

**UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS IN A  
POSTSECONDARY SETTING**

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UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS IN A POSTSECONDARY  
SETTING

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this project to my family, friends, and colleagues for their endless support in my academic and professional endeavours. This journey required unconditional love, encouragement and, at times, forgiveness. I would not have been able to complete this without them standing beside me.

## Abstract

The overall purpose of my Masters of Counselling project was to present an overview of postsecondary disability accommodation themes and an insider's guide for providing these services. With an influx of students with documented disabilities attending postsecondary, institutional faculty and staff are required to accommodate individual student needs to enhance the students' academic success. There is a level of ambiguity when it comes to providing accommodations for students with disabilities, and there is often a discrepancy in understanding the need for, and responsibilities of, service provision at the faculty level (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Therefore, this project addresses the knowledge gap, provides insights into the nature of disabilities, and provides solid recommendations for faculty to use when accommodating their students. This project is split into two distinct parts: first a literature review intended to provide an overview for the theoretical foundation of the disability accommodation world; and second, a manuscript focused on *An Insider's Guide for Supporting Postsecondary Students with Disabilities* to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal for the targeted audience to access. It is anticipated that this project will provide both an applied and theoretical basis for understanding disability accommodation in postsecondary and will minimize the ambiguity of this required service for faculty members.

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## **Chapter 1: Overview**

My intentions for this chapter are to identify my expertise in the field of disability accommodation, clarify the intent of this project, outline the rationale for addressing the ambiguity in postsecondary disability accommodation, highlight and define common terms, and describe the format of this project. The chapter ends with a summary and an introduction to the following chapter.

### **My Background**

My intention for this Masters of Counselling project is to provide faculty members with an insider's perspective on providing disability accommodations at a postsecondary level. For the past 8 years, I have worked in disability support administration at the University of Lethbridge and have many insights on accommodations that I wish to share with faculty in order to minimize their apprehensions when dealing with their students with disabilities. Along with my work with students with disabilities at a postsecondary institution, I also work in collaboration with my colleagues across Alberta in the hopes of enhancing provincial disability accommodation standards and practices. I am a trained government-funding agent who works with students to obtain provincial disability grants for study support. My extensive work in postsecondary disability accommodations led to my nomination and selection for the University of Lethbridge's Presidents Award for Service Excellence, for my commitment to disability support. Furthermore, I have concurrently worked in the developmental disability support world for over 12 years as a frontline worker, supported home provider, coach, mentor, advocate, and friend. My work within community disability support has landed me two Dr. Gary McPherson Awards for disability

leadership, which recognizes individuals who have demonstrated outstanding leadership in the area of disability support and advocacy.

### **Project Focus and Rationale**

For my project, I chose to focus on the rationale for disability accommodations in postsecondary institutions, basic thematic literature, and experiential perspectives of disability accommodations in postsecondary. I structured my project around the main objective of educating faculty on general literature themes surrounding disability accommodation, reasons why accommodation is required, and methods for accommodating students in a meaningful way based on my disability support perspective. I chose to target the ambiguity of disability services by enhancing clarity about disability accommodation to minimize faculty concerns. As result, I posit that faculty members stand to help their students more efficiently and effectively. Thus, I will provide an overview for the theoretical foundation of the disability accommodation world with the overall goal to summarize my work into a manuscript as a way to bridge the gap between disability support services and faculty members.

The legislated responsibility of each postsecondary institution is to provide reasonable services that assist the student in minimizing their disability barriers and achieving equitable access to education (Alberta Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2010). With postsecondary education becoming increasingly accessible to learners of all abilities, there has been an influx of students with diagnosed disabilities or mental health conditions attending postsecondary institutions. According to Harrison and Wolforth (2012), 4% of Canadian students are registered for disability supports at a postsecondary accommodation centre. Disabilities provide difficult barriers for learning and require

specific supports to minimize the impairment and to improve the student's chance of success.

The responsibility for providing an accommodation is ideally split between faculty members and disability support services; a discrepancy often exists between understanding the need for, and responsibilities of, service provision at the faculty level (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Students require accommodations in order to equitably attend to their studies; therefore, faculty members should be well versed in disability service requirements and should demonstrate competence in broaching the variability of accommodations with their students. My intent in this project is to bridge theory and application from the perspective of a disability support specialist to facilitate a confluence of understanding, confidence, and motivation for faculty members who are assisting their students with documented disabilities.

### **Glossary**

*Accessibility* refers to the minimization of physical and nonphysical barriers that could potentially inhibit an individual's ability to engage in educational opportunities (Banerjee, Madaus, & Gelbar, 2014; Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Accommodation* refers to the act of implementing supports or technologies to bridge the gap between disability and student success; institutions are mandated to provide these services to a threshold of undue hardship in order to remove barriers to a student's access to education according to human rights legislations (Banerjee et al., 2014; Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Russell & Demko, 2005; Rath & Royer, 2002).

*Amplification System* refers to a digital device that aids in auditory amplification of a lecture or speech (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Assistive Technology* refers to software or hardware technology used to enhance a student's learning strength and minimize the impact of their disability or weakness (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Biopsychosocial Model* refers to a model of diagnoses used by professionals and takes into consideration, biological, psychological and social or environmental factors of an individual's symptoms and impacts, when making a diagnosis (Banerjee et al., 2014).

*Disability* refers to impairment that limit an individual's ability to participate in everyday society. The Supreme Court of Canada has established that a disability may be the result of a physical limitation, an ailment, a perceived limitation or a combination of all these factors (Russell & Demko, 2005). Furthermore, in Alberta, physical and mental disabilities include but are not limited to: hearing, mobility, psychological, psychiatric, vision, learning, neurological, chronic health, and developmental disabilities (AHRC, 2010).

*Disability Documentation* refers to a letter or assessment provided by a medical doctor, psychiatrist, or psychologist resulting in a formal diagnosis, an outline of the impact of diagnoses on academics, and a set of recommendations for accommodation supports unique to the student and their needs (Banerjee et al., 2014; Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Discrimination* refers to prejudicial philosophies, treatment, or actions towards another based on their age, gender, ethnicity, or ability (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Extra-Time Accommodation* refers to the additional time given to a student who requires longer exam writing opportunities typically at time and a half or double the regular class time allotment (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Intellectual Ability-Achievement Model* refers to the identification of a discrepancy between a student's actual grade level and his or her achievement level as indicated by grade-equivalent scores (Proctor & Prevatt, 2003).

*Intra-Individual Model* refers to procedures that explores a student's academic strengths and weaknesses and incorporates cognitive abilities that could be associated to the individual's learning difficulties (Proctor & Prevatt, 2003).

*Learning Disability* refers to a number of disorders that can affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding, or use of verbal or nonverbal information; these disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada [LDAC], 2015).

*Learning Strategist* refers to a peer support individual who provides learning support training for time management, study skills, and learning enhancement tools (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Notetaker* refers to an individual who takes notes for a student with visual, processing, motor, or visual-motor disabilities (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Perceptual reasoning* refers to the ability to make connections between nonverbal stimuli (images), develop mental images, and to intuitively solve problems accordingly (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003).

*Preferential Seating* refers to a specified spot in the front or centre of a classroom for optimal viewing or listening opportunities (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Processing Speed* refers to the ability to process mental information in an efficient and error-free way (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003).

*Psychoeducational Assessment* refers to a set of psychological tests that measure both cognitive ability and academic skills along with making determinations on weaknesses and strengths related to potential learning disabilities (Banerjee et al., 2014).

*Recording Device* refers to a digital instrument that records audio or visual information and is used as a study aid for information reinforcement (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Separate and Private Accommodation* refers to the provision of a distraction-free area for exam writing that is separate and private from the normal class (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Social Responsibility Model* refers to a model of support provision that accepts individuals for support without formal diagnoses or documentation of a condition that hinders their learning ability and on the philosophy that it is important to support everyone succeed (Jung, 2003).

*Speech-to-Text* refers to software that converts user-controlled verbal dictations into a digital text format (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Stigmatization* refers to the description or identification of an individual based on a perceived negative difference (Jung, 2003).

*Text-to-Speech* refers to software that converts written content to an auditory format so that the user can hear what he or she is reading (Russell & Demko, 2005).

*Underachievement Model* refers to an approach that differentiates academic weakness from more significant physical, mental or emotional issues existing within the student that present as an academic mismatch (Proctor & Prevatt, 2003).

*Universal Design* refers to the process of creating barrier-free environments, course materials, or products accessible to all people, including those with or without disabilities (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003)

*Verbal comprehension* refers to the ability for an individual to reason with words, as well as learn and process incoming verbal information (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003).

*Working memory* refers to a short-term memory process that involves holding, processing, and manipulating information (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003).

## **Project Format**

This project consists of two parts. The first part includes six chapters. This chapter outlined and introduced the project. Chapter 2 details the research methodology used in developing this project. Chapter 3 reviews and discuss the literature on postsecondary disability accommodation. Chapter 4 provides an overview of *An Insider's Guide for Supporting Postsecondary Students with Disabilities*, which is the manuscript provided in the second part. Chapter 5 highlights relevant accommodations used for specific disabilities. Chapter 6 discusses implications for faculty and students, outlines the strengths and limitations of this project, and identifies areas for future research.

The second part of this project is a commentary manuscript, *An Insider's Guide for Supporting Postsecondary Students with Disabilities* that will be submitted to a peer-



reviewed journal in order to present information to faculty on disability accommodations. The stylist nature of the manuscript will be somewhat informal by offering a commentary of the “dos,” “don’ts,” and “do not worries” related to postsecondary disability accommodation. The second part of this project is located in the Appendix, as it is a stand-alone document.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined my interest in minimizing ambiguities of disability supports in postsecondary institutions for faculty members. This chapter provided preliminary evidence that supported the need for attention to the gap in understanding disability accommodations that professors have. The next chapter outlines the research methodology used in the formation of this project.

## **Chapter 2: Research Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to identify how the information used in the development of this project was acquired. This chapter identifies the search terms and databases utilized. This chapter also includes a statement of ethical conduct. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research methodology and an introduction to the following chapter.

