

Voices, Stories, and Lived Experiences

Summary Report from the Ontario Summit for Students with Disabilities



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1.0 Introduction

A message to students with disabilities:

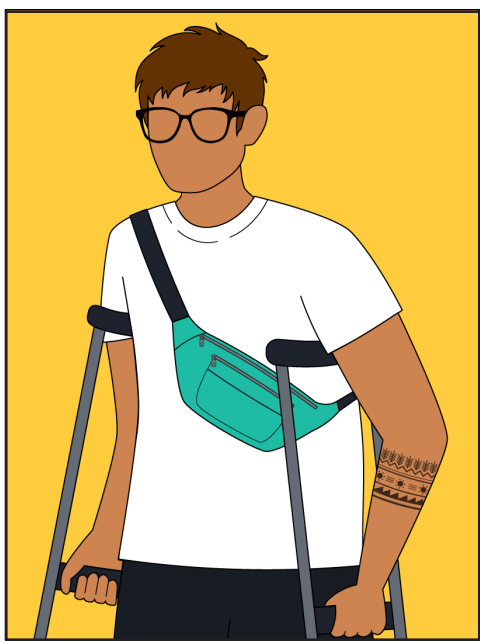
We hear you. This report is designed by two disabled students to support our peers with disabilities and to amplify disabled experiences. If this report does not echo your experiences, feelings, or ideas, we encourage you to use this report as a catalyst to encourage your institution to further consult with and listen to students with disabilities.

A message to postsecondary staff and faculty:

We need change. Let this report support your continued actions to advance accessibility and inclusion at your institution, as well as inspire further consultations with students with disabilities and collaborations to follow our lead.

1.1 Ontario Summit for Students with Disabilities

The Ontario Summit for Students with Disabilities (hereinafter referred to as “the Summit”) was a one-day, free, virtual event hosted by the STEM With Disabilities project on Saturday, February 10, 2024. Ontario postsecondary students with disabilities were invited to attend to build community and share knowledge.



Quotes shared during the Summit were consolidated into this report along with quotes from an affiliated web survey that asked students to share their stories and recommendations for postsecondary institutions. This report aims to share the voices of students with disabilities and guide postsecondary institutions in advancing accessibility and disability inclusion.

The Summit saw 131 registrations from Ontario postsecondary institutions, with 78 participants and an additional 41 stories shared through an online form.

1.2 Report Consolidation Methods

Phased Approach to Report Consolidation:

Quotes for this report come from audio transcripts, virtual chat recordings, and the online survey that was available for one month before and after the Summit. Longer quotes from speakers and participants were broken down by topic. A qualitative, semi-emergent design was used to organize quotes to encapsulate overarching experiences, barriers faced, and recommendations for institutions. To begin, the *a priori* framework of the AODA Postsecondary Education Standards final recommendations report (2022) was used to organize barriers experienced by students with disabilities to support institutional groups already implementing these recommendations. Then, additional constructs were added using grounded theory to capture the unique experiences of students with disabilities and the emergent themes from the Summit. Research ethics was not required for this evaluation as it was intended for quality improvement, and not publication.

Organizer Positionality:

We, Emma Collington and Samantha Fowler, are both students with disabilities. In this way, this report is purposefully written from a disabled perspective and the consequent biases. We strived to include many diverse perspectives from participants with intersectional identities in the speaker list at the Summit, as well as in the quotations included throughout this document. Intersectionality plays a vital role in the experiences of all equity-deserving groups, and we aimed to amplify authentic voices and experiences. As the organizers of the Summit and the editors of this report, our own respective positionality and privilege will play a role in how we present and write content. We are cisgendered and white women coming from academic families, and it is important for us to recognize the privileges associated with these identities.

Use of Person-first Terminology:

The disability community has a variety of different positions regarding the labeling of individuals. Person-first language (for example, 'students with disabilities') emphasizes the importance of recognizing the individual being described as a person first and foremost, describing the individual as 'having' something as opposed to 'being' something. Identity-first language (for example, 'disabled students') recognizes that the person and their disability are not separate identities and that disability can be integral to a person's experience.

We recognize that the participants in this Summit will have different views regarding the use of terminology, and when working with people with complex identities, it is essential to refer to them in the manner that they prefer. Formal writing conventions typically utilize person-first language. Although we the organizers of the Summit and writers of this report personally prefer to use identity-first language, and choose to refer to ourselves as ‘disabled students’, for the purposes of this report we use person-first terminology.

Integration of Student Quotes:

In order to maintain the authenticity of student stories and their contexts, quotes from student participants are shared as blocks of text, as opposed to embedded. The following is an example of a quotation from a Summit participant.

“Always start by operating from a place of empathy, compassion, and understanding. The student will likely be harder on themselves than anyone else, and reinforcing their worst fears will only cause more distress. Know and acknowledge that the world is not set up for neurodivergent [or disabled] people, and do the work to undo your unconscious biases that say otherwise. Do not forget to include disabled perspectives in conversations about equity, diversity, and inclusion.”

1.3 How to Cite this Report

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2.0 Understanding the Experiences of Students with Disabilities

Section 2.0 Understanding the Experiences of Students with Disabilities describes the experience of being a student with a disability at a postsecondary education institution in Ontario, including what students want staff, faculty and peers to know about their experiences (2.1), the need for increased disability community spaces (2.2), and the drive to create systemic change (2.3). We, the Organizers, encourage all audiences to read this section first as a fundamental understanding and glimpse into what it is like to be a student with a disability.

2.1 What Students with Disabilities Want You to Understand

Students with disabilities were eager to share their stories during the Summit and have their voices heard in a safe environment by an understanding audience. Participants were asked to share what they wanted their institutions to know about navigating the post-secondary system with a disability. First and foremost, participants emphasized the importance of recognizing people with disabilities as being complex, intersectional individuals.

"I think I would want universities to get to know people who have disabilities as holistic people: students, staff, lecturers, professors who have disabilities are holistic people and not just a series of needs."

"Even when people notice your disability right away, they do not understand your disability...they rely on narratives, assumptions, and stereotypes, all of which tend to be steeped in ableism. Oftentimes people do not have a robust, lived experience with a disabled person and instead rely on certain scripts."

Students wanted to highlight how the challenges associated with disability can be compounded by the demands of post-secondary education. Individuals with disabilities often have limited energy, resources, and time, which all need to be carefully balanced to maintain their health and wellness. Post-secondary education places an additional set of demands on all students, and can lead to students overextending themselves to meet their academic goals.

“Moving on to university has presented me with a unique set of challenges. This has resulted in many difficulties of flare ups in lectures, tutorials, and sometimes it has prevented me from going about my day altogether.”

“Anxiety can be pretty unpredictable...sometimes the smallest events can cause big breakdowns. This is not convenient at all for the structure of university, which requires you to always think critically, participate, and not be a distraction.”

“I’m neurodivergent, have a learning disability, and deal with some mental health issues. It feels like they compound on one another, especially when classes get involved. Focusing for a long time for several hours a day becomes exhausting. I take a reduced course load to compensate. But I have shame related to this, feeling lesser than my peers because of my disability.”

When students with disabilities overexert themselves, they risk exacerbating their disability and causing a flare-up of symptoms, which in turn can impact their ability to continue to meet academic goals. This makes it more difficult for students with disabilities to fully participate in their academic experience, and many commented that this made them feel excluded from campus life.

“This starts a vicious cycle, because there will be fewer people with disabilities participating in the world if they cannot access buildings and services. And the less people with disabilities access these spaces, the less they are seen as users of these spaces. It’s crucial that people with disabilities get access to these spaces in a holistic way. In a way that does not highlight their disability.”

In order to manage their disabilities and the academic demands of post-secondary institutions, participants at the Summit agree that students with disabilities need to develop their self-advocacy skills to a further extent than their able-bodied classmates. Students with disabilities often find that the responsibility falls to them to solve the problems and barriers that they face at their institution. This creates a narrative that their disability is a problem that needs solving, rather than that the nature of post-secondary institutions produces barriers that need to be addressed and removed.



"You must have a very strong personality and mentality to deal with obstacles and solve them. You should look for a suitable solution such as finding people or centers and talking to them about your problem in order to be guided in the right direction."

Despite the challenges and barriers experienced by post-secondary students with disabilities, and the increased need for self-advocacy and problem solving skills, participants did emphasize that attending a university or college can be a rewarding experience.

"Navigating university life can be challenging, although it is also very rewarding."

Building on this sense of reward, when individuals with disabilities are able to navigate barriers and challenging experiences, it creates a sense of disability pride. Summit participants emphasized the fact that 'disability' is not a bad word, and that it can be powerful to identify with the disabled community.

"That's the thing I love about people with disabilities. We do things in a way that's different from others, and that way may sometimes be more effective and more productive. We bring solutions that other people just don't think of. I find that in engineering, and I'm sure in many many different subjects and careers, you bring different options and ideas, and it helps for sure."

"I feel comfortable in my skin. Being disabled, it has never been a negative thing for me. That might not be the case for everyone, and not everyone feels the same way about disclosing their disability."

Even when individual students with disabilities are successful in their academic careers, they still demand the advancement of accessibility and disability inclusion in post-secondary environments. People with disabilities have a right to inclusive education, and accessibility needs to become the default for all institutions.

"This is what true access and equity is about. It's not about doing the minimum that is needed to make sure that students can enter their classrooms, but about doing all that you can do to make sure that all students have the same opportunities to thrive. By fourth year, I no longer felt grateful for the accommodations I received in first year. My eyes had been opened to how much more it needed to improve."

"We also need to stop treating access as a charitable and nice thing to do. It has to become a default. Accessibility has been missing for far too long, and it's actually required."

