

Disable the Label

Improving Post-Secondary Policy, Practice
and Academic Culture for Students
with Disabilities

students 

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Abstract

Building on StudentsNS' *quality* and *accessibility* values, this report discusses the systemic barriers that persons with disabilities face when pursuing post-secondary education. Providing an in-depth discussion of the supports and challenges found within the academic system, this paper begins to re-conceptualize how disability is viewed and accommodated. Nova Scotia has made great strides toward enabling persons with disabilities to access post-secondary education in the past several decades, but we still have a long way to go. Persons with disabilities remain among the most underrepresented and underemployed groups in Canada. Ensuring persons with disabilities have access to and adequate support during post-secondary education is fundamental if we want this to change. Programs aimed at increasing persons with disabilities' participation in post-secondary education, and in the work force are often insufficient. Similarly, the supports offered by post-secondary institutions (funded through the province) could be improved to better support students with disabilities. We make suggestions for the post-secondary system to further develop present accessibility measures and improve the quality of education delivered to students with disabilities. Recognizing that providing support for students with disabilities is not purely an academic matter, this report will be complimented by future reports on campus health services, social determinants of access to post-secondary education, and discrimination and human rights.

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Statement of Values

Students Nova Scotia is built upon the belief that post-secondary education can play a fundamental role in allowing both the individual and society to realize their full potential. Students Nova Scotia's values are pillars built upon this foundation. They give direction to Students Nova Scotia's work and reflect our organizational goals.

ACCESSIBILITY: Every qualified Nova Scotia student who wishes to pursue post-secondary education should be able to do so, irrespective of their financial situation, socioeconomic or ethnic background, physical, psychological or mental ability, age, sexual orientation, geographic location, or any other factor exogenous to qualification.

AFFORDABILITY: The cost of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia should not cause undue hardship upon any student, restrict their ability to pursue the career path they choose, or make them financially unable to live in the community of their choice.

QUALITY: Policies, programs, and services in post-secondary education should meet student expectations to help prepare them for lifelong success, including in their citizenship, careers, and personal wellbeing.

STUDENT VOICE: Nova Scotia students must be empowered to actively participate in setting their post-secondary system's direction via engagement through their representative student bodies, within the post-secondary institutions themselves, and through the broader democratic process.

Our Research Process

Position papers are the primary outputs of our research. They aim to describe and clearly articulate Students Nova Scotia's *Principles* in approaching an issue and *Concerns* that obstruct the realization of those principles. Finally, we propose *Recommendations* aimed at addressing the policy issues (and our specific concerns) in a manner that is consistent with our organization's values.

The Students Nova Scotia Board of Directors is comprised of student representatives from our six member associations. It sets annual priorities for Students Nova Scotia activities, including research. Position Papers represent formal Students Nova Scotia policy and are approved by the Board of Directors at bi-annual Board Policy Retreats, following a draft's one-month release for consultations with students.

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Abbreviations

AC	Atlantic Centre for Research, Access and Support for Persons with Disabilities
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AST	the Atlantic School of Theology
C-NS LMAPD	Canada-Nova Scotia Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities
CBU	Cape Breton University
CSLP	Canada Student Loans Program
DSO	Disability Services Office
DRF	Disability Resource Facilitator
LAE	Department of Labour and Advanced Education
LD	Learning Disorders
MSVU	Mount Saint Vincent University
NEADS	National Educational Association of Disabled Students
NSAC	the Nova Scotia Agricultural College
NSCAD	the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University
NSHRA	Nova Scotia Human Rights Act
NSSAP	Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program
MH	Mental Health
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
PALS	Participation and Activities Limitations Survey
PSDS	Post-Secondary Disability Services
PSE	Post Secondary Education
SFA	Student Financial Assistance
SMU	Saint Mary's University
StFX	Saint Francis Xavier University
WHO	World Health Organization
US-A	Université Sainte-Anne

Key Terms

Accommodation

Provisions/alterations in how a student accesses curriculum and demonstrates learning that do not substantially change the instructional level, the content, or the performance criteria of a course.

Chronic/Medical Disability

“Medical Disability” is a catch all term for “invisible” body-based illnesses that may cause serious difficulties for students in an academic setting. Students can be disabled by chronic illnesses such as asthma, arthritis, diabetes, Crohn’s disease, cardiac conditions, cancer, chronic fatigue syndrome, epilepsy, etc. These illnesses often have ‘flare-ups’, or episodic symptomology. However, medical conditions may also have a consistent impact on students’ lives and ability to achieve in an academic setting.

Disability

According to the World Health Organization (2014), disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Thus disability is not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives.

Handicap

The WHO’s International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (1980) defines a ‘handicap’ as a disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from an impairment or a disability, that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal for that individual. Handicap considers the person’s participation in their social context. I.e. a person may be handicapped by the lack of wheelchair ramps at their work place. This handicap will be removed when ramps are installed.

Impairment

A problem in body function or structure.

Intellectual Disability (ID)

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V) defines Intellectual disability as being characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning (reasoning, learning, problem solving) and adaptive behavior (socializing, effectively communicating). This disability originates before the age of 18. People with intellectual disabilities learn skills more slowly and with greater difficulty than the

general population. There are varying degrees of intellectual disability, from mild to profound. Although it is unlikely persons with profound intellectual challenges would enter the post-secondary education system, higher education is becoming an increasingly viable option for students with mild levels of impairment.

Learning Disorder/Disability (LD)

According to the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, the term ‘Learning Disability’ may refer to a number of disorders that may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. Learning disabilities are genetic/neurobiological issues that result from impairments in one or more of the processes related to perceiving, thinking, remembering or learning. These include, but are not limited to: language processing (e.g. dyslexia); phonological processing (e.g. auditory/visual processing disorder); visual spatial processing; numerical processing (e.g. dyscalculia); processing speed; memory and attention; and executive functions. These disorders affect learning in individuals *who otherwise demonstrate at least average intellectual abilities and reasoning skills* – this is the significant difference between LD and ID. There is no standard definition of ‘learning disability’ in Canada (Harrison, A, 2012).

Mental Health/Illness (MH)

In this report the terms “mental health” and “mental illness” are used interchangeably, though this is not appropriate in all contexts. Everyone has mental health, but some students have serious psychological disabilities that are expected to remain with them throughout their lives. The Public Health Authority of Canada defines mental illnesses as those characterized by alterations in thinking, mood or behaviour associated with significant distress and impaired functioning. Such disabilities may include severe depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and other psychiatric impairments. The person with mental illness’ ability to function effectively may vary from day to day, similar to those with physical illnesses. Although medications may ease some of the symptoms of mental illness, they are often associated with side effects resulting in physical illness.

Modification

Substantial changes in what a student is expected to learn and demonstrate in an academic course or program. These changes provide a student with the opportunity to participate meaningfully in a variety of learning experiences and environments while recognizing that certain program components may not be feasible for the particular student.

Physical Impairment

The loss or abnormal functioning of a portion of a person’s physical body characterizes physical impairments. Some common forms of physical impairments

include spina bifida, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, limb amputation, etc., as well as visual and auditory impairments. These impairments impact what the student can physically do, and accommodations typically involve changing the format of class activities/ materials or location. People with physical impairments face a significant amount of stigma that may impact their education experience; they are often wrongly assumed to be wholly dependent on others and/or have intellectual impairments. There is no intrinsic relationship between physical ability and intellectual ability. Students will vary in their ability to perform activities independently depending on the form and extent of their impairment.

Stigma

Stigma can be defined as a set of negative and often unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something, such as a particular religion, group association, or bodily characteristic. Stigma is often the root cause of discrimination and prejudicial action. Unfortunately, all persons with disabilities, regardless of form, face significant levels of stigma in our society.

Universal Design

Broad-spectrum ideas meant to produce buildings, products and environments that are inherently accessible to everyone, reducing the need for specialized services and accommodations.

1. Introduction

Since 1985, enrolment in Maritime universities has increased by 40%, while enrolment at the Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) also increased 67%¹ between 1992 and 2011 (MPHEC, 2012; StudentsNS, 2013). As our post-secondary education (PSE) student population has grown we have seen greater numbers of students from underrepresented groups than ever before. Nova Scotia's P-12 school system has improved its capacity to educate students facing special circumstances in recent years, which has supported a more diverse student body moving on to post-secondary education (PSE; Nova Scotia, LAE, n.d.; NEADS, 2012). As a result of these trends, demand for accommodations for students with physical, cognitive, medical and psychiatric conditions has increased — in 2013, the Nova Scotia Post Secondary Disability Services (PSDS) reported a 152.13% increase in students registered with their program since 2004/05 (LMAPD, 2013).

Nova Scotia has the highest disability incidence rate in Canada, with one fifth of our population living with a disability (PALS, 2006). Experiencing impairment may affect one's ability to attend and excel in a post-secondary environment not only in the classroom, but in social spheres as well. As three quarters of new jobs in Nova Scotia require some form of PSE (AUCC, 2011), ensuring that all citizens of Nova Scotia have an equal opportunity to engage in higher education is critically important. This is especially true when coupled with Nova Scotia's increasing problems with youth retention, and the ever-growing need for trained workers in our province (Nova Scotia Commission on Building Our New Economy [NSCONE], 2014).

The need to better serve students with disabilities has been identified as major issue for Canadian institutions (e.g. Harrison, 2012; NEADS, 2012; OUSA, 2012; Woods, Cook, DeClou, & McCloy, 2013). The topic was addressed on a federal level by the Canadian Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology in their 2011 report "Opening the Door: Reducing Barriers to Post-Secondary Education in Canada". Furthermore, individual institutions in Nova Scotia and across the country have recognized the need for increased services (e.g. CADSPPE, 2011; Linkow, Barrington, Bruyere, Figueroa, & Wright, 2012; McCloy, U. & DeClou, 2013; Queens University, 2012), implementing programs such as peer support, learning strategists, and the Queen's University "green folder" system of mental health support.

However, due to the fact that formalized disability support systems are relatively new to most Canadian campuses, we are still in the early stages of developing our strategies to support the academic pursuits of students with disabilities. Since their creation, Disability Services Offices (DSOs) have faced numerous changes in

¹ Accounting for changes in reporting methodology. Without this, NSCC's population appears to have grown by 258%. For more information see StudentsNS 2013 publication "From Worst to First: How Nova Scotia can lead the Pack on Student Financial Assistance".

demand for services, leaving the field in a constant state of 'catch up'. Originally focused on supporting those with physical impairments and medical conditions, DSOs were then challenged to integrate support for students with learning disorders (LD). While still learning how to best provide for these demographics, a recent push toward mental health (MH) awareness and stigma reduction has led to a substantial increase of students with psychiatric illnesses registering for their services. Coupled with the near tripling of their caseloads and lack of increases in funding in the past ten years, many departments have struggled to keep up. The result is that the services meant to help students overcome the challenges posed by the environment are often inadequate, despite the tireless work of supportive staff.

StudentsNS recognizes accessibility and quality of PSE as two of our foundational values because we believe that education is critical to the growth and development of individual Nova Scotians, their families, their communities, and the Province as a whole. Students with impairments face barriers that threaten to impede their ability to access PSE, as well as impact the quality of their college/university experience. These barriers include systemic issues such as financial constraints, lengthened timelines to graduation, inaccessible classrooms, the dependence on the written word in educational communication, and more. Perhaps more concerning are the cultural barriers persons with disabilities face: having a disability continues to be heavily stigmatized and often serves to make students feel isolated and discriminated against by both peers and staff, decreasing their educational experience and ability to learn (Harrison, 2012; Goode 2007; Mullins, & Preyde, 2013; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

All too often the needs of minority groups are seen as auxiliary, as opposed to integral to the college/university experience. The PSE community has a duty, obligation and an underlying commitment to promote and support student success. The ability of persons with disabilities to achieve their educational goals and reach their full potential in their chosen fields is not simply an ideal it is a human right. We need a very different approach to the conceptualization and integration of disability at PSE institutions in Nova Scotia. We identify policy changes to ensure students with disabilities have equal opportunities to reach their full potential through PSE. We must do better, we can do better, and this report shows how.

2. Conceptual Framework

The term “disabilities” may encompass a wide variety of illnesses and/or impairments, including (but not limited to): Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Learning Disorders (LD), Mental Health (MH) issues, Mobility issues, Hearing or Vision loss, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Traumatic Brain Injuries, Crohn’s Disease, Epilepsy, etc. Many of these health problems have similar implications for students within the academic environment, but each diagnosis is unique, and each may present very differently in different individuals. Students with disabilities are a diverse population facing many similar constraints, as opposed to a homogeneous group with identical needs.

2.1 Disability Theory

One of the most complicated components of developing disability policy is deciding how disability is framed. It is difficult to define ‘disability’ because it is a multifaceted concept with both objective and subjective characteristics. When interpreted as an illness or impairment, disability is seen as fixed within an individual, and this person is the bearer of a disability (HRDC, 2003). When interpreted as a social construct, disability is seen in terms of the cultural, socioeconomic, and political disadvantages that result from an individual’s exclusion (HRDC, 2003). Persons with disabilities, advocacy groups, the medical community, and the general public all have different views of disability. Furthermore, the meaning of disability has evolved over time as perspectives have been integrated with one another. The viewpoints we adopt have an effect not only on how we define disability but also how programs are designed and how decisions are made regarding the degree to which students with disabilities are included in our schools, classes, and social environments.

The impairment perspective encompasses the most commonly utilized view of disability. This perspective is best expressed by the medical model, which defines disability as a health problem, disease, illness or abnormality that is situated within the individual (Areheart, 2008; Seelman, 2004). It assumes that disability is an intrinsic quality of a person; thus a person is either “disabled” or “non-disabled” with no areas in between. Therefore, the inclusion of people with disabilities into society is focused on “fixing” the individual’s disability to closer approximate the societal norm (Areheart, 2008; Seelman, 2004). For example, when an individual has a hearing impairment, and is provided with hearing aids or other auditory devices, this enables them to act more like the majority and thus diminishes the impact of their impairment. The major criticism of this model, of course, is that it ignores the role of the social and physical environment in the development of perceived disability (HRDC, 2003). Moreover, the medical model dictates that the disabling qualities are located within particular individuals’ bodies or minds (as opposed to in their environment), therefore defining these people as defective and/or biologically or

mentally inferior. More generally, adherence to the medical model encourages the view that disability rights are “special,” a form of charity offered to those who “drew the biological short stick” (Areheart, 2008). Although disability theory has progressed beyond the medical model definition of disability over the past several decades, it persists as the predominant definition in disability policies, medical practices, methods of accessing services, and in the minds of general public (e.g. for insurance, for student financial assistance, for receiving disability benefits).

The ecological perspective sees disability as resulting from the interaction of impairment, activity limitations, or restricted participation, and a specific social or physical environment such as work, home or school (HRDC, 2003). This perspective is best explained in terms of the social model of disability. The social model redefines disability as a social construct of multifaceted societal oppression and discrimination, separate from the notion of impairment (Areheart, 2008). In this context, being ‘disabled’ is the result of differing from the social standards upon which our society was built. The experience of being disabled largely consists of interacting with the physical, institutional, and attitudinal barriers that inhibit full participation in mainstream life. In other words, the experience of disability is not innate to a person with a particular issue or diagnosis; it is dependent on the particular social context in which that person lives. For example, the cause of a person in a wheelchair’s disability on campus is partially due to inaccessible buildings. According to the social model, updating our physical structures to be accessible could eliminate this element of disability. Thus, whereas the medical model pushes for medical solutions to fit individuals with disabilities into society, the social model aims to adjust society to fit all individuals.

Today, it is commonly acknowledged that both the medical and social models have valid points and useful applications (HRDC, 2003; WHO, 2002), but they must be used in tandem with one another. This is often referred to as the ‘biopsychosocial model’ (WHO, 2002).

Within the social model, the terms, “impairment”, “disability” and even “handicap” have very precise meanings. “Impairment” refers to problems in physical or mental functioning such as significant loss (e.g. the loss of a limb) or deviation (e.g. legs that cannot support one’s weight) from the norm (WHO, 2002), whereas a “disability” refers to the interaction between individuals with a health condition and personal or environmental factors (WHO, 2002). Finally, the somewhat shunned term “handicap” refers to a disadvantage in filling a role in life relative to a peer group (WHO, 1980). “Handicap” was previously used as a substitute for the word “impairment”, indicating that the individual was disadvantaged because of their impairments. This is now considered to be discriminatory, or at least a politically incorrect use of the term. Today, we acknowledge that many factors (not just disabilities) can cause a person to be considered ‘handicapped’. For example, someone who learned French late in life may be handicapped when applying to be a French teacher when compared to

a Francophone individual. In a disability context, handicaps are viewed as resulting from disabilities, meaning our environment is seen as imposing handicaps as much as our physical qualities. For example: Brian has cerebral palsy, which causes his legs to be stiff and difficult to move. Because of this, he cannot walk. In this case, Brian's impairment is the inability to walk or move his legs easily. His disability is his inability to utilize many of society's buildings/services, his exclusion from things that involve walking, and the stigma he faces as a person with impairment. Thus, although we may not be able to correct Brian's impairment, we can reduce his disability (e.g., eliminating the walking portion of certain activities, using a mobility device such as a walker or wheelchair, and creating accessible social spaces), which helps to diminish his handicap.

The sentiment behind this idea is that if we create environments that are accessible to everyone, no one will experience a handicap due to their disability. What it would take to create an accessible environment for one person may be very different from another; for example, having ramps makes an environment more accessible for those with mobility issues, whereas attitudinal adjustments such as 'safe space' zones may be more beneficial for those with psychiatric impairments. It is clear that creating truly accessible environments is a lofty goal, however it is an ideal our culture has begun to embrace.

Universal Design (UD) is a pedagogical approach to the design of products and environments that aims to create spaces, systems, and commodities that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design (Centre for Universal Design, 1997). Groups representing persons with disabilities, architectural movements, and others have advanced UD globally, though at present it primarily focuses on the physical elements of accessibility.

Universal Design is based on seven principles that define how spaces, equipment and environments should be created:

1. Equitable use
2. Flexibility in use
3. Simple and intuitive
4. Perceptible information
5. Tolerance for error
6. Low physical effort
7. Size and space for approach and use

Some basic examples of UD in action would include: lever door handles instead of twist knobs; closed captioning on video; presenting instruction both verbally and visually; and the use of high contrast colorations on visual materials. Essentially, UD

is an inclusive practice that allows persons with disabilities to be more integrated with their peers.

Applying UD principles at PSE institutions is a proactive method of ensuring PSE is accessible to all. Therefore, the closer we get to fully implementing UD, the less we need to depend on specialized supports (such as Disability Services) and individualized accommodations. A UD approach would help in numerous areas, including addressing the increasing demand of resources due to rapidly expanding service usage; helping to build a more sustainable model of service provision (considerably reducing the need for future provincial financial support); allowing institutions to respond to the increasing complexity and diversity of diagnostic labels without limiting their services to select groups of students; and creating a campus culture based in the a social model of disability, reducing stigma. Additionally, UD allows for students who may not be comfortable disclosing their disability to abstain from doing so. Furthermore, it allows people of all levels of ability to utilize the same spaces and equipment, eliminating the process of disclosing need and the subsequent stigma that comes with it.

Recently, Canadian PSE institutions have been focused on UDL, or Universal Design for Learning. This branch of UD focuses specifically on how to best transmit information to a diverse population without the need for special accommodations. A simple example of this is posting lecture notes online for students who have difficulty listening and writing at the same time (e.g. students with LD or students for whom English is a second language). Currently, McGill University is spearheading the movement toward UDL in Canada, but Nova Scotian institutions have the ability to progress on UDL within our province as well.