### **Research Process**

Through a secondary analysis of postsecondary disability accommodations core subject areas, a collection of resources were used for this project's literature review. For this, University of Lethbridge library databases, Google, and Google Scholar were used. The following University of Lethbridge databases were used to locate information about postsecondary disability accommodations: PsycINFO, Academic Search Complete, Ovid, and EBSCOhost. The search terms used for postsecondary disability accommodations were as follows: disability accommodations in postsecondary, supporting students with disabilities, disabilities in postsecondary, and disability supports in postsecondary.

Additional peer-reviewed articles were obtained via Google Scholar using the search terms identified above. Review of the reference lists in these articles also identified additional resources that were accessed using one of the University of Lethbridge's library databases identified above. Based on my professional knowledge and experience and based on themes identified in my analysis of the literature, this project focused on the subjects of supporting students with disabilities in a postsecondary setting, legislation on disability accommodations, benefits and barriers of

accommodation, perceptions of disability accommodation, and accommodation processes.

### **Ethical Conduct Statement**

All sections of this project adhere to the American Psychological Association's (2010) standards for grammar and sentence construction. In addition, at all times during the creation of this project, I remained conscious of the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* (Canadian Psychological Association, 2000). I altered the format of the material in the Appendix to comply with the guidelines and expectations of the journal to which the project's manuscript will be submitted.

### **Chapter Summary**

I created this project to provide faculty members real-world insights about providing their students with disabilities accommodations. In the following chapter, a thorough literature review was completed pertaining to postsecondary disability accommodations. The first purpose of the literature review was to highlight the need for the legal requirements and overall benefit of providing disability accommodations. The second purpose was to provide a theoretical foundation for my insider tips on disability accommodations found in the Appendix of this project. The next chapter includes a comprehensive literature review on disability accommodations in postsecondary education.

### **Chapter 3: Overview of Disability Accommodations in a Postsecondary Setting**

My intention for this chapter is to review and discuss the literature on disability accommodations in postsecondary education to provide foundational information and highlight theoretical perspectives of this expansive field. In this chapter, I begin by defining accessibility and disability accommodations. Furthermore, I review diagnostic processes and recommendation styles. This is followed by an overview of research findings pertaining to the legislative requirements of accommodation. Next, benefits and barriers of disability accommodations are discussed. Also, perceptions, trends, and cautions of disability accommodation are addressed. The chapter ends with a summary and an introduction to the following chapter.

#### **Understanding Accessibility and Accommodations**

In the past decade, accessibility has become paramount in the provision of services to the public. As a result, the availability of basic services to all individuals is now a human rights standard. Moreover, access to education and services that support an individual's academic path is emphasized in legislation and in academic literature as being a requirement for recruitment, retention, and success of students with learning disabilities (Banerjee et al., 2014; Gormley, Hughes, Block, & Lendman, 2005; Jung, 2003; Lindstrom, Nelson, & Foels, 2013). Accessibility is a mindset of openness for individuals to participate without barriers and can be attributed to offering services in multiple modalities or with universal design principles in mind (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003). Universal design and accessibility are general concepts or philosophies that are applied at an institutional level, which makes attendance and

participation easier for all, but does not account for individual needs (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Rath & Royer, 2002; Russell & Demko, 2005).

Accommodations, however, account for individual learning needs and are specific to disability type and the individual. Accommodation is the implementation of supports such as exam accommodations, assistive technologies, or specialized support staff such as tutors, learning strategists, or note takers to minimize a student's impairment and promote equitable learning opportunities (Jung, 2003; Rath & Royer, 2002; Russell & Demko, 2005). Accommodation does not intend to tarnish academic integrity or diminish learning outcomes, as there is no modification of coursework or standards; rather, there is the addition of supports that bridge the gap between disability and applied skill demonstration (Rath & Royer, 2002; Russell & Demko, 2005).

Furthermore, accommodation is the application of a wide range of recommended supports that are specifically tailored to the individual and his or her particular learning impairment. Nevertheless, limitations exist in the provision of accommodations as the institution and service provider are only required to support a student up until the threshold of undue hardship; this caveat is connected to the human rights legislation and is discussed in subsequent sections (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Russell & Demko, 2005).

Rath and Royer (2002) identified universal design as the process of changing a school's learning philosophies, whereas accommodation is a process focused on changing the student's skills or approach. An example of this would be for a school to implement text-to-speech capability within its online learning systems for all of its students, not just for those students with visual reading difficulties. Another example of universal design

would be a professor giving a lecture and providing notes to follow. Furthermore, Rath and Royer (2002) noted that, individually, accommodations and universal design are not sufficient, as they are more beneficial to the learner when they work together in concert. This would best be exemplified by a student being able to access text-to-speech technology within a class and also by a professor using lecture styles that are more auditory focused than visual (e.g., Powerpoint slides, handouts). Research literature further emphasized this two-pronged approach where the school will be adaptable to the masses, but also provide personalized services that meet the needs of the individual student (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Rath & Royer, 2002; Russell & Demko, 2005).

Although accessibility or universal design is for everyone and can substantially benefit those with disabilities, the acquisition of specific accommodation requires the individual learner to connect with an institution's disability services with his or her diagnostic information. The next section highlights diagnosis and the recommendation process in further detail.

### **Diagnosis and Documentation**

Accessing disability accommodations typically requires documentation, provided by a psychologist, psychiatrist, medical doctor, or specialist, to verify the student's individual diagnosis as well as to highlight suitable accommodations that would be helpful in accommodating his or her specific learning needs. The literature revealed a common theme of documentation requirements based upon a biopsychosocial model of practice. The biopsychosocial model is best characterized as an assess, diagnose, recommend, and implement process based on, ideally, biological, psychological, and

social characteristics of the student (Banerjee et al., 2014; Gormley et al., 2005; Harrison, Larochette, & Nichols, 2007; Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Klassen, 2002; Lindstrom et al., 2015; Russell & Demko, 2005). Documentation is often required to validate a student's needs and allow for a targeted approach to supports. The criticism with the biopsychosocial model is that it requires assessment and diagnoses; this approach ultimately applies a label to the learner, which in turn holds a history of criticism due to the potential of stigmatization and the often high cost of assessment practices to the learner (Gormley et al., 2005; Harrison et al., 2007; Klassen, 2002; Lindstrom et al., 2015; Jung, 2003).

A less common theme, known as the social responsibility model, promotes accommodation without a diagnosis (Gormley et al., 2005; Jung, 2003; Klassen, 2002). The difficulty with the social responsibility model is that it does not account for institutional resource limitations, and there is no standardized assessment used to determine specific needs or justify why supports would be helpful (Gormley et al., 2005; Jung, 2003; Klassen, 2002). Within the literature on institutional practices, there tends to be a focus on the biopsychosocial model of documentation in order to activate disability accommodations; however, there are cases where students who do not have documentation available may be supported from a social responsibility perspective (Gormley et al., 2005; Jung, 2003; Klassen 2002; Lindstrom et al., 2015; Russell & Demko, 2005).

The assessment models and final diagnostic documentation differ from professional to professional: psychologists provide psychoeducational assessments; psychiatrists provide psychiatric letters; and doctors or specialists provide medical letters

documenting diagnoses, impact on education, and recommendations for support (Harrison et al., 2007; Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Lindstrom et al. 2015; Russell & Demko, 2005). Some institutions will accept social worker, counsellor, or various health care provider letters granted that the professionals are clear on the individual's learning needs and that the documentation reflects specific recommendations for support (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Russell & Demko, 2005).

Alternatively, a controversial model of disability diagnoses known as the response to intervention (RTI) model is also accepted in some levels of education. The RTI model was introduced as an alternative to the objective psychological testing approach for determining disabilities. This approach allows teachers and parents to make diagnoses of a learning disability on a student without the use of standardized testing (Batsche, Kavale, & Kovalski, 2006). The RTI approach is common in elementary, junior and senior high schools that do not have access or resources to provide students with psychological testing (Batsche et al., 2006). This model has limitations that include: increased false-positive diagnoses; lack of objectivity; poor validity and reliability; and puts diagnostic ability into the teacher or parents hands (Batsche et al., 2006). At a postsecondary level, there would be controversy if a faculty member was required to provide primary academic interventions based on perceived academic weakness; consequent monitoring of those interventions for efficacy and diagnostic reporting responsibilities for their students, therefore it is typically avoided at a postsecondary level.

**Psychological documentation.** The most common learning disability documentation is in the form of a psychoeducational assessment (Harrison et al., 2007;



Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Klassen, 2002; Lindstrom et al., 2015; Russell & Demko, 2005). Ideally a registered psychologist who specializes in assessment will conduct cognitive testing and applied academic skill assessments to identify gaps between cognitive abilities and learning skills (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003). Based on the level of discrepancy between the cognitive ability and impaired learning skills of an individual, a specific learning disorder can be diagnosed (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003). The discrepancy model is closely associated with the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, although other criteria such as symptoms, chronological age, differential diagnosis and impairment severity can be used for diagnosis (Fiedorowicz, Craig, Phillips, Price, & Bullivant, 2015).

Psychologists will typically use standardized tests, such as the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale or Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Fifth Edition, to assess cognitive ability including working memory, processing speed, verbal comprehension, perceptual reasoning, and general knowledge (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003). Psychologists then add an academic skill test such as the Woodcock-Johnson Test of Achievement IV or the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT-III) to identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses and an ability achievement discrepancy analysis (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003). The result of the two is a psychoeducational assessment that specifically identifies learning disabilities and attributed recommendations for support.

A cross-section of literature highlighted discrepancies in testing, diagnoses, report writing, and recommendation practices. The discrepancies included the following:

standardized test measures used, a comprehensive nature of psychoeducational assessment document, and accommodation matching for disability need (Banerjee et al., 2014; Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Klassen, 2002; Lindstrom et al., 2015; Russell & Demko, 2005). Furthermore, Klassen (2002) highlighted a shift in using IQ testing as he posited that skill testing alone was enough to determine significant learning issues. That being said, the standard model across Canada is the discrepancy model between IQ and academic skills (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003).

**Medical documentation.** Medical documentation is widely accepted in postsecondary support services. Medical documentation is provided by a family physician, specialist, or psychiatrist and is predominantly based on a medical issue that impairs a student's ability to attend a postsecondary institution. Depending on the institutional practices for intake, provincial documentation requirements, and detailed nature of documentation, most doctor notes will suffice for supports. One of the most common doctor's notes for disability support in postsecondary education is a diagnosis and recommendation for support of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, also known as ADHD (Weyandt & DuPaul, 2006).

