and their non-disabled peers and professors.

Both the fundamental and applied aspects of our studies have been published in scholarly journals and books and our findings have been presented at numerous conferences. But having conducted the research and having shared the findings with the scholarly community are not sufficient. Therefore, we have prepared non-technical reports of the findings for lay persons, have given talks to concerned community groups, and have compiled and disseminated, free of charge, the two award-winning guides which are based on our research and which are designed to help students with disabilities and their professors to better relate to each other (Fichten, Goodrick, Amsel, & Libman, 1989a, 1989b). We continue to share our findings on professor and student interactions with those who educate college students, with rehabilitation professionals (Fichten, 1985a, 1985b, in press; Wolforth & Fichten, 1991), with college students who have disabilities (Fichten, 1994), as well as with the larger disability community (Fichten, 1995). Our current work, however, is concerned primarily with developing and evaluating a model of interaction strain (Fichten, Robillard, & Sabourin, 1994) and with investigating the effects of a variety of techniques, proposed by the model, to minimize discomfort and interaction difficulties (Fichten, Lennox, Robillard, Wright, & Amsel, in press).

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