Universal Design is our cultural ideal and must remain a primary focus during course development, event design, and building renovation at colleges and universities in the future. Although the majority of policy-makers and service providers understand the need to remove societal barriers and reduce the experience of disability, Canadian society is still a long way off from being able to fully implement this ideal generally, let alone on post-secondary campuses. Thus, our current challenge lies in understanding what a barrier-free society entails, and how to best progress toward this goal.

PRINCIPLE 1: The post-secondary education system should prioritize inclusivity as a principal goal.

2.2 Legislation

One of the most complex issues in disability policy is discerning how the term 'disability' is practically defined and applied in particular contexts. Although

federal and provincial laws always protect the rights and freedoms of persons with disabilities, the definition of a 'person with a disability' is much less concrete. There are four distinct areas that define how the term 'disability' is used in relation to PSE students in Nova Scotia: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRDP), the Federal laws surrounding human rights, the Provincial laws surrounding human rights, and the definition used by Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) and the Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program (NSSAP).

2.2.1 THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Canada approved the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRDP)² in March of 2010, after having supported the Convention in 2007.³ The UNCRDP outlines numerous commitments to uphold in efforts to support persons with disabilities and applies to all levels of government.

The United Nations defines 'persons with disabilities' as:

“all persons with disabilities including those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers, hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations, 2007).

However, the UNCRDP also explicitly states that this is a minimum list of persons who may claim protection under the Convention, and that a person with disabilities may be regarded as a person with a disability in one society or setting, but not in another. Importantly, the Convention is fully rooted in the social model of disability; this is directly addressed throughout the document.

The UNCRDP establishes important principles on how disability should be viewed and supported within Canadian society, and thus also within Canada's educational system. Article 24 speaks directly to the rights of individuals with disabilities in educational settings:

States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

A. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;

² The entire convention is available at: <http://www.un.org/disabilities/>

³ A full list of countries who have ratified the Convention can be found at https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=iv-15&chapter=4&lang=en

B. The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;

C. Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society

(UNCRPD, Article 24).

The Convention also specifically addresses the need to support persons with disabilities in the pursuit of higher education. Section 5 of article 24 requires that States Parties ensure persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis as others. Moreover, it requires that reasonable accommodations be provided to persons with disabilities to facilitate their ability to participate.

Canada's passing of this Convention shows significant dedication to improving societal culture for persons with disabilities. There is little question of what is required of our governments, businesses and civic enterprises where disability is involved. However, the UNCRDP was passed only four years ago, just over three years after it had been adopted in December 2006, and two years after its ratification in 2008. Although most would like to believe Canada had been living up to these standards before 2010, a considerable amount of work needs to be done before Canada will be truly upholding the UNCRDP.

2.2.2 FEDERAL LAW

In Canada, the rights and freedoms of individuals with disabilities are protected by two pieces of legislation: the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (CCRF)*, and the *Canadian Human Rights Act (CHRA)*. At the most basic level, the *CCRF* guarantees that every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination, in particular based on race, nationality or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability (The Constitution Act, 1982). Additionally, physical and mental disabilities are prohibited grounds of discrimination under the *CHRA*. The Act defines disability as "any previous or existing mental or physical disability" including "disfigurement and previous or existing dependence on alcohol or a drug" (Canada Human Rights Act, 1985).

However, neither the *CCRF* or the *CRA* defines clearly what qualifies as a "mental or physical disability". As a result, Canadian provinces and institutions have not adopted a standardized definition of the term, such that what qualifies a student to be recognized as having a disability varies substantially across the country. For instance, Quebec does not formally recognize learning disorders as permanent disabilities, whereas Nova Scotia does.

CONCERN 1: There is no standard definition of disability used for disability resources in post-secondary education across the country, putting some out-of-province students with disabilities at a severe disadvantage in comparison to other students.

The *CHRA* also includes “duty to accommodate” legislation. Under the Act, federally regulated institutions are bound by law to prevent discrimination and to provide access and support to individuals with disabilities (Canadian Human Rights Act, 1985). However, institutions are required to accommodate persons with disabilities only to the point of “undue hardship.”

Implications with respect to health, safety, and cost may cause accommodations to require undue hardship of an organization. However, several Canadian legal cases have set precedent that, for all intents and purposes, undue hardship is incredibly hard to justify for PSE institutions, and they are responsible for accommodating the student. For example, in *Howard v. University of British Columbia (1993)* a deaf student enrolled in a teacher education program required interpreters as an accommodation. The institution refused, pleading undue financial hardship due to the practicum heavy nature of the course. The Council of Human Rights decided in favour of the student, stating that education is a service available to the public and thus needs to be accessible to students who are deaf. Although there would be some impact on the university’s budget, it was not enough to constitute undue hardship. In order to prove undue hardship, the institution must be able to demonstrate that they are affected in multiple ways.

2.2.3 PROVINCIAL LAW

The rights of persons with impairments are also protected on a provincial level. In Nova Scotia, the *Nova Scotia Human Rights Act (NSHRA)* prohibits the discrimination against individuals based on physical or mental disability. The Act defines “physical or mental disability” as:

actual or perceived: 1) loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological, or anatomical structure or function, 2) restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity, 3) physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement, including but not limited to epilepsy and any degree of paralysis, speech impediment or reliance on a hearing-ear dog, a guide dog, a wheelchair or a remedial appliance or device, 4) learning disability or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language, 5) condition of being mentally impaired, 6) mental disorder, or 7) dependency on drugs or alcohol (NSHRA, 1989).

Importantly, this act does not state that the disability must be permanent, or give a minimum duration the impairment must exist for. Officially, the definitions of disability

Table 1: Educational Attainment Levels of Disabled and Non-Disabled Canadians, aged 25-64 (2006)

EDUCATION	PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES		PEOPLE WITHOUT DISABILITIES	
	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
Total	2,244,010	100	14,830,000	100
No certificate	569,610	25.4	2,002,340	13.5
High school Diploma	545,720	24.3	3,545,970	23.9
Trades/registered apprenticeship	329,590	14.7	1,785,910	12.0
College, CEGEP, University certificate below Bachelor's	488,730	21.8	3,933,010	26.5
Bachelor's degree	187,300	8.3	2,274,630	15.3
Graduate degree	122,480	5.5	1,289,890	8.7

Source: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009 Federal Disability Report: Advancing the Inclusion of People with Disabilities, 2009, p. 27.

at Nova Scotia PSE institutions' DSOs are governed by this Act, although this is not always referenced or defined in formal policy (See Table 6).

2.3 Education and Employment Challenges

The exclusion of people with disabilities from everyday settings is now generally considered to be the failure of society to properly accommodate different levels of ability or to properly address ongoing discrimination faced by these individuals, rather than the fault of the person with impairment (Canadian Labour Congress [CLC], 2008). Yet, while progress is being made in this arena, many Nova Scotians with disabilities and their families continue to experience major barriers to their full and equal participation in society, and in particular in the labour force. Persons with disabilities have remained one of the most undereducated and underemployed groups in Canada for decades (Linkow, Barrington, Bruyere, Figueroa, & Wright, 2013; Prince, 2014).

The Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) by Statistics Canada found that 20.8% of Canadian 18-21 year olds reported having a disability (Statistics Canada, 2013). However, the Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities (LMAPD) 2012/13 report suggests that 37% individuals with disabilities may be too severely impaired to benefit from PSE. Thus, assuming everyone with a disability identified as such when taking the SLID, 13% of Nova Scotia's PSE population would need to identify as having a disability for persons with disabilities to be entering PSE at

approximately the same rate as their non-disabled peers.⁴ As indicated in Tables 8 and 10 in Appendix A, registered students with disabilities currently make up less than 6% of Nova Scotia university students and just over 10% of NSCC students. This indicates that a substantial portion of persons with disabilities are not successfully transitioning into PSE, that students with disabilities are not registering with DSOs, or a combination of the above.

National level research (HRSDC; 2009) indicates that 25% of persons with a disability have not graduated from high school compared to 13.5% for persons without a disability. Participation in PSE is similarly lower: although persons with disabilities (14.7%) are more likely than those without disabilities (12%) to have trade diplomas and certificates, they are significantly less likely to have achieved any other level of PSE, including college, undergraduate and graduate degrees (HRSDC, 2009). Overall, across Canada, 16.1% of youth with disabilities aged 15 to 24 left school because of their impairment. The latter trends lengthen these students' time spent in school and presumably out of the workforce (HRDC, 2009).

Post-secondary education is more expensive for students with disabilities. They face higher costs, longer study periods and lower in-study employment earnings. In addition to the elevated costs facing PSE students in general, students with disabilities must often pay for assistive devices, tutors and medical supports. According to a recent survey of 1,026 Canadian students with disabilities, only five percent did not require a specific aid or service on a daily basis⁵ (CMSF, 2009). Of those not utilizing any form of aid, 63% stated they were doing so because it was too costly for personal purchase (CMSF, 2009). An additional 39% indicated that they were not accessing supports because they were unaware that services were available to them.

Moreover, students with disabilities often take reduced course loads to allow them to manage their disability, which increases the time their program takes to complete and, consequently, the cost (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009). These students often must study for longer hours, allocate time for medical assistance, prepare for the possibility of symptom flare-ups, and more. According to HRDC (2009), 29.8% of Canadian youth with disabilities aged 15 to 24 have had to reduce their course load and 19.7% have experienced long school interruptions because of their disability.

4 We are not actually assuming that all persons with disabilities taking the SLID will report having a disability. However, providing that approximately the same proportion of respondents to the SLID and students who have disabilities report their disabilities, the comparison is valid and basically the best we can do with the information available. We will never have perfect reporting on the proportion of persons with disabilities because individuals have the right to choose whether to pursue diagnosis and self-identify.

5 Includes psychotropic medications.

The demands of balancing their responsibilities and education makes students with disabilities also less likely to be able to work during their academic career, significantly reducing their revenues. They face significantly greater challenges finding co-op placements or volunteer opportunities within their field (including on campus) that are accessible and willing to train them to complete their education (Annabelle et al, 2003; Fredeen et al., 2013; Personal Communication, 2013; 2014).

The combination of factors leads students with disabilities to accumulate greater debts (Standing Senate Committees on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 2011; PSDS, 2013). They are more likely to access greater amounts of student financial assistance than counterparts without disabilities and are significantly more likely to take on private loans (18% compared to 11-12% among other students from underrepresented groups; Frenette, 2007). Moreover, students with disabilities had the highest average bank loan/line of credit of any underrepresented group, averaging \$9,071 (OUSA, 2012). These private loans bring with them worse repayment conditions relative to public loans. Students who are low on funds may have to reduce their course loads further, further prolonging their education, or be forced to abandon their studies in favor of employment (HEQCO, 2012).

PRINCIPLE 2: The cost of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia should not cause undue hardship upon any student, restrict their ability to pursue the career path they choose, or make them financially unable to live in the community that they choose.

In terms of employment, a greater proportion of youth with disabilities hold multiple jobs in a year, have jobs unrelated to their credentials, are neither working nor attending school, and/or live in low income households (Hughes & Avoke, 2010; Prince, 2014). This means that youth with disabilities are more likely than non-impaired youth to be un- or underemployed, and to be in poverty. Graduating with substantially less work experience than their peers can make it even more difficult for students with disabilities to find gainful employment in their area of expertise.

Across a broader age spectrum, according to the last conducted Participation and Activities Limitations Survey (PALS; 2006), 62% of Nova Scotian adults aged 25-54 with a disability were employed, in comparison to 88% of those without a disability. In contrast, PSDS' Longitudinal Follow Up Survey of Post-Secondary Education Graduates and Leavers (2012, aged 25-30) indicated that graduates and leavers with a disability achieved an 85% employment rate whereas those without a

PRINCIPLE 3: Increased participation in the workforce is of critical importance for persons with disabilities as this enables them to be independent and self-sufficient citizens who feel they are contributing to society.

disability achieved a 95% employment rate. Statistics Canada (StatsCan) data (2008) also shows that working-age (15-64) persons with disabilities are much less likely to hold paid employment. Higher debts compounded with lower long-term employment earnings mean that PSE costs can place students with disabilities in financial hardship for a greater amount of time than their non-disabled peers (CMSF, 2009). Considering that persons with disabilities are still fighting to have adequate representation in the workforce at all, it is unsurprising that they are particularly underrepresented in senior positions.

While some persons with disabilities are simply not able to actively engage in the workforce, in many cases, discrimination and/or a lack of appropriate supports, accommodations and education are what is keeping these individuals unemployed. In PSE, students with disabilities are often treated as if their career potential is less than that of their peers without disabilities, explicitly or not, and because we underestimate their ability to hold leadership roles, we do not encourage them to develop their leadership skills. Freedom, Wafer, Birch & Martin's 2013 report explored many of the myths and misperceptions employers hold when it comes to hiring persons with disabilities in the private sector and found that many common beliefs surrounding negative aspects of hiring persons with disabilities were untrue. Contrary to common belief, their work shows that hiring people with disabilities makes good business sense.

Nova Scotia's traditional university-age demographic (18-29) is set to decline 24% between 2011 and 2031 (Akbari, 2012). The recent One Nova Scotia report projected that our entire working aged (20-64) population will decrease by 21% by 2034 (NSCONE, 2014). These demographic trends seriously threaten economic growth and will heavily impact our society and economy beyond post-secondary enrolment. Meanwhile, according to the Greater Halifax Partnership, local businesses already rank the availability and quality of skilled labour as their top concern.

The significant difference in employment rates between individuals with disabilities in the PALS (2006), and the PSDS Graduates and Leavers study (2012) indicates that PSE can facilitate meaningful increases in employment for persons with disabilities. As nearly 75% of new jobs in Canada require PSE as a condition of employment, increasing the number of persons with disabilities obtaining this credential will drastically increase this population's ability to take part in the workforce (AUCC, 2011). Clearly, increasing persons with impairments' ability to participate in PSE has the potential to increase the employment rate of this demographic, thereby increasing their self-efficacy and involvement in the community, and reducing their poverty rates. Moreover, it will help our province reach the 10% increase in working age population with a PSE credential called for by the One Nova Scotia report (NSCONE, 2014).

Given these very serious concerns about our economic future and declining labour force, it is imperative that we allow and encourage all individuals to acquire the education they need to actively participate in Nova Scotia's workforce. We must strive to maximize the capabilities of all Nova Scotians, not only to create a more inclusive and diverse province, but also to combat the effects of demographic decline and foster a more prosperous province.

PRINCIPLE 4: Persons with disabilities offer talents and perspectives that enrich Nova Scotia communities socially, economically and culturally, and must be supported and included for our communities to realize their full potential.

2.4 Our Approach

Although many barriers toward full inclusion exist in general society, inability to gain needed supports and the continuation of stigmatizing attitudes during education are key aspects of the marginalization of many impaired individuals (CTF, 2012; OECD, 2003). It is crucial that PSE institutions impart the idea that persons with differences, including those with disabilities, are equal, valuable members of society, but to achieve this vision, students with disabilities need to not only be present, but supported, active members of their college/university communities.

By accommodating students with disabilities, institutions are simply upholding the legal and moral standards set by our society, including especially the UNCRDP and the NSHRA with their emphasis on human rights, the social model and both permanent and temporary disability. In contrast, not accommodating these students is an act of discrimination against a specific group of people. While the medical model does have useful applications, they are almost exclusively useful within a

PRINCIPLE 5: Students may attend post-secondary education for diverse reasons based on their personal lived experiences and life goals.

PRINCIPLE 6: Every qualified Nova Scotia resident who wishes to pursue post-secondary education should be able to do so, irrespective of their financial situation, socioeconomic or ethnic background, physical, psychological or mental disability, age, sexual orientation, geographic location, or any other factor other than qualification.

medical context. It is our view that PSE institutions have a duty to emphasize the social model, as suggested by the WHO, and universal design in their approach to disability. This is especially the case considering that the demand for the individual to adapt to their surroundings is often assumed, whereas the need for society to accommodate is often ignored, even in social (i.e. non-medical) environments such as schools. This needs to change, and PSE institutions should be on the forefront of that change.

3. Admissions for Persons with Disabilities

Graduating from high school and beginning the transition to PSE is a very challenging and exciting time in many young people's lives. This holds true for many youth with disabilities, though the routes they take to enter the PSE system may be slightly different than those of other students. Most will use the standard admissions process and access on-campus supports; others may require specialized admissions or unique programs.

3.1 Standard Admissions Process

Students with disabilities who are high school graduates are eligible to attend any PSE institution in the province if they have achieved competitive grades and fulfill the additional requirements of the program. Their acceptance into a PSE institution is identical to that of any other student, and is in no way attached to their disability status. However, there are a lot more steps that these individuals must take between high school graduation and PSE entry to get the most out of their educational experience. The particular steps needed may vary by person, but there are several broad themes.

For example, determining which schools or campuses will work best with a student's particular needs can be a major concern, in addition to schools' reputations, programs offered, etc; they must seriously consider if and how the school handles disability. Similarly, location can become a much more critical issue. While many of their non-disabled peers may be dying to move halfway across the country to attend PSE, students with disabilities have to consider the implications of moving on their ability to access supports, medical care, etc. Thus, even if a student is accepted into schools elsewhere, their actual educational options may be limited by locale.

Additionally, students have to consider how their disability will affect their ability to participate in certain programs, and to plan for this. Even if the student decides to take a subject that seems easily adaptable, they may need to spend weeks to months getting adequate supports in place on campus before they even begin classes.

Another important decision these students will have to make is whether they wish to pursue full-time or part-time classes. Having a disability can significantly impact the amount of time you have to spend on academics – either because you have different activities needed to take care of yourself, or because you may learn course content differently than others. This choice has significant implications for students' finances, and stress levels.

Perhaps most importantly, they have to decide if they are going to self-identify to their institution as a student with a disability, either by applying as such, or by registering with Disability Services. If so, they must begin the process of obtaining proper medical documentation to access supports on their campus. This may take days, or it may take several months. If a student chooses not to self-identify, the institution then treats them as if they are an average student with no disability-related supports provided.

Many of the choices potential students make during this time period have lasting effects on their educational experience, academic results, and ability to continue in a PSE environment. Unfortunately, very few students with disabilities entering PSE through the standard admissions process are prepared to think through or take action on these steps; they may not think there is a need to plan or they may not know that they could plan. This is an unfortunate failing of both our primary, secondary and post-secondary education systems that may set students with disabilities at a disadvantage relative to their peers.

3.2 Special Admissions Programs

A disability can range in severity from mild to profound. While the standard admissions process alone may work for many students, it does not provide opportunities for students with greater impairments to achieve a higher level of education.

One of the major challenges facing persons with disabilities, and those with more severe disabilities especially, is how to achieve a higher level of education and gain useful skills so they are able to participate in the labour force when they do not qualify for standard entry to university/college. Many of these individuals are capable of high-level intellectual work, but have some form of impairment that required course modification during high school, as a result of which they are no longer eligible for entry into most PSE programs. This can make acquiring career specific training difficult, even when their potential career path has no relation to subjects that gave them greater difficulty in high school. Additionally, attending higher education may be viewed as a cultural experience, and, as moving on to PSE becomes the norm for high school graduates, the inability to attend PSE often serves to separate persons with disabilities from their peers.

In Nova Scotia, two programs have been developed to address these challenges: NSCC Special Admissions, and Ax-cess Acadia. While both programs have a similar end goal (to increase the educational prospects of people with disabilities), there are some notable differences.