An issue with doctors' notes is that they are often very brief and do not contain the amount of information that a psychoeducational assessment from a psychologist would. The limited nature of the doctor's note often leaves the bulk of the learning plan development on the disability service provider (Weyandt & DuPaul, 2006). Regardless of the level of detail, a medical diagnosis is a credible and suitable piece of documentation. Now that documentation and diagnoses have been highlighted, in the next section I

explore legislation and the way that it informs disability support in a postsecondary setting.

### **Legislation**

Not all legislation is created equally; the same can be said for disability accommodations. In the United States, federal legislation dictates the requirement for schools to accommodate students with disabilities, whereas in Canada federal legislation supports the individual provinces in determining their own human rights laws (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Klassen, 2002; Jung, 2003; Russell & Demko, 2005). According to Harrison and Wolforth (2012), the Canadian Human Rights Act ensures that Canadians with disabilities are not interfered with when it comes to equal participation or opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and ability in an educational setting. Furthermore, the individual provinces maintain their own human rights codes that inform provincial practices on equality, equity, access, and accommodation.

In the province of Alberta, the Alberta Human Rights Commission oversees the Alberta Human Rights Act (AHR Act). The AHR Act (RSA 2000) determines that no person shall

1. deny to any person or class of persons any goods, services, accommodation, or facilities customarily available to the public, or
2. discriminate against any person or class of persons with respect to any goods, services, accommodation or facilities that are customarily available to the public.

The Alberta Human Rights Act protects regardless of the race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, physical disability, mental disability, ancestry, place of origin, marital status,

source of income, family status, or sexual orientation of that person or class of persons or of any other person or class of persons (AHRC, 2010).

Disability definitional issues are prominent across the literature, highlighting slight variations from country to country, state to state, and even province to province (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Klassen, 2002; Lindstrom et al., 2015; Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001). Though definitions vary slightly, the philosophies and principles supporting the definition remain consistent and are reinforced within individual legislations to protect those who require accommodations. In Alberta, physical and mental disabilities include, but are not limited to, hearing, mobility, psychological, psychiatric, vision, learning, neurological, chronic health, and developmental disabilities (AHRC, 2010). Furthermore, illnesses that are transitory may also be considered based on the chronic nature, frequency, severity, and impact (AHRC, 2010). Canadian federal and provincial legislation provide common protection for disabled individuals and with generalized definitions, which makes accommodation and access much easier to provide (Boyko & Chaplin, 2012; Klassen 2002).

The Duty to Accommodate falls under the Alberta Human Rights Act (RSA 2000), a legislation created to protect Albertans against discrimination (AHRC, 2010). It is a primacy legislation, which means it will supersede any other legislation that conflicts with it. Protected grounds under this legislation include mental and physical disabilities and apply to goods, services, accommodation, or facilities, all of which would affect postsecondary education (AHRC, 2010). Furthermore, the Duty to Accommodate highlights the legal duty to accommodate the aforementioned protected grounds of

disabilities within an educational setting up until the point of undue hardship (AHRC, 2010).

Undue hardship occurs if accommodation provision has a significant impact on the accommodation provider. The protected grounds may include the following: financial cost, disruption of operation, impact on others morale, substantial interference with the rights of others, or health and safety concerns (AHRC, 2010). That being said, alternative accommodations may be employed as long as they are reasonable and benefit the individual. The legal implications can be severe for organizations that do not accommodate individuals under protected human rights grounds, including financial fines, mandatory organizational training, or letters of apology (AHRC, 2015). For those that do, however, there are great benefits of accommodation. The next section highlights these improvements.

### **Benefits of Learning Disability Accommodation**

Students with disabilities enter the postsecondary world with many challenges; the provision of accommodation aids in the minimization of these challenges and promotes academic success and well-being. Several benefits have been identified across the literature for students receiving disability accommodations. The following are three key benefits: increased academic output, including improved grades; increased confidence and motivation; and increased retention of students with disabilities with a greater chance of completion (Erten, 2011; Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004; Kim & Lee, 2015; Trammel, 2003).

For students, accommodations, if appropriate, have been shown to support the individual learner in a way that positively affects his or her academic output and overall

grade point average (Kim & Lee, 2015, Trammel, 2003). Kim and Lee (2015) conducted a quantitative research study of over 1200 students registered for accommodations. The study investigated the effects of accommodation on productivity and grade point average (Kim & Lee, 2015). The outcome highlighted a substantial influence: accommodations—such as extra time, distraction controlled areas, and assistive technologies—minimize the disability impact, which allows the student to demonstrate his or her true abilities, which in turn leads to better productivity and increased grades (Kim & Lee, 2015).

Similarly, Trammel (2003) identified 61 students with both ADHD and learning disabilities. They demonstrated increased grades and academic productivity when using accommodations for testing in a postsecondary setting versus when not using accommodations (Trammel, 2003). Though both studies quantitatively supported the benefit of increased grades for students using accommodations, Trammel noted that additional quantitative studies should be conducted in the future.

Also, as a result of accommodation provision and the improvement of grades and productivity, literature has identified that students exhibit improved self-esteem and enhanced motivation for continuation (Erten, 2011; Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004). Graham-Smith and Lafayette (2004) conducted a qualitative study of 71 postsecondary students with disability accommodations. The study highlighted that by using accommodations, students experienced an increase in self-esteem and comfort in the postsecondary environment and improved motivation for their studies (Trammel, 2003). Also, a qualitative study by Erten (2011) produced a similar result that identified the value of accommodations in enhancing student confidence and minimizing attitudinal barriers for both students and faculty, which makes for a comfortable study experience.

Furthermore, there are benefits to the institution for providing accommodations. These include sustained retention rates and higher completion numbers (Erten, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2015; Tagayuna, Stodden, Chang, Zeleznik, & Whelley, 2005). Both benefits, to student and to institution, make a strong case for the provision of disability accommodation in education. A goal of postsecondary institutions is to attract, retain, and graduate students. Those students who have disabilities represent a strong consumer base; therefore, institutions that provide adequate support that promote successful student outcomes will benefit (Belch, 2004; Erten, 2011; Kim & Lee, 2015; Tagayuna et al., 2001; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Accessibility of services is a primary point of recruitment for prospective students; postsecondary institutions that demonstrate a strong record of providing comprehensive support service are often highly sought after (Belch, 2004; Getzel, 2008; Tagayuna et al., 2005; Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

A reputation of accessibility and student-focused learning environments can be helpful to a school's enrolment numbers and positively affect the organization's financial stability (Belch, 2004; Getzel, 2008; Tagayuna et al., 2005; Wild & Ebbers, 2002). Schools that ultimately support their students in achieving success will be successful organizationally; however, barriers will present themselves in this pursuit.

### **Barriers to Learning Disability Accommodation**

Across the literature, many barriers that prevent disability accommodation in postsecondary institutions are highlighted. The most common barriers include the following: stigmatization issues (Harrison et al., 2007; Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010; Russell & Demko, 2005); poor awareness of services (Gil, 2007; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Mull et al., 2001; Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden,

Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001); lack of professional understanding with professors or disability staff (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Marshak et al., 2010; Russell & Demko, 2005); funding complexities (Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden et al., 2001); undiagnosed issues (Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden et al., 2001); and institutional resource challenges (Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden et al., 2001).

A primary barrier for the access of supports for students with disabilities is the perceived stigmatization or issues with self-identification that may result in their access of accommodations (Harrison et al., 2007; Russell & Demko, 2005). Marshak et al. (2010) highlighted the identity challenges faced by students who have dealt with stigmatization or negative experiences in their previous academic settings. According to Marshak et al. (2010), these students tend to avoid the reality of their limitation and prefer to challenge their self-sufficiency to avoid being singled out, or they fear resentment of others. When students avoid supports for these reasons, they significantly hinder their chances of success and create additional challenges as a result.

Another barrier is the lack of transition training for students coming from high school, transferring from another institution, or receiving a new diagnosis (Gil, 2007; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Mull et al., 2001; Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden et al., 2001). Without the awareness of available services, many students with documented disabilities fail to seek out services to self-identify, which leaves them without the recommended accommodations that they require (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Mull et al., 2001; Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden et al., 2001).



Furthermore, once a student registers, he or she can face barriers related to the level of expertise demonstrated by both faculty members and the disability service staff. Due to the variable nature of learning disabilities, students must be treated on an individual basis; not all faculty or staff will be fully knowledgeable about the learning requirements of the student or the ways to creatively adapt the learning environment to the student's particular needs (Barnard-Brak et al., 2020; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Marshak et al., 2010; Russell & Demko, 2005). Without adequate knowledge, support staff coordinators may not be benefitting the students as much as they could be.

Also, due to the nature of some accommodative supports, complex funding requirements may cause issues for both students and staff. The process of applying for such funds can be difficult as personal finances are often considered, and long wait periods for funding disbursement can provide a barrier to accessing required supports (Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden et al., 2001). Further to the complex funding issue, often times students may not be diagnosed with learning disabilities, and they require costly testing to be assisted, which is reliant on funding access (Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden et al., 2001).

Resource limitations impact accommodation delivery as institutions are required to provide a minimum level of services to support students with disabilities; however, this comes at a high cost (Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden et al., 2001). With growing numbers of students enrolling with learning disabilities, institutions must be responsive to the support service needs; however, a distinct source of funding is not always available to draw from (Russell & Demko, 2005; Stodden et al., 2001). This limitation places strain on both disability support offices and the students. Although there are many barriers to

accommodation, there are also many alternatives or ways to navigate these. Benefits and barriers lead to perceptions being formed with students and faculty; the next section addresses these beliefs.

### **Perceptions of Learning Disability Accommodation**

A confluence of legislative, academic, and social changes has opened the door to students with disabilities to attend postsecondary at a higher rate than in the past, and there are often mixed perceptions and a sense of ambiguity related to this topic (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011). Students seeking supports may or may not be met with welcoming support from institutional staff and faculty. This section explores the topics of student and professor perceptions of disability accommodation in postsecondary.

**Student perceptions.** Students with learning disabilities can face a mixed reception when requesting their recommended supports from faculty and staff (Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011). Across the research literature, deconstructing personal learning barriers is often at the centre of the personal challenges faced by a student with learning disabilities in postsecondary. These challenges include stigmatization, discrimination, high testing costs, limited awareness of services, and personal reluctance (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Mullins & Preyde, 2013).

