

## Stakeholder Summary

### Provincial program improves academic success for students with learning disabilities

Many postsecondary students with learning disabilities are apprehensive about disclosing their disability because they want independence and parity with their peers. But new research finds that those who utilize support services designed to level the playing field are likely to benefit through increased disability awareness and acceptance, decreased fears of stigmatization and increased academic success.

Compared with their peers without disabilities, fewer students with learning disabilities pursue postsecondary education (PSE) and those who do are less likely to graduate. The Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities has created a number of programs to improve academic success of students with disabilities, including the Summer Transition Program (STP). The program is designed to give students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder the skills that promote PSE success without the added pressure and demands of a full postsecondary course load.

#### Project Description

Commissioned by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, *Evaluating Postsecondary Supports for Ontario Students with Learning Disabilities* explores the effect of STP and enhanced services that promote student engagement and academic performance. Quantitative data was collected from 151 students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Of these, 117 students attended a combination of focus groups and personal interviews and shared their PSE experiences as persons with disabilities. The data was collected over a period of two and a half years at the Centre for Students with Disabilities, which provides support and accommodations to students at Durham College and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT).

#### Findings

Many students who attended STP reported that the benefits of seeking academic support and accommodations outweighed the psychological costs of self-identifying as a person with disabilities. The study found that STP improved the quality of students' transition to PSE through an early introduction to institutional disability services and personnel, and smoothed pathways to required pre-PSE assessments. Students who did not attend STP described a generally lengthier and more complicated transition process.

STP improves students' orientation to campus and awareness of student services, disability awareness and willingness to self-advocate, according to the study. At the completion of data collection, more than 87 per cent of the students in the sample were still enrolled in one of the institutions or had graduated. Students who attended STP were more likely to use other student services and were more likely to be successful in their studies. Of those, the majority said that they would not have been as successful had they not used disability and other supports on campus. The study found more similarities than differences in college and university student experiences. Students attending both kinds of

institutions reported that their disabilities increased their academic demands. They needed to make additional time commitments and use of supports and accommodations, as well as develop organizational strategies and time-management skills, which they found to be very beneficial to their academic success.

### **Policy Implications**

Students from both Durham College and UOIT encountered personal and institutional barriers in accessing services and accommodations. Some students, particularly mature students and others not pursuing PSE directly from high school, identified a need for more information about available services and accommodations. Others said faculty would benefit from professional development for greater disability awareness and knowledge. Students also said that financial support and increased availability of assessments before the start of PSE would ease their transition and improve their academic outcomes.

Many students in the study, particularly college students and those who did not attend STP, had previously attempted to attend one or more postsecondary programs. These extended and multiple attempts can increase debt, result in lost time in the workforce and the loss of completed credits when transferring between programs. Institutions should improve credit transfer and take additional measures to reduce the financial burden of prolonged studies.

Despite students' desire for independence, they are likely to benefit from support services. Service providers must find creative ways to establish and maintain a productive connection with students in need by ensuring effective collaboration and referrals among student services programs.

Ultimately, the goal for postsecondary institutions is to give persons with disabilities a fully accessible environment in which they can achieve their desired independence and anonymity with no need to self-identify. According to the study, the PSE system has not achieved this level of accessibility and must make it easier for students to self-disclose and access disability supports in the current system -- by improving access to updated assessments at the high school level or before PSE begins and through more collaboration between secondary and postsecondary systems.

Institutions should also maintain data collection in a standardized and consistent manner that would allow postsecondary institutions to develop a longitudinal understanding of the unique educational challenges and pathways of these students, especially on issues related to academic performance, retention, delayed entry to PSE, prolonged time to complete programs and multiple PSE attempts.

*Evaluating Postsecondary Supports for Ontario Students with Learning Disabilities* was written by Deborah Tsagris, principal investigator, Learning Strategies Counsellor, Durham College and UOIT; and Bill Muirhead, co-investigator, Associate Provost Academic and Information Technology, UOIT.