3.2.1 NSCC SPECIAL ADMISSIONS

The NSCC offers a Special Admissions program for those students who had Individual Program Plans (IPPs), or modified course content, during grade 12 and/or in their highest-level math course. These students do not meet the entry requirements at most PSE institutions because they have not been required to master all of the basic high school content, and because they may continue to need course modification throughout their program.⁶ By having this Special Admissions program, the NSCC allows these individuals to continue their education and gain more trade specific skills, increasing their ability to find meaningful employment.

Special Admissions applicants are admitted to the same Certificate (one year) or Diploma (two year) programs as regular admissions students, and have the opportunity to earn the full credential for these programs. However, if it is determined that a student needs in-course modifications at the college level (meaning their program has been significantly altered), they are awarded a Certificate of Accomplishment along with a list of achieved skills instead of a diploma.

To be admitted into the NSCC under the Special Admissions program, students must demonstrate that they have the learning proficiency to meaningfully participate in college level courses. The process students must go through to demonstrate such competency has been a topic of controversy in the past, and has recently undergone significant reform. Previously, the NSCC required proof of core competencies via a thorough interview process, and additional documentation. After six weeks in the program, students participated in a progress review meeting; if students were struggling, further modifications to the program could have been made, or the school could suggest a new program or other alternative. In the new system, the NSCC utilizes the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) to determine if students meet the core competencies requirement, foregoing the interview process. Additionally, as all students are now able to have progress meetings, special admissions students progress meetings no longer have to conform to the six-week schedule (though they are still required). As always, this process is independent of arranging any accommodations the student may need while attending the institution.

While programs like these are very necessary to assist persons with disabilities in participating in the province's labour force, the rather thorough admission process has caused many to express concern (Personal Communication, 2014). The primary issue raised has been the sheer number of hoops these students have had to jump through in comparison to the average student, who only had to submit an application to be considered and may underperform without being removed from their program. The NSCC appears to have heard these concerns and has attempted to modify

⁶ Aside from Ax-cess Acadia, no University in Nova Scotia allows for course modification of any kind. Similarly, NSCC only allows for modifications under the Special Admissions program.

its entry requirements, reducing the length of the admission process and the wait times experienced by students. These changes are too recent to be properly evaluated, and it is unclear if the new process will be sufficient for both students and administration.

It is hoped that administration will involve students as they continue to evaluate and evolve the special admissions process.

3.2.2 AX-CESS ACADIA

Ax-cess Acadia is a participatory audit program offered in partnership with PSDS, Acadia University's School of Education, and Open Acadia. It is the only university-based program in the province for students who would otherwise not be able to attend PSE as a result of disabilities.

In contrast to the NSCC program, Ax-cess Acadia is specifically intended to offer individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities the ability to take part in university life (Bruce, 2011). To gain admission to the program, students must fill out an application form and be interviewed by the school. The primary determinants of admission are the prospective student's desire to go to university, and the ability of Acadia's programming to be adapted to their interests and goals. The program admits only a very limited number of students at one time, capping-out at five in total.

Unlike the NSCC Special Admissions students, Ax-cess Acadia students audit the courses they participate in as opposed to earning credits. Similarly, they are able to create their own timetable as opposed to following a set program. However, students are only allowed to stay in the Ax-cess Acadia program for 4-5 years, the expected length of an undergraduate degree. While participating in the program students have full access to all of Acadia's facilities and events, receive academic mentoring and support, and are aided in finding summer employment. Upon completion, the student receives a Certificate of Completion and a list of mastered skills.

This program is important to increase the educational options of persons with disabilities, and particularly those with intellectual challenges. However, the design of this program appears to target students who would be coming to Acadia for the cultural experience of university life as much as or more than the academic experience. Due to the fact that the student is auditing classes as opposed to taking them for credit – faculty members are not required to provide feedback on the students' progress, and students have the choice to write examinations or complete projects – the program cannot reasonably transition into a diploma or certification. The cultural focus of this program is arguably justifiable, however, as PSE is increasingly becoming the norm and programs like these would allow students with more severe disabilities to participate in the experience of university life.

The main issue students have reported about this program is that many of the students trying to access it are not developmentally disabled, but had IPPs for a variety of other reasons. The Access Acadia program is nevertheless often their best option due to the lack of other PSE alternatives in Nova Scotia. Some of these students have indicated that the program's limited focus on academic achievement was bothersome (Personal communication, 2014). Acadia needs to clearly delineate where this program falls on the spectrum of cultural experience and educational attainment for potential students. Is this program primarily to give individuals with higher levels of impairment the opportunity to experience university life with their peers, or is it to provide a solid educational background for students who may have had modifications during high school, but are still able to complete the majority of university-level work? If it is the latter, the school must find a better way to fully integrate these students into academic study. They need to be tested on their skills, and faculty must provide feedback on their performance so they can improve.

4. Campus Disability Services

Once students with disabilities have been admitted into PSE, many need some specialized supports relative to the general population. DSOs are the focal point of PSE institutions' efforts to support students with disabilities, upholding their "Duty to Accommodate".

PRINCIPLE 7: Disability Services is a necessary equity resource that aids in the prevention of discrimination against students with disabilities and enables them to complete their studies.

As is outlined through Post Secondary Disability Services funding agreements, DSO's core responsibilities with respect to students with disabilities include (1) arranging academic accommodations and (2) connecting students with available federal and provincial funding (see section 5.0 for funding information), while improving the physical accessibility of campus and administering targeted skills development programming may also be DSO areas of focus. In practice, these responsibilities are fulfilled to a greater or lesser extent on different campuses through a variety of different policies and programs. Also, students with disabilities are a very diverse group, so supports that work for some students may not work for others.

4.1 Financing of Disability Services Offices

DSOs require significant funding to deliver their services. Important costs include human resources, technology and physical space. The Federal and Provincial governments provide most of the funding to finance these expenditures, with some further support from post-secondary institutions themselves, who secure their resources through operating grants, student fees and charitable donations.

The Canada-Nova Scotia Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities (C-NS LMAPD) directs Federal and Provincial government resources to improve the employment situation for persons with disabilities in Nova Scotia (PSDS, 2013). The first LMAPD was negotiated in 2004 for a 3-year period, followed by annual extensions until 2014, when a new Canada-NS LMAPD was signed for 2014-2018 with the same funding envelope as in 2004. The LMAPD provides financial support for a broad range of education and workforce services, including notably Post-Secondary Disability Services (PSDS) within Nova Scotia's Department for Labour and Advanced Education (LAE). The key objective is to increase employment and employability of persons with disabilities, recognizing participation in education as a key ingredient.

PSDS is tasked to support persons with disabilities in their pursuit of higher education (PSDS, 2013). They fund on-site Disability Services Offices (DSOs) at nine

Nova Scotia universities and 13 NSCC campuses.⁷ PSDS also funds direct grants for students with disabilities, which will be discussed more in Section 5.

Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with the NSCC and each university outline the funding the province will be providing each institution's DSO and what specific services the money is intended to support. Funding to universities is broken down into discretionary funds and a specified amount of funding to hire a Disabilities Resource Facilitator (DRF). Discretionary funds are distributed based loosely on institution size, as in total enrolment and not enrolment of students with disabilities. In contrast, the MOU with the NSCC provides a lump sum, which the institution then divides amongst campuses and staff members with little input from PSDS.

The principal exception to the funding terms outlined above is Saint Mary's University (SMU), along with the affiliated Atlantic School of Theology (AST). SMU is home to the Atlantic Centre for Research, Access and Support for Persons with Disabilities (AC), which was founded in 1985 as the intended hub of disability resources for the province. It houses the Liberated Learning Centre and other initiatives that conduct disability-related research. The AC is funded based on a pre-existing "targeted funding" agreement with LAE's Universities and Colleges Branch worth \$300,000 annually, which was maintained and taken into consideration by the C-NS LMAPD. It is difficult to determine the precise intent of the Atlantic Centre's funding, including notably to what extent it is intended to directly support students with disabilities in securing academic accommodations.⁸ Excluding discretionary funds to the AC for this reason, PSDS distributed \$1,019,370 in total to support DSOs in 2012-13, including \$480,000 in discretionary funds and \$539,370 for DRF salaries. The funding distribution for Nova Scotian Universities' DSOs since 2004 is outlined in Table 2.

Currently the NSCC receives a total of \$1,170,000 per year to provide support at 13 locations (PSDS, Personal communication, 2014). Unfortunately, the MOU with the NSCC does not set any financial breakdown guidelines, so we are unable to infer how much of this money goes toward staffing versus how much would be considered discretionary funds. Additionally, as we do not have access to how the NSCC distributes these funds across campuses,

CONCERN 2: Post Secondary Disability Services does not mandate nor track the division of the Nova Scotia Community College's Memorandum of Understanding money between discretionary/staff funds, nor how much each campus actually receives.

⁷ Students at private career colleges (PCCs) and other forms of vocational training are also able to register as a student with a disability with PSDS and access financial disability supports, but these institutions are not provided direct support by PSDS.

⁸ An interview was conducted with a Disability Counsellor at SMU, however there was no response from staff who could speak to the AC's other activities, despite multiple attempts at contact.

Table 2: MOU funding by Institution[#]

INSTITUTION	POPULATION (2012/13)	# OF SWD (2012/13)	FUNDING [#]	DRF FUNDING
Acadia	4449	275	\$50,000	\$59,930
CBU	3298	154	\$90,000	\$59,930
Dalhousie [§]	17653	1009	\$120,000	\$59,930
MSVU	3281	210	\$60,000	\$59,930
NSAC*			\$35,000*	\$59,930
NSCAD	908	160	\$35,000	\$59,930
StFX	4826	312	\$55,000	\$59,930
SMU/AST [^]	7401	380	\$300,000	\$59,930
US-A	432	53	\$35,000	\$59,930

Note: *The NSAC became the Dalhousie Faculty of Agriculture in 2012. The campus still has its own DSO, but all Dalhousie students are now tracked as one group.

[^] Funding provided by Universities and Colleges Division

[§] Dalhousie population totals include University of Kings College and Dalhousie Faculty of Agriculture students.

[#]Totals do not include any occasional special project funding.

we are not able to compare the needs/funding of each campus, or to make direct comparisons to how the DSOs are funded at universities.

4.2 Accessing Disability Services

To access academic accommodations and other campus supports, students must register with disability services. Nova Scotian institutions recognize any individual with medical documentation of *permanent* illness or impairment as a student with a disability, so long as they inform the institution of their diagnosis (i.e. “self-identify”).

4.2.1 REGISTRATION

The first step in registering as a student with a disability is providing written documentation confirming a permanent diagnosis, and outlining the accommodations needed. For many impairments, a simple note from a medical specialist is adequate, although some institutions provide a specific medical form for the medical specialist to complete. Students with LD are an exception in that they require highly specialized documentation to obtain support from DSOs and PSDS.

CONCERN 3: Many incoming students are not aware that the process of receiving support services during post-secondary education is substantially different from high school.

Psycho-educational assessments, or psych-eds for short, provide extensive information about the learning strengths and weaknesses of students with

LD, allowing the practitioner conducting the psych-ed to offer individualized accommodation recommendations to the DSO. Psych-eds provide a crucial resource for students with LD and/or ADHD, as the implications of these diagnoses vary broadly, with different and at times contradictory symptomology. A medical note simply may not provide the depth of information DSOs need. Psych-eds conducted before the age of 18 are not accepted five years after their original test date for registration with DSOs, nor for access to student financial assistance (SFA) grants through PSDS, the Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) or the Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program (NSSAP; Canada Student Financial Assistance Regulations, 1995).⁹ The reasoning for this is that the report must have been conducted recently because students' abilities within the school environment change as they learn coping mechanisms or new ways to perform activities, and some things that may have been relevant in Junior High School are not applicable in a post-secondary environment.

In the second step in the registration process, the student must meet with a member of the DSO team to formally request services, establish which accommodation requests will be granted, and learn how to go about achieving them in each of their classes.

4.2.2 INFORMING FACULTY

Informing relevant faculty members that the student has registered with the DSO and has provided the necessary medical documentation completes the registration process. The notification process usually involves providing the professor with an overview of the accommodations that the student requires. However, there are two methods by which this can be achieved: the DSO can contact the faculty-members directly, or the student can be required to discuss their accommodations with their professors and report back to the DSO. Interviewees were divided on which method is preferable.

When the DSO is solely responsible for interactions with faculty, communication is usually completed through a form email that substitutes the student's name and checks off the requested accommodations from a standardized (though modifiable) list. The professor is then considered informed and the process is complete. This method is quick, does not require an excessive amount of paperwork, and keeps students relatively removed from the process, which may reduce stress for them.

However, this method also has significant drawbacks. First, it often results in faculty skimming their email with little personal investment or concentration, leaving them unlikely to remember specific details. Additionally, because the DSO handles all interaction with the professors, the student and the faculty member often do not

⁹ Psych-Eds conducted after the age of 18 do not expire.

discuss the best methods of implementing their accommodations, which can lead to conflict down the line when things are not going as the student had expected. Finally, the student avoids having to discuss their needs with others; a skill they will need to develop to be successful in the long-term, especially in the workforce.

PRINCIPLE 8: Self-advocacy skills are critically important for persons with disabilities and post-secondary education policies should support the development of these skills.

To address some of these concerns, some schools utilize ‘student-faculty agreements’. These are basically accommodations contracts that must be signed by both the student and the faculty member at the beginning of every semester. These faculty agreements contain the same information that the direct email would, but face-to-face interaction about accommodations helps to ensure that both parties are invested, and come to mutually agreed-upon courses of action.

CONCERN 4: Poor communication between students with accommodation needs and faculty at the beginning of the semester results in greater difficulty achieving accommodations later.

CONCERN 5: Disability Services’ programming does not aim to increase the self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities.

Student-faculty agreements have many advantages, particularly for those with unique accommodations, physical restrictions or episodic illnesses. Not all accommodations are going to require a lengthy discussion, but it is critical that the student and faculty work together to come to mutually agreed-upon solutions to meet students’ needs. Foremost, they create space for the student and the professor to plan ahead. For students with physical restrictions, this may be as simple as teaching the professor a

new method of presenting something, or ensuring that a particular accessible seat is always available. In the case of episodic illnesses, it allows both parties to plan for crisis situations, which preemptively takes care of many of the small details that a person in crisis is unable to handle, while also better preparing the instructor for such an eventuality. These conversations may help to mitigate the need for complicated appeals processes and increase students’ ability to return to school should crisis arise. Additionally, once details have been discussed and both the faculty member and the student have signed off on them, there is a binding agreement that both the faculty and the student are obligated to uphold, giving the faculty member a greater sense of certainty and control of their course’s academic integrity, which in turn makes faculty more likely to work with the DSO and not against it. Finally, by requiring the student to self-identify as a student with a disability, this process develops self-advocacy skills in students. By the end of a four-year degree, a student should become able to talk about their needs and how they work best to future

employers/co-workers. Although it is possible to have these conversations without the agreements, this rarely occurs in practice. The agreements create an easy way to lead in to what may feel like an uncomfortable conversation.

As an example of an issue that could be resolved through a student-faculty agreement, students with medical illnesses may request to not be marked on attendance. If 10% of a student's grade was supposed to be allocated toward attendance and participation, where is this 10% to be reallocated? Divided equally among the other assignments? Given based only on participation when present? Added to the final exam? The student and faculty member may have very different ideas of what is appropriate in this situation, and it is important that this is clarified *before* the mark is given.

PRINCIPLE 9: Successful accommodations address student, faculty and institutional needs.

CONCERN 6: Many students are not equipped with the skills or confidence to discuss their needs and effectively self-advocate

CONCERN 7: Students often do not understand how to disclose need for accommodation without disclosing their diagnosis.

Despite the apparent benefits of this method, it has clear drawbacks. Obviously, the agreements require a greater investment of time from professors. They also generate substantial paperwork as hundreds of students must get letters signed for each class they attend, creating significant administrative burden. Finally, developing self-advocacy skills is challenging, and takes time. Unfortunately, these skills are

still not yet adequately addressed at the junior high or high school level and PSE is often the first time youth must explain their needs and stand up for themselves with authority figures.¹⁰ Thus, students often do not come in with the skills/confidence to have open discussions about their needs with professors, resulting in short, useless interactions between students and faculty where each simply signs the paper and walks away.

Regardless of the process, it is important to note that no student is ever required to disclose their diagnosis to anyone outside of the DSO. There is a significant difference between disclosing a need for an accommodation and disclosing a diagnosis. While students will be required to self-disclose need to their instructors, they must be allowed to explore the pros and cons of disclosing their diagnosis before feeling pressured to do so. Disability Service staff members must ensure that students understand the difference between disclosure of need and disclosure of

¹⁰ This is currently a topic of great concern in Nova Scotia high schools; see the Halifax Regional School Board's (2013) "Transition Planning" for more information.

disability; particularly that they *do not have to disclose their specific impairment* to professors.

4.3 Disability Services Usage

DSOs and institutions offer mostly the same package of accommodations: exam accommodations (extended time, writing alone, having a scribe, oral administration, etc.), note-takers, tutors, assistive technology, alternative format texts, etc. However, there are some notable variations in programming, including learning strategists, study skills training, peer support groups, tutor databases, etc. It is not possible to measure the usage of most of these different types of services by campus. However, we can track the number of students registered with disability services overall, their types of impairments (which have important implications for services required) and the number of exams invigilated.

4.3.1 REGISTERED STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students registered with DSOs represented 5.8% of the province's total university enrolment and 10.8% of enrolment at the NSCC in 2012/2013.¹¹ Community colleges historically have more students with disabilities (McCloy & DeClou, 2013). However, there are significant disparities in representation levels of students with disabilities as proportions of total populations among the universities and among NSCC campuses.

Within the university system, NSCAD has the greatest representation of students having registered with the DSO, at 17.6%.¹² Among the comprehensive institutions,¹³ StFX leads the pack with 6.4% of their population having registered with the DSO. CBU (4.7%) and SMU (5.1%) were at the lower end of the spectrum for the 2012/2013 academic year, although CBU consistently had among the higher representations until 2008/09, whereas Dalhousie was on the lower end of the spectrum in 2010/11 and 2011/12 (see Appendix A for more information). US-A and NSCAD are the closest universities to having enrolment levels of students with disabilities that are representative of the proportion of persons with disabilities within the general population.