2.2 Importance of the Summit as a Disability Community Space

Community spaces are a powerful tool to build connections, share knowledge, and nurture a sense of belonging. The feedback received in response to the Summit overwhelmingly discussed the power and importance of creating a disability community space specifically for postsecondary students.

"I wholeheartedly agree with your perspective on the importance of sharing the experiences and perspectives of individuals with disabilities."

"It's an exciting opportunity and it's something different: I've never been to a conference that's centered around students with disabilities, so this is new for me. But, it's such a great field, and great to know that there are folks who are out there, like me, that exist."

It can be difficult for students with disabilities to find community spaces where they can learn from others and ask questions specific to their experiences. The Summit was designed to give students the opportunity to address a wide variety of topics relevant to students with disabilities. These topics included balancing competing needs of academia and disability, navigating disability disclosure, and navigating the unpredictable nature of disability in an academic setting. The final, unstructured panel allowed the event to adapt and include additional topics as they arose. There was, however, a limit to the number of topics that could be covered over the course of a single event: no single, one day event is sufficient to allow for discussions on the diverse variety of topics of interest to students with disabilities.

From the conversations had during the Summit and information collected during registration and in the post-Summit feedback form, 74 additional topics were requested which did not fall within the scope of the panels. These included publishing as a disabled student, academic mentorship, educating principal investigators on disability issues, human rights, navigating legal and government supports, service animals, disabled mature students, disabled part-time students, dealing with difficult professors, and transitioning to or navigating workplaces.

Further emphasizing the importance of providing students with disabilities a space to connect with each other, many Summit attendees expressed their desire to continue expanding the community and connections initiated during the Summit. A grassroots community channel on Discord was set up by a student volunteer to allow interested participants to stay in touch following the event. This community currently has 50 student members. It includes a space for participants to introduce themselves and share their stories, a channel for students to share resources related to their postsecondary experiences, and channels for sharing interests and hobbies.

“What the panelist is sharing makes me kinda wish the group here at this Summit would have a discord space or online community following the summit.”

2.3 Students Advocating for Change

Before the Summit, participating students were invited to indicate on the registration form discussion topics of interest. One commonly requested theme was for more discussion of training and resource sharing for disability justice and advocacy.

“How can small-scale accessibility clubs at postsecondary institutions become more politically active, in a crippled way?”

“I'm reaching out to see if anyone here has ideas on how we can advocate for marginalized students with disabilities during this ongoing pandemic...Many of my peers and colleagues, especially those living with disabilities or immune-compromising conditions, are struggling to safely access their in-person classes and education without putting their health at significant risk. They tell me they feel isolated.”

These requests for advocacy support or training were met with understanding and support from many of the other Summit participants who are already heavily engaged in advocacy work. Summit panelists included advocates for accessibility in STEM-related fields, members of accessibility advisory committees from several Ontario institutions, volunteers with accessibility-focused organizations, and founders of campus disability clubs.

“Outside of the classroom, I have been involved extensively within numerous committees on campus and off-campus...through the experiences that I have had to deal with, I have found it inspiring to get involved where I can not only take a leadership role, but can advocate and make change for the improvement for all, in healthcare and beyond academics.”

“I have also done a lot of disability advocacy through writing for newspapers, being on different advisory committees, as well as founding a disability club on campus...I’ve pursued a path of disability advocacy for several reasons. One is that I am a person born with [disabilities]. And, I realized...that not a lot of people know what it is like to have a disability in the first place, and the importance of telling [our] stories.”

The advocacy-related stories shared by participants center on the theme of creating systemic change. Many students stated their hopes for future cohorts of students to have more positive and inclusive experiences relative to their own. Participants all agreed that the first step in initiating any change is to bring awareness to the experiences of students with disabilities.

“In learning to slow down, to accept good enough instead of perfect, and to love my whole self, I hope to be able to support my future students in doing so as well. The world may not be built for people like me, but I can do my part to ensure that my world sets me up for success.”

“Through this experience, and many others related to my mental health disabilities, I have been able to advocate for myself, as well as other students who may find themselves in similar situations.”

“If we are going to make change, then we need to share our experiences and our stories. We have to let others know.”

Participants already engaged in advocacy work cited their feelings of not belonging and missing community, as well as the systemic barriers they faced, as being the driving factors that led them to advocacy work. When building disability communities, students also emphasized the importance of welcoming and creating safe spaces for diverse intersectional identities.

“There are different forms of marginalization, and intersections of identities that are not well studied or well understood, or even observed. I generally do not feel like I fit in. Queer spaces tend to be very white, and disability spaces tend to be very white. If you go to cultural events where I look like I fit in, there’s a lot of homophobic and ableist ideologies in those spaces. I am not able to find a space where I feel fully comfortable. I enter spaces with the understanding that I stick out. When possible, I try to view it as a platform for advocacy. If I am going to stick out so much, I might as well use that to my advantage where possible, if I feel safe and comfortable (which is not always).”

3.0 Barriers Faced by Students with Disabilities

As postsecondary institutions begin work toward enacting the new [AODA Postsecondary Education Standards final recommendations report \(2022\)](#) (hereinafter referred to as the AODA PSES recommendations), it is vital that the lived experiences of students with disabilities guide processes, policies, and projects. The stories shared by students during the Summit should be used to inspire collaboration and consultation with students with disabilities at Ontario institutions.

Sections 3.1-3.8 in 3.0 Barriers Faced by Students with Disabilities is organized by the eight areas of barriers identified in the proposed AODA PSES recommendations.

3.9 Additional Barrier Areas Identified by Summit Participants includes additional themes that emerged from participant discussions during the Summit that are not captured by the AODA PSES recommendations.

3.10 Impacts of Barriers on Students with Disabilities describes the lived experiences of students with disabilities and how the barrier areas described by Summit participants and the AODA PSES recommendations impact their experiences and performance in the Ontario postsecondary education system.

3.1 Attitudes, Behaviours, Perceptions, Assumptions

Students at the Summit connected with one another over their experiences at Ontario postsecondary institutions. Many students shared that they face stigmatization as a result of their disabilities. This is experienced by students with both invisible and visible disabilities. Students with invisible disabilities often feel that they need to explain and justify their condition to prove that they are deserving of their accommodations; students with visible disabilities are often stared at or treated differently by their peers.



“When your professors and TAs do not recognize it as being a legitimate disability or a barrier for you - I think that is a big trend with invisible disabilities...we feel we have to justify ourselves.”

“I have a complicated medical history, and fully depend on a central line for Total Parenteral Nutrition (TPN), as well as a surgical feeding tube to sustain me...aside from being medically complex, other challenges include interacting with peers on campus. People stare and I often feel as though I am unapproachable because of all my medical devices. When I am administering medications intravenously, many are often afraid and become judgmental.”

“The truth is, in my personal experience, very few people are especially understanding of people with different disabilities. There are people that have never interacted with a blind person, or have only done so very rarely. They do not know what it is like.”

It's important to note that many of the behavioural barriers students with disabilities face may not be the result of intentional discrimination. Even though many postsecondary education staff, faculty, and community members may act with good intentions, their behaviour and reactions can still have detrimental impacts.

“Sure, intentional discrimination sucks, but I feel like indirect discrimination based on ignorance is probably the most frustrating thing. Because in order to discriminate against a person, you have to be aware of the issue and be able to identify what's discriminatory and what is not. Disability issues are just largely unknown to many people. That ignorance is costly.”

“The truth is that people don't know that disability issues exist. I should know, I have met at least one person who admitted that to me personally. They didn't know any better, despite being a full fledged adult.”

These attitudinal behaviours exist not just within individual social interactions, but also within larger institutional structures. Many students commented that their programs of study have strict timelines for degree completion and expectations as to what constitutes an acceptable course load. This leads to students with disabilities feeling that they need to overexert themselves to keep up with their peers, and experience feelings of shame when unable to carry the expected course load or finish a program within the expected timeframe.

"I am a social work student living with chronic pain and mental health diagnoses...I sometimes feel that there is a lot of pressure to complete your degree within the allotted 4 or 5 years, but I've come to see that there isn't any shame in doing what works for you and will support your well-being even if you don't graduate in the traditional length of time."

"That [course] load was crushing. It never occurred to me that I could slow down, and that I didn't have to take them all at once, the system says that you just push through."

"When I was an undergrad there were rules for who could be considered for the Dean's honor list. You could only be recognized and receive academic awards if you carried a full course load. I was on the honor roll my first term, but that heavy course load made me so ill, it wasn't sustainable. I dropped down to three courses a term, and even though my averages stayed just as high, I never received that recognition again for my work. I felt discriminated against for prioritizing my health."

Stigma and attitudinal barriers also change how students with disabilities interact with their postsecondary educational environment. Students at the Summit shared that they struggle to fit in at their institutions, and feel unable to share their authentic selves with their peers. Some participants attributed this to their internalized ableism and their projection of how society views disability onto themselves.

"The most frustrating thing for me is that people think autism can only be presented in one way, and will often question my diagnosis. I generally just say that I'm "neurodivergent" to avoid that conversation. The people who are closest to me are supportive though, and I think that's all that matters."

"Another way that my internalized ableism has manifested itself has been my inability in the past to recognize my asexuality. I have felt a pressure to prove to people I am a sexual person, not because I experience any desire to be, but because of the belief that people with disabilities are not sexual people. I felt the need to prove this wrong, and to show people that disability does not affect me in a negative way."

"I have downplayed my medical conditions to people, because their fear/anxiety in a way just makes it worse. I have made myself more sick sometimes because I have chosen to not tell people that I needed medical attention to save them from that hard time (which is not the best approach I have now recognized.)"

Internalized ableism impacts not only the ability of students with disabilities to be themselves with their peers, it can also impact their perceptions of themselves and their own disability. Self-doubt and imposter syndrome were both topics raised by participants during the Summit. People with disabilities in the media are often depicted as being inspirational, and as overcoming their disabilities, and students shared the pressure they feel to live up to this expectation in the high-achieving environment of postsecondary institutions.

