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Working with, not on behalf of students with disabilities

October 28, 2015 (/forum/working-with-not-on-behalf-of-students-with-disabilities) · Academia

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A look into the current state of support for students with disabilities in postsecondary education, with reflection on what still needs to be done.

Born with a rare neuromuscular myopathy, Dr. Jeff Preston

(<http://www.jeffpreston.ca/about/about-jeff-preston/>) has spent his life advocating for himself and for others with disabilities. With a PhD in Media Studies from Western University, Dr. Preston is an example of the success that can be achieved when PSE institutions work with students with disabilities and not merely on their behalf. However, Preston's success has not come without critical reflection on the difficulties that still affect these students.

In a memorable scene from the 2014 Academy Award-nominated film *The Theory of Everything*, famed physicist Stephen Hawking rises from his wheelchair in front of a packed lecture hall and... walks.

As a professor and a disability rights advocate, Dr. Preston finds this scene troubling.

“If nothing else,” he writes in a review of the film (<http://www.jeffpreston.ca/2015/02/22/theory-of-everything-2014/>), “this scene presents an opportunity to explore the normate fantasy of disability, an imagination of disabled life formed by those without disabilities. This scene is for the viewer: walking is their fantasy, a wish that must be fulfilled at least once before the curtain falls.”

Preston argues that in the context of a PSE institution, strategies for working with students with disabilities must embody the desires of the students, and not, as he argues in his film review, the desires of the administration or faculty. “The biggest difference, for me,” he says, “between a successful and unsuccessful academic

experience has been how involved I was in my own education and accommodations. A major barrier I've faced throughout my academic life has been educators and administrators who think they can develop accommodation plans without my input."

Preston says that his most successful learning experiences have come when he was asked for direct input on his course accommodations and educational path—input that represented his reality and not that of the administration or faculty. "A team was willing to sit down with me," he says, "and talk frankly about the requirements and design of the course and what types of things I've done previously to adapt these types of assignments. No two disabled students are the same and their accommodation needs could be very different."

Everyone's Responsibility

Joe Henry, Dean of Students at King's University College, agrees with Preston. He argues that accessibility is "everyone's responsibility" and that it should include a set of campus services that are seamlessly connected to create the most inclusive atmosphere possible. Henry believes that PSE Student Services offices must move away from being the "gatekeeper of everything disability related" and give students greater opportunity to determine their own needs and goals. Perhaps in the near future, he says, services for students with disabilities will operate as part of a holistic network of inclusive campus opportunities that no longer marginalize and isolate these students.

Henry believes that significant improvements in PSE can be found in "personalizing the learning experience of individual learners, which can go a long way to not only impact the learning environment of students with disabilities, but also have a tremendous impact for all learners in postsecondary education settings." From a

long-term perspective, this approach may also address some of the barriers students with disabilities face after graduation. Although PSE enrollment rates for students with disabilities are on the rise, says Henry, finding employment after graduation is still a major hurdle. Transitioning from the segregated—albeit imperfectly accommodating—world of PSE to a workplace remains a challenge because workplaces may not be as considerate and may not have necessary physical and pedagogical accessibility features in place. As PSE institutions continue to evolve, Canada is still in the beginning stages of implementing anti-discrimination and workplace accessibility laws (<http://www.hrmonline.ca/hr-news/disability-audits-likely-for-ontario-employers-197945.aspx>).

Breaking down administrative silos

Henry and Preston argue for a strategy that brings students with disabilities out of segregated administrative silos, helping them find their desired place within the mosaic of student experience while supporting their transition into life beyond school. Preston states that the goal should be “to actively promote and naturalize services on campus to support students with disabilities in an effort to destigmatize the process.”

However, Preston is quick to point out that questions of academic and symbolic accessibility still begin with physical accessibility. The point is “not just getting into buildings,” he says, but making classrooms functional and flexible for all students and professors. “Classrooms,” he says “are power structures and we’re sending a pretty strong message to our students when the lectern is at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Not only that, but we often design classrooms that physically segregate the physically disabled students from everyone else.”

Disability rights advocates and senior administrators such as Dr. Preston and Dean Henry are altering the paradigm for learning among PSE students with disabilities and expanding the opportunities available to them once they graduate. Henry believes there is still much work to do, but senses that the landscape for disability rights is shifting. Canada is home to many medical doctors with physical disabilities (<http://www.macleans.ca/education/post-graduate/breaking-down-barriers-for-med-students-with-disabilities/>) who have forged successful careers, as well as federal government initiatives that mandate workplace accommodation and inclusion. Both Preston and Henry agree that it's time for PSE institutions to help students with disabilities pursue their own goals and not just the goals those institutions envision for them. For Preston and Henry, being heard as a student with a disability is not merely a privilege, but a fundamental human right.

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If the landslide Liberal victory in the October 19th federal election has ushered in a new era of Canadian politics, it may have been due to the PSE student vote.

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With a new school year underway, we are once again hearing about sexual violence on university and college campuses. The September news cycle included reports of sexual assault on the west and east coasts alike. It also documented institutional efforts to develop and implement stand-alone sexual assault policies.

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