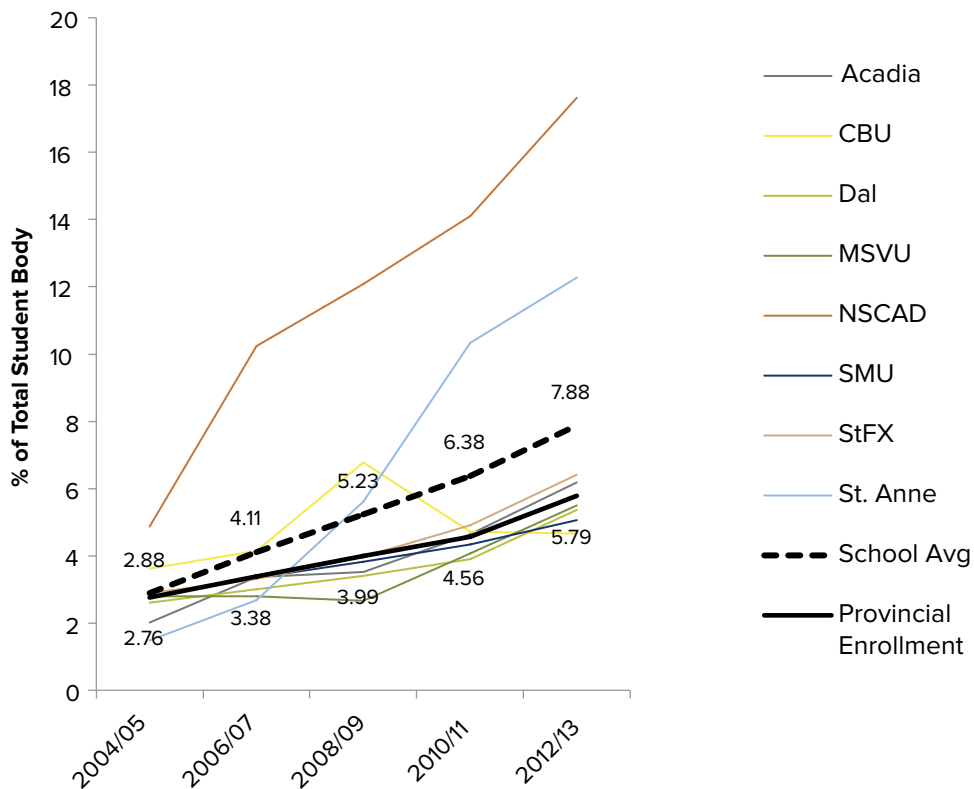
In stark contrast to the university system, by 2014 the majority of the NSCC's campuses averaged about 12% of their student body being registered with disability

11 Considerably less population data is available for the NSCC as compared to Nova Scotia's universities. Although the number of NSCC students registered with DSOs was obtained through PSDS, the total NSCC population numbers are only available for the past four years, and were obtained by PSDS through NSCC News Briefings.

12 Although NSCAD has a unique population in comparison to other schools in the province, it seems unlikely that they have two-thirds greater representation of students with disabilities than the provincial average. Some part of this variation may reflect a higher likelihood to register with the DSO among NSCAD students.

13 We define comprehensive institutions as those offering a range of academic programming across multiple faculties, i.e. Dalhousie, SMU, StFX, Acadia, CBU and MSVU.

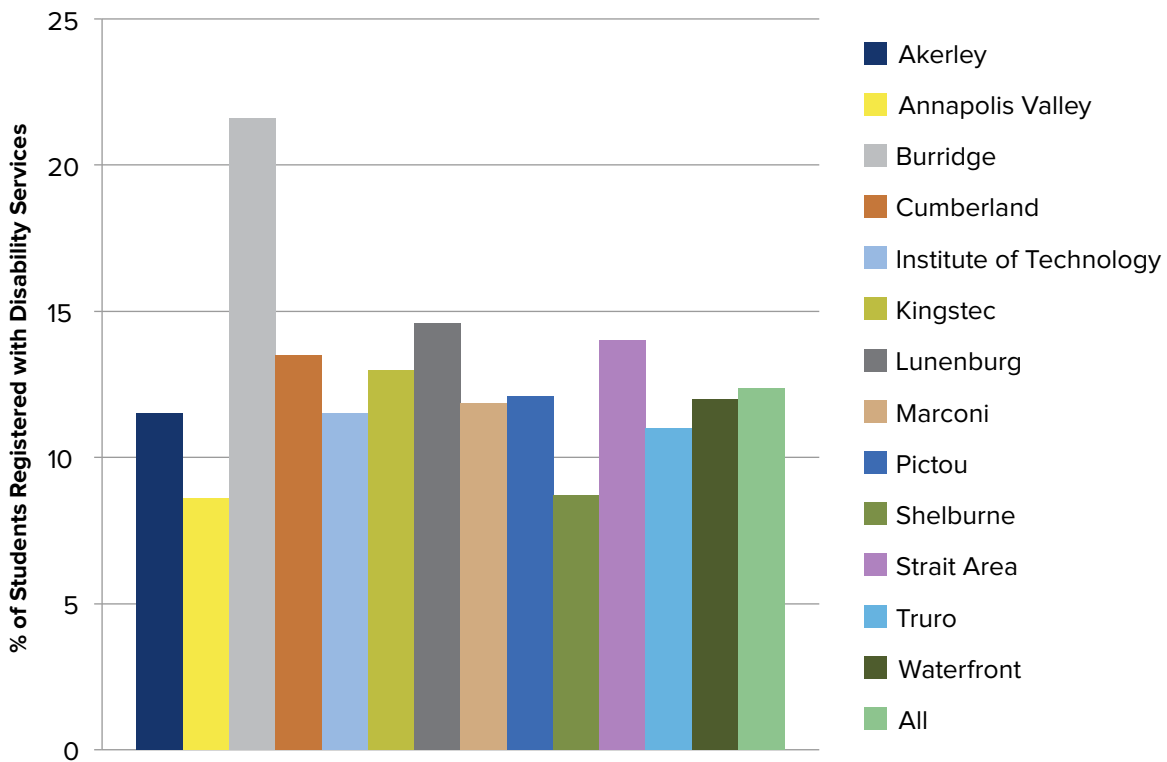
Figure 1: Number of university students registered with Disability Services as a percentage of the student body (2004/05-2012/13)



services. In 2014, the Burridge campus had a 21.6% representation rate – just over target numbers for proportional representation. Lunenburg and Truro campuses also edge slightly above the norm with just over 14% of the population self identifying. On the other end of the scale, the Annapolis Valley and Shelburne Campuses had lower representation levels – 8.6% and 8.7% respectively. Unfortunately, it was not possible to determine the fluctuation in registered students by NSCC campus over the past several years with data available.

It is important to note that these numbers include students admitted under the Special Admissions program. These students do not typically meet the requirements for entry to PSE, and thus it is difficult to determine where PSDS drew the line when stating the proportion of students who may not benefit from traditional PSE, and to which category these students would have been placed. Thus, although it was stated earlier that a 13% representation rate would be proportional to the number of persons with disabilities in the general population with disabilities who would benefit from PSE (as determined by PSDS), we are likely aiming too low with this number at the NSCC given their Special Admissions program.

Figure 2: Proportion of the NSCC's Student Body Registered with Disability Services by campus (2014)



Although it is clear that the NSCC is doing a significantly better job of attracting and retaining students with disabilities than other PSE institutions, we still believe students with disabilities may be underrepresented at the NSCC. Given the substantial differences in underrepresentation between the two systems, it may be beneficial for universities to consider some of the strategies utilized by the NSCC to encourage students with disabilities to attend university.

Despite it being shown that PSE institutions have a critical underrepresentation of students with disabilities, every public post-secondary institution has seen substantial increases in the number of students registered with DSOs in recent years (see table 3 for university data, appendix A for exact numbers for universities and the NSCC). NSCAD has always had the highest percentage of students registered with the DSO, but experienced a 226% increase between 2004-05 and 2012-13. Acadia's numbers jumped 220% over the same period, ranking first among comprehensive universities. Université Sainte-Anne has had an enormous 562% increase in service uptake in 10 years. The NSCC's slower growth (68%) remains substantial, in particular relative to their higher baseline.

Table 3: Change in % of Student Body Registered with Disability Services at Universities between 04/05 and 12/13.

	INCREASE IN % OF STUDENT BODY	INCREASE IN # OF REGISTERED STUDENTS (%)
Acadia	4.17%	220%
CBU	1.05%	22%
Dal	2.76%	126%
MSVU	2.71	74%
NSCAD	12.8%	226%
SMU	2.26%	64%
StFX	3.53	101%
US-A	10.79	562%
Provincial[^]	3.06[^]	109%

[^]Total number of registered students with DSOs as a % of total provincial enrollment at universities
 Orange: Highest comprehensive Red: Highest overall Blue: Provincial

Importantly, the number of students with disabilities graduating has seen similar growth: 93% increase in 2011-12 over 2004-05 (PSDS, 2012). This means that not only are more students with disabilities making it into PSE, more are achieving their educational goals.

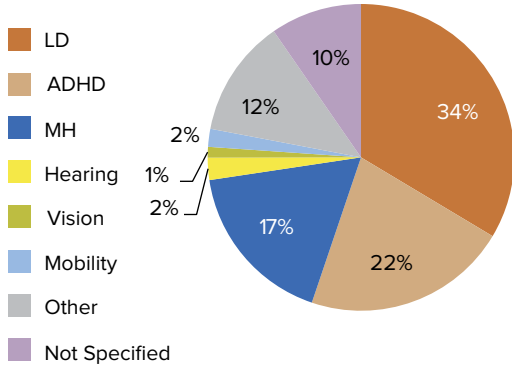
Of course, many students with disabilities do not register with disability services. The increase in registered students with disabilities thus may indicate that more students with disabilities are accessing PSE, that more students with disabilities are choosing to register with DSOs, or a combination of the two.

4.3.2 PREVALENCE OF IMPAIRMENTS

In addition to the increase in service uptake, there has been a dramatic change in the prevalence of particular impairments among students registered with DSOs (CAUCASS, 2011). Unfortunately, data on the prevalence of students registering with particular disabilities in Canada is not readily available predating the late 2000's. American data is used instead, given that anecdotal evidence suggests American numbers were comparable to the Canadian situation at that time, as they are today. As well, these numbers are generally based on reports of 'primary' diagnoses – a person may have several disabilities, but will only be counted in a single category.

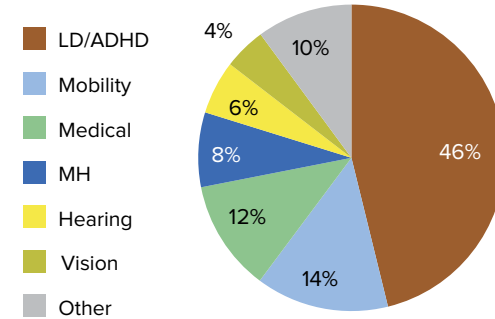
Figures 3 & 4: Prevalence of impairments among registered students with disabilities in 2012–13 compared to 1999.

**REPRESENTATION OF IMPAIRMENTS
(NOVA SCOTIA, 2012–13)**



Note: Universities only (data unavailable for the NSCC). Data compiled by StudentsNS via documents provided by PSDS & Institution MOU Reportbacks; all numbers are approximations.

**REPRESENTATION OF IMPAIRMENTS
(USA, 1999)**



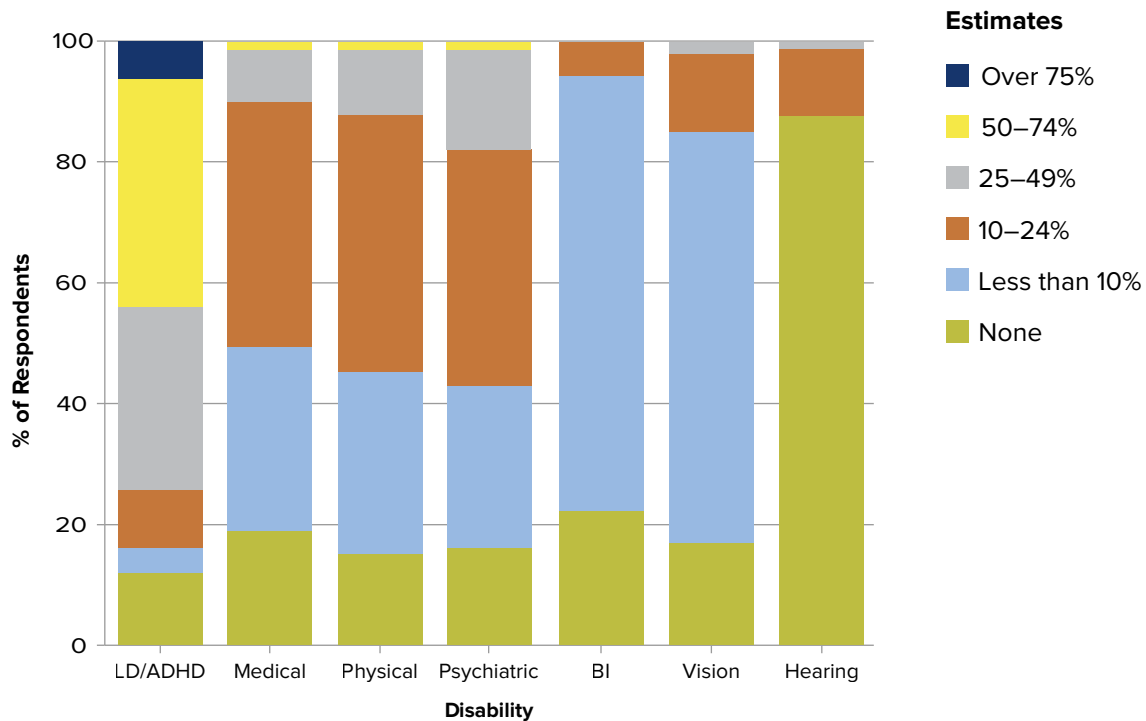
Data retrieved from the 2012 Maclean's article "The Mental Health Crisis on Campus" by K. Lunau.

Students with learning disabilities and ADHD (LD/ADHD) continue to account for the largest proportion of registered students with disabilities: 46% of student reported impairments in 1999 (Lunau, 2012) and 56% in Nova Scotia today. However, prevalence of Mental Health (MH) challenges represented only 8% of reported disabilities in 1999, but reached over 17% in 2013, moving from the fifth to the second most common form of impairment when treating LD/ADHD as a single category. Moreover, both mental health issues and ADHD are frequently reported as 'secondary' disabilities, often presenting with each other or with other learning disorders. In contrast, Mobility, Hearing & Vision issues accounted for 24% of student disabilities in 1999, but today they account for only 5%. Most institutions report fewer than five students identifying mobility, hearing or vision issues as their primary diagnosis registered with DSOs; a substantial decrease from 15 years ago that has likely resulted from technological advancement.

The changes in impairment prevalence have had a very large impact on DSOs. Disability Services Staff members have had to modify priorities and update training to meet the challenges faced by new cohorts. Whereas when they obtained their education¹⁴ many DRFs' predominant focus and training surrounded education, mobility devices, assistive technology and learning strategies, today's population demands knowledge of episodic illness and LD/ADHD with a reduction in the use of older assistive technology and note-taking services. In short, this means that Disability Services staff require updated training, department policies and practices need to be changed, and available resources need to become more varied. Thus,

¹⁴ Many DRFs did not pursue formal disability-related training in the context of their post-secondary studies (Personal communication, 2013).

Figure 5: Disability Services Facilitator estimates of students served as a function of Disability (Pan-Canadian Survey, 2006-07)



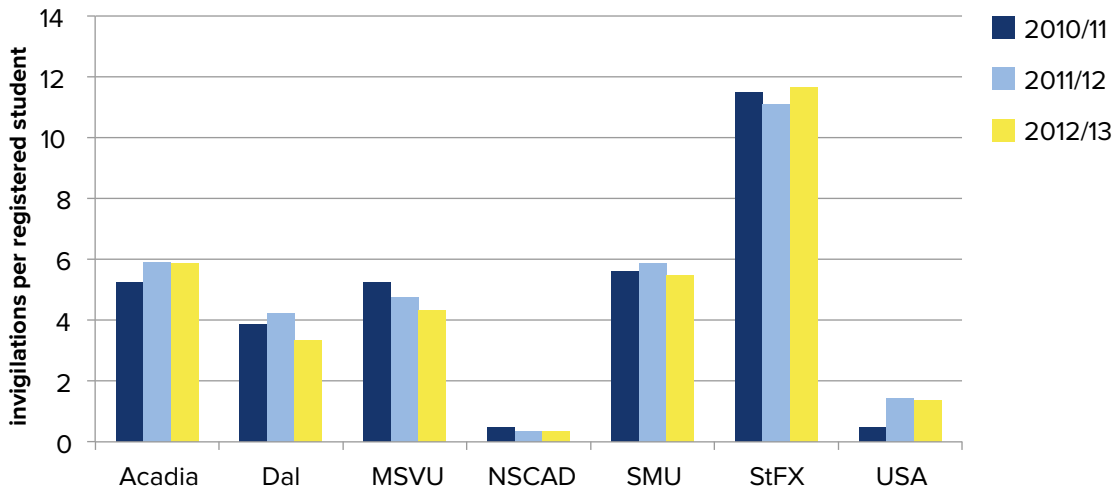
Source: Harrison & Wolforth, 2007

the increased workload facing DSOs is not only in numbers, but also in education and reform.

4.3.3 INVIGILATIONS

Increases in total numbers of registered students with disabilities are significant, but not all students have equal demands for services. One method to determine students' need is to look at the number of exam accommodations they require. Exam accommodations comprise the vast majority of accommodation requests (Sharpe, Johnson, Izzo, & Murray, 2005), so much so that some schools have developed dedicated testing centers (e.g. Dalhousie, SMU, CBU). Exam accommodations are also among the most time consuming activities for the DSO, because unlike other forms of accommodations, the DSO itself implements exam invigilations. Each accommodated exam requires that the DSO secure permission from the professor, acquire the exam, book a room (often with only one student per room), find a proctor and return the completed exam to the professor, not to mention any actual writing-based accommodations such as a scribe. Therefore, the number of invigilations performed at each school provides a good picture of the DSO's per-student workload. Figure 5 provides the number of invigilations per registered student in 2010-11, 2011-12 and 2012-13.

Figure 6: Average number of invigilations per registered student.



Source: Data gathered through institution MOU reportbacks and independent communication.

Note: CBU data was not included in MOU reportbacks. NSCC data is not available.

* PSDS does not formally track/compare invigilations; thus different institutions may be reporting their statistics differently than others.

StFX performs the most invigilations per student of any school in the province by far, averaging 11.7 exams per student per year. There are many possible reasons why StFX performs so many more invigilations than any other school, including having more courses that use the two midterm model, or having fewer students taking reduced course loads. Alternatively, they may provide exam accommodations to a broader range of students (e.g. those suffering from exam anxiety). But regardless of cause, they have been consistently performing over 3000 invigilations per year. It is obvious that testing accommodation support is needed to ensure that the DSO has the capacity to perform other activities, and the resources available at other schools will be available at StFX.

PRINCIPLE 10: Government and institutions share responsibility for providing supports to students with disabilities.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, both NSCAD and US-A perform very few exams per student: 0.33 and 1.38 respectively in 2012-13. However, the programs offered by these schools are not directly comparable to those at

comprehensive schools such as Dalhousie, SMU or StFX. The vast majority of classes a NSCAD student takes are studio based, meaning they don't have written exams to be invigilated in the first place. Moreover, these numbers do not include any other form of midterm/final project accommodations that may be unique to NSCAD's particular course structure. Similarly, US-A offers a large variety of programs that differ in length (including "immersion school" which lasts a matter of weeks), and many of their exams involve an oral component, which may reduce the need for accommodations for many students with learning disorders.

5. Student Financial Assistance

Student financial assistance (SFA) programs are the primary instruments the governments of Canada and Nova Scotia use to reduce financial barriers to PSE access and reduce the debt burdens faced by students when they finish their studies. In *“From Worst to First: How Nova Scotia Can Lead the Pack on Student Financial Assistance”* (2013), *StudentsNS* critically reviewed the complex array of government SFA programs available to Nova Scotia students before, during, and after their studies.¹⁵

In that paper, *StudentsNS* made a number of recommendations designed to make PSE more affordable for all students with significant financial need, regardless of one’s disability status. Certain government SFA programs, particularly In-Study and Post-Study SFA programs, do make specific provisions in policy for students with a disability. These policies are detailed below.