“There have been times in my life when I have needed to use a wheelchair. I have always felt very guilty about this, and have experienced an intense amount of imposter syndrome given the fact that I am, technically, able to walk. Feeling the idea that because of this, I have no right to use a mobility device, even if it provides me with the mobility I need in that moment...This is reinforced by the reactions people get when they see me stand up from my wheelchair: they often look like they have witnessed a miracle!”

“I put pressure on myself to excel at school, to participate in many sports (even if I did not like most of them). My goal was to impress people. My goal was to make people believe that my disability did not affect me. And I got positive reinforcement of this every time someone told me how impressive I was. How inspiring. How they would never be able to do what I did if they were in my situation.”

Students with disabilities also discussed the difficulties they experienced in coming to terms with their own disabilities, in part due to societal attitudes and their own internalized ableism. They emphasized that embracing disability and recognizing limitations and barriers is an important step towards self advocacy in an academic setting. Being able to recognize and communicate disability-related needs is essential to academic success and overall well being.

“I realize now that maybe they wanted to prove to others that I did not have a disability. This is damaging, because I do have a disability. The need to prove myself still continues now, although I have better come to understand it and am working on it every day.”

“Even when I got older and moved onto postsecondary, I lacked the skills to advocate for my own needs - in part because I did not fully understand them myself.”

“My own perception of myself as a disabled person was so tainted by years of unrealistic expectations and the insistence that I should strive to be neurotypical. I pushed myself so hard to achieve greatness while blending in seamlessly with the crowd, only to discover that in doing so, I'd only exacerbated my problems.”

3.2 Awareness and Training

Summit participants communicated their hopes for more comprehensive accommodation systems at universities, including training for their instructors on how to appropriately interact with students with disabilities. Many participants expressed their frustration at having to disclose, explain, and justify their disability in order to have their accommodation needs met. Students shared stories about having their disability disclosed without their permission, or of having instructors refuse to grant the accommodation requests students are entitled to.

“You should not have to educate every professor in every new class.”

“University faculty and staff should be trained (and re-trained if needed) to ensure they do not require disclosure when not necessary, and that approval must be sought before sharing personal information such as disability status.”

When instructors lack sensitivity training, students with disabilities can be negatively impacted. One student reported being called out repeatedly for leaving class when needed, despite having a specific accommodation allowing this.

“Throughout my four years, I have been interacting with many TAs and professors who are not understanding of my anxiety, and as a result have put me in a couple vulnerable situations, despite having accommodations that allow me to miss class and have alternative forms of notes available. There've been times...they would call me out...which in turn pressures me to expose my disability in front of the class, and also makes me feel guilty for being a distraction. Other times...I had to practically beg my professors and TAs to allow me a chance to compensate for participation points, even though, again, I have accommodations that allow me to leave class.”

Institutions need to clearly communicate to instructors that students with disabilities have a right to their accommodations. Many students at the Summit reported that their instructors treat the granting of accommodations as being ‘favours’ to students. It is essential that postsecondary instructors recognize that this is not the case:



accommodations allow for students with disabilities to overcome barriers to academic success which are not encountered by their able-bodied peers. By improving institutional attitudes and behaviours towards disability, the experience of disabled students could be greatly improved.

“Personally I'd like there to be some kind of training for the professors. I've had some professors fail to comply with my listed accommodations, some who came across as annoyed at needing to meet them. Sensitivity training and maybe an explanation on how to accommodate students with different needs.”

“As a whole, establishing educational awareness about “invisible disabilities” would assist instructors and professors to acknowledge the concerns surrounding stigma, barriers that still may occur for students...as they relate to ableism and diverse abilities.”

3.3 Assessment, Curriculum, and Instruction

A common theme from the Summit when students discussed the accommodations that allow them to successfully complete assessments and participate in the curriculum is the fact that disabled individuals are expected to come up with their own solutions to the barriers they experience. Students reported needing to problem solve and teach themselves how to use accessibility tools, while simultaneously balancing their mandatory coursework. This places an extra burden on students with disabilities relative to their able-bodied peers.

“For school, I had to learn how to use Dragon naturally speaking, which is a speech recognition program, in order to use my computer. While I was learning how to use that, I started university. My first two years were actually quite difficult trying to teach myself how to use a computer again as well as writing essays and taking tasks and studying so my first two years of school were quite difficult. By my third year, I really started getting the hang of things.”

3.3.1 Universal Design

Participants at the Summit had mixed feelings on the concept of ‘universal design’. They emphasize the importance of working with students with disabilities to understand how universal design impacts them in order to ensure that the design is fulfilling its intentions. The Summit keynote speaker discussed an example of universal design that is not as universally accessible as it was intended to be. In this example, steps and a ramp are combined (a so-called ‘stramp’) in a visually pleasing way, but which has been criticized by mobility-aid users as being impossible and potentially dangerous to use.

“I realized that this stramp looked and felt like a universal design for people that had never used a ramp or mobility device. It had been designed by people that did not have challenges with balance or stamina when using stairs, or by people that use handrails for balance or navigating their environment...They allow people to boast about how inclusive they are while actively adding more barriers into the built environment.”

The intention behind universal design, and consequently universal design for learning, is to come up with solutions that are usable by everybody, instead of focussing on the needs of one specific group. Summit participants note that, while this may sound inclusive, it is also important to recognize that one specific group may have different needs than another, and that disability inclusion should still be a priority for postsecondary institutions.

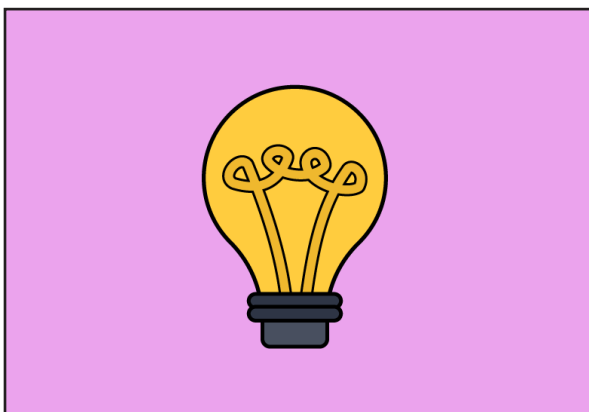
“I think universal design for learning is fantastic. Let's make everything more accessible. But one of the big ways is being promoted and marketed is this idea that you should do it because it is good for everybody. Yes, but also it is needed for students with disabilities, and it's okay if it's something you are doing that is only beneficial to students with disabilities. A lot of times this message is that we can focus on everybody. You could also focus on the disability inclusion parts.”

3.3.2 Co-operative Education

Many students participating in the Summit are enrolled in co-operative education programs that require work placements. Students with disabilities shared that they experienced barriers to their success at all levels of the co-operative education process. For example, the rigid timelines associated with these programs can be difficult for students who experience unpredictable health complications or flare ups.

“I am a social work student living with chronic pain and mental health diagnoses...A requirement of my program is completing two 400 hour unpaid work placements. You must complete these within 1 or 2 semesters, and if you don't succeed in that you have to do it over. I found this to be really challenging because my health is unpredictable. I think that having the option to complete hours at your own pace would be helpful.”

Other students shared that they struggle with interviews for co-op positions. Students experience uncertainty regarding disclosing their disability during interviews, and shared their fears that disclosing a disability may impact their ability to find a placement due to stigma and perceived limitations. Participants noted that while the actions of an



interviewer can help indicate an inclusive workplace and guide student's placement decisions, not all students have the luxury of choosing between placements or accurately interpreting these actions.

“My biggest fear when it comes to job searches, which I’m currently doing right now, is the interview round. I’ve always requested accommodations throughout the way, but I know that certain hiring committees or hiring panels will have different preconceived notions with regards to autistic folks...Often I don’t get requests answered, and the best I can get is having the questions posted in my chat...overall, the accommodations will never meet up to the level where you as an autistic being can get the best support at the interview.”

“One thing I do notice though, is that if you are getting to the interview, and you are sensing that you can’t fully be yourself during that interview process. I think that’s a very good indicator, a very good reflex, that the job is not the right place for you. I’m also using that as my internal selection process. Not only are they selecting me, I’m also selecting who to be with and who to apply for.”

Once a student with a disability is able to find a placement, the next difficulty they face is ensuring that their accessibility needs are met during that placement. Accommodations that students receive at their institution do not extend to the working-world, and it is up to students with disabilities to discuss their accessibility requirements with their co-op employers. One student shared that, at their institution, they are able to use a recorder in classes due to their inability to take notes. When on co-op placement, this was not permitted by the employer. As accommodations are necessary for students with disabilities to succeed, when these requests are refused, students may need to seek employment elsewhere.

“My concern as a disabled student is placements...One of my placements could not accommodate me because I cannot take my own notes. Even though I told them that I had my recorder with me, I asked if I could record the session and later take my own notes then erase it, and they said no. I guess it was company policy. I actually ended up having to find my own placement again.”

3.3.3 STEM Labs and Field Work

In addition to co-op, many programs have requirements for laboratory courses and field work, which can pose additional barriers to students with disabilities. Many students shared that they struggled to complete these requirements.

“Labs were manageable for me - I could show up prepared, do what was necessary, and then be out in three hours. It wasn’t ideal, and I experienced a lot of pain and discomfort during this time, but I got through them.”

Field work or labs requiring physical labor can be especially difficult for students with disabilities, who may not be able to perform certain tasks that are required for the course. Labs and field courses need to be designed in a way that individuals with disabilities are able to participate to the same extent as their able-bodied colleagues to ensure they are getting the same learning experience. Some participants with disabilities shared that they felt the need to push themselves in order to fit in with their peers.