Surprisingly, disability policy and institutional operating standards are rarely informed by student voices (Denhart, 2008, Erten 2008; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). This lack of consultation further leads to the marginalization of students with disabilities as policies are not developed with the user in mind, which can lead to missed opportunities

for proper support. That being said, the reviewed literature highlighted that voices of students with learning disabilities, their perceived importance of their accommodations, and the positive impact of the accommodations (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Furthermore, incidences of humiliation and harassment occur between students with disabilities and their faculty or peers (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Perceptions of being intellectually inferior, incompetent, lacking effort, or attempting to use an unfair advantage when using accommodations are projected onto the student.

Furthermore, awareness of support services was noted in the literature as being a major problem for diagnosed and undiagnosed students with learning disabilities with regard to accessing suitable supports (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). It was also cited that institutions may not be doing enough to broadcast information on support services for those who may need to find it. Also, when it comes to assessment of disabilities, some research has identified that students perceive the cost of assessment as being a major deterrent for seeking out supports (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Mullins & Preyde, 2013).

Lastly, researchers reported that students' personal reluctance to self-identify is the result of preconceived fears of judgement and/or past negative experiences with receiving disability supports (Denhart, 2008; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Perceptions of being academically inferior, incapable, or lazy or of attempting to use an unfair

advantage when using accommodations are all contributing factors in students' reluctance to self-identify (Denhart, 2008). Along with reluctance to seek support, mental health concerns can also be a secondary issue as these same students may have been subject to bullying or exclusion from social participation in grade school, which has shown to increase problems with depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem in students with learning disabilities (Denhart, 2008, Mullins & Preyde, 2013).

The literature circled around themes of positive and negative perceptions. Students using supports indicated that the addition of academic and social disability supports in a postsecondary settings have positive effects on confidence, self-worth, self-advocacy, and overall successful outcomes (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Faculty and staff who promote autonomy and provide appropriate levels of recommended support can enhance a student's experience and create opportunities for personal growth and academic success (Cawthon & Cole, 2010; Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). With student perceptions centred on themes related to interpersonal interactions, professor perceptions are of great importance in the provision of disability accommodation and can significantly impact the student experience.

**Professor perceptions.** Professors are a focal point in the provision of disability supports and the disability service office; they provide students with the accommodative supports that are required. Many reported that students' perceptions seem to be based in fear of the professor's judgement or lack of empathy towards their needs; therefore, professors are central to a positive accommodation experience (Cawthon & Cole, 2010;

Denhart, 2008; Erten, 2011; Hutcheon & Wolbring, 2012; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Mullins & Preyde, 2013). Nevertheless, literature on professors' perceptions of disability accommodation revealed a contrast between student perceptions and their own. In general, surveyed professors seem to have a long-standing history of perceiving disability accommodation as positive, although a need for better training on disabilities, diagnoses processes, and the accommodations are highlighted as requirements for increased involvement, sensitivity, and support of students (Murray, Lombardi, & Wren, 2011; Murray, Wren, & Keys, 2008).

Professor training is a primary area of concern in the literature; Research literature identified three areas where professors would like to enhance their knowledge base. These included understanding disabilities, how they are diagnosed, and what accommodations work best for some students (Murray, Lombardi & Wren, 2011; Murray, Wren, & Keys, 2008). Strategies that have been used to engage faculty in understanding include education sessions, newsletters, and open forum meetings with disability services. By providing education to professors about the students that they are supporting, fears of over-accommodation, equality issues, or of negative impact on learning outcomes would dissipate (Murray et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2008).

Furthermore, faculty identify limitations in space, time, and resources as a perceived detriment to the provision of good accommodations Murray et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2008). Professors are under great amounts of pressure with their instructional and research duties; this is amplified by the accommodation requirements of their students with disabilities. Many institutions have limited resources to contribute to

professors when accommodating their students, which adds further pressure and time commitments to their schedule (Murray et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2008).

A perceived gap exists between student and faculty impressions of the accommodation experience. Further education and collaboration between students, staff, and faculty could minimize this gap and create a more positive environment for all stakeholders involved. Aside from perceptions, many special themes and topics contribute to the ambiguity of accommodation. Disability services and instruction should make conscious steps towards information sharing and improving awareness on disability supports. The next section discusses a wide range of current trends pertinent to disability accommodation.

### **Special Themes in Learning Disability Accommodation**

Certain themes related to learning disability accommodation surface throughout the literature. These themes include the advances of a social responsibility model of accommodation; questions related to the model used for diagnosing learning disabilities; parental involvement; and transition issues from high school to postsecondary. This section highlights these themes and brings light to current trends in postsecondary accommodation.

**Social responsibility model.** A social responsibility model of learning disability support is presented in the literature as a proactive, inclusive way of supporting students with learning difficulties (Gormley et al., 2005; Jung, 2003; Klassen, 2002). The guiding principles of the social responsibility approach to supporting students include unconditional provision of academic accommodation without the need for formal diagnoses or documentation and the provision of accommodations for those who may

simply be struggling (Gormley et al., 2005; Jung, 2003; Klassen, 2002). The social responsibility model is rooted in accessibility principles and promotes the support of students without the need for diagnostic documentation. The benefit of this model is that students are not required to seek medical, psychological, or psychiatric appointments, which can be time consuming and quite costly (Gormley et al., 2005; Jung, 2003; Klassen, 2002). The social responsibility model is an approach that emphasizes a moral foundation for helping students succeed without questioning the reasons for requesting services.

As mentioned in previous sections, the RTI model of diagnoses is used at some levels of education. The RTI model fits within the philosophy of the social responsibility model as it does not call for a standardized test and can lead to the diagnosis of a learning disability based on teacher and parent managed interventions and feedback. Although, it may be controversial to ask postsecondary faculty to begin the subjective process of RTI, diagnoses made through the RTI approach at an elementary, middle, or high school level could be accepted in at a postsecondary level for accommodations. However, Canadian federal and provincial disability grants require diagnosis and documentation derived from a standardized process for eligibility (Russell & Demko, 2005). In Alberta, standardized psychological assessments are typically funded at a postsecondary level for most students and therefore are easily accessed. Conversely, the RTI model spawned out of the American school system in response to a lack of assessment resources, giving the responsibility to assess and diagnose to teachers and parents which reduced costs and increased access to accommodations for those who could not otherwise afford or access testing (Batsche et al., 2006). Regardless of guiding principles or controversy, the RTI

model is a viable model for those seeking assistance that may have restrictions related to resources or access to testing services.

Jung (2003) stated that if professionals move away from the biopsychosocial model when approaching disability support, in favour of the social model for supporting students, this change could contribute to the reduction of discrimination and oppression by eliminating the barriers created through documentation requirements. Interestingly, a 2016 Ontario Human Rights Commission ruling determined that a student suffering from mental health issues, which led to learning impairments, did not require documentation to receive supports (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2016). Such a human rights ruling reinforces a new trend in disability support by which students can and will be accommodated regardless of whether diagnoses or supporting documentation are provided.

**Diagnostic models.** Diagnostic models are frameworks or a set of strategies used to organize symptomology, frequency, and severity of an individual's specific medical, psychiatric, or psychological issues and to render a formal diagnosis, which informs treatment and supports. Accommodation is prefaced by the diagnosis of a learning disability and followed by subsequent recommendations for support. In the literature, the use of the simple discrepancy model of diagnosis was highly prevalent (Banerjee et al., 2014; Gormley et al., 2005; Harrison et al., 2007; Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Klassen, 2002; Lindstrom et al., 2015; Proctor & Prevatt, 2003; Russell & Demko, 2005). According to Proctor and Prevatt (2003), three other diagnostic models could be considered by practitioners for use; these include intra-individual, intellectual ability-achievement, and underachievement models. Selection of an appropriate method and



determination of criteria for learning disability diagnoses is a challenging and highly debated task as a result of conflicting methodologies and inconsistencies in defining learning disability (Proctor & Prevatt, 2003).

Proctor and Prevatt (2003) identified that the simple discrepancy model of diagnoses rendered the highest number of positive learning disability diagnoses compared to the other three models (intra-individual, intellectual ability-achievement, underachievement). Also, the research concluded that moving from a simple discrepancy model to one of the three alternatives decreased positive diagnoses of learning disabilities, but when the three alternatives were compared with each other, no significant differences in positive diagnoses were identified (Proctor & Prevatt, 2003). These findings identified the three alternatives—intra-individual, intellectual ability-achievement, and underachievement models—as being closely aligned diagnostically. Sparks and Lovett's (2009) study yielded similar results and identified the discrepancy model as being the model with most learning disability diagnoses in a sample of 378 postsecondary students with learning disabilities.

The research findings are of interest, as not all models yield the same learning disability diagnoses when assessing the same research participants, thereby furthering the degree of ambiguity and inherent subjectivity in the diagnostic process. These results do not inform a more valid or reliable diagnostic method; they only highlight the need for diagnosticians to carefully select their methods and to understand how discrepancies between models may lead to challenges in their determination.

Furthermore, a great deal of controversy exists within the diagnostic assessment community related to the discrepancy model (Fiedorowicz et al., 2015). Currently,

diagnoses based on the discrepancy model are utilized for provincial and federal grant activation. Alternative diagnoses models are accepted, but none as frequent as the discrepancy model. As standardized processes have evolved to include more applied, contextual data, the discrepancy model becomes more obsolete by industry standards (Fiedorowicz et al., 2015). I posit the best approach for diagnoses is a combined model that uses both standardized processes and alternative diagnostic modalities such as the RTI model for a more balanced, accessible approach to diagnoses. This type of implementation would require advocacy work by psychologists and disability support specialists since the government grants are activated predominantly on the discrepancy model. However, in the interest of best practices, this academic challenge to government funding models would be important to pursue.

Also, this issue expands in to government relationships with the field of psychiatry. It is well documented that psychiatry as a profession has great influence over government models of funding, including educational accommodation (Fiedorowicz et al., 2015). A minimization of the medical model of mental health diagnoses, including the highly contested discrepancy model for learning disabilities may be a shift that could break the status quo of diagnostic practices and open the diagnostic field to new advances that are more student-centered. A more holistic model that considers the demonstration of below average academic achievement, impairments in cognitive processes, and the confirmation that other causes are not attributed to learning deficits, can be useful (Fiedorowicz et al., 2015). An approach that considers multiple personal and academic factors will be an improvement to the diagnostic field and quality of diagnosis for students. Letting go of the status quo of assessment and becoming open to applied

methods that include other data will contribute to the evolution of the profession and enhance benefits to students.