5.1 In-Study Assistance

The main in-study SFA program available to Nova Scotia students has federal and provincial components. The federally funded portion, known as the Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) falls under the mandate of Employment and Skills Development Canada (ESDC). The provincially funded portion, the Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program (NSSAP), operates within LAE. The NSSAP administers delivery of both programs.

5.1.1 ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The CSLP and NSSAP define a disability as:

a functional limitation caused by a physical or mental impairment that restricts the ability of a person to perform the daily activities necessary to participate in studies at a post-secondary school level or the labour force and is expected to remain with the person for the person’s expected life (Canada Student Financial Assistance Regulations, 1995).

Students declaring a personal disability when applying for SFA must provide a completed medical assessment from an appropriate medical professional stating that their disability is permanent, and outlining how the disability impacts their studies (see Appendix B). This assessment is kept on file and need not be repeated for subsequent SFA applications.

¹⁵ These are classified as Pre-Study SFA programs (education savings programs), In-Study (traditional student loans and grants), and Post-Study SFA (debt management and tax subsidies), respectively.

With one major exception, students with disabilities are subject to the same set of basic eligibility criteria as other SFA applicants (see Section 4 in *StudentsNS*, 2013). The exception relates to the size of the course load that is required to maintain eligibility for SFA. For most university students, a full course load is defined as five courses per term; and to be eligible for SFA, a student must maintain 60% of a full course load (or 20+ hours per week, depending on the type of program). Students with a permanent disability, however, are considered full time for SFA eligibility purposes if they maintain 40% of a full course load (two courses or an equivalent number of study hours – NSSAO, 2011). As a result of this exception, there are two additional policy differences for students with disabilities: (1) they can receive SFA funding for more than the typical program length plus one year (without special permission); and (2) their total lifetime SFA eligibility is extended to 520 weeks as opposed to the standard 340 weeks allowed for most other students.

BEST PRACTICE: NSCC allows students with disabilities to pursue a one-year program, but take the necessary courses over two years with no additional fees.

CONCERN 8: Students with disabilities taking reduced course loads face additional costs to complete their program of studies.

There are positive and negative aspects to this policy. On the positive side, it is critically important that allowances be made for students with disabilities who are unable to successfully manage a typical full course load. On the flip side, however, students choosing to take a reduced course load inevitably face other barriers to successful program completion. A student taking 40% of a full course load will take 2.5 times longer than a student with a full course-load to finish the necessary course credits, or ten years to complete a nominally four-year bachelor's degree. By extension, they will also face significantly higher financial costs for completing their program.

5.1.2 TARGETED FUNDING

Students with disabilities may be eligible to receive financial assistance through the same loan and grant programs available to other students. There are also a number of grant programs specifically targeting students with disabilities. Briefly, these targeted grants are as follows¹⁶.

- The Canada Student Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities (CSG-PD), created in 2009, is valued at up to \$2,000 per year, for students with a permanent disability and at least \$1 of financial need. In 2012, the CSG-PD was awarded to 1,160 students studying in Nova Scotia at a cost of \$2,311,000. An additional 158 Nova Scotian students studying out of province received the CSG-PD, costing \$314,000.

¹⁶ All funding information was provided by PSDS. All numbers are approximate.

- The Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities (CSG-SEPD), valued at up to \$8,000 per year, for students with a demonstrated need for adaptive equipment and services while attending a PSE program. In 2012, the CSG-SEPD was awarded to 549 students studying in Nova Scotia at a cost of \$1,440,013. An additional 52 Nova Scotian students studying out of province received the CSG-PD, costing \$164,480.
- The Nova Scotia Provincial Access Grant (NS-PAG), valued at up to \$2,000 university students and up to \$1,000 for college students, for those with at least \$1 of financial need. Students with unmet need receive a cheque from PSDS while all others receive this grant as a reduction to their existing student loan debt. In 2012, the NS-PAG was awarded to 910 students at a cost of \$1,426,341, including both in (786) and out (124) of province students.
- The Nova Scotia PSDS Goods & Services Program (NS-GAS) is for students with disabilities in need of additional goods and/or services (SFA-ineligible students may also apply). In 2012, the NS-GAS was awarded to 162 students at a cost of \$282,432, including both in (147) and out (13) of province students.

SFA program statistics offer some insight into the financial needs of Nova Scotia's population of students with disabilities as well as their educational tendencies (see Appendix, Table 4-10 from *StudentsNS*, 2013). Overall, CGS-PD awardees represent 9% of Nova Scotia resident SFA recipients, but 15% of NSCC SFA recipients. Moreover, within the total student population, CGS-PD awardees represent less than 3% of all Nova Scotia resident PSE students, but over 4% of all NSCC students.

In total, the federal and provincial governments targeted a combined \$5.9 million in direct grants to Nova Scotian students with disabilities in the 2012-13 academic year. This figure has grown significantly since 2009, when the combined support totalled \$4.4 million. Finally, these direct grants to students are in addition to direct funding provided to institutions, described in the MOU section above.

5.1.3 OTHER IN-STUDY ASSISTANCE POLICIES

Current SFA policy outlines a wide range of extraordinary circumstances in which students' current or future SFA eligibility may be affected. Importantly, it also includes provisions for an appeals process through which most issues related to the assessment and awarding of SFA are subject to student appeal (see *StudentsNS*, 2013).¹⁷ In general, *StudentsNS* supports the existence of any process giving extra consideration to student's facing personal and/or financial hardship. We believe these policies are particularly important for students with disabilities.

¹⁷ There are many possible grounds for appeal of an SFA decision and only a few policies that are explicitly not open to student appeal. These include the maximum weekly loan amounts (\$210 federal and \$180 provincial), the maximum values of the various grants, and the maximum lifetime limits on SFA (520 for students with disabilities).

For example, consider a student forced to withdraw from school (or reduce to a part-time course load) as a result of their disability. Such a student may face a variety of possible SFA-related consequences:

- An over-award assessment, which results in disbursed grants for the remainder of term being converted to repayable-loans (CSGs are waived if withdrawal is beyond 30 days into the term);
- Cancellation or reduction of any future awards not already disbursed, which, depending on individual circumstances, may place the disabled student in a position of financial vulnerability;
- A determination that the student has failed to meet the satisfactory scholastic standard, which may result in temporary loss of SFA eligibility if it happens more than once.

Importantly, each of the above circumstances is subject to the appeals process, representing an important recognition of the challenges facing students with adverse medical conditions (including permanent disability). The appeals process promotes the financial accessibility and overall fairness of the system by giving students a formal opportunity to receive additional consideration for their uniquely challenging circumstances.

5.2 Post-Study Assistance

On the one hand, there are a number of Post-Study SFA programs and policies recognizing the challenges that students with disabilities can encounter while studying and later in life by providing assistance in managing student debt, including the Repayment Assistance Program for Borrowers with Permanent Disabilities (RAP-BPD) and the Severe Permanent Disability Benefit (SPDB). On the other hand, Nova Scotia's existing Debt Cap program critically fails to recognize these same challenges.

For most students, the Repayment Assistance Program is a two-stage program designed to help borrowers manage their debt through more affordable payment terms (determined based on individual circumstances). In the first stage, any qualifying student is eligible to have the interest paid on their student loans for up to 60 months, during which, depending on their circumstances, the borrower may be required to make an adjusted affordable payment, or no payment at all. In the second stage, borrowers become eligible to have not only their interest subsidized by government, but also part of their loan principal, while the borrower continues

to make affordable payments. The payments made by government are adjusted to ensure that no borrower on RAP is in repayment for more than 15 years.¹⁸

The RAP-BPD has only a single stage, which corresponds to Stage 2 of the standard RAP program (i.e. interest plus at least some principal paid by government, ten-year maximum repayment period on RAP). In other words, the RAP-BPD ensures students with disabilities with low earnings will have their debt eliminated ten years after graduation.

The SPDB grants immediate Canada and Nova Scotia Student Loan forgiveness to students that are deemed to be severely disabled to the extent that they are unable to participate in the labour force or further PSE for the remainder of their lives. In practice, this benefit may be very similar to the RAP in that both programs offer a path to full loan forgiveness. The key difference is that the SPDB does not require eligible students to make affordable payments or wait for the prescribed maximum 10-year period to elapse.

¹⁸ Borrowers approved for RAP Stage 2 (or the RAP for Borrowers with Permanent Disabilities) are ineligible to receive any additional loans or grants until the existing loans have been fully paid off.

6. Barriers

Notwithstanding the presence of DSOs on each campus, students with disabilities encounter many different campus-level barriers to equitable access to PSE.¹⁹ While these barriers may take many different concrete forms, they amount to a few systematic phenomena:

1. Chronic resource shortages;
2. Financial need
3. Discrimination and stigma (including self-stigmatization);
4. Poor information;
5. Structural disempowerment;
6. Bureaucratic rigidity; and
7. Physical infrastructure and equipment.

These phenomena interact to pose serious obstacles to students with disabilities, limiting their learning and fundamentally undercutting their human rights on campus.

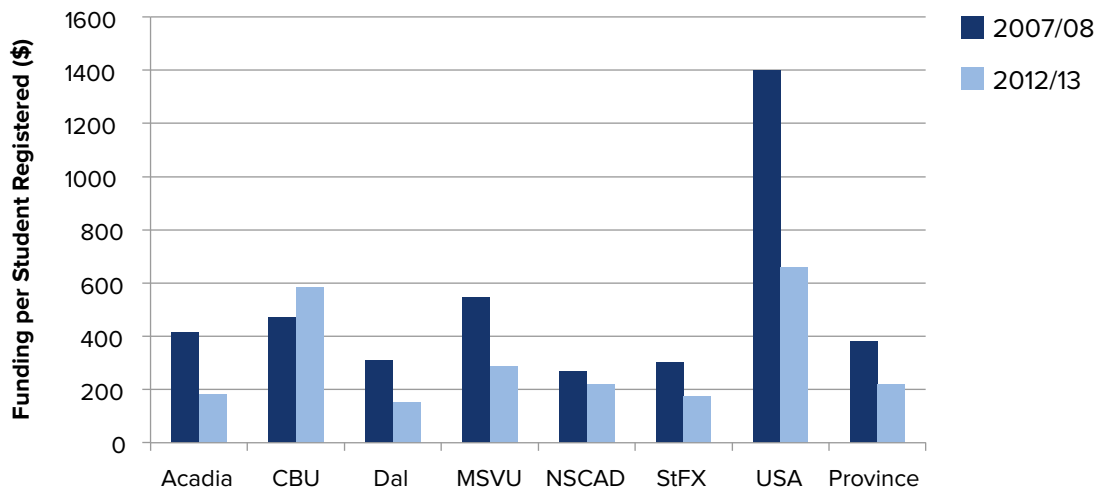
6.1 Chronic Resource Shortages

As a result of increased enrolment of registered students with disabilities and frozen funding, universities have seen a 42.2% decrease in discretionary funding dollars per student since the C-NS LMAPD was negotiated in 2008 (see Figure 6). The total amount of money given by PSDS to universities per student registered with DSOs in 2007-08 was \$382.17 (not including DRF funds). By 2012-13, the average amount per student had almost halved to \$220.89. CBU is the only university to have an increase in per-student funding. This means resources, in addition to staff time, are stretched thin. Unfortunately, because the province has not set guidelines for the division of staff and discretionary funding within the NSCC's MOU, a similar comparison cannot be made. However, there is a similar overall trend as the number of NSCC students registered with Disability Services has risen while the funding has remained the same. University services are especially stretched, as, combined, they serve twice as many students with disabilities but receive approximately the same amount of funding from the Province as the NSCC.

In the same seven years that we have witnessed a 42.2% decrease in funding, we have also seen increasing demands for a larger variety of services to be provided by DSOs, calls for DSOs to participate in stigma reduction and awareness campaigns, and the expectation that they make outreach a priority. Much of the increased demand, and many of the changes in demand, likely result from increased

¹⁹ These barriers exclude financial need which is discussed in Section 5.

Figure 7: Differences in discretionary funding per student between 2007/08 and 2012/13



awareness of disabilities and reduced stigma, as well as improved supports in Primary-to-12 education, such that further increase in DSO workload remains likely.

CONCERN 9: The number of students registered with Disability Services has increased dramatically without matching funding or additional staff and as a result it is more difficult for students to obtain the support they need.

CONCERN 10: The current distribution of funding provided by the Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities via Post-Secondary Disability Services does not align with current usage rates at each school causing disadvantages for students at particular institutions.

The severity of resource shortages varies by institution, principally because PSDS funding to DSOs is distributed roughly based on institution size. As indicated in Figure 1 and Tables 7-10 in Appendix A, some schools have a dramatic difference between their school size and the proportion of registered students in comparison to others. For example, NSCAD enrolls 2.1% of all university students in Nova Scotia but three-times its share of students with disabilities. Dispersing funds based on the size of the institution is a critical flaw of the current system.

Acadia Case Study

Acadia has experienced the most dramatic growth in the number of students registered with the DSO of any comprehensive school in the province at 220%, reaching a 137.5:1 students-to-staff ratio. Being a small department at a small university, Acadia's DSO is simply not equipped to handle a dramatic increase in students; they lack specialized software, exam coordinators and other resources. Additionally, the Acadia DSO performs the second highest number of invigilations per student (5.9) of any institution in the province, reaching 1613 invigilations in total.

Acadia's DSO identified a need to limit the time spent coordinating invigilations in order to maintain a high quality of service. They formed a partnership with local start up Frostbyte Interactive to develop a standardized software database. This completely digital system allows students, as well as each person assisting in the examination accommodation process (e.g. proctors, professors, administrators) to report their availability. It also keeps track of the spaces available to host exams, and automatically assigns an available room, proctor and time for each exam requested by each student, while it will also notify the professor when the exam is ready for pick up. This software system, or ones like it, offers a relatively low-cost measure to increase the efficiency of DSOs, and to allow Disability Services Staff to gain back valuable time with students.

CONCERN 11: Saint Francis Xavier University's Disability Services Office is responsible for coordinating so many exam invigilations that other aspects of disability support may be suffering.

StFX notably hosts the most invigilations, but does not have a testing center and arranges all of these accommodations directly through the DSO. In comparison, SMU, averages 5.48 invigilations per student, but has a testing center and a full-time exam coordinator with part-time help. More to the point, SMU's DSO still

considers exam accommodations to be a significant area of work. Given the modest difference in registered students with disabilities at these schools (380 at SMU, 312 at StFX), this means that while SMU's exam center is coordinating 2081 invigilations per year, StFX is coordinating 3640 invigilations out of their DSO. Given that StFX only employs one full-time year round staff member and two additional staff during the school year, whereas SMU has roughly seven full time employees, it is questionable whether StFX's DSO can coordinate this many exams while adequately addressing students' other needs.

Table 4: Disability Services Staff to Student Ratios at Universities in Nova Scotia ^{§ (2012-2013)}

	# OF STAFF MEMBERS	STUDENTS PER STAFF MEMBER
Acadia	2	137.5
CBU	1	154
Dalhousie	8 Ft, 2 PT	101 (school year)
MSVU	3, 4 days a week	70
NSCAD	1	160
SMU	7	54.3
StFX	1 FT, 2 PT	104 (school year)
US-A	1	53
Average	--	104.2

[§] Numbers do not include admin assistants, proctors, notetakers etc.

The most pressing consequence of DSOs' decline in funding relative to demand is staff shortages. For the past couple years, many institutions in the province had over 100 registered students with disabilities per DSO staff member, as indicated in Tables 4 & 5.

NSCAD has the highest students-to-staff ratio (160:1) and as a result is likely especially in need of additional funds. However, the role of the DSO is different at NSCAD given the modest amount of time spent on exam accommodations. An on-site psychologist or counselor would likely benefit NSCAD's DSO the most, although

Table 5: Disability Services Staff to Student Ratios at the NSCC\$ (2014)

	# OF STAFF MEMBERS	STUDENTS PER STAFF MEMBER
Akerley	1 Full Time	114
Annapolis Valley	1 Part Time	36
Burridge	1 Full Time	85
Cumberland	1 Part Time	60
Institute of Technology	1 Full Time	112
Kingstec	1 Full Time	117
Lunenburg	1 Full Time	59
Marconi	1 Full Time	135
Pictou	1 Full Time	86
Shelburne	1 Full Time	17
Strait Area	1 Full Time	91
Truro	1 Full Time	124
Waterfront	2 Full Time	148.5

[§] Numbers do not include admin assistants, proctors, notetakers etc.

these specialists would be considered out of PSDS' jurisdiction at other schools. This illustrates well the need for flexibility in staff roles to meet campus-level demands.

PRINCIPLE 11: Disability Services must provide individualized support.

The very nature of Disability Services is highly personalized and involves individual contact and support to be effective. Higher student to staff ratios

are connected to less effective services and more students left on their own to handle problems that would be better addressed with support from the DSO.

As public awareness campaigns surrounding disability issues gain traction, often driven by student organizations, it would be ideal for DSOs to have the time and funds to participate and further develop these initiatives, as the hub for disabilities and chronic health issues on campus. However, if there were greater promotion and awareness of disability services, it is probable that demand would increase. Considering how major increases in usage have not been supported through additional resources it is appropriate to question at what point the DSOs' capacity to deliver good quality services would be compromised and staff would be further overloaded. It is already unfair to expect that DSOs are going to be able to provide adequate, personalized services to students with more than twice the service uptake of just even years ago, and very limited additional staff.

CONCERN 12: Provincially, Disability Services service uptake at universities has risen 109% in ten years, but Provincial financial support has not compensated for this and offices have not been provided with increased staffing or additional technology.

With proper staffing, DSOs could play a crucial role in improving not only the academic environment, but also the campus environment both for their clients and the rest of the academic community. Currently, this role is being haphazardly filled by a combination of counselors, administrators, and others who, despite not being disabled or working with students with chronic health conditions, are tasked with adjusting the college/university environment/community to better serve them.

6.2 Insufficient Financial Aid

Students with disabilities have greater costs and more limited resources than other students. Unfortunately, many government and institutional policies around financial support still fail to recognize this reality.

6.2.1 INEQUITABLE ASSISTANCE

As discussed earlier, each province has its own definition of disability included in their provincial Human Rights Act. What is explicitly stated in this definition varies substantially across the country. This means that while all Canadian students have equal access to Federal disability supports, students from some provinces receive better provincial support. In other words, a student who qualifies as “disabled” in Ontario may not in Saskatchewan.

BEST PRACTICE: The Ontario Bursary for Students with Disabilities (OBSWD) is for students with permanent or temporary disabilities who are studying full- or part-time at a post-secondary institution and have financial need. Students who qualify for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) or the Canada Student Grant for Part-time Students (CSG-PS) can receive this bursary.

Nova Scotians are lucky in that the Province does recognize all of the disorders that are recognized by the Federal Government. Quebec, in contrast, does not provide funding support to students with LD.

Among the 54,743 students registered at Nova Scotian PSE institutions in 2012-13, 14,931 of them were out of province students (MPHEC, 2013; MSCC Internal Data). This almost certainly means that at least some of our out-of-province students do not qualify for supports from their home provinces, but are attending school with students who receive greater supports for the same diagnosis. This puts many of these students at a disadvantage relative to their peers.

6.2.2 “PERMANENCE” OF DISABILITIES

CONCERN 13: Many students cannot access post-secondary support systems because medical professionals are often reluctant to classify mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety as ‘permanent’.