“Much of our lab work was done in teams, and I was often able to avoid doing physical labor that I knew I should avoid, under the pretense of taking notes or photos. I also equipped myself with as much information as I could before labs so I could be useful in other ways.”

“I often gave in to the desire to prove myself as a person with a disability, and a woman in engineering. I carried heavy metals, used demanding machines, and walked around hazardous lab sites because I wanted to prove to everyone (and myself), that I deserved to be there as much as everyone else”

A major issue students with disabilities noted with regards to labs and field work is that the expectations for these courses may not be clearly communicated in advance. Students with disabilities need to know what will be required of them in these courses in order to plan ahead and ensure their accessibility needs are met in these scenarios. Summit participants noted that it would be useful to know whether heavy lifting, physical labor, exposure to chemicals, or the ability to walk long distances are required in advance. Similarly, they shared that the ability to take breaks is essential, especially in lab or field work scenarios which might be longer than regular classes.

“My lymphedema meant that being on my feet for prolonged periods made my legs become more swollen, sometimes to the point that I could no longer lift my leg. There were no places to sit and rest during the field courses, but that would not have made much difference as they were given so few breaks. We were expected to work, to take notes, learn, and write about our findings once the work was done, and I can’t think of an environment that would be less conducive to my learning.”

“After my first ever chemistry lab, I was in the ER with a severe headache. Second chemistry lab, ER again. Even though the chemicals we were using were technically ‘safe’, I was really sensitive to them. I had to use a respirator for the rest of my lab courses. There was no mention in the course notes that some people could be sensitive or might need masks, and I often got called out for wearing them.”

“I hadn’t realized that we would be expected to actually be in the river, or that the terrain would be so difficult...The professor had brought some fishing pants/boot combinations...I was too embarrassed and proud to tell them the pants and boots would not fit me. I still regret not standing up for myself and refusing to go in the water or anywhere that was dangerous for me.”

3.3.4 Barriers Faced by Graduate Students

Graduate students with disabilities have unique needs and face unique barriers relative to undergraduate students. The general process of obtaining accommodations as a graduate student is more difficult: accessibility offices typically devote their resources to undergraduate accommodations, and the process is less defined for graduate studies. Participants shared that, as graduate students, they were often encouraged to go inactive for an entire term instead of being offered short-term leave or accommodations that would allow them to continue.

“If I had been working in industry, I would have had three or four stints on short-term medical leave (2 weeks – 2 months each). However, at university, the only option available to graduate students for “medical leave” is to go inactive for a term (or several terms) for medical reasons - and put all scholarships (i.e., income) on hold. And, since the significant impacts of my disabilities never lasted that long (nor were they expected to), I never bothered with the lengthy and complicated process of applying for an inactive term.”

“I quickly discovered that the only real accommodations available to grad students were related to degree milestones (and even those were limited)...You can take a term off or muddle through. If you are approaching a milestone, there are a few small accommodations possible but the base format – the presentation, defence, thesis/ dissertation, or comprehensive exam format – is set...even if the base format itself is a barrier considering one’s current capabilities. I genuinely feared I would fail to achieve a milestone because of the limitations I was experiencing.”



Graduate students are often told to work directly with their supervisor to obtain unofficial accommodations, which requires that they disclose their disability to their supervisor. The success of these unofficial accommodation requests is then at the discretion of the individual advisor, as opposed to an office dedicated to supporting students with disabilities.

“This brings me to my final disappointing experience as a graduate student with invisible disabilities: forced and involuntary disclosure. I have been required to disclose my disability status to individuals outside the student accessibility office or medical personnel in order to access services...I was immensely frustrated that I was forced to disclose my disability status.”

Completing graduate school may be more intensive than undergraduate studies, and these higher expectations may result in higher support needs or limited opportunities for students with disabilities to pursue graduate degrees. Graduate programs have rigid timelines for degree milestones, which some students may struggle to meet due to the unpredictable nature of disability. Similarly, not all programs or fields of graduate studies are accommodating with regards to sick days or time off for medical leave.

“Universities should re-examine the necessity of sticking to a rigid format for graduate degree milestones.”

“When not in a [depressive] episode, I still have down days and weeks which severely limit my productivity during those times. I guess those are like sick days... although graduate student contracts do not include sick days (or vacation days) so I am not sure they are technically allowed to begin with. I take them because I have to. Collectively, I am sure my “sick days” due to depression add up to over a term of days absent.”

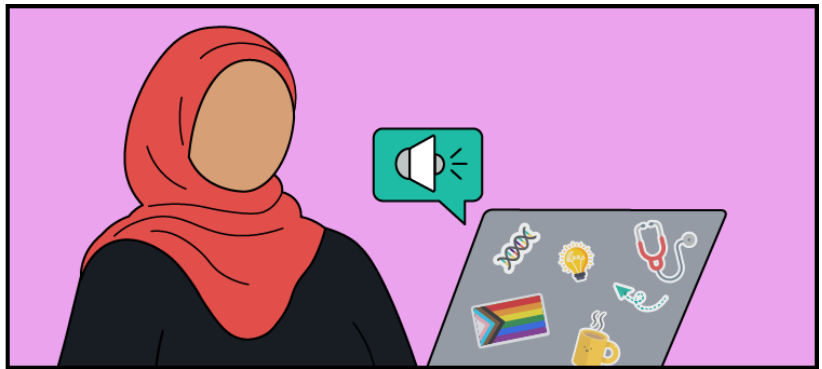
3.4 Digital Learning and Technology

Students at the Summit discussed their different perspectives on the use of technology, particularly virtual learning platforms in postsecondary institutions. Many participants shared that the shift during the COVID-19 pandemic to entirely virtual-based learning systems facilitated a more positive learning experience. For many, shifting back to in-person classes has been difficult.

“I’m in my second year of a college program. I am fully in person for one course, and it’s a big struggle due to my past classes being fully online. If I’m in person, I find it harder to focus and understand, but most of my profs have been understanding.”

“[Some] professors have continued to offer classes via Microsoft Teams, which has helped as driving to and from...every class would have been very difficult for me (especially with my post-concussion related symptoms).”

Many students with disabilities expressed their desire to continue to use and have access to the same virtual resources that were established during the pandemic. During this time, all classes ran virtually, as did laboratory and field courses (which usually only run in-person). Campus and



institutional events were also hosted virtually. With postsecondary institutions pushing a return to in-person learning and events, students with disabilities are losing access they had during the pandemic, and are once again feeling left behind.

“One of the more upsetting ‘post’-pandemic shifts is that we know that the accessible resources are in place but there are many profs, professionals, etc that refuse to use them. It’s very frustrating being told that ‘that can’t be offered online’ when it was less than 6 months ago. This goes for doctor’s appointments as well. It feels as though once the ‘general’ population no longer needed these resources they no longer mattered.”

There are, however, compounding barriers that may be experienced by students with disabilities with respect to digital accessibility in learning. Access to up-to-date technology and a stable internet connection are necessary to take part in virtual learning experiences. As students with disabilities may experience additional financial burden as a result of their disabilities (often referred to as the ‘crip tax’), virtual learning may not be a viable option for many individuals.

“One tricky complication about online courses, they are only useful if you can afford the technology to use it. This is actually an economic privilege that many do not share. If you are limited to using a computer in a public library, this neither helps with health and safety, nor facilitates learning. This makes university a rich-person’s game...And there is a large portion of the disabled community that does not enjoy this privilege.”

3.5 Organizational Barriers

A frequent subject in Summit discussions was the systemic nature of ableism in academic institutions. Summit participants felt that programs were designed for non-disabled students who have a consistent ability to fully participate in academics, including concurrent attendance of a certain number of classes, completion of additional educational placements, and maintaining grades. Disabilities and chronic illnesses are, by nature, unpredictable and dynamic, resulting in students being unable to fully participate at the required times to the required standard as a result of their disability.

“Although my professors are accepting of my accommodations, the program as a whole is very ableist in nature. For example, we are only able to miss a certain number of days...[otherwise] we have to withdraw from the course. Further, the course load [during] these clinical placements is too much for my current cognitive health (despite accommodations in place), as I find it difficult to maintain adequate grades and/or complete assignments in a timely manner. In addition, my symptoms related to the disabilities from this injury have flares and I can not determine when they will occur, which creates a lot of stress on me to explain to professors why this occurs.”

“Although there are established accommodations put in place, there is still an ableist focus on nursing programs that students have to adhere to (maintain certain grades, complete certain assignments, attend certain clinicals, complete certain tasks/duties) despite individual’s diversabilities.”

While there may exist post-hoc policies to support students, such as the ability to be registered ‘inactive’ for a semester due to medical reasons, the misalignment of these policies with organizational attitudes can inadvertently result in further harm to students with disabilities.

“An inactive term would show up on my [graduate student] records, potentially impacting future hiring decisions (despite the official stance that it shouldn’t).”

Given the difficulties in obtaining accommodations and the perception that inactive semesters or accommodation records will impact future studies or job opportunities, many students shared that they have chosen to pursue their studies without this type of support from their institutions.



“Based on these experiences and my conversations with others, I have never sought accommodation related to my struggles with depression. I do not believe there are any accommodations that they could offer that would be worth the hassle and drawbacks. My major depressive episode lasted less than a term - and I would not have had the capacity to pursue accommodation or an inactive term were that not the case.”

“I do not intend to apply for a degree extension on this basis because it would go on my record.”

3.5.1 Accommodation Process

Students at the Summit noted that, in their experiences at postsecondary institutions, accommodations are often viewed by instructors as added advantages for students with disabilities, or as being unnecessary altogether. Participants affirm that their accommodations are essential to their academic success.

“My accommodations aren't helpful, they are needed.”