**Parental involvement.** The learning disability literature highlighted that students with learning disabilities have a higher rate of parental participation than their nondisabled peers (DaDeppo, 2009; Hewitt, 2011; Kwon, Yoo, & Bingham, 2016; Scorgie, Kildal, & Wilgosh, 2010; Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002; Ungar, 2009). Although parental involvement has positive benefits, overinvolvement has drawbacks. In general, postsecondary students with parental guidance, and with a consistent level of support and encouragement, have more success than those who do not (Hewitt, 2011; Kwon et al., 2016; Ungar, 2009). A certain level of parental involvement, however, becomes a risk to the development of a student's adult independence and his or her coping and problem-solving skills (Hewitt, 2011; Kwon et al., 2016; Ungar, 2009)

A term for defining parental overinvolvement is the *helicopter parent*; however, other terms such as *snowplough parent* are also used. A helicopter parent is one who is known to hover over his or her children, ensuring that they are fine at every step of life; a snowplough parent, however, is one who clears the child's path of all challenges and forces any potential adversity out of his or her child's life (Kwon et al., 2016). Regardless of pop culture taglines that define parenting styles, parents who micromanage, make decisions, and address possible challenges can significantly impact their child's executive function and self-advocacy development (Hewitt, 2011; Kwon et al., 2016; Ungar, 2009). There is certainly a paradox when it comes to parental involvement in a child's postsecondary engagement. On one hand, there is the benefit of support, but on the other,

there is a caution against overstepping and impairing a student's personal and social development.

Ungar (2009) evaluated overprotective parenting models and concluded that such approaches are unnecessary as they do the following: deny the child the opportunity to experience healthy psychosocial development; contribute to patterns of delinquency, anxiety, and instability; impact decision-making abilities in the child; and leave the child unprepared for transitions into adulthood and independent living (p. 259). With such negative implications related to overparenting in the transition to postsecondary, students and parents are encouraged to discuss and plan the postsecondary experience to create a balance between parent involvement and student autonomy (Hewitt, 2011; Kwon et al., 2016; Ungar, 2009).

**Transition.** Observing the differences between high school and postsecondary is a critical step, specifically in the delivery of disability support services. School districts and the individual schools are responsible for identifying students with disabilities, whereas students in postsecondary are required to self-identify and provide documentation at their own discretion. Second, high schools will alter curriculum to meet the needs of the student, whereas postsecondary institutions will not alter the program or course requirements, but only provide accommodations that do not minimize the expectations. In high school, individual education plans involve parents, teachers, and the students; in postsecondary, the accommodation provider sends letters to the professors at the request of the student. Finally, in high school, parents are the advocates; in postsecondary education, the student must be responsible for his or her academic supports.

Due to the anticipated challenges when navigating the differences in disability support, several areas of skill development are encouraged for transitional success. These include the following: self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy (Dadeppo, 2009; Gill, 2007; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Milson & Hartley, 2005). All three skill areas are critical. They encompass a student's ability to be introspective, understand personal strengths and weaknesses, make pragmatic decisions regarding his or her academics, and articulate his or her personal needs (Dadeppo, 2009; Gill, 2007; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Milson & Hartley, 2005). Students who work with high school guidance counsellors, parents, friends, and others knowledgeable of their challenges and strengths will experience the development of self-awareness, self-determination, and self-advocacy skills. Student with disabilities should work on these personal skills, as they are important for long-term achievement and they give students the best opportunity for a successful transition into postsecondary.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter overviewed current literature and highlighted many themes related to supporting learning disabilities in a postsecondary setting. An exploration of common definitions, diagnosis processes, legislation, benefits and barriers to accommodation, perceptions of students and faculty, and current themes have given insight to a complex and often misunderstood world. The next chapter explores learning disabilities by providing definitions and examples and by identifying common accommodations.

## **Chapter 4: Learning Disabilities and Accommodations**

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight common learning disabilities and to provide insight into accommodations used to minimize the impact of learning disabilities on the student. By defining common learning disabilities and applied strategies, a better understanding will be created for disability accommodations. I am not sharing this information for any diagnostic purposes, but only to highlight common learning disabilities and present possible options for accommodation.

### **Learning Disabilities**

The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (2015) stated, “Learning Disabilities refer to a number of disorders which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information” (para. 1). These disorders impair the learning ability of an individual, who could otherwise demonstrate average levels of intellectual capacity (LDAC, 2015). A learning disability is present when one or more psychological processes that contribute to perceiving, thinking, remembering, or learning is impaired (LDAC, 2015). These psychological processes include the following: language processing, phonological processing, visual-spatial processing, processing speed, memory, attention, and executive functioning (British Columbia Ministry of Education [BCMoE], 2011; LDAC, 2015). A confluence of psychological processing impairment leads to the impact on specific areas of academic ability and, thus, the presentation of a specific learning disability.

### **Accommodations**

Accommodations are specifically tailored to the student’s individual needs. Many different accommodations, learning strategies, or assistive technologies may be employed

to aid the student in his or her studies. A history of accommodations or psychoeducational assessment is beneficial when assessing what the students' needs are. Students typically have copies of their documentation, or it could be easily obtained from their high school or diagnosing practitioner. Based on the specific area of need, students will be offered a wide range of available options; the following is a breakdown of possible supports related to the individual disorders.

**Arithmetic disorder.** Arithmetic disorder or dyscalculia is characterized by difficulty in learning or comprehending mathematics. It affects a person's ability to understand and manipulate numbers; generally speaking, it is a disconnection in a student's sense of numbers and math operations (BCMoE, 2011; LDAC, 2015). An example of this would be when a student has difficulty reading or writing numbers as well as completing calculations or operational math. A basic accommodation for arithmetic disorder would be the use of a calculator, use of calculation sheets, and/or tutoring supports in and out of class.

**Writing disorder.** Writing disorder or dysgraphia, is generally characterized by distorted writing in spite of thorough instruction (BCMoE, 2011; LDAC, 2015). Issues with written expression are demonstrated in the student's inability to articulate thoughts on paper and can also include messy writing and attributed issues with spelling. An example of this would be when a student has difficulties writing proper sentences or has trouble structuring themes in a paper. Standard accommodations for this would include Speech-to-Text software, use of a word processor, creative writing software, and/or tutoring in and out of class.

**Reading disorder.** Reading disorders can have many variables and do not present the same in every student. Reading disorder or dyslexia is generally characterized by difficulties with the alphabet, word recognition, decoding, spelling, and comprehension (BCMoE, 2011; LDAC, 2015). An example of this would be when a student has difficulty reading quickly or has problems reading with the correct expression. Standard accommodations for reading disorder could include a text-to-speech software, extra time allowed for tests and assignments, and/or intensive reading tutoring.

**Spelling disorder.** Spelling disorders, including dysorthographia, are generally characterized by difficulties with spelling. They stem from weak awareness or memory of language structures and letters in words (BCMoE, 2011; LDAC, 2015). The inability to reproduce, recognize, or understand symbols are key components to spelling disorders. Students with spelling disorders can have illegible printing, inconsistencies in print structures, poor word construction, or poor spatial planning on their paper, or they grip their writing instrument too hard. Common accommodations include word processor, speech-to-text software, scribe services, use of oral exams, and/or assignments.

**Auditory processing disorder.** Auditory processing disorder describes a variety of disorders that impair the way a student's brain coordinates, processes, or interprets what it hears even though the student might have good hearing ability (BCMoE, 2011; LDAC, 2015). Students with auditory processing disorders can have difficulties listening to, understanding, or remembering verbal commands or information. These students can have problems listening in busy rooms with lots of noise, can be significantly disorganized, and can have problems with conversational communications. Common accommodations include increased written activities and instructions, access to quiet



study spaces, repetition of instructions or commands, using increased volume, and slower articulation when speaking to someone affected.

**Visual processing disorder.** A visual perception disorder involves a student having difficulty making sense of what he or she sees, even though the student's vision is adequate (BCMoE, 2011; LDAC, 2015). Discrimination of visual symbols and visual sequencing are two common issues with visual processing disorders. Students with visual processing disorders have issues with visual data presented in class; they misread class content, have difficulty writing in lines or margins, skip words, commonly have strained eyes, and often have reading comprehension issues. Common accommodations include alternative formats such as audio or digital versions of text, notetakers, extra time with reading assignments, and/or better spacing and colour-coding of printed content.

**Organizational learning disorder.** An organizational learning disorder is a type of learning disability related to challenges with executive functions and frequently accompanies other learning disabilities (BCMoE, 2011; LDAC, 2015). Students with organizational learning disorders will demonstrate issues with time management, attention, problem solving, prioritization, organization of materials, and visual or auditory information. Common accommodations include the use of calendars; schedules; reminders; day planners; technologies such as phones, tablets, or computers; colour coding; extra time; or a learning strategist.

## **Chapter Summary**

The intended purpose of this chapter was to address and define learning disabilities and to provide examples of commonly applied accommodations. A definition of common learning disabilities, an example of how they impact students, and attributed

accommodations were identified to provide a better contextual and applied understanding. The next chapter provides an insider's perspective from an experiential lens on postsecondary disability accommodations.

## **Chapter 5: An Insider's Guide to Disability Accommodation in a Postsecondary**

### **Setting**

My intended purpose of this chapter is to provide an applied perspective of the material from the previous chapters to enhance faculty understanding. To accomplish this, I will provide personal insights, philosophies, and applications of postsecondary disability support and my perspectives as a specialist in the field of postsecondary disability. A narrative on why accommodations should be provided is presented. Then I present a step-by-step outline of the accommodation process at the University of Lethbridge, followed by a section highlighting challenges, myths, or questions that faculty may be afraid to ask along with my expert responses. I conclude with need-to-know insider recommendations about how to support students with disabilities in a postsecondary setting. It is my intent to offer faculty members a comprehensive guide that summarizes what they need to know to make informed decisions when accommodating students with disabilities.