Importantly, both the CSLP and NSSAP only deal with *permanent* disabilities. The adoption of the permanent disability framework over the broader terminology of the NSHRA effectively limits the students who are able to access financial aid, negating the needs of those suffering from disabling illnesses they may recover from, or that present episodically (e.g. severe concussions, medical conditions with lengthy waiting lists for treatment etc.).

The permanent requirement becomes increasingly problematic for things like concussions, where the expected duration of symptoms often cannot be determined, and may in fact be permanent. Additionally, it can be difficult to persuade medical professionals to state that conditions such as major depression are permanent,

both because some do recover, and because it can be discouraging for the patient. Furthermore, the need for formal test results to prove the permanence of a documented illness may interfere with the student's ability to access supports while awaiting testing or other specialized services. This results in a number of students falling through the cracks, and a number of doctors being pressured to stretch what they know to be true in order for their patients to receive the supports they need. This is another area where provincial inequities are present. Ontario does provide disability grants to students with temporary disabilities.

6.2.3 PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

As mentioned in Section 4.2, students with LD are required to provide a psycho-educational assessment to receive disability-related supports. Psycho-educational assessments are extremely expensive for students and/or their families. Averaging \$1500, though occasionally running as high as \$3000, requiring an updated Psych-Ed to access supports can be extremely costly for students (OUSA, 2012).

PRINCIPLE 12: All Nova Scotians must have access to information, including medical testing, necessary to make informed choices about their physical and mental health.

Students applying for the Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities are eligible for reimbursement of up to 75% of the costs related to this assessment, but only if the test comes back positive, and only to a maximum of \$1,200. Many students cannot afford the upfront expense, even if the reimbursement is guaranteed. In situations

where the student receives the full \$1,200 reimbursement, they still pay about \$300 per assessment on average, with some students paying over well over \$1000.

This policy unfairly affects students of lower socio-economic status, who are less likely to be able to pay such a large sum upfront. Moreover, students who have reason to believe they may have LD, but who have not been previously tested may be leery of spending money on the test, given that students receiving a negative result are not reimbursed.

CONCERN 14: The upfront cost of psycho-educational testing represents a significant barrier for students with limited financial resources, who as a result also cannot access disability related financial and academic supports.

A small minority of universities provide upfront funding for Psych-Ed assessments or a small fund to pay the upfront costs of LD assessments for a very limited number of students per year. However, these funds are only available to students in great financial need. At the majority of universities, the only funding option for students is the temporary emergency funding available through other school departments or student unions typically capping out at \$100-\$500. In short, the lack of upfront

funding for Psych-Ed assessments is resulting in many students with LDs not being able to access needed supports, reducing their capacity to excel in a PSE environment.

CONCERN 15: The Federal Government reimburses only a portion of the cost of psycho-education assessments, resulting in students paying significant amounts to acquire federally mandated supports.

In British Columbia, the provincial government disperses the Learning Disorder Assessment Bursary (LDAB).

This grant provides PSE students up to \$1800 to assist with the upfront costs of Psych-Ed assessments to confirm an LD diagnosis. The need for this sort of grant to be implemented in Nova Scotia is clear: the current system blatantly favors wealthy students. Learning disorders are not a class-specific problem, and we as a province must take steps to ensure that people from all backgrounds are able to get the testing and subsequent support they need.

BEST PRACTICE: In British Columbia, the provincial government disperses the Learning Disorder Assessment Bursary (LDAB), giving PS students up to \$1800 to assist with the upfront costs of psycho-educational assessments to confirm a LD diagnosis.²⁰

The expiry of psych-eds for the purposes of SFA calculations is also highly problematic. The argument in favour of Psych-Eds over a practitioner's note is that it gives DRFs a better picture of the student's strengths and abilities as well as where they need more support. However, PSDS, the CSLP and the NSSAP do not need to know the student's current specific accommodation needs to recognize them as having a permanent disability. If the student has previously

received a Psych-Ed assessment resulting in an LD diagnosis, and can provide current a medical note stating that the diagnosis is still relevant, there is no need for PSDS to require an updated full assessment for the student to receive SFA grants.

6.2.4 INSTITUTIONAL SCHOLARSHIPS AND BURSARIES

One of the most common ways to finance PSE outside of SFA is through scholarships and bursaries. Institutions offer a variety of scholarships open to the general public, and many offer awards specifically aimed at students with disabilities. The most prominent example of this is the AC, which offers 14 different scholarships worth between \$220 and \$5000. Some DSOs also actively advertise non-institution-based scholarships to their students through their website or email communications. However, the vast majority of these scholarships require that the student be enrolled in full-time study.

SFA programs currently recognize students with disabilities as full time students at a 40% course load in recognition of the additional time needed due to their disabilities.

CONCERN 16: The full-time classification for students with disabilities taking reduced course loads is often not applied with respect to scholarship and bursary opportunities, limiting students with disabilities' access to financial assistance.

In turn, institutions have adopted this definition of “full-time” for students registered as having a disability. This proactive step allows for students with disabilities to be considered for scholarships and bursaries targeted at full-time students while on a reduced course load.

Unfortunately, many schools screen for qualifying scholarship recipients using a 60% minimum course load. Moreover, as students who are registered with DSOs do not have to self-identify to the departments giving out the awards, they are often unfairly excluded from consideration.

6.2.5 DEBT CAP PROGRAM

The existing Debt Cap program makes no allowances for students with disabilities. As structured since its inception in 2011, this program provides provincial loan forgiveness for up to four years of undergraduate study,

CONCERN 17: The Debt Cap program disfavours students with disabilities who are more likely to pursue a reduced course-load.

provided that the loan borrower completes the program of study within 8 years. This is problematic for students with disabilities for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it appears that these students may be more likely to pursue studies at the community college level, making them automatically ineligible for Debt Cap benefits. Secondly, the existing Debt Cap eligibility criteria are simply unfair to students with disabilities that study on a reduced course load. It is entirely fair and appropriate that students with disabilities be permitted to reduce their course loads. This policy exists to recognize the additional academic challenges that may be faced by students with disabilities. It is, therefore, incongruous to deny such students the possibility of full debt relief if they do not finish within the minimum four-year period, meaning that they will not receive the benefits of full provincial loan forgiveness available to students able to complete a full course load in the expected time period. Furthermore, a student taking the minimum 40% course load could actually take up to 10-years to complete an undergraduate degree and, as a result, would not be eligible for any benefit from the Debt Cap.

6.2.6 UNMET NEED AND MISJUDGED RESOURCES

Students with disabilities are also subject to the same financial eligibility criteria as all other students. *StudentsNS* (2013) has previously identified a critical flaw in these criteria; namely, that SFA policy dictating the financial resources expected of students (and/or their parents) fails to account for a number of important savings priorities (i.e. retirement savings, education

savings for other children, or disability savings for family members). Families needing to make such contributions receive no reductions in the contributions expected by the SFA program, which may force parents to make impossible choices: between their own future financial security and their child's education; or, between two or more children pursuing education. *StudentsNS* believes it is neither fair nor appropriate to force such decisions on parents (including students with children).

CONCERN 18: The financial support programs available to students with disabilities do not adequately take daily living costs into account.

CONCERN 19: The parental and student contribution assumptions within the Canada Student Loan and Nova Scotia Student Assistance Programs fail to consider important family financial priorities including registered retirement savings, registered education savings for other children, and registered disability savings for any family member.

The need for parents or spouses to contribute to disability savings, notably through a Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP) for a family member with “a severe and prolonged impairment in physical or mental functions” (Canada Revenue Agency, 2013c), is not considered in the financial analysis of family resources within the CSLP/NSSAP. For students with disabilities who also rely on SFA, this omission from policy is particularly egregious. Investing in an RDSP on behalf of a disabled child can

provide important peace of mind to both the parents and the child. Forcing families to choose between current investment in education and an insurance policy for the child's future financial security is extremely problematic.²⁰ SFA policy should be designed to enhance access to PSE for disabled students and simultaneously, to affirm that PSE is not the only important financial decision facing those students.

In a similar vein, SFA maximum loan amounts may be inadequate for students with high medical costs. CSLP provides a maximum of \$210 per week of study and NSSAP will provide a maximum of \$180 per week of study. Although both the federal and provincial governments do make allowances for students with disabilities through grants, particularly a combined total of \$16,000 available for goods and services,

²⁰ This is underlined further by existing SFA program repayment policies and programs, which make significant allowances for the very real possibility of future financial insecurity for disabled student loan borrowers (see Section 5.2 on Post-Study Financial Assistance).

if assessed at maximum need by both the provincial and federal governments, this still may not cover a student's medical costs. For example, a student requiring attendant care while on campus is essentially paying another person's salary out of these grants, in addition to any technology, tutors or other help they may need. Finally, students with episodic illnesses often receive the short end of the stick with regard to financial supports. Episodic illnesses rarely qualify for federal and provincial programs aimed at persons with disabilities (such as disability benefits, access to RDSPs, etc.), because the federal government requires the impairment be debilitating to the point of diminished self-sufficiency 90% of the time. Students with mental or medical illnesses deal with similar issues within the SFA system: although they qualify as students with disabilities and are able to access some disability supports, they are not able to access all of them. Neither the Federal or Provincial Goods and Services Grant can be used to pay for therapy or prescription medication, when it may be these very things that would enable the student to attend and excel in school. For example, if someone with an LD needs to employ a learning strategist because they have difficulty writing and concentrating on what the professor is saying at the same time, this may be covered by a Goods and Services Grant. On the other hand, if someone has ADHD and has found a medication that works for them and enables them to concentrate within a classroom environment, the grant will not cover the expense.²¹

6.2.7 SUSPENSION OF ELIGIBILITY

CONCERN 20: The students assistance appeals process can be an invasive and emotionally challenging experience that may be unhealthy for individuals with wellness-related grounds for appeal.

Students with disabilities, including notably cyclical conditions, are particularly likely to be suspended from student assistance programs as a result of dropped or unsuccessful courses. This can cause very significant financial and emotional stress, further aggravating many health conditions.

It is excellent that the NSSAP has an appeals process, but as we have argued previously, the process can be invasive and also emotionally challenging for appellants. It generally requires the appellant to share private details of their lives with a panel of complete strangers, which could cause additional stress on individuals appealing on the basis of serious health problems.

Unfortunately, student assistance programs do not have policies adjusting expectations around suspension of eligibility and over-awards for students with disabilities. Such policies would allow students with disabilities to avoid the need to appeal in many cases.

²¹ This is an area that will be further addressed in an upcoming report on Campus Health Services.

6.3 Faculty and Staff Resistance

Faculty and staff at PSE institutions themselves can hold and purvey stigmatizing attitudes towards students with disabilities and/or obstruct students accessing accommodations and services. They generally voice two main concerns with accommodations, not only here in Nova Scotia, but across Canada and the United States: a) do academic accommodations provide advantages to students and jeopardize academic integrity, and b) do students really have the issues they say they do?

The first question of academic integrity is very important in a PSE context. We must ensure not only that students with disabilities are not receiving “advantages” but, arguably more important, that they are still gaining the same knowledge and skills as their classmates.

Thankfully, the impact of academic accommodations on student learning has been a heavily investigated, though often controversial, topic. Results have indicated that while academic accommodations may have a small positive impact on the performance of all students, they have a substantial positive impact on the performance of students with disabilities. In their 2012 meta-analysis, Gregg & Nelson determined that students with LD taking a standardized test with extended time still generally underperformed relative to their typically achieving peers, which contradicts the notion that extended time accommodations are “unfair advantages” for students with LD. They also found that students with LD experienced significant gains in performance when extended timelines were provided. Kosciolk and Ysseldyke (2000) found that elementary students with special education needs preferred the accommodated test administration (75%), whereas the results were reversed for students without disabilities (76% of whom preferred the standard administration), suggesting students without disabilities did not perceive value in accommodations provided. Although there is still a need for greater research in this area, the available evidence strongly suggests that allowing all students to access these accommodations would have little effect on the performance of students in general, whereas the removal of these supports would be a significant detriment to students with disabilities. It is the responsibility of the instructor, student and DSO to work through requested adaptations to course work to ensure that students with disabilities can experience the same level of education as their peers. Faculty must recognize that standard testing accommodations do not jeopardize academic integrity, and that the student understands that other accommodations involving the adaptation of coursework need to be discussed directly with the professor to ensure a high standard of education.

PRINCIPLE 13: When implemented correctly, academic accommodations do not compromise academic integrity.

Perhaps a more profound problem within the question of academic integrity is the notion that all students have a responsibility to mold to the classroom as opposed to the classroom molding to them. At universities in particular, many staff harbour antediluvian views that they belong to elite institutions and that some people simply do not belong in university; notably people who would need academic accommodations. This belief is discriminatory, judgmental and has no place in our public PSE institutions. Moreover, institutions must take ownership of the fact that the PSE system has been developed based on a ‘typical’ student, and that their will always be deviations from the norm.

The second common attitude among staff and faculty is disbelief that students actually need accommodations and that they are claiming these in order to reap the benefits of having a disability. Perhaps most disturbingly, a pan-Canadian study conducted by Harrison and Wolforth (2007) found that 10% of DSO staff had

suspected 10-25% of students to be faking or exaggerating their disabilities, and that an additional 58% of respondents felt this happened, but less than 10% of the time. Students with invisible disabilities such as LD or MH issues were the most likely to be viewed as feigning their disabilities. In fact, the suspicion that not all students with LD “really had” LD was brought up in StudentsNS’ interviews with DRFs in preparation for this report. Additionally several students reported being told they “did not really need” accommodations that their doctors requested, including attendant care and other physical accommodations. DSO staff members are meant to be students’ allies on campus and they are meant to be the best-informed staff members with regard to disability-related issues. If these people are questioning them (despite having presented medical documentation), it speaks to the depth of the stigma prevalent on our PSE campuses. That being said, the vast majority of DSOs in this province are supportive, knowledgeable, and dedicated allies for students with disabilities.

CONCERN 22: Post-secondary institution faculty and staff too frequently hold stigmatizing attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, particularly those with invisible or episodic issues.

Moreover, believing some students may not have the diagnosis they hold is not intrinsically bad; they may simply believe they hold a different, but equally disabling condition, for example. The important part is that they do not allow these personal feelings to affect the quality of support these students receive.

CONCERN 21: Post-secondary faculty, students, and environments are often not inclusive, accessible, accepting, or informed of disability or disability issues.

Moreover, believing some students may not have the diagnosis they hold is not intrinsically bad; they may simply believe they hold a different, but equally disabling condition, for example. The important part is that they do not allow these personal feelings to affect the quality of support these students receive.

Several students interviewed for this report directly stated that they had encountered professors who challenged their disability status (often in front of classmates), causing them significant distress and discomfort. Individuals with “invisible” disabilities encounter these problems more often than others; particularly those with episodic illnesses. This ignorant attitude is based highly in cultural stigma, and is often the source of student-faculty conflict.

Many students find that faculty members lack the knowledge, willingness and/ or ability to create accessible learning plans. The PSE system differs from the P-12 system in that, relatively speaking, professors are generally hired more based on their expertise in an area of research than their teaching ability. While this allows students to learn from the best in their field, it does not always ensure that instructors are able to effectively transmit their knowledge to their pupils.

PRINCIPLE 14: All students should be treated with respect and dignity, and a student’s differences should not negatively impact how faculty/ staff to treat them.

This is exceedingly true for students with disabilities. Outside of formal education on the subject, it is rare for a layperson to fully understand the typical needs caused by a single disability, let alone disability in various forms. Faculty have expressed concern (e.g. Canadian

Teacher’s Foundation, 2012; DiGiorgio, 2009) that they do not feel adequately equipped to teach or advise students with disabilities, particularly those with mental health concerns and learning disorders. In fact, a report released by UPEI (DiGiorgio, 2009) found that not only were many professors not familiar with learning disabilities or the support systems in place, some did not know the difference between learning disabilities and intellectual disabilities. Reportedly, “their discomfort with teaching students with intellectual disabilities sometimes affected their attitudes towards students with learning disabilities”. Our concern with this is two-fold: not only are faculty uneducated on issues that are very relevant to their jobs, they admittedly have ‘discomfort’ with some impairments to the point of it impacting how they do their job. This is completely unacceptable.

CONCERN 23: Faculty are not systematically educated on disabilities or how to work with students with disabilities, which can result in discriminatory behavior.

If information on this subject is not provided to the people expected to teach Nova Scotian students, Nova Scotia cannot expect these people to provide a quality education to differently-abled learners. A basic understanding of the differences in in-class, academic needs is fundamental to ensuring students with disabilities will receive the same quality of education as their peers. It will also allow professors to move toward designing their courses using Universal Design for Learning principles. Secondly, instructors need to be informed about how to discuss challenges with students in an appropriate manner. Occasionally, things said with the sincere wish to help cause more damage than having not said anything at all, simply due to tone and

word choice. This can cause faculty to shy away from these issues, making an open dialogue difficult and leaving students to cope on their own.

CONCERN 24: Some institutions do not have a policy that formally addresses accommodations or the rights of students with disabilities.

CONCERN 25: Accommodation policies, and more specifically disability policies, often do not formally identify the populations that they serve, which allows for loopholes that may be disadvantageous for students.

Institutions across the province have recognized the need to provide faculty education, however each individual institution is currently attempting to do so independently through handbooks, videos and/or training days, resulting in a large replication of work and unnecessary spending. Moreover, DSOs across the province have indicated that despite reports that faculty do not

feel knowledgeable about disabilities, they have an exceedingly difficult time getting them to attend non-mandatory training on the subject (Personal Communication, 2013). Additionally, when mandatory training is provided, it is only for full time staff. With recent growth in the number of part time faculty members, relatively fewer instructors may be receiving any form of disability related training.

6.4 Weak Institutional Policy Frameworks

Every PSE institution in Nova Scotia is bound by the NSHRA, and must abide by its definition of “disability”. As shown in 6, the majority of PSE institutions also have some form of written, legally binding accommodations policy for students with disabilities, but not all. Where in place, these policies vary with respect to references to the NSHRA and clarity in defining “disability”.

Table 6: Policy references to the NSHRA.

	HAS POLICY	REFERENCES NSHRA	PROVIDES NSHRA DEFINITION
Acadia	Yes, but limited	Yes	No
CBU	No*	--	--
Dalhousie	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kings	Yes	Yes	Yes
MSVU	Yes	Yes	Yes
NSCAD	Yes	No	No
NSCC	Yes*	No	No
StFX	Yes	Yes	No
SMU	No	--	--

*Currently being written and/or heavily edited

PRINCIPLE 15: For students with disabilities, accommodations are human rights, not privileges.

PRINCIPLE 16: Students should be aware of and informed of their legal rights as citizens with disabilities.

Accommodations policies are often outlined in stand-alone documents that apply specifically to students with disabilities, with all other students requiring accommodations being governed by a separate document. Policies vary by institution and occasionally within institutions or

departments. This means students may be accommodated differently in the context of different programs. This tends to imply that necessary accommodations are *privileges* being granted to a select group of students; the academic version of “pity points” given to students who are “deficient”, or incapable of performing as well as the average student.²² In actuality of course, accommodations are a human right enshrined in law.

The majority of DSOs state that they use the NSHRA definition of disability in their written policy. However, fewer provide the definition to students. This is problematic because the definition can help students understand their rights and responsibilities.

CONCERN 26: Many current Disability/Accommodation policies present accommodations as a service as opposed to a human right.