“Accommodations or accessibility in general is often treated as something that can be compromised. Many non disabled persons do not recognize the significance of having accommodations and or how they equated to survival. It's not a matter of I want you to wear the FM microphone, I NEED you to wear it. The amount of times I have 'fought' with professors about this issue is three times too many.”

“I've often been told it's unfair that I get extra time for my tests - everyone would benefit from extra time, so why do I get it? But I don't think able-bodied people know what it's like trying to write a test when you spend half your time trying not to drop your pen, trying to control your tremor so your handwriting looks ok, trying to watch your posture so you don't injure yourself while sitting through the test, trying not to think about how much pain you're in, and also trying to remember the content! That extra time gives me the opportunity to perform at the same level as my peers, it doesn't give me an advantage, it levels the playing field.”

Another discussion at the Summit was the fact that both requesting and receiving approval for accommodations at postsecondary institutions can be a difficult process. Students with disabilities often encounter barriers in the medical system. For example, there may be long wait-times associated with seeing certain medical professionals, while other medical offices may charge a fee for medical documentation. This places students with disabilities at a disadvantage when even starting the process of requesting necessary accommodations that require medical documentation.

“I found that there were barriers to accessing student accommodations... because for me, as someone that struggles with executive dysfunctioning, getting all the medical documentation, especially as someone that experiences barriers related to lack of access to regular medical care, was overwhelming to me to the extent that I did not end up registering for accommodations.”

“Unfortunately, it is very based on the medical model of disability, so you are going to have to pay a couple thousand dollars to go get diagnosed [and access psychoeducational testing for neurodivergence]...It is not the best process, especially for students who do not have the financial means to go get diagnosed, and also the long process it takes, especially if you cannot go to a private clinic to get diagnosed and go through public healthcare, the wait list is very long and you are probably not going to get those accommodations in time.”

Even when medical documentation is provided, some students receive negative responses to their accommodation requests, often without a reasonable explanation for the refusal. Students with disabilities request accommodations that will facilitate their wellbeing and success in the academic environment, when their accessibility needs are not met, students with disabilities are unable to perform and participate to their full academic potential.

“Negative responses can be devastating and knock you out and destabilize you.”

“I made what I thought was a simple request - all my lectures were in a theater with folding chairs, which caused me a lot of pain to sit in as I wear a spinal brace. I just wanted a regular chair...I was told ‘no’, apparently I would be a fire hazard?...I had to sit in those chairs for my 3 hour lectures in agony, I couldn’t focus on material and would often leave halfway through when the pain was unmanageable. I explained this to both the disability office and my instructors, but no one ever offered alternatives, or provided me with the material I missed.”

Even positive stories from students with disabilities emphasize the need for postsecondary institutions to do more to support them. Students commented that the effort they put into applying for and receiving their necessary accommodations was a significant burden.

“I did not consider myself a student with a disability until I got to university. I did not know I had the right to accommodations until I heard about accommodation services at the university...The accommodation officer told me that I had rights, and that they would fight for them...To me, this felt like so much, and I was extremely grateful. Unfortunately, it wasn’t enough, and I deserved more. Many other students with disabilities deserved better every day.”

Some students with disabilities even shared that they had deliberately chosen not to seek accommodations from their institutions because of the barriers they faced during the request process, or due to interactions with accommodations advisors that had made them uncomfortable. The requirement to disclose medical information regarding disability can make students uncomfortable, as can the concept of having their disability ‘on record’.



"The first time I met an accessibility advisor in my first year, they asked me all these medical questions...I figured they were supposed to support me, so I shared more than I was comfortable with. The advisor suggested that I would feel better if I didn't take so much medication. I have heart disease: if I don't take medication, I die. I felt so betrayed and misunderstood...I was terrified of going back, and I am still very uncomfortable with the accessibility office in general after that experience".

"For now, I do not feel that I can afford to have my disabilities on record from a future hiring perspective, and I could not afford (literally) to take a term off of my studies for my disabilities."

Many students shared stories of times when the formal accommodation process was unable to provide the necessary accessibility supports. Instead, participants often rely on 'unofficial' accommodations granted by understanding instructors in the absence of documentation or an official accommodation request. Even when students have medical documentation, they note that the accommodation approval process at their institutions can be very long, and many shared stories of not being able to utilize their accommodations within the necessary timeframe.

"I am lucky that many of my professors were supportive without requiring official registration."

"My accommodation experience has not been great. In one instance, it took me over a month to be cleared to use an aid to lessen my pain despite having a doctor's note before I applied for the accommodation. I was not allowed to use the aid without explicit approval, so I had to endure the pain because my research team needed me during that time. My supervisor and I arranged things to minimize the time I was required to be on campus, but we could not eliminate the need entirely."

"Together [with my supervisor], we determined that I would muddle along as able for a short time [with a disability] to maintain my income and ability to proceed with my studies. So, I have no official record of medical leave - which means that I cannot state medical reasons for degree completion extensions... Despite this "small snag", I would make the same decisions again in the same circumstances."

Students shared that they experienced many difficulties at all levels of the accommodation process: recognizing and coming to terms with their own need for support, submitting formal accommodation requests, and then supplying the required medical documentation. Summit participants indicated their desire for institutions to move away from this medical model, which requires medical documentation before accommodations can be granted. Instead, students with disabilities would prefer to be recognized as being the experts when it comes to their own accommodation needs.

“I wish schools would just automatically believe students when they identify that they need support, without putting the onus of proof on them.”

“Believe students that identify that they need academic support without requiring medical proof. Not everyone has easy access to supportive medical professionals. Believing people are the experts in their own experiences and needs should be the automatic response.”

3.6 Social Realms, Campus Life

The postsecondary educational experience is more than just classwork. Students with disabilities may also face barriers in the social realms of campus life, and find that they are unable to participate to the same extent or in the same way as their able bodied peers. Many participants commented that, between managing their disability and completing their academic requirements, they do not have the energy to maintain a meaningful or fulfilling social life.

“My first degree was often a lonely experience because of managing chronic pain. I couldn't do all the fun things my friends did - eat anything they want, stay up all night, dance, party, etc. I was often left out and overlooked, and I didn't have the time or the energy to be involved in much outside the classroom. I never met anyone like me, and I missed having a sense of community or connection. Working on my second degree is a lot easier because I've had time to understand myself and my disability, and I have supports and like-minded friends. I wish I'd had all that when I was younger!”

While there are many online disability-related communities where students may be able to find support, Summit participants shared that these may be difficult to access for individuals depending on their neurodiversity.

“All of these things are huge pieces and if you keep seeing these events and activities that are happening and you don't have inroads for people to participate with accessibility needs, it causes a lot of it causes a lot of grief.”

The general stigma that people with disabilities face can also impact how students with disabilities are able to interact with and relate to others. Students at the Summit shared that able-bodied peers may not have experience meeting individuals with disabilities, which can make social encounters awkward.

“I started to have more social problems. For example, a lot of people in the working world would freeze up: they would not know exactly how to interact with me because they would not know what I can do.”

Participants at the Summit noted that educating student leaders on accessibility would be a good starting point for removing social barriers for students with disabilities. Campus events need to be planned with accessibility in mind, and need to be advertised far enough in advance that students with disabilities are able to ensure that their accommodation needs for participation are met.

“Why do campus events, especially social events run by student groups and spearheaded by student leaders not give enough advance notice of activities so that accommodation arrangements can be made. e.g. at least three weeks notice - haven't they gotten the message around equity, inclusivity yet? This oversight remains status quo and excludes a large portion of the student body.”

“I'm an undergraduate, and one of my frustrations is really around the bandwidth and the opportunity to try and be able to prioritize those social interactions. And I see one area where this falls really short is around social groups and timing of student activities...Those activities have no pathways for accommodations or anything.”

Many Summit participants also shared that their social struggles as students with disabilities are compounded by their other intersectional identities. While the Summit mainly focused on the disabled identity, many participants identified as members of other marginalized groups, which also experience their own unique social stigmas. When building community spaces for individuals with disabilities, it is essential that these spaces are equally welcoming towards other intersectional identities.

“Compounding marginalization is not well studied and understood, and the more marginalized identities you embody, the more complex and individual that intersection becomes. And I have certainly found that to be very isolating. I don't feel like I fit in anywhere.”

"I generally do not feel like I fit in...Queer spaces tend to be very white, and disability spaces tend to be very white. If you go to cultural events where I look like I fit in, there's a lot of homophobic and ableist ideologies in those spaces. I am not able to find a space where I feel fully comfortable. I enter spaces with the understanding that I stick out. When possible, I try to view it as a platform for advocacy. If I'm going to stick out so much, I might as well use that to my advantage where possible, if I feel safe and comfortable (which is not always)."

The inability to fully participate in campus events and social activities as the result of disabilities can be devastating and have negative impacts on students. Many students at the Summit mentioned feeling disconnected and distanced from campus life, acknowledging that this often unintentional discrimination compounds other experienced barriers.

"All of these things are huge pieces and if you keep seeing these events and activities that are happening and you don't have inroads for people to participate with accessibility needs, it causes a lot of it causes a lot of grief."

3.7 Physical and Architectural Barriers

Some of the most difficult barriers for students with disabilities to overcome are physical and architectural barriers, where the physical features of the built environment of their institution limit their access. Architectural barriers discussed by students during the Summit included classrooms on upper floors without easy access to lifts; the absence of functioning automatic push buttons on all doors; and convenient accessible parking and washrooms. Participants reported that these barriers may require them to risk their safety in order to attend their classes, and that encountering these barriers regularly is both frustrating and disheartening. Participants emphasized that no student should have to worry about being able to physically make it into their classroom.