### **Why Provide Accommodations: A Narrative**

It is the law, across Canada and the United States, to support students with disabilities to fairly access education and to provide them with accommodations to enhance their opportunity for success. If there is a failure to provide learning accommodations to a student with a disability, it would directly contravene Alberta's Human Rights Act (RSA 2000) and can lead to significant consequences to the institution and faculty or staff, including human rights investigations or tribunals, law suits, reputation tarnishing media coverage, or pressure from government and human rights advocacy groups.

That being said, there are limits to the provision of accommodations in a postsecondary setting. These limits are part of the “undue hardship” caveat within the legislations. Undue hardship means that (a) accommodations must not have an extreme impact on the financial viability of the institution; (b) students are unable to demonstrate capability in meeting the standards of the program with basic accommodations; (c) the accommodation cannot severely impact the rights of other students; or (d) accommodations must not cause substantial risk of harm to others (AHRC, 2010). I must caution, however, that meeting qualifiers for undue hardship is very difficult and is rarely supportable; therefore, accommodations will always be required to some degree. Flexibility, creativity, and cooperation are always encouraged when working through accommodation considerations. These attributes will ensure that legalities are upheld; the students’ needs are attended to; and that faculty or staff can maintain the standards of the courses, programs, and institutional reputation. In sum, the provision of accommodations is mandatory by law, but it can be flexibly determined and administered in the postsecondary setting.

Another core reason for the provision of disability accommodations in a postsecondary setting is that education is a business, faculty and institutional staff are the proprietors of it. Due to the business nature of postsecondary, students are the primary customers of what faculty members can offer them. There is a great deal of competition between institutions for students to attend campuses, both physically and online; therefore, institutions, faculty, and staff need to contribute to the customer’s experience, satisfaction, and success. Furthermore, with the legislative requirement of accessibility and accommodation, students with disabilities encompass a strong consumer base and

look for schools that provide the best services and supports to meet their needs.

Enrolment, student retention, and graduation statistics are reliant on a good support network for students; but for those students with learning challenges, enrolment, student retention, and graduation statistics are reliant on accommodations.

Finally, providing accommodations is simply the right thing to do. The provision of experiences or opportunities to students in an accessible, supportive way is what faculty and staff need to do as culture of caring individuals. Accommodation does not take away from the outcomes of postsecondary; rather, it weaves the fabric of society by including everyone, expanding horizons, and by simply welcoming others. Postsecondary institutions and its stakeholders cannot exclude an individual from an opportunity for education because of a limitation. Faculty and staff need to embrace and support this as much as possible.

### **A Step-by-Step Process of Accommodation at the University of Lethbridge**

**I have a student that is struggling, what should I do?** Students acquire disability supports from many avenues, faculty, and staff play a large role in the referral of students with learning issues to disability services for screenings, or further medical or psychiatric referrals. Faculty are encouraged to play a role in assisting students to seek out support before it is too late. Faculty can encourage students to book an appointment with their disability service department and discuss some of their ongoing academic issues.

**What will the student need to do?** Documentation of a disability is the starting point of the process. Students are requested to seek out, request, and bring to the Accommodated Learning Centre any available documents that provide diagnoses;

describe impact on academics, including frequency and severity; and recommended any supports that may be of help. Documentation of diagnoses is typically accepted from doctors, psychiatrists, or psychologists; other reasonable documentation may be considered and discussed. If no documentation is available, disability services can provide screenings and referrals to assist in this. During the intake process, students fill out registration forms and consent to the exchange of information between the student, disability department, faculty, and other staff. During the intake, the student is interviewed, the documentation is reviewed, and the student and disability support specialist will agree upon a learning plan that would best suit the student's needs.

**What will the disability department do?** The disability department will work with the student and the available documentation to create a learning plan. A learning plan will outline what supports are required; this includes exam accommodations, funding needs, and in-class and out-of-class accommodations. This plan can be tailored to the student's evolving needs and specific accommodation challenges.

**Will the student always use accommodations during their studies?** Students are required each yearly or each semester to check in with their disability support staff, review policies, update staff on their progress, and seek out solutions to challenges. A student's needs are always evolving; therefore, contact is kept on a regular basis to ensure best practices. Students may use full accommodations for all of their classes; they have the choice to use them for whatever impacts them most.

**How are professors informed of a student with accommodation needs in their class?** Letters to professors are common practice and are used to inform faculty that a student or students in their class will require one or more accommodations. That being

said, students may or may not choose to use all or any of their accommodations. The Accommodated Learning Centre encourages the students to inform their professors via a letter when class begins about the potential activation of accommodations, regardless of their actual accommodation use. Letters contain the student's name and specific accommodations that he or she would be using. No disability information is disclosed due to privacy regulations, and faculty members are requested to keep information confidential and to destroy this letter after the end of the semester.

**Can I speak with the student about their accommodations?** Disability support staff always encourage student self-advocacy and relationship building with their professors; however, students do have the right to limit their disclosures. That being said, increased communication and personal understanding create a good rapport and a better experience for both student and professor. If faculty are interested in having an in-depth conversation about a student's accommodations, they are encouraged to do so.

**What about trouble shooting issues and support?** The disability support team is available for conversation, problem solving, and new strategies for supporting students as issues arise. Although the disability support staff is tasked with upholding legislation and ensuring students are supported, disability staff members are also advocates for the institution and support faculty in the accommodation of students.

### **What Accommodation Services Are Provided to Students?**

**Assistive technologies.** Based on the documentation and learning plan, a student may be provided with a wide range of technologies that minimized their learning barriers. These technologies are often funded by the government and are very useful in the support

of a student. Speech-to-text, text-to-speech, laptops, tablets, Smartpens, recorders, and other technologies are commonly assigned.

**Notetakers.** Based on the documentation and learning plan, a student may be provided with a notetaker as an added level of support for in-class learning. The purpose of a notetaker is to provide supplemental notes to the student who may have auditory, visual, fine-motor, or attentional issues and who may be unable to follow lecture as strongly as other students. These services are often funded by the government and coordinated by the Accommodated Learning Centre.

**Tutors and strategists.** Based on the documentation and learning plan, a student may be provided with out-of-class support staff, such as tutors or learning strategists. Tutors support a student with learning content, assisting with writing and math skills, or assisting in studying. Learning strategists support a student in staying on track, enhancing study skills, and remaining organized, and they provide mentorship in the early stages of a student's studies.

**Exam accommodations.** Exam accommodations are a cornerstone of postsecondary disability support; typically the student will book all of his or her exams directly with the Accommodated Learning Centre. Its staff members will make all arrangements for space and supervision, will request the exam from the professors. The Accommodated Learning Centre and its staff will provide an environment that is secure for exam writing and that protects the integrity of the exam while making available all required supports for the student. I will now present best practices recommendations for professors when accommodating students.



## **Challenges, Myths, or Questions Faculty May Be Afraid to Ask and An Expert Response**

My intention of this chapter is to provide expert responses to some of the encountered challenges, myths, or questions that faculty may have been afraid to ask when working with students with disabilities. In the past 8 years, I have had the privilege to work with an amazing group of faculty members at the University of Lethbridge, and I am proud to say that University of Lethbridge has professors who are committed to supporting students and providing opportunities for success. That being said, I have encountered issues when working with students who require accommodations in the postsecondary setting. Some issues are fairly easy to remedy; some, much more complicated. Every conflict has a solution; the beauty of accommodation is that it can be a grey area. This “greyness” leaves room for creativity and custom tailoring to supports, which ultimately leads to the mitigation of barriers; course conflicts; confusion between faculty, students, and staff; resource limitations; and undue hardship.

**Do these students belong in university?** Determining a person’s belonging to a postsecondary institution and subsequent classes based on disability is discrimination. On rare occasion, I have heard questions from faculty and staff who asked whether or not students with disabilities belonged, in reference to their need for support. The fact of the matter is that everyone—regardless of race, gender, or disability—should have equal access to participate in academia. This is law. Students with learning disabilities have been assessed by a psychologist, who determined through a battery of testing that the student has sufficient cognitive capacity; however, these students may have limitations in one or more areas of academic skill that creates disordered learning. Accommodations

bridge the gap between weaknesses and strengths to allow students the opportunity to succeed. That being said, if a student is accommodated and fails, they simply fail; they receive no special advantage for having a disability. Just because they have equal opportunity through accommodation does not guarantee equal results.

**I never had accommodations when I was a student; why now?** Disability accommodation is a concept that has only come into the forefront in the past couple decades. Accommodations are specific to a student's disability and individual needs for learning. Doctors, psychiatrists, and psychologists put great effort into their diagnostic processes and diligently inform accommodations for their student-patient. The argument that "I never had accommodations when I was a student" is like comparing apples to bricks. Accommodations are based on need only; if you did not have them they were not available or you likely did not need them.

**Do I have to move my exam for disability reasons?** Disability student services come into logistical challenges quite frequently. Students taking a full semester load of three or four different courses will present exam-booking challenges for the student and exam coordinators. The syllabus is a contract between faculty members and students that highlights the timeline of the course, and that syllabus contract has ultimately been approved by the department and dean. Students cannot really do their best if they have two exams at double time accommodation. Support staff and faculty need to do everything within reason to minimize barriers; most deans will be reasonable and will allow the exception to avoid the inevitable grade appeal. If faculty members are concerned with leaked information, they can change the exam up, mix up the order,

change the colour of paper, or mark the exam as if it were a top secret version with a jumble of numbers or letters identifying it is an alternative version. They can be creative.

**Do I have to allow recording in class?** This is one that can go either way.

Faculty members must be clear about the reasons why it is harmful or risky for a student to have his or her recorder out during class. Current copyright laws have caveats for disability recording or manipulation of content, so intellectual property can be a weak argument against the laws. That being said, some courses have delicate conversations for which students can push for privacy. Take counselling courses as an example; many times, mock counselling sessions or conversations expose a student's private life and issues. This is a scenario where recording could be blocked. That being said, disability support staff always would like to see an alternative, such as a notetaker or the provision of notes before or after class for the student accommodation to be upheld. A classroom is typically deemed a public space; therefore, recording is usually legal. Further, most disability support offices have recording agreements that assure the faculty member that the student will delete the recording after it has been used for study and will not distribute it.