Explicit references to the NSHRA definition are especially important because this definition differs from that used by student assistance with respect to the permanence of an affliction. This information has the potential to affect whether a student will choose to approach their DSO, especially in the case of mental illness or other episodic conditions. Yet, although all DRFs will state that they follow the NSHRA definition of disability when asked, from our research they much more commonly reference the “permanent” requirement set forth by the CSLP and the NSSAP when actually working with students. This is perhaps unsurprising, as Disability Services Offices (DSOs) were initially created to connect qualified students with federal/provincial funding supports (Personal communication, 2013).

There is, in fact, a disconnect between PSE institutions, which are governed by provincial law and have the duty to accommodate, and PSDS, which is mandated to help individuals with permanent disabilities. As PSE institutions utilize DSOs to fulfill their duty to accommodate, this puts DSOs in the awkward position of being legally obligated to register and help those with severe, disabling but possibly recoverable illnesses, but receiving little to no financial, government or institution support to do so. This begs the question of whether or not it is technically the DSO’s mandate

²² Similar concerns were raised by Areheart in his 2008 publication “When Disability Isn’t “Just Right”: The Entrenchment of the Medical Model of Disability and the Goldilocks Dilemma”

to uphold the NSHRA for the institution without considerable additional support to handle students that are suffering from severe (but temporary) impairments. Moreover, it is questionable as to whether institutions are upholding the NSHRA if they do not have a method of supporting those with possibly recoverable disabilities.

CONCERN 27: The current system prevents students with severely disabling but recoverable or temporary illnesses from accessing supports, even temporarily, from Disability Services, Post Secondary Disability Services and the Federal Government because it requires that the disability be ‘permanent’.

CONCERN 28: Many students are unaware that mental illnesses are recognized disabilities.

BEST PRACTICE: Dalhousie University’s “Accommodation Policy for Students” provides a good example of contextualizing disability accommodation as a human rights issue. The integration of the NSHRA anti-discrimination language is clear and to the point.

CONCERN 29: There is no formalized way for students to disagree with Disability Services Offices’ decisions regarding their academic accommodations.

6.4.1 APPEALS PROCESSES

DSOs are supposed to follow the written accommodation requests provided by medical professionals in the administration of student accommodations. Unfortunately, these requests are often far from explicit, leaving individual DRFs responsible for working out many details with the student. This is a common practice, and is likely better for students who may be better judges of what services they actually need. However, many DRFs in the province indicated that many accommodations letters ask for a great deal of things that DSOs do not offer, or that DRFs do not perceive as being beneficial for the student.²³ The DRF must therefore play a mediating role between documentation and practice.

It should follow, then, that there be a formalized procedure for students to disagree with DRF’s judgments. Currently, this is not true of any campus in the province: none have an appeals process in place.

As well, even once an accommodation has been approved it does not guarantee

that it will be achieved in a timely fashion, or even that it will be achieved at all. For example, a ‘note-taking’ accommodation typically depends on finding willing volunteers. Most often, the DSO will contact the professor and ask them to seek a note-taker for the student. Occasionally, there simply will not be a student willing to act as a note-taker in that particular course. Moreover, several DSOs in Nova Scotia consider the process of finding a note-taker to be entirely on the student – meaning

23 As one DRF put it, they ask for “the sun, the moon and the stars”.

PRINCIPLE 17: Nova Scotia students must be empowered to actively participate in setting their post-secondary system's direction via engagement through their representative student bodies, within their post-secondary institutions, and through the broader democratic process.

CONCERN 30: Many Disability Services staff members are unfamiliar with medical deferral policy and the impacts of deferrals and withdrawals on Student Financial Assistance.

they expect the student to approach a peer/professor explain their situation and get the notes as needed. Depending of the student's individual situation, this may be a significant barrier to the student actually being able to achieve this accommodation. Secondly, faculty may also occasionally refuse accommodations. In both scenarios, the DSO will usually intervene to find a resolution to ensure the student's needs are met, but the process can delay the student accessing their accommodations by a number of weeks. Similar issues arise when waiting for equipment to be delivered, for testing to occur, or when learning how to properly use assistive technology. If a student is unable to obtain a requested

accommodation, or if it is not achieved until several weeks into the term, this can have implications for their success in the course, which they may wish to appeal. It is not clear whether any DRFs have the knowledge to support students engaged with the academic appeals processes within their institutions.

Lack of accommodation is likely to result in sub-par achievement by the student. Poor grades may affect their access to financial assistance, their standing within the university, and ultimately their ability to continue their education. Every effort must be made to ensure that the grades students receive are reflective of ability, and not the result of depleted disability supports.

6.4.2 RETROACTIVE ACCOMMODATIONS

Since the purpose of an accommodation is to permit disadvantaged individuals to participate fully, "but for" their disability, the law is increasingly recognizing that after-the-fact, or retroactive, accommodations may be required (Komlan, 2014).

Within the post secondary system, there are two forms of retroactive accommodation that may arise: a student may receive a diagnosis part-way through their educational career that may explain poor performance in the past, or a student with a recognized disability may fail to request an accommodation before it is needed. PSE institutions and government programs have struggled to provide these types of accommodations. Most of the debate surrounds how to adjust past performance for a present disability.

Consider the following example, adapted from Komlan's 2014 lecture:

A student performs well until the second midterm in a course, at which point they visibly exhibit signs of exhaustion and stop participating in class. Their grades begin to suffer to a point where it is noticeable to the instructor. The student fails to submit a final paper and asks to be able to write the paper or to retroactively withdraw a few weeks after the due date has past, as they have been diagnosed with depression.

Allowing the student to receive a withdrawal or extension in this case would be considered a retroactive accommodation. Typically, the less time there is between the grade being given and the request being submitted, the easier it is to obtain retroactive accommodation.

Obviously, from an institutional standpoint, this is a very individualized process to be considered on a case-by-case basis. There are many factors that need to be taken into account before it can be determined if retroactive accommodations are appropriate. Similarly, there are several possible accommodation options available depending on the student's situation: deferring upcoming exams, allowing for the student to re-write exams with proper accommodation, re-weighting of grades, retroactive withdrawals, grade replacements, etc. However, very few PSE institutions currently allow for this kind of accommodation.

Not achieving retroactive accommodation can affect the student in a number of ways. Foremost, they may receive a poor grade in a subject that they are actually quite good at, and that they may have excelled at if they had received accommodations. Secondly, a failing grade may jeopardize their standing at the institution, and with CSLP and NSSAP. These students can lose the ability to access student loans after having several episodes of success and failure, then must go through a long, complicated process to appeal their suspension, repeatedly disclosing very private hardships in order to return to school. Similarly, these students often have difficulty with academic standing within the school, being put on academic probation or being removed from the institution.

Retroactive accommodations are also relevant to the student assistance program itself. For example, graduates with disabilities can access the RAP-BPD to help them finance their debts when their incomes do not allow them to make the payments that would otherwise be required. The following circumstances are a fictional account of a prospective student, based loosely on an actual case:

The individual had completed a credential at a private community college (PCC) previously with loans from CSLP/NSSAP, but failed to secure meaningful work and accessed the Repayment Assistance Program for four years. She then became

aware that she has a learning disability and wished to access the RAP-BD, in which case the RAP would have been paying down her principal over the course of those four years, accelerating significantly her debt relief process.

Allowing this individual to qualify retroactively for the RAP-BPD, provided they can prove that they would have been eligible, would dramatically improve their circumstances. The only cost to government would be in money they had saved as a result of the student being unaware of their disability.

Figuring out how to navigate retroactive accommodations is challenging. However, it is a critical ingredient to be fully inclusive of the diversity of students' abilities and circumstances.

6.4.3 EXTENDED TIMELINES

Practices around extended timelines are especially variable among institutions. Some institutions do not extended timelines at all, while for others these even eliminate the need to apply for medical deferrals.

People who do not support extended timeline accommodations do so primarily based on the reasoning that allowing students to extend their class length does not help them to learn needed time-management skills, and it allows their classes to run over into the next semester, compounding the problem. While the value of this complaint is understood, extended timelines are not the crux of that problem. Advising should be done to give students a manageable course load, and mentoring services should be available to help students develop time management skills.²⁴ Moreover, students need the flexibility of extended timelines as they manage the transition into a post-secondary environment and the increased demands that come with it.

Importantly, denying extended timeline accommodations prevents students with episodic illnesses from being able to utilize this accommodation. This point is usually dismissed with the explanation that institutions, because of 'crisis policy' or 'medical reasons', would accommodate these students with or without disability accommodations. However, this reasoning is deeply flawed. For the most part, students with episodic illnesses (such as Crohn's Disease, Epilepsy, and mental health problems) are unable to anticipate when they will experience difficulties, so their need for extended timelines is not for lack of planning. Denying students with episodic illnesses extended timelines ensures that every time they experience severe symptoms that result in missing exams or being unable to complete the

24 Students must ultimately make their own decision re: course load etc. The extended timeline accommodation allows students who have misjudged the workload to learn from their mistakes, giving them the ability to continue in their education without penalty.

coursework, they have to bring in another copy of the same medical documentation the school *already has on file*, and complete the same stack of paperwork over again to obtain a medical extension.

PRINCIPLE 18: A high-quality post-secondary education should be challenging, but all reasonable efforts should be made to mitigate threats to students' health and recognize the diversity in how individuals learn.

What is perhaps more important about extended timeline accommodations, is the possibility that they can help students to avoid crisis situations. Particularly with regard to mental health conditions, students can often recognize when they are pushing their limits or evoking symptoms through stress. Institutions

must allow these students some control over their own schedule, as opposed to forcing them to either push through (possibly causing an episode) or drop out.

6.4.4 EXPIRED PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENTS

The requirement that psych assessments conducted before the age of 18 must be less than five years old is problematic for many students who make the transition from high school to PSE.

Psychologists often avoid formally diagnosing LDs before the age of 18 as the label can be very stigmatizing and, if incorrectly diagnosed, possibly detrimental to a child's education. Meanwhile, many students wait until they turn 18 to acquire updated testing so their documentation does not expire partway through their education. Finally, it is optimistic to believe that high school students or their parents are aware of the documentation requirements at PSE institutions.

As a result, most students with LD do not start the process of acquiring updated documentation until the end of their grade 12 year or later. However, lengthy waitlists for these services mean many simply will not be able to acquire updated testing when classes begin in September. Local data is unavailable, but the average processing time for Psych-Eds in Ontario can be as long as six months (OUSA, 2012).²⁵ Thus, many students with LD/ADHD enter PSE with insufficient documentation and cannot access accommodations that they need to be successful.

6.5 Limited Outreach

DSOs are not considered to be responsible for performing any outreach activities with the general school population, or recruiting students. This has a number of consequences. It limits DSO contributions to reducing stigma within the campus

²⁵ To their credit, the majority of DSOs in Nova Scotia aim to provide as much help as possible to students in these circumstances. However, this is rarely considered to be 'mandatory' on the part of the institution.

CONCERN 31: Disability Services' mandate has a very narrow scope, limiting their influence on the post-secondary environment and increasing cultural accessibility.

community. As importantly, it prevents many students from accessing the services they are entitled to.

6.5.1 LOW AWARENESS OF DISABILITY SERVICES

It is very important to boost the utilization of DSOs by current students with qualifying conditions. OUSA's student survey (2012) found almost 10% of Brock University's undergraduate students reported having at least one disability, yet Brock's Multi-Year Accountability Agreement Report Back for 2010-2011 only reported 5% of their undergraduate population as having a disability. Moreover, previous research conducted in Ontario found that 39% of students with disabilities did not know disability services or a DSO existed at their school (CMSF, 2009). A disturbing number of students withdrawing or deferring on the basis of medical documentation stating they suffer from a permanent disability are not informed of the services available to them should they choose to return, indicating a lack of knowledge or concern on the part of the institution. As a result of all these factors, more students are likely to drop out permanently, struggle, and/or ultimately not achieve at the level they are capable of.

CONCERN 32: Students temporarily leaving school for medical reasons are not informed of the services available to them on campus before leaving or when returning.

CONCERN 33: Post-secondary institutions and government do little to no outreach to ensure that students understand what Disability Services is or why registering with Disability Services could be beneficial.

Pamphlets and school websites are the primary method of distributing information to students and staff. Every school's DSO has some form of web presence, but some departments make better use of this than others.

The majority of schools include not only information targeted at students, but packages specifically directed at faculty as well. Examples of exemplary resources include: Acadia and StFX's advice on self-disclosure, MSVU's highlighting of the differences between disability services in high school and university, Acadia's information for students with learning disorders, CBU's etiquette tips for the non-disabled, SMU's directing students to a specific staff member at the Employment Center, NSCAD's extensive information on mental health and wellness, NSCC's self-advocacy tips, and the inclusion of scholarship opportunities.

Efforts should be made to provide as much information online as possible, but this level of outreach is insufficient. Importantly, these tools are useful for students and staff that are already engaged with DSOs, but are inadequate when it comes to reaching students that are not already aware of DSOs and the services they provide.

6.5.2 LIMITED STIGMA REDUCTION EFFORTS

CONCERN 34: Disability Services only addresses the academic portion of the post-secondary experience, even though its mandate is to make the post-secondary environment more accessible to students with disabilities in general.

CONCERN 35: Despite institutional recognition of the need to create an inclusive environment, Disability Services, one of the departments most qualified to address these issues, is often not involved in outreach

DSOs serve to make the modes of teaching and information acquisition during class accessible to students with impairments. This is a very important role that needs to remain central to the DSO function within the institution; students are there to learn. However, limiting the focus of disability related services to the classroom negates larger cultural factors that have significant influence on the quality of students with impairments' learning experience.

Students still experience significant cultural barriers even when taking advantage of available services. Being the victim of stigma and discrimination, caused either by a lack of education or

direct prejudice, reduces the ability of a student to be successful in the classroom. It affects their self-esteem, self-worth, attitudes and drive to continue on in their studies and pursue their goals.

Institutions across the country have identified stigma reductions as a primary objective in improving campus culture (e.g. Queens University, 2012). Yet efforts in this arena have rarely included the service most qualified to address these issues: the DSO.

NSCAD's DSO, which actually consists of a single staff member, is perhaps the most involved with student groups, outreach and advocacy initiatives. This appears to have had a dramatic impact on student willingness to use the DSO. Staff at Acadia's DSO, in contrast, have

BEST PRACTICE: NSCAD's DSO is actively involved in committees with student and administrative representation aimed at addressing issues faced by students with mental health concerns. They have worked with students to run a very proactive mental health campaign that not only aims to impart knowledge to their university community, but also serves to reduce stigma and increase students' comfort in disclosing/registering with DS.

very little available time to do any sort of outreach to students or engage in any stigma reduction or campus wellness initiatives, which is especially unfortunate considering the university could have an excellent partnership between the DSO, the administration and students: Acadia's President has been influential in acclimatizing the university community to the "mental health crisis" and Acadia is one of the few schools to have a student-run Mental Health Committee. Acadia is one school where it would be particularly impactful for the DSO to become engaged in outreach, inclusion and wellness campaigns.

6.5.3 NAMING "DISABILITY SERVICES"

As well, the majority of departments providing support to students with disabilities are currently called "Disability Services Offices". Similarly, the provincial program for these students is called "Post-Secondary Disability Services". While this title makes practical sense, and is an accurate representation of what the department does, the use of the term 'disability' creates a major barrier between the department and the student body.

PRINCIPLE 19: Creating healthy environments and other prevention initiatives, delivering effective crisis-response, and supporting full recovery from crises are equally important elements in a holistic approach to student wellness.

CONCERN 36: The cultural stigma associated with having a disability causes many students to avoid Disability Services and not seek supports that they are entitled to and may need.

This happens for two reasons: students do not believe their condition would be considered a 'disability' in a traditional sense, and/or students do not want to be labeled as 'disabled'. For example, in the American National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, only 35.5% of PSE students with LD considered themselves to have a disability and had informed their institution. A majority (56.7%) did not consider themselves to have a disability, while 7.8% thought they had a disability but chose not to inform their schools (Newman et al., 2009). Similarly, Lighter, Kipps-Vaughan, Schlute & Trice (2012) found that "wanting to develop an identity independent of disability status"

accounted for a significant portion of their sample's reasoning for not registering with DSOs. A third problem created by the title of "Disability Services" or "Accommodation Services" can be summed up in the following quote: "People told me to go to [the DSO] to get [disability] accommodations. I don't want accommodations. No one told me about all the other things they provided." (Lighter et al, 2012).

6.5.4 INADEQUATE ORIENTATION OF NEW STUDENTS

Regardless of the form orientation/ transition programs take, giving students with disabilities a platform to not only learn about the services offered, but also begin the acquisition of learning strategies and use of assistive technology could be very beneficial to Nova Scotian students. Additionally, this would allow students to bond and to help create a support network of people who may understand challenges the student faces throughout the academic year in ways others may not.

Currently, Dalhousie is the only university in the province to offer a full-day orientation that is specific to students with disabilities, called “ABLE@Dal”. Both staff and students run the program. They aim to provide incoming students with learning strategies and skills, and an introduction to life as a student with a disability at Dalhousie. Although not as extensive, Acadia also runs a short introduction to disability services during regular orientation. During this program they explain what the DSO does and how they can help, but they also have a panel of current students with disabilities to answer any questions incoming students may have. All other schools in the province give only a limited presentation and/or information to students during orientation, through staff alone. The Acadia model may be more suitable to small schools that have a limited number of incoming students with disabilities. Ideally, however, these presentations should attempt to incorporate or end with some form of social activity as opposed to being a ‘lecture’.

Alternatively, regional school boards could work together to host these orientation/transition workshops, having break-off groups based on school or type of schooling when required.

REGION HIGHLIGHT: Dalhousie’s ABLE@Dal orientation program for students with disabilities helps students with disabilities transition into university life.

In recent years, the Government of Ontario allocated \$47 million dollars to help students with disabilities succeed in PSE, and provided funding targeted specifically at students with LD. One of the results of this initiative was the development of summer transition programs for students with learning disabilities. The aim of these programs is to “give students with LD and/or ADHD a chance to learn evidence-based learning strategies, self-determination skills and the use of assistive technologies that promote PSE success without the added pressure and demands of a PSE course load” (HEQCO, 2012). So far, these programs have received very positive reactions from both students and institutions, and have been found to improve student outcomes (HEQCO, 2012). Moreover, findings indicate that these programs improve students’ orientation to campus, orientation to services, disability awareness and willingness to self-advocate (HEQCO, 2012).

Obviously PSE institutions in Ontario have a much larger student population on average than PSE institutions in Nova Scotia. In turn this means we have fewer

students with disabilities. This has both advantages and disadvantages in relation to orientation programs. For instance, limiting the program to a specific set of disorders would likely result in very low attendance rates, therefore a general orientation for multiple forms of disability is more likely to be successful. Our size may provide us the opportunity to more easily create transition programs based out of the high school system as opposed to the PSE system.

6.6 Service Shortfalls

In a number of areas, DSO services are simply inadequate relative to their mandate and the needs of students.

6.6.1 LACK OF COORDINATION

CONCERN 37: Improving campus accessibility is often presented as a crisis reduction issue rather than a human rights imperative.

When discussing DSOs and the support systems available to students with unique challenges or needs, the most obvious departmental partner is Counseling Services. The interconnectedness of these two departments is undeniable;

during interviews, all DRFs reported working or wanting to work quite closely with Counseling Services. Efforts should be made to foster and develop this partnership as much as possible.

However, the tendency to lump DSOs and Counseling Services together creates the impression that DSOs serve a crisis-oriented function within their institutions. Yet, whereas students access Counseling Services when they have already encountered difficulties, the proper utilization of DSO services and academic regulations, such as medical deferrals and appeals processes, have the ability to prevent difficulties from occurring in the first place.