"The winter here is awful. Trying to walk around campus as someone who has a difficult time walking on uneven ground is already challenging with the unreliable sidewalks (missing stones, cracks, potholes, dirt paths to get to classes) in the fall/summer terms, but in the winter there is too much snow, slush and ice covering the majority of sidewalks and stairs that makes it a huge risk for my safety."

"Using mobility aids on a daily basis has proven to be a challenge when accessing physical spaces on campus. From elevators being out of order to a lack of functioning push buttons, actually getting to class can sometimes feel impossible."

“Another major challenge [as a blind student] was navigation...Some areas in the University are not very easy to navigate for me. Some areas have very long courts where there is big open space. It is very difficult to walk in a line when you have no reference point at all. I have to follow the grass and other landmarks. Next time you go for a walk, look for a bunch of landmarks that you can touch. If there is nothing like that, then it is very easy for me to get lost.”

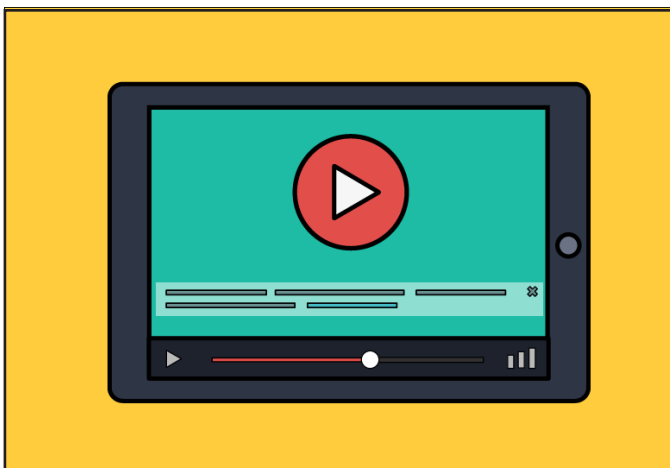
Students with neurodiversity may also face architectural barriers to their education, although these may be less visible than the issues faced by individuals with mobility difficulties. Neurodiverse students may experience difficulty processing sensory information, and may be very sensitive to the lighting and noise levels of their surroundings when on campus.

“I've struggled in school since I can remember, I just didn't understand why at the time. Fluorescent lights for someone with sensory issues are incredibly triggering. Last semester, I had to miss quite a few classes because the lights in that particular room were glaringly bright to the point where it made me nauseous... It isn't just uncomfortable for me. It is physically painful.”

In some cases, these barriers may prevent a student with a disability from being able to attend classes entirely. It is essential that institutions support their students with disabilities in such a way that they are able to access their classes without any added difficulty relative to their able-bodied peers, especially given that they are paying the same tuition.

“I was forced to miss more than half my [in-person] classes...The university left me feeling abandoned, neglected, and abused.”

In these discussions, students with disabilities reiterated that the responsibility falls on them to ensure that spaces are accessible. This places extra workload on these students: for example, some participants reported having to check all their classrooms before



the start of term to ensure that the classroom is a space they can actually access. If the space is inaccessible, then the onus is on the student to report this and find a solution. The fact that spaces on campuses exist that may not be accessible to individuals is hugely problematic, and educational spaces need to be designed in a way that ensures that no one is excluded.

“One thing that was always a struggle, while I was at school, is making sure that things were physically accessible for me. At the beginning of each semester I would have to go to each one of my classrooms that my courses were being held in and make sure that I could physically get into the class and find a space that was accessible for me. That was one major thing that I remember always doing when I was at school.”

“I’ve always struggled with managing my disability in biology labs, and I don’t even use any mobility devices. I got upset, so I asked the department how on earth they would accommodate a wheelchair user in that space if they couldn’t make it work for me. They just shrugged: no wheelchair user had ever been in those labs, and no one had ever asked to be accommodated like that...Those labs are required courses for the department, so really that means there’s never been a wheelchair user in the program. As someone who may one day require mobility aids, that really bothers me.”

Students also reported that, when faced with architectural barriers or non-functioning accessible technology, there is not always an obvious way to report this to the institution. As malfunctioning accessible door buttons or elevators could prevent a student with a disability from reaching their destination on campus, it is important that these technologies are maintained, checked regularly, and that any issues that do arise are solved in a timely manner to ensure there is no disruption to the education of students who rely on accessible technology.

“It would be helpful for push buttons and elevators to be reported to maintenance when they are out of order, instead of able-bodied people just taking the stairs and turning a blind eye.”

3.8 Financial Barriers

In addition to physical barriers, students with disabilities may also experience financial barriers. Disability-related treatments may be expensive, and can place additional financial burden on students. For example, one participant at Summit shared that their “medication alone costs \$20 000 dollars annually”, and while they are fortunate that their institution’s insurance covers “a portion of this”, others with complex medical needs may not be so lucky. This is a financial burden that able-bodied individuals do not experience, and as such may not appreciate how expensive it can be to have a disability. Many participants shared that they need to work part-time (sometimes taking on multiple positions) in order to support themselves and their disability-related needs.

"I had to accept two part-time positions (while attending nursing school part-time) to ensure I have enough funding...it has been difficult to adjust to ensure I have enough hours to have the funding to support my livelihood, while still excelling in my academic studies."

Managing disabilities can also be time consuming. This reduces the number of hours a student has available both for their academics and for working to support themselves. Taking a reduced course load in order to manage a disability will also increase the number of years a student is in school prior to entering the workforce. Some participants shared that they would not be able to complete their academics without the support of their families.

"I attended [a mental illness support program] 2-3 times a week for the entirety of the summer...Throughout this time, I was unable to work and had to rely on parental support for groceries and assistance with accommodations."

"The issue of finances has been a factor for me in relation to my disabilities, specifically as it relates to me having to go down to part-time, in addition to having to go to treatment for my post-concussion related symptoms."

3.9 Additional Barrier Areas Identified by Summit Participants

In addition to the eight barrier regions identified by the AODA PSES recommendations discussed above, participants at the Summit shared additional barriers that they experience that are not covered in the PSES document. These include navigating disability disclosure, the impact of the pandemic on students with disabilities, the transition from an academic environment to the workplace, and the unique barriers faced by graduate students.

3.9.1 Disclosure

Following requests in the registration form, one of Summit panels covered the difficult topic of disability disclosure. There are many factors that are taken into consideration by students with regards to disclosing their disabilities. Participants shared that, in general, they were very apprehensive of sharing specifics of their disability with their institution, but all agreed that disclosure is made easier by the fact that institutions have procedures for accommodations (while many workplaces may not). The discussions held during the Summit and shared in this section mostly cover the topic of disclosing invisible disabilities, although there was also some conversation on how individuals with highly visible conditions navigate the forced disclosure of the fact that they have a disability.

“As a teaching assistant, I frequently consider sharing my struggles with my students so they will know that they are not alone – but that knowledge would then be “out there” and could become known by the institution. I know that medical diagnoses and disabilities should not impact my chances of being hired in the future or how people treat me now...but I am a realist, so I hide this part of myself from almost everyone.”

“Disclosing I have MS put my career progression to a halt. I've actually had to return to school to change careers. It is totally different in an education setting vs an employment setting. Some employers are so old school that they don't even know what to do when you ask for accommodations.”

Disclosure is also a significant concern to students with disabilities in a social setting. Participants shared that, if disability is integral to their identity, it is important that they share this identity with their friends and peers. They also shared their fears that disclosing a disability may alienate them from their peers, and that they have to carefully balance these competing needs. Some students shared that this is easier to do in an online environment than in person, as it requires less risk and fewer emotional resources.

“In my experience, disclosing to people you meet online is the best filter for sure. It also ends conversations very quickly. People seem to disappear once they find out... In online spaces, I try to at least share about my needs early on, so that I don't invest in developing relationships of any sort without them being prepared or willing to understand me, and online people are easier to filter out.”

“When I am starting, let's say, to make new friends, that is a really difficult thing for me to navigate. Do I want to disclose that really soon?...There are people who will then not know how to act around you, so poof, there goes the friendship. If you just never tell them, on the other hand, you are not really being honest in the relationship. It really depends on the individual situations and the individual challenges.”

Another speaker noted that, while disclosure may be difficult, there are also risks associated with choosing not to disclose a disability. In order to receive accommodations from an institution, some degree of disclosure and medical documentation is required. If a student chooses not to disclose, they risk not having their accessibility needs met. There are also, however, risks associated with disclosing, and Summit panelists discussed how navigating disclosure is a complex balancing act.

"I would also consider the risk factors of not disclosing. One of the risks, obviously, of not disclosing is that you may not be accommodated. Can you afford to take that risk? In other spaces, you might not be able to afford the risk of disclosing. In places like immigration offices, if you disclose that you have autism or any sort of disability, you might be rejected. That might be a space where you would determine that the risk is too high, and that you will not disclose."

Some participants shared that disclosing their disability repeatedly can be draining. Instructors may not respect an accommodation request without additional explanations as to why those accommodations are needed. Students may find themselves needing to disclose their disability first to their accessibility office to have an accommodation request approved, and then a second time to instructors. One participant shared that needing to repeatedly explain their disability was demeaning, and that one explanation to the accessibility office should be sufficient.

"...that does not necessarily mean I enjoy disclosing my disability all of the time. In university, I have an accommodation letter which is supposed to do the disclosure for me. However, my professors sometimes do not necessarily feel like that is enough for them. They feel like I need to justify the accommodation, like an extension for an extra week. And it further forces me to disclose more and over-share my information. Then it feels like I am guilt tripping them into giving me more attention, and to pity me, (which is kind of degrading and not really nice)."

Another issue faced by students with disabilities is forced disclosure, when an instructor either deliberately or accidentally shares information regarding a disability without permission of the student. If a student chooses to disclose their disability to an individual or as part of their institution's accommodation process, their privacy needs to be respected: just because they've disclosed in one scenario does not imply they are comfortable disclosing in all scenarios.