**Do accommodations destroy academia and the integrity of the course?** No, accommodations do not destroy academia, the rigour attributed to it, or the integrity of a course. Accommodations are creative solutions that minimize a student's learning barriers to success; no part of the materials, standards, or expectations will have to change. Extra time for quizzes, access to a notetaker, or a word processor does not change the foundation of what is being taught and further assessed. When a person is given a walking aid to get down a path, does the path itself change? No, the path remains

just as challenging, except that the individual has an accommodative support to help him or her get to the end. This is no different from accommodations in a learning environment.

**Are these students looking for an advantage?** This is something that has come up from time to time, and yes, in my experience, some students are looking to turn their A to an A+ or get some type of edge on their performance. This is fairly common in areas where one is being assessed or is in competition. That being said, the disability support team maintains a knowledgeable and skilful background in data collection, documentation review, and at times, disability screening tools. Students with disabilities must have supportive documentation to register for services. Anyone who is registered has gone through an intake, screening, and subsequent disability testing to confirm his or her need for supports. It is important for faculty to have faith in the intake system and the disability team at your school.

### **Best Practice Recommendations**

The following section presents five core recommendations generated through an in-depth study of postsecondary disability literature, paired with my own experiential data from over 8 years of facilitating disability accommodations in a postsecondary environment. The recommendations are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather are to provide postsecondary faculty members with an insider's perspective about how to accommodate their students with disabilities.

**Recommendation 1: Think of accommodations as a team effort.** The first recommendation to professors is to not worry; they are not alone in the accommodation process. Literature highlighted the necessity for faculty to work in cooperation with all

stakeholders in the accommodation process, as cooperation allows for a better exchange of information and ideas and increases comfort when dealing with sensitive disability matters (Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2011). The world of disability accommodations can be very grey and at times difficult to understand, and the diversity and individual characteristics attributed to the individual student and their unique disabilities can make supporting students a daunting task. The reality is that accommodation is a team effort between the students, faculty, and Accommodated Learning Centre, all of whom are responsible for ensuring that accommodations are being properly implemented. A faculty member is never alone as the disability support team is available for assistance to work working through any accommodation issue.

**Recommendation 2: Learn about disabilities and the related policies.** If faculty members investigate what the classroom common disabilities are and how they are supported in the classroom, they can better understand how to assist their students in a focused way. Increased knowledge of disability subject matter can lead to increasingly competent, confident support of students with disabilities in the classroom (Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2011). At times faculty may be intimidated by disability accommodation business due to its legislation underpinnings and may make decisions out of fear or misunderstanding (Murray et al., 2008). Therefore, knowledge of legislation, policies, and procedures related to disability accommodation and its provision can be helpful. That being said, accommodations are not set in stone; there are adaptations, adjustments, or creative changes that can be made to accommodations should they interfere with the objective of the course or simply do not work in the lab or class (Barnar-Brak et al., 2010). If faculty members are unsure, they should consult with the

student disability centre and campus disability policies regarding their concerns or lack of clarity.

**Recommendation 3: Know and advertise campus resources in the class**

**syllabus.** Faculty should know and share with students what supports are available on campus as they are often the first line of contact and the cornerstone for student learning opportunities (Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004; Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2011). Professors should keep a list of support departments, their campus location, and the best people to contact as the information can be very helpful for both faculty members and their students. Many students with difficulties may not know where to turn; therefore, faculty can provide valuable guidance and ensure that students can achieve success (Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004; Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2011). Faculty members should have a notice on disability or other supports in the syllabus as this information can be quite helpful for students who already have accommodations, as well as for those that do not. The added information shows that faculty are supportive of accommodations and will be an ally during the student's journey through class.

**Recommendation 4: Support but not unnecessary special treatment.**

Students with disabilities have the right to accommodations, they have the right to respect, and they have the right to equitable supports that give them the equal chance of success. Disability support staff encourage faculty to provide support and equal access, but never to give a student unfair advantages or special considerations outside of a learning plan on account of his or her disability. Literature has highlighted that students with disabilities want to be treated the same as their peers, and special treatment may cause discomfort (Barnar-Brak et al., 2010). Once the accommodations have been provided, it

is a fair or close to fair playing ground and time for the student to prove his or herself independently.

**Recommendation 5: Design courses with disabilities in mind.** The likelihood that a student with disabilities will enrol in a faculty member's course is very high; thus, it is important for faculty members to development their courses with disabilities in mind for increased student engagement and improved outcomes (Barnar-Brak et al., 2010; Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004; Murray et al., 2011). Faculty members who attend to multiple modalities of content delivery, make adjustments such as microphone use, make slides available, and add video or audio content will find that these adjustments will be very helpful for all students, not only those with disabilities.

### **Chapter Summary**

My goal of this chapter was to provide an applied perspective of the material from the previous chapters to enhance faculty understanding. I provided personal insights, philosophies, and applications of postsecondary disability support and my perspectives as a specialist in the field of postsecondary disability. I presented a step-by-step outline of the accommodation process at the University of Lethbridge. Then I concluded with need-to-know insider recommendations about how to successfully and confidently support students with disabilities in a postsecondary setting. The next chapter will provide a synthesis and conclusion of this project.

## **Chapter 6: Synthesis and Conclusion**

My purpose of this chapter is to provide a conclusion of the project in its entirety. This chapter begins with a discussion of the implications of this project for faculty, staff, and for students who receive accommodations. This chapter then discusses areas where future research could be of use. The chapter ends with a conclusion section.

### **Implications for Faculty and Staff**

I provided background information related to the legal and moral reasons for the provision of disability accommodations. It is anticipated that this project would have positive implications for individuals working within a postsecondary setting, namely faculty and staff. Overall, the information that was explored within the project, both theoretical and applied, would enhance the understanding of faculty and staff members who are not fully aware of disability support needs on campus. With an enhanced understanding of human rights law, standard disability intake and accommodation procedures, and recommendations for disability accommodations, faculty members could experience the following: (a) a heightened sense of empathy for students struggling with learning disabilities; (b) greater confidence in the role they play when supporting students with disabilities; (c) increased comfort with the limits to accommodation; and (d) a greater sense of the shared accountability between student, disability staff and themselves.

Accommodation of students with disabilities is a well-known grey area and comes with a great deal of ambiguity. The provided information and the personal insights should encourage faculty and staff to be increasingly comfortable within the ambiguity and to understand that there is ample room for flexibility, creativity, and collaboration in



providing accommodations at a postsecondary level. There is no certain way to eliminate the ambiguity of the disability field, but the provision of additional information, resources, and personal support for those attempting to accommodate students in need may help alleviate it.

Furthermore, an intended by-product of improved faculty and staff understanding of accommodations includes an attitudinal and cultural shift on campus when it comes to dealing with diversity, mental health, and disabilities in general. The minimization of invisible barriers increase knowledge and empathy, which improves the campus community and provides a safer, more accessible environment for everyone to study regardless of disability. Potential implications for students are discussed further in the next section.

### **Implications for Students**

With improved understanding and greater sense of empathetic support from faculty and staff as a result of this project, students stand to face many positive implications. After all, the intention behind helping faculty and staff become increasingly comfortable in the world of disability accommodation is to find ways to ensure students have equal access to education, ample support for increased chances of success, and respect for their efforts despite any disability they face. A campus community that demonstrates warmth and compassion in supporting students with learning barriers is one that will be highly sought after by those prospective students looking for a safe place to study and is one that offers a wide range of supports to meet their needs.

Furthermore, students with disabilities stand to be better accommodated by faculty and staff as a result of this project. Increased technical knowledge of disabilities,

awareness of the common disability issues faced on campuses, and familiarity with typical accommodation processes will provide the student with competent support from both disability service team and their professors. New-found skills and understandings of disabilities may promote the enhancement of universal design within the classrooms and make the learning environment much more dynamic in the delivery of information.

This will also foster better working relations between students and faculty as the level of understanding and empathy will be greatly affected. A good working alliance between student, faculty, and staff are critical to the student's success. Students with disabilities stand to have increased stability and greater opportunities for success, including higher rates of retention and ultimately completion, when they are part of a supportive campus with open-minded attitudes towards accommodations and when they have a skilled, comfortable faculty in the area of accommodation. In many ways, students are the centrepiece of postsecondary operations; therefore, they need to be supported, and this project encourages that support.

### **Areas for Future Research**

There is a need for future research in the area of disability accommodation in postsecondary. Several key areas of potential were uncovered during the research of this project; however, a few of the areas could be of greater benefit: student accommodation use post-graduation; efficacy of specific accommodations; long-term benefits or risks of incorrect accommodation assignment; and research into the consistency in the assignment of accommodations between diagnosing professionals and their chosen approach.

A study focused on how students, who received disability accommodations in a postsecondary setting, continue to use them in their careers following graduation would

be of great interest. Specifically, a post-graduation accommodation use study will be useful if it determined efficiencies in support provision and improvements that were made related to skills, resilience, and overall ability. Also, a study related to the efficacy and overall usefulness of specific accommodations could be useful in minimizing over-accommodation and finely tuning accommodation designations to students in an increasingly specific, useful way. Lastly, a study related to the consistency in the assignment of accommodations between diagnosing professionals and their chosen approach could be useful and could inform changes to disability service providers' approaches to accommodation.

### **Conclusion**

My goal of this project was to present an overview of postsecondary disability accommodation themes and an insider's guide for providing these services. With an influx of students attending postsecondary with documented disabilities, institutional faculty and staff are required to accommodate individual student needs for enhanced academic success. This project addressed the knowledge gap, provided insights into the nature of disabilities, and provided solid recommendations for faculty to use when accommodating their students. As a result, this project has provided ample evidence and support for the provision of equitable disability accommodation on postsecondary campuses and provided a format to reduce ambiguity when supporting students with disabilities.

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**Appendix**

**An Insider's Guide for Accommodating Postsecondary Students with Disabilities**

## **Preamble**

### **Purpose**

The following contains the applied component of this Master of Counselling project. It is a manuscript that will be submitted for publication to the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* upon approval of this project by the University of Lethbridge. If this manuscript is not approved by the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, It will be submitted for publication to *Cognica* or *The Canadian Counsellor Review*. The author of this article is Aaron Tamayose, and the second author of this article is my project supervisor, Dawn McBride. This preamble closely follows the format and structure of Kewley's (2013) master's project entitled *The Dual Role of Psychologist-Researcher: Using Psychological Assessment For Research Purposes*.