"One TA in particular told me my tutorial is not a cause for anxiety, that my reaction was unjustified, and then proceeded to send an email to the entire class stating the importance of being present for the tutorial, which I felt like was directed at me."

"I was initially enrolled as a full time student and then became part time status because of some issues with the classroom and professors. Once one of my professors disclosed my accommodations in front of the whole class."

3.9.2 COVID-19 and Safety Protocols

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to present barriers for students with disabilities. Even though lockdowns have ended and postsecondary institutions are pushing a return to 'normal' pre-pandemic activities, students with disabilities, especially immunocompromising ones, continue to be negatively affected by COVID-19. This is exacerbated by societal insistence that pandemic-related safety measures (such as masking and social distancing) are no longer required, as well as the fact that a mandatory quarantine period for sick individuals is no longer in place. Students with immunocompromising conditions worry for their health and safety in classes that emphasize the importance of in-person attendance, and at events that take no measures to mitigate the risk to vulnerable populations. Participants at the Summit want to highlight that the pandemic is not over and that COVID-19 and other contagious illnesses continue to pose a threat to the community.

"I'm immunocompromised because of Long COVID...I was in a tutorial, and there was someone in the row behind me coughing 2-3 times a minute. I had a mask but didn't offer it because there's no real way to do that that isn't rude. I just sat there getting more and more nervous until I decided to just get up and move to another seat."

"I know people living with disabilities are struggling to access their in person classes safely without putting their health at significant risk. They tell me they feel isolated in an environment where physical presence on campus is necessary for their academic success, and where people in the institution are not behaving in ways that show they care about their health...As someone who was also at risk, advocating for these measures can feel isolating, especially when it seems like most people in my life act as though COVID is over and avoid discussing it... The pandemic and its impact on marginalized groups are very much ongoing."



3.9.3 Transitioning from Postsecondary to the Workplace

One of the requested topics from the Summit registration form was the transition from postsecondary education to the workplace. Accommodation processes at academic institutions are highly structured, with offices and institutional resources dedicated to accessibility. This is often not the case in the working-world, and students described the difficulties they faced during this transition. As postsecondary institutions continue citing employment statistics after graduation, as well as expand career action centres to support work placements and transition to full-time workplaces, it is vital that students with disabilities are considered as a target audience for new programming.

“What does it look like to transition from the structured support of university to the working world? How can you be prepared so that, when you graduate, you are not without support?”

“In University there was more of a structure. If you need a document made more accessible, you know where to go. If you need other accommodations, you know where to go. In the workplace, I found it was not really like that at all... It was on you to work directly with all your colleagues and your manager to get accommodations.”

3.10 Impact of Barriers on Students with Disabilities

The barriers in assessment, curriculum, and instruction, compounded by the additional barriers identified in this report, can have a significant impact on the well-being and academic success of students with disabilities. Summit participants shared that studying at a postsecondary institution is a challenging experience for everyone, students with disabilities may struggle more than their able-bodied peers. Some of the every-day aspects of student life may be draining for a student with a disability. Summit participants also wanted to highlight the difference between being able to do something, and being able to do something safely given their disability. The highly competitive academic environment can make it difficult for students with disabilities to prioritize their health and wellbeing.

“Making it from one end of campus to the other might seem like a tedious walk to some, but for many of us with a disability, it is both physically and mentally draining.”

Students with disabilities may become frustrated and exhausted by the barriers they face, which can have a negative impact on their mental health. Summit participants shared that between focusing on their academics and the social stigma associated with having a disability, they felt lonely and isolated.

"I feel extremely lonely due to the negative impact of my hearing impairment on communication. Understanding and comprehending the other person's words in English without using a mobile phone is very challenging for me. The continuous use of a phone and software is also very tiring and exhausting. This makes it difficult for me to have active social relationships and meaningful everyday conversations...I am confident that continuing this trend will lead to severe depression because, no matter how internally strong and resilient you are, interaction with others is necessary for living in society, and loneliness is not beneficial."

Throughout the Summit, students with disabilities emphasized the extent to which self-advocacy was essential to their success. Students with disabilities may, however, have limited resources for this, and participants also discussed the importance of being able to recognize when they are low on resources to prevent themselves from experiencing burnout.

"Advocating for yourself takes soooo much energy; especially when you already have limited bandwidth, and that being coupled with often having to reduce / restrict participation, even with reduced course loads."

"As someone who scream cried in the car yesterday because of the energy it took to advocate for myself (in the medical system in this case)...YES!"

"I know that it's not great when I push myself to the point of shutting down or burn out, so how do you notice that out-of-balance sooner than when it's dire?"



4.0 Recommendations for Postsecondary Institutions from Students with Disabilities

NOTE: These recommendations represent the limited conversations that occurred during the Summit and its associated survey forms. While students with disabilities were eager to develop recommendations with regards to systemic institutional change, they can only speak with regards to their own experiences.

These recommendations are meant to provide postsecondary institutions with the voices of students with disabilities, in the hopes that these quotes will inspire the advancement of institutional accessibility and disability inclusions. Use these as catalysts for internal consultations and further conversations with students with disabilities.

4.1 Need for Systemic and Institutional Change

First and foremost, students with disabilities want their institutions to ensure that their accessibility needs are being met. This requires **communicating with students** with disabilities to determine how best to meet their needs, and then following up to ensure that the support provided has the desired effect.

“The [campus accessibility center] introduced me to a volunteer for five months, and we spoke for two hours each week, with the help of the Live-Transcribe application on my cell phone. However, he was an ordinary English Literature student and did not have expertise in lip-reading and speaking systematically. In other words, our sessions were not helpful, and it did not contribute to improving my English lip-reading skills.”

"I had a notetaking accommodation...[this term] due to no notetakers, I was unable to get this service, which caused a lot of stress for me because it took me a lot longer to try to retain everything that I was reviewing and then studying for course content (due to my disabilities)."

"I think we should not forget the benefits of online learning . Sure it was a rough transition and not all of the accommodations were available or had good quality. But with our rush back into normalcy we have forgotten what we learned about accessibility in the pandemic. Recorded lectures, captions, asynchronous lectures were great! Why have we forgotten them now that we're back on campus?"

Students often find that they need to rely on the goodwill of their classmates to support them through lectures. While Summit participants were heartened by stories of the willingness of able-bodied peers to help, students with disabilities expect their accessibility supports to come from the institution, as opposed to the kindness of those who sit next to them in their classes.

"I am fortunate to have had some kind classmates who would go out of their way to make space for me and take notes in class on my behalf during my hospitalizations."

"I was also very lucky in school to have friends as well as notetakers in classes to help me take notes, even if I was there, they would help take notes for me, and if I had to miss a class due to my disability...I was able to get notes from my note takers and my friends."

"I have had friends in classes who will have the cameras on their laptops on, and turn around their computers so I can attend classes that way. I have people do all of their meetings with me with computers in front of them. There are ways around it. You just have to be really, really creative."

4.2 Recommendations for Instructors

Many Summit participants shared that whether their accessibility needs are met for a given class depends entirely on the instructor. The attitude of course instructors with regards to accommodations should not be a factor impacting the success of a student with a disability. Once an accommodation request is approved by the accessibility office of an institution, that accommodation needs to be provided equally in all the student's classes.

"I remember when I first got to university there were different categories of professors I encountered when it came to accommodations. The vast majority of them were very open to it, then there were ones who were not accommodating in the beginning simply because they just didn't know a whole lot about my needs and what worked best for me, it had nothing to do with lack of willingness. Then there was the other small, unfortunate group of people that were more rigid and resistant to wanting to change anything to meet accommodations."

"Accommodations at my school seemed like a mere suggestion to professors. There's been so many times where I had professors tell me this is unfair to other students, I'm not gonna grant you these accommodations. So then I just have to drop the class and go elsewhere. Accessibility services can only offer them resources and alternative accommodations, but ultimately they can't make the professors do anything. Speaking to professors, I think there needs to be some sort of incentive for professors to have accessible classrooms if they're not going to be mandated."

Students with disabilities want their institutions to know that they are not requesting accommodations in order to make more work for the instructors or to disadvantage their peers. Accommodations allow students with disabilities to perform to the best of their abilities, and to benefit and learn the most from their classes.

"I need professors to actually listen and pay attention. I know accessibility sounds like work, effort that you don't have time for. But I can assure you that we're not asking for much, only for you to understand that when we ask for accommodations, it isn't to inconvenience you; rather, it's something that we need in order to succeed in your classroom. I can imagine the difficulty of being a professor, you're constantly managing multiple things."

"I think that instructors should be more respectful towards students with disabilities and maintain the same standards towards all students regardless of this. The staff that are responsible for accommodations should be more understanding towards the students needs and different situations. They should provide support and help to those who are struggling, as well as provide resources for students to locate different tools that would benefit their educational journey."

The following are some recommendations that Summit participants have for their instructors to maximize accessibility in their classrooms.

1. If worksheets or material is provided in class, ensure this is also available on the course website.

“Providing a digital copy of any worksheets done in class should also be essential, as opposed to an additional accommodation that needs requesting.”

2. Be receptive when approached by students with accommodation requests.

“Take the time to speak with the student and clarify any questions you have about their accommodations, and strive to do your best to honour their needs wherever possible. Bravely acknowledge situations where you have fallen short and recommit to doing better.”

3. Content should be made accessible proactively instead of only when requested.

“Proactively make your content accessible regardless of student requests (i.e., closed captions, checklists, narration of content, movement breaks, etc.), and look for opportunities to further integrate inclusive, trauma-informed practices into your classroom.”

“Courses should be automatically designed with accessibility in mind instead of the onus being on students to request accessibility.”