The intent of this manuscript is to provide postsecondary faculty members a valuable resource for working with students who have disabilities in a postsecondary setting. This manuscript outlines from an insider's, experiential perspective the dos and don'ts of disability accommodation to reduce ambiguity and enhance professor competence.

### **Format Style Requirement**

This manuscript is prepared based on the 6th edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2010), as per the requirements set by the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*.

### **Copyright Statement**

The material included in this draft manuscript is subject to copyright, and permission to use any material in this manuscript should be sought from the author or the

author's supervisor (Dawn McBride) prior to use. For permission please email the author aaron.tamayose@uleth.ca or the author's supervisor dawn.mcbride@uleth.ca. The reader may use ideas from this project and draft manuscript providing the following reference is utilized:

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### **Abstract**

My intention of this article is to present an overview of disabilities in postsecondary education and an insider's guide to faculty for providing accommodations to students. With an influx of students attending postsecondary with documented disabilities, institutional faculty and staff are required to accommodate individual student needs for enhanced academic success. There is a level of ambiguity when it comes to providing accommodation for students with disabilities, and there is often a discrepancy in understanding the need for, and responsibilities of, service provision at the faculty level. Therefore, this article will address the faculty knowledge gap, present insights into the nature of disabilities, and provide solid recommendations for faculty members to use when accommodating their students.

*Keywords:* disabilities, postsecondary, accommodation, student support, faculty



## **An Insider's Guide for Supporting Postsecondary Students with Disabilities**

This article focuses on providing postsecondary faculty members with pertinent information about supporting students who are registered with a disability and with a resource for providing students with accommodations. Disability accommodation refers to the process of providing students with disabilities with in-class, out-of-class, or technology-based supports that minimize the impact of the disability and that provide equitable opportunities for academic success in postsecondary (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Russell & Demko, 2005). Providing disability accommodations is a shared responsibility between on-campus disability support staff and faculty members. It is my intention of this article to give faculty members useful insider recommendations from the experienced perspective of a disability accommodation professional.

### **Disabilities in Postsecondary Education**

In the past decade, accessibility has become paramount in the provision of services to the public. As a result, the availability of basic services to all individuals is now a human rights standard. Moreover, access to education and services that support an individual's academic path is emphasized in legislation and academic literature as being a requirement for recruitment, retention, and success of students with learning disabilities (Banerjee, Madaus, & Gelbar, 2014; Gormley, Hughes, Block, & Lendman, 2005; Jung, 2003; Lindstrom, Nelson, & Foels, 2013). Accessibility is a mindset of openness for individuals to participate without barriers and can be attributed to offering services in multiple modalities or with universal design principles in mind (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003). Universal design and accessibility are general concepts or philosophies that are applied at an institutional level, which makes attendance and

participation easier for all, but does not account for individual needs (Harrison & Wolforth, 2012; Jung, 2003; Rath & Royer, 2002; Russell & Demko, 2005).

Accommodations, however, account for individual learning needs and are specific to disability type and the individual. Accommodation is the implementation of supports such as exam accommodations, assistive technologies, or specialized support staff—such as tutors, learning strategists, or notetakers—to minimize a student’s impairment and promote equitable learning opportunities (Jung, 2003; Rath & Royer, 2002; Russell & Demko, 2005). Accommodation does not intend to tarnish academic integrity or diminish learning outcomes, as there is no modification of coursework or standards; rather, there is the addition of supports that bridge the gap between disability and applied skill demonstration (Rath & Royer, 2002; Russell & Demko, 2005). Furthermore, accommodation is the application of a wide range of recommended supports that are specifically tailored to the individual and his or her particular learning impairment. For students to receive these supports, faculty and staff need to work collaboratively and share a mindset committed to supporting students with disabilities.

### **Why Accommodate Students with Disabilities?**

It is the law, across Canada and the United States, to support students with disabilities to fairly access education and to provide them with accommodations to enhance their opportunity for success. If there is a failure to provide learning accommodations to a student with a disability, it would directly contravene Alberta’s Human Rights Act (RSA 2000) and can lead to significant consequences to the institution and faculty or staff, including human rights investigations or tribunals, law suits,

reputation tarnishing media coverage, or pressure from government and human rights advocacy groups.

That being said, there are limits to the provision of accommodations in a postsecondary setting. These limits are part of the “undue hardship” caveat within the legislations. These limits are part of the “undue hardship” caveat within the legislations. Undue hardship means that (a) accommodations must not have an extreme impact on the financial viability of the institution; (b) the student is in no way capable of meeting the standards of the program with accommodations provided; (c) the accommodation cannot severely impact the rights of other students; or (d) accommodations must not cause substantial risk of harm to others (AHRC, 2010). I must caution, however, that meeting qualifiers for undue hardship is very difficult and is rarely supportable; therefore, accommodations will always be required to some degree. Flexibility, creativity, and cooperation are always encouraged when working through accommodation considerations. These attributes will ensure that legalities are upheld; the students’ needs are attended to; and that faculty or staff can maintain the standards of the courses, programs, and institutional reputation. In sum, the provision of accommodations is mandatory by law, but it can be flexibly determined and administered in the postsecondary setting.

Another core reason for the provision of disability accommodations in a postsecondary setting is that education is a business, and we are the proprietors of it. Due to the business nature of postsecondary, students are the primary customers of what faculty members can offer them. There is a great deal of competition between institutions for students to attend campuses, both physically and online; therefore, institutions,

faculty, and staff need to contribute to the customer's experience, satisfaction, and success. Furthermore, with the legislative requirement of accessibility and accommodation, students with disabilities encompass a strong consumer base and look for schools that provide the best services and supports to meet their needs. Enrolment, student retention, and graduation statistics are reliant on a good support network for students; but for those students with learning challenges, enrolment, student retention, and graduation statistics are reliant on accommodations.

Finally, providing accommodations is simply the right thing to do. The provision of experiences or opportunities to students in an accessible, supportive way is what faculty and staff need to do as culture of caring individuals. Accommodation does not take away from the outcomes of postsecondary; rather, it weaves the fabric of society by including everyone, expanding horizons, and by simply welcoming others. Postsecondary institutions and its stakeholders cannot exclude an individual from an opportunity for education because of a limitation. Faculty and staff need to embrace and support this as much as possible.

### **Insider Recommendations**

The following section presents five core recommendations generated through an in-depth study of postsecondary disability literature (see Tamayose, 2017 for more information), paired with my own experiential data from over 8 years of facilitating disability accommodations in a postsecondary environment. The recommendations are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather are to provide postsecondary faculty members with an insider's perspective about how to accommodate their students with disabilities.

**Recommendation 1: Think of accommodations as a team effort.** The first recommendation to professors is to not worry; they are not alone in the accommodation process. Literature highlighted the necessity for faculty to work in cooperation with all stakeholders in the accommodation process, as cooperation allows for a better exchange of information and ideas and increases comfort when dealing with sensitive disability matters (Murray, Wren, & Keys, 2008; Murray, Lombardi, & Wren, 2011). The world of disability accommodations can be very grey and at times difficult to understand, and the diversity and individual characteristics attributed to the individual student and their unique disabilities can make supporting students a daunting task. The reality is that accommodation is a team effort between the students, faculty, and Accommodated Learning Centre, all of whom are responsible for ensuring that accommodations are being properly implemented. A faculty member is never alone as the disability support team is available for assistance to work working through any accommodation issue.

**Recommendation 2: Learn about disabilities and the related policies.** If faculty members investigate what the classroom common disabilities are and how they are supported in the classroom, they can better understand how to assist their students in a focused way. Increased knowledge of disability subject matter can lead to increasingly competent, confident support of students with disabilities in the classroom (Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2011). At times faculty may be intimidated by disability accommodation business due to its legislation underpinnings and may make decisions out of fear or misunderstanding (Murray et al., 2008). Therefore, knowledge of legislation, policies, and procedures related to disability accommodation and its provision can be helpful. That being said, accommodations are not set in stone; there are adaptations,

adjustments, or creative changes that can be made to accommodations should they interfere with the objective of the course or simply do not work in the lab or class (Barnar-Brak et al., 2010). If faculty members are unsure, they should consult with the student disability centre and campus disability policies regarding their concerns or lack of clarity.

**Recommendation 3: Know and advertise campus resources in the class**

**syllabus.** Faculty should know and share with students what supports are available on campus as they are often the first line of contact and the cornerstone for student learning opportunities (Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004; Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2011). Professors should keep a list of support departments, their campus location, and the best people to contact as the information can be very helpful for both faculty members and their students. Many students with difficulties may not know where to turn; therefore, faculty can provide valuable guidance and ensure that students can achieve success (Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004; Murray et al., 2008; Murray et al., 2011). Faculty members should have a notice on disability or other supports in the syllabus as this information can be quite helpful for students who already have accommodations, as well as for those that do not. This shows that faculty are supportive of accommodations and will be an ally during the student's journey through class.

**Recommendation 4: Support but not unnecessary special treatment.**

Students with disabilities have the right to accommodations, they have the right to respect, and they have the right to equitable supports that give them the equal chance of success. Disability support staff encourage faculty to provide support and equal access, but never to give as student unfair advantages or special considerations outside of a learning plan

on account of his or her disability. Literature has highlighted that students with disabilities want to be treated the same as their peers, and special treatment may cause discomfort (Barnar-Brak et al., 2010). Once the accommodations have been provided, it is a fair or close to fair playing ground and time for the student to prove his or herself independently.

**Recommendation 5: Design courses with disabilities in mind.** The likelihood that a student with disabilities will enrol in a faculty member's course is very high; thus, it is important for faculty members to development their courses with disabilities in mind for increased student engagement and improved outcomes (Barnar-Brak et al., 2010; Graham-Smith & Lafayette, 2004; Murray et al., 2011). Faculty members who attend to multiple modalities of content delivery, make adjustments such as microphone use, make slides available, and add video or audio content will find that these adjustments will be very helpful for all students, not only those with disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

The process of disability accommodation can be a complex process for professors. By increasing their understanding of disabilities in the classroom and available resources on campus and by working collaboratively with their students and disability support staff, faculty members can minimize ambiguity and improve their accommodation competence. It is hoped that this article, including the information and insider recommendations, will enhance faculty awareness, understanding, and confidence with regard to providing accommodations to their students and promoting academic and social success on campus.

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