4. Be flexible when it comes to deadlines and expectations of student performance.

“Be flexible in your expectations of them when setting due dates for assignments, as they often are not aware they need an extension until it is too late.”

5. Remember that students have commitments outside of one individual class.

“Be mindful of known points of coursework overload during the semester, and try to structure your courses to account for this.”

6. Be prepared to review syllabi and policies and update them as needed.

“Reassess your syllabus often to see if any assignments contain exclusionary practices, or could be modified to be more inclusive of all learner types.”

"I also feel like there's a lot of pressure for people who hear about access needs to feel like the first suggestions or asks need to be and will be perfect in supporting someone. There needs to be more room to try accommodations that don't work, and adapting and trying new things. And also for people who are accommodating to accept that they might not be perfect at it, but trying and improving will go a long way."

7. Incorporate accessibility and disability inclusion into curriculum as it applies to the field.

"I also think disability and accessibility should be part of the curriculum. For instance, web accessibility should be part of the computer sciences curriculum, and accessible spaces part of architecture courses."

"Accessibility is a societal responsibility, and our attitudes should reflect this all together."

8. Set clear expectations of all curriculum content, including lab and field work.

"Knowing what to expect [from field work] is hugely important, but that kind of information is rarely provided. We were never told anything beyond wearing sunscreen and long pants. I recommend approaching your profs, I truly believe that 95% of them will be helpful. The truth of the matter is that you need those field courses to graduate, they're part of your curriculum. So I wonder if, with the help of your profs, you could navigate how you could still learn from field courses in a way that is accessible for you. You need to be honest about what you need, and about your boundaries."

4.3 Recommendations for Student Accommodation Services

Students with disabilities at the Summit first expressed their appreciation for the hard work and dedication of student accommodation services offices within their unique postsecondary institution. For many with disabilities, accommodations facilitate their academic success.

“Other than that though, my school has been great. I love the accommodations I've received to write my exams, that's been very helpful. I appreciate the [institution's accommodation services] and am very glad they exist, not just for me, but for all students with disabilities who need a little extra help.”

The following are recommendations from Summit participants on how student accommodation services can further support students with disabilities:

1. Explore different accommodation options with the student to find what will work best for them.

“Do not assume that the student knows what accommodations they need or are available.”

2. Be understanding with regards to the expectation for self-advocacy, particularly for neurodiverse students

“Be flexible in your expectations of them when setting boundaries for tasks requiring self-advocacy, such as requesting extensions, as they often are unaware they need one until it is too late.”

3. Ensure that students receive their necessary accommodations within an appropriate timeline.

“The student rights coordinator recommended that I speak to the dean, which is what I did. They offered to write a letter [supporting the accommodation request] but they did that 3 months after I requested it and so I am no longer eligible for the program. I just wanted to put it out there as an example of how a student in my case was able to fall through the cracks because like someone said earlier, the system is not built for us.”

4.4 Recommendations for Staff

Summit participants also had recommendations for other staff at postsecondary institutions with regards to institutional communications and event planning.

1. Ensure communications are accessible and easy to understand.

“Easy to access and easy to understand are the most important things. It doesn't matter how good the support is if you don't know about it or can't understand it.”

2. Ensure all events are planned with accessibility standards in mind.

“When referring to or setting up workshops - consider offering options that are not only aligned with neurotypical learning needs (i.e time management).”

3. Build connections with students to provide access to additional support.

“Get to know the students in your program so that you can recognize the signs that someone is struggling, and offer support as needed.”

4. Invest in ongoing evaluation and feedback mechanisms.

“Communicate regularly with your students about what is working and what isn't, and adjust as you can within the confines of bureaucratic structures.”

5. Ensure that faculty receive adequate support to meet student accessibility needs.

“...professors have so much pressure put on them and so much work to do. For most of them, teaching is only supposed to be 40% of their [work] load (the rest being mostly research). I think that a lot of them do their absolute best and try to support students as much as possible but are already stretched very thin themselves. I wonder if there is a sort of "middle" person missing there, between a professor and a student, a person that is there to support and guide and provide information that goes beyond the baseline course material.”

4.5 Recommendations for Policies

Institutional policies also need to take the perspectives of students with disabilities into account:

1. Re-implement health safety policies from COVID-19 lockdowns to protect immunocompromised members of the campus community.

"I'd really like a page on the website with "what to do when you're sick" and some way for people who need masks to get some."

"More protection for immunocompromised students by incentivizing sick students and staff to stay home, and practicing acceptable sanitation measures."

"Moving forward, I also think we need a layered approach with clean indoor air (e.g., ventilation, filtration, air disinfection), and ultimately, a cultural shift to caring for each other and having supports for students who can feel like they won't be negatively impacted in their schoolwork by staying home when sick."

"Scouting out classrooms to ensure there will be enough space for everyone to comfortably occupy space. If there are 50 students in a class, it is NOT sufficient to learn in a room that has only 50 seats."

2. Consult with members of the campus community with disabilities.

"I also think it would be beneficial to have a committee that joins together students with disabilities and staff to discuss issues and make decisions towards a more inclusive campus."

"Other ways that help to support me is through...includ[ing] perspectives on disabilities, and include disabilities/diversabilities in discussions for the Strategic Planning Committee moving forward."

3. Ensure that policies recognize the diversity of disabilities.

"In addition, for [institutions] to acknowledge disabilities (not just physical disabilities, but "invisible" ones as well), in addition to diverse abilities, as well as the acknowledgement to implement further action to accommodate students, staff, and stakeholders in these discussions"

4. Implement policies for short-term medical leave.

“Universities need to offer short-term medical leave that is shorter than 4 months. And, the process can’t be difficult to navigate for those with limited capacity. While on that medical leave, financial support must be available or it should be possible to continue to hold existing scholarships.”

5. Enforce accountability for accessibility policies.

“There should also be further consequences for professors that fail to offer accommodations in a timely manner.”

6. Schedule classes with meaningful breaks.

“Avoid scheduling classes with no breaks in between, or if necessary - do so strategically (i.e., schedule an academic class back-to-back with a more participatory course).”

7. Design and build physical spaces to be sensory and disability friendly.

“Make your learning spaces sensory-friendly environments (i.e., flexible seating, noise reduction/amplification aids, light reduction/improvement aids, no or few limitations on where you can eat/drink, ensure A/V equipment is maintained so that students can access learning information easily, encourage instructors to close doors during lectures to reduce background noise, etc.).”

8. Structure programs to honor work/life balance.

“Even though the system was built in a way that values high achievement, these ways are not the only ways to assess success. They are constructed through an ableist lens.”

“Make your learning spaces sensory-friendly environments (i.e., flexible seating, noise reduction/amplification aids, light reduction/improvement aids, no or few limitations on where you can eat/drink, ensure A/V equipment is maintained so that students can access learning information easily, encourage instructors to close doors during lectures to reduce background noise, etc.).”

4.6 Recommendations for Student Leaders

Student leaders also play an important role in campus life, and can also have an impact on the experiences of students with disabilities.

1. Invest in diverse recruitment and hiring processes to effectively represent intersectional identities.

"...the biggest benefit of our club is that we welcome everyone so we have a variety of perspectives to consult all the time. We are constantly asking for feedback on our events and being open to criticism to make sure our club remains accessible."

2. Share accessibility and accommodation information for every event.

"Another thing that we do is to send out a form for accommodations before every single event, so just turning on simple things like captions, or having alternative forms of participation. I think any club should be doing this, I feel like this would be the basic standard because even people without disabilities could benefit from accessibility"

3. Mandate accessibility training for all student leaders

"Any student leader who's involved in event planning should have partaken in that training...There is tons of training available, but there is no mandate around that."

4.7 Need for Disability Community Spaces

As part of the holistic student experience, all students need opportunities to build relationships and connections with peers that share similar experiences, including students with disabilities. A consistent theme throughout the Summit was the need for more disability community spaces within postsecondary institutions.

“We also need to create more disability social spaces on campus. I don’t think disability is as taboo as it once was, but why is it that the one time I’m talking about disability is with my professor for accommodations or with my accessibility advisor? I created a disability club because I craved community.”

“I think schools need to treat disability as another form of inclusion, not just accommodations. There are student communities and initiatives for many other marginalized students - why not students with disabilities and those with chronic illness? Feeling accepted and understood is crucial.”

“One of the things I really wish I had during my undergrad was more of an opportunity to meet other people with disabilities. It’s a hard thing, because my disability can be quite visible, especially with the service dog. You could spot me, the disabled kid, a mile away, but that doesn’t mean I was able to see other people like me - I wish I’d had that.”

While the 2024 Summit for students with disabilities in Ontario institutions provided a safe space for students to discuss their experiences, it was in no way sufficient to provide the community building needed for students with disabilities. Let the Summit and this report be the inspiration for further conversations about disability-inclusive campus communities.



5.0 Conclusion

This report aims to realistically reflect the struggles and barriers that students with disabilities face every day and the authentic themes of lived experiences shared throughout the Summit. While many of the stories and experiences shared in this report are predominantly negative and may be disheartening to read, feedback from the Summit emphasized that the most memorable part of the event was the overwhelming support and validation offered by participants to their peers after each story was shared. A thematic report cannot fully reflect the sense of community felt throughout the event.

Participants at the Summit overwhelmingly shared their enthusiasm to partner with their institutions to advance accessibility and disability inclusion within postsecondary education. We, the Organizers, urge institutions to use this report as a catalyst for further consultations and collaboration with students with disabilities. Students want to work with you to advance change.

“Every time someone at the Summit shared their story, it was like I was hearing my own story - slightly different versions of it - but coming from someone else. There is power in that. And even in cases where the experience of a participant varied from my own, there is still a shared sense of passion and motivation. We know we can do better, and we want to be part of that change.”