Yet, no interviewees discussed partnerships with academic advising or the registrar's office aside from Dalhousie. Students registering with DSOs with medical conditions and mental health issues are inadvertently identifying themselves as students at high-risk for in-course complications. When in-course complications are handled incorrectly, this can often result in the student's inability or diminishing desire to return to studies. Presumably, DSO's at institutions other than Dalhousie have at least some form of established relationship with the Registrar's Office as well (MSVU, NSCAD and CBU do have some policies that would fall into this jurisdiction), but in general there is a major gap in this area.

DSOs seek to set students on the path with as few disability related barriers as possible. Much of this involves removing symptom provoking or stress-inducing

PRINCIPLE 20: Proactive programming is as important as crisis-oriented solutions.

time the student will have to spend on school work given their condition and life circumstances, how to manage time, etc. All of these activities overlap with functions served by Academic Advising.

At many schools, all academic advising is left to the Academic Advising department, irrespective of whether students have disabilities. Obviously, this is disadvantageous for students with disabilities, as Academic Advisors likely will not have a thorough understanding of how disabilities can impact students' studies. In fact, it is likely that they will not know when students have disabilities at all.

REGION HIGHLIGHT: Dalhousie employs an Occupational Therapist within their Accessibility Department.

Other schools do the opposite. At CBU, for example, all students identifying as having a disability on their application are immediately sent to the DSO for their academic advising. This has several advantages, not the least of which is that it gets students in the door and familiar with the supports offered by DSOs. However, it may also be disadvantageous in that the DSO is not as familiar with each program in the school, their requirements, and the workload each class truly entails. Thus, this would not be an ideal solution for large schools, but may work well for smaller schools with fewer programs.

BEST PRACTICE: Disability Services Offices should aim to have working relationships with medical professionals such as occupational therapists, learning strategists, psychiatrists and private psychologists, both on and off campus.

Additional policies managed entirely by the Registrar's Office impact to a much greater proportion on students with disabilities than students without

disabilities. If, when and how to receive incompletes (up to six week course extensions), and medical deferrals (up to 6 months), as well as the procedures surrounding exiting school mid-semester are all critically important to DSOs. Shockingly, in our interviews only one DSO in the province knew their institution's incomplete/medical deferral policies and how they related to students with disabilities.

Case Study: Dalhousie

Dalhousie is the largest school in Nova Scotia and has by far the most students registered with Disability Services. Due to their size, they have a unique approach to providing disability supports in comparison to other schools in the province.

Recognizing the problematic disconnect between Disability Services and Academic Advising, they recently integrated the provision of academic accommodations within their Academic Advising Department, creating Advising and Access Services. This department acts on an 'advising as coaching' model; they aim to assess all parts of a student's life (work, home life, disability, other obligations, etc.) to develop an academic plan that is suitable for the student, and arrange accommodations as part of this. By working to build a student's schedule around their disability from the beginning, it decreases the likelihood that the stresses of the academic environment will significantly impact the student. This model is advantageous in that it acts as a prevention method as opposed to a crisis-focused service.

By merging the two departments, they have created staff that are, theoretically, familiar with both disability issues and the school's academic requirements. One of their advisors is even an Occupational Therapist, which can greatly help students with physical impairments. In terms of planning for their academic future, this is ideal. Additionally, by merging the two activities it makes it less obvious students are entering the building for disability support, making some students more comfortable. Finally, by providing academic coaching as a general service that is also able to accommodate a variety of life factors, including disability, employment and other commitments, it is a solid step closer to universal design.

However, while this body handles the typical 'core' disability services – arranging for accommodations, contacting professors, etc. – they are not responsible for a large amount of the other services DSOs typically or ideally provide. In essence, Dalhousie's large student population results in a large enough proportion of the student body without disabilities needing to utilize things such as study skills sessions and tutors that these services exist independently of Disability Services. Unfortunately, this arrangement does not guarantee that the people working in these departments are familiar with disabilities and how to best work with students with impairments, which could reduce the usefulness of these services for students with LD, ADHD etc. Additionally, it serves to decentralize a lot of the disability support systems, creating a somewhat drawn out and complicated process to achieve all of the out-of-class supports a student may need. However, it also allows students with disabilities to remain with their peers, as opposed to being separated from the group. Achieving easier communication between departments handling these aspects of disability care is something that Dalhousie still needs to work out. However, overall this does seem to be the best method for larger institutions.

6.6.2 CAREER PREPARATION

Both our federal and provincial governments recognize that persons with disabilities are one of the most underrepresented groups in Canada's workforce and the express purpose of the C-NS-LMAPD has been to address this problem. PSDS was also created specifically to facilitate the participation of persons with disabilities' in PSE and in the labour force; more specifically to bolster the number of persons with disabilities able to obtain high-level positions within their fields, as opposed to entry-level positions that may be unrelated to their area of expertise. PSDS funds DSOs on campus within the context of this mandate, meaning that preparing students with disabilities to enter the workforce is in fact meant to be a fundamental objective of DSOs.

REGION HIGHLIGHT: NSCAD does not require students who have extended timeline accommodations to obtain additional medical documentation for end of class extensions.

Yet, DSOs across the province reported providing few to no career-oriented services, supports, or workshops. Currently, SMU is the only university in the province with a staff member in Career Counseling has (openly disclosed) lived experience with disability in the workplace, who provides a substantial level of support to students with impairments looking for work. MSVU offers disability specific career counselling within their DSO; their Disability Services Coordinator is a Registered Counselling Therapist specializing in Career Decision-Making/Job Search.

PRINCIPLE 21: Disability Services should facilitate persons with disabilities' participation in the workforce.

CONCERN 38: Disability Services is meant to be career-oriented rather than focused on education for education's sake, although it should support both.

CONCERN 39: Disability Services Offices do not help prepare students to transition to the labour force either by providing work skills training, or information about the accommodations available in the workplace.

A salient aspect of preparing for the workforce for students with disabilities is learning how their impairment impacts on their potential careers. As discussed earlier, students with disabilities are also less likely to work during their studies, which means that many will not have experienced how their impairment will affect them in a work setting when they look to transition into the workforce at graduation. Studies have also shown that accommodations/assistive technologies are provided at a much higher rate during PSE than they will be in the workforce (e.g. Sharp, Johnson, Izzo & Murray, 2005).

These services are very important, but that we must adequately prepare these students to be able to transition into environments with significantly fewer supports. Perhaps even more important is for students to learn how to talk about their disability and their needs in the workforce in a way that does not diminish their abilities. Disabilities are not temporary problems and we need to stop providing just temporary solutions. If students leave PSE unable to complete the same sort of tasks they did in school in the workforce, they have received relatively limited value from their education. This is not only unacceptable, but ultimately means that PSDS is not fulfilling its mandate.

We recognize that the barriers of the workforce cannot be fully mitigated through PSE. However, institutions can offer significant support to those students with disabilities who want to work and ought to be fulfilling the terms of their mandate. Services could include helping otherwise inaccessible employers understand how to become accessible and mediating the gap between the employer and the student for co-op/volunteer placements or work opportunities; a problem that consistently plagues students with disabilities. Opportunities to develop self-advocacy skills could be provided, giving students an understanding of how these skills will be needed/used in the workforce. Finally, DSOs could (and should) inform students of their basic legal rights in the workforce, ensuring that they are adequately informed before pursuing employment. This is perhaps the most surprising area in which DSOs are not pursuing their mandated objectives.

REGION HIGHLIGHT: SMU

employs a career counselor with lived experience of disability and disability issues in the work place to help students wishing obtain work and volunteer experience.

6.6.3 LEARNING STRATEGY SUPPORTS

Students with other forms of disabilities (and students without disabilities) can have issues with time management and learning strategies when they enter PSE, but not all require the same supports as those with behavioural or neurocognitive disabilities (such as LD, ADHD, Autism, etc.). By definition, these disorders indicate a difference in learning methods that must be understood and addressed to facilitate student success.

Students with LD/ADHD now comprise over half of the students currently registered with DSOs. Moreover, the Learning Disorders Association of Canada (n.d.) estimates that one in ten Canadians has a learning disorder, so the number of students with such disorders could continue to rise. Yet, many DSOs in the region do not provide direct help with 'study skills' for this group of students because the school has a general study skills or writing tutor type centre. This may be beneficial in that it keeps students with disabilities with their peers, but this approach is only adequate if

REGION HIGHLIGHT: MSVU has a dedicated learning strategist on staff.

the people employed by this centre have training specific to working with people with behavioural and neurocognitive disorders.

Some schools have begun to address this issue in recent years. A dedicated Learning Strategist joined MSVU's DSO staff in the 2013-14 academic year. Other schools use an "academic coaching/ mentoring" model. For instance, Acadia offers one-on-one services where the DRF and the student review what is required of the student over the term and plan out when things need to be done, then meet every week or two to work through difficulties the student may be having. In the student's first year, this is a very involved process, but the intent is that the student will learn the necessary skills as they go and become able to succeed without mentoring support over time. CBU also has a program they call "Success Coaching" during which the incoming student meets with a current student to learn about the programs/courses and build a timetable. The student then meets with an advisor, followed by the Success Coach. The role of the Success Coach is to discuss the student's future plans, what they want to do, the services available to them, club and societies they may want to join, etc. as well as provide time management advice. However, it is up to the student to disclose their disability to have it adequately factored in. CBU's Success Coaching is similar to Dalhousie's "advising as coaching" model, but it integrates more peer support and campus life elements. Nevertheless, considering the growing numbers of students with learning disabilities, autism and other similar disorders and the significance of the challenges these students face, Nova Scotia's PSE institutions must develop greater capacity to address these students' specific needs.

REGION HIGHLIGHT: CBU integrates peer mentoring and directs students to groups, societies and events outside of the academic services provided to students with disabilities within their advising model.

6.6.4 ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

Quite often there are students requiring assistive technologies who do not qualify for student assistance grants, or who have great enough need as to spend over their received supports. Some of the most commonly reported groups in this situation include international students, aboriginal students receiving band funding, and Quebecois students with documented learning disorders. In such cases the institution *may* purchase the

BEST PRACTICE: The NSCC has a learning strategist, funded through PSDS, to work at the three HRM and Truro campuses. This staff member is also a trained ADD Coach & Peer Support Councilor who runs ADHD programming and mental health awareness initiatives on campus.

equipment necessary for the student to complete their studies (as part of their duty to accommodate). Unfortunately, however, this often results in these students simply having to make due without.

Similarly, some students require documents to be scanned/ enlarged, taped or converted into braille. Often times this is a demanding process for the DSO that involves working with the publisher and navigating copyright laws. Having institutions repeating these efforts for the same textbook simply because of their institution is impractical, especially with an established interconnected library system. SMU is home to the Ferguson Tape Library: a resource for students who are visually impaired and require auditory versions of their required readings. These items may be beneficial for students in other locations.

Currently, every institution has acquired stockpiles of assistive technology that were needed for particular students or situations in the past, or that is provided for general student use.²⁶ Moreover, US-A acquires their software and technologies in French, which is considerably more difficult and costly than procuring them in English.

6.7 Inaccessible Physical Infrastructure²⁷

Finally, new campus structures are being designed with accessibility in mind, but many of Nova Scotia's campuses are hundreds of years old. Many institutional structures are not built to accommodate disabilities and require significant investments to allow students with physical impairments to move freely within them.

However, the addition of elevators and larger washrooms does not in itself make a building accessible. To be considered fully accessible a student with a physical impairment should be able to use the environment as any other student would. That is, they are able to get into the building, into the classroom, have their choice of seating, access to a washroom, the ability to reach light switches and other basic elements of their surroundings, and access to other crucial parts for their education. In this view, the use of tools such as a chairlifts should not be presented as viable solutions, as these items, while purchased with the best of intentions, reduce the independence of students with impairments; not to mention they are not "one size fits all" equipment.

The importance of ensuring that student life oriented spaces, such as student union buildings (SUBs), study lounges, and residences is often overlooked. It is these spaces that allow for the full integration of persons with disabilities into campus

26 Equipment purchased through the institution, but paid for by student equipment grants belongs to the student.

27 StudentsNS plans to complete future work looking specifically at the physical accessibility of Nova Scotia's public PSE institutions.

life. Overall, students would likely prioritize the ability to enter the only building on campus specifically dedicated to students (SUBs) over being able to speak to the registrar's office in person. Thus, it is shocking that schools such as NSCAD and Acadia still have buildings dedicated to the student experience that are completely inaccessible and exclusionary.

The Campus Accessibility Mapping Projects

Recently, there have been efforts made to ensure students are aware of the accessibility level of various campus structures before they enter. McMaster University student Nick Schoenhoff created a campus map indicating which parts of campus were accessible, where elevators and accessible washrooms were located etc. The map was color coded to indicate what areas were completely off limits, which to proceed with caution, and which were fully accessible. This invention netted him second runner-up prize at the third annual Innovative Designs for Accessibility (IDeA) student competition in Toronto. He is now working to develop an app that will provide real-time updates to students to alert them what is safe after a snowstorm, or to let them know when an elevator is out of commission. This invention could be very useful for schools in the future.

Additionally, companies such as local start up Mapability.ca have developed software that provides city maps and real-time directions with an accessibility focus. Similar to Google Maps, Mapability users are able to click on streets, sidewalks, buildings, etc. and leave ratings, comments, or pictures about the area's accessibility. The program provides consensus on the accessibility of an area, as opposed to a single opinion. Unlike Google Maps, Mapability also maps the interiors of large buildings allowing users avoid inaccessible or unpleasant areas inside as well as outside of their destinations. This allows a person to plan out where they need to be dropped off, or what routes to take inside the building while still on route. Institutions should consider engaging in this sort of physical mapping of their campuses. Combined with its interactive rating features, this service would not only be useful for students and staff with disabilities, but also to the school. The institution would be able to easily identify what areas need work, what design elements have worked well, and it will aid in the prioritization of maintenance work. This form of technology is a logical next step in creating more accessible campuses.

7. Changes to Uphold the Rights of Students with Disabilities

Institutional policies and practices surrounding disability and disability services are largely outdated, and have not been adapted to present demands. DSOs in Nova Scotia are currently unable to adequately fulfill their mandates. Moreover, as DSOs were set-up predicated on the notion of maintained or slow growth in population, the infrastructure to support student numbers does not exist on many of our campuses. Things that could once easily be managed by hand are now overtaking DSOs. Finally, our present approach to students with disabilities blatantly ignores the importance of positive campus culture in creating a barrier free educational system. It is becoming increasingly apparent that we need to facilitate understanding of disability on our post-secondary campuses.

The remainder of this report will provide recommendations for systemic change to improve students with disabilities educational experience. It is hoped that institutions and the Province will use these recommendations not as end goals, but as launching points for further improvement to our campus communities.

Recommendation 1: *The Provincial Government and all Nova Scotia post-secondary institutions should develop long-term strategies to achieve the full realization of Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning.*

Being a fully accessible and inclusive environment should always be a primary goal of our PSE system. While the virtues of the UD concept are often acknowledged, getting institutions to make the necessary changes to actually implement these ideas has proven quite difficult. UD requires dedicated efforts and fundamental structural changes to become a reality. Talk is not enough.

In addition to adopting UD in our physical structures, it is critically important that institutions begin to embrace the idea of Universal Design for Learning. This involves thinking outside of the box in terms of course delivery and resource management, and will require significant pressure to be put on faculty to move beyond the basic lecture-style courses that are the mainstay of undergraduate degrees. For years it has been acknowledged that people learn best in different ways, regardless of disability status, and our failure to integrate more teaching styles into university classrooms especially is unacceptable.

7.1 Post-Secondary Education Institutions

7.1.1 STRENGTHENING POLICY

All PSE institutions in Nova Scotia are bound by law to accommodate students with disabilities. However, many individuals on campus do not understand the connection between accommodations and discrimination, mistakenly viewing these services as ‘privileges’. Institutional policies must be strengthened to reduce the room for individuals to interpret the entitlements of students with disabilities.

Recommendation 2: *All post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia should have written policy formally addressing accommodations and the rights of students with disabilities within their anti-discrimination policy.*

Integrating disability-related accommodations within a larger anti-discrimination framework establishes clearly that accommodations are not privileges, but human rights, similar to accommodating religious activities such as the call to prayer or sitting Shiva. It allows the institution to outline what discrimination is, why it will not be tolerated, and what actions/activities the school has developed to prevent discrimination (accommodations being among them). This in turn, will help dissolve the communication barrier often felt between faculty, students and DSOs.

Generally speaking, faculty members do not intentionally cause students grief, but they often do not understand the purpose of academic accommodations for students with disabilities (e.g. Canadian Teachers Federation [CTF], 2012). If accommodating disability is put into the context of preventing discrimination against a group, as opposed to privileging one, these issues will hopefully diminish.

Recommendation 3: *Post-secondary education institutions must ensure that their accommodations-related policy is implemented consistently across all faculties and departments.*

Accommodations policies are human rights policies, and thus should remain consistent across all faculties, programs and areas of any institution. Far too often individual programs believe they can circumvent parts or all of their institutions accommodation policy because of the nature of their classes. This is simply untrue. Persons with disabilities must be accommodated in any class, major, or department that choose to engage in unless the institution can prove Undue Hardship that would hold up in court against the institution’s Duty to Accommodate. Institutions must to a better job of clarifying this information to faculty and staff.

Recommendation 4: *Post-secondary institutions must be mindful of the language used within policies, ensuring they are not using outdated or discriminatory terminology.*

Language is critically important when discussing human rights issues. Some terminology used may be legally and/or technically correct, but may still alienate students with disabilities. It is strongly suggested that institutions consult disability advocacy groups, such as NEADS or the Disabled Persons Commission, before finalizing disability-related policies to ensure appropriate language is used.

Recommendation 5: *Post-secondary institutions should include the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act definition of disability within their Anti-Discrimination policy.*

It is important to explicitly state to whom these policies on accommodations apply, especially because the NSHRA definition of disability, which governs the activities of all PSE institutions, differs from the definition used by Student Financial Assistance in its inclusion of non-permanent disabilities. This change will help to eliminate any confusion around whether students with temporary conditions can access accommodations: DSOs would be obligated provide services to students suffering from temporary impairments.²⁸

However, while we are pushing to have a definition of disability formally adopted, it is important to note that this is not an optimal long-term solution. In many ways, defining what can be called a disability can be limiting and is often viewed as ‘medicalizing’ human experience²⁹. This is true even when it is done in very broad terms. Moreover, defining what issues, circumstances, or conditions are allowed to be considered “disabling” moves us away from one of the corner stones of UD, the ideal would like to be moving toward (Stachowiak, 2010). Unfortunately, our PSE environments are simply not far enough along in the journey toward UD to benefit from a lack of delineation. The absence of a formal definition is serving to reduce the number of students accessing supports, and is allowing for loopholes that may undercut students’ human rights.

Recommendation 6: *Human Rights Policies should allow students suffering from severe but impermanent impairments to access disability supports during the semesters they are affected if they can produce medical documentation of impairment similar to permanent disabilities.*

In many cases, illnesses that last several months or years may have as much or more of an impact on a students’ ability to perform academically than permanent illnesses. People suffering from non-permanent illnesses are going to need academic supports similar to those provided by DSOs. It is impractical for institutions to develop a second system to deliver the same service, only for students who do not meet PSDS’

28 Including the NSHRA definition within the documentation covered in the first meeting between the student and the DSO would be a very excellent practice to ensure students and DRFs are aware of students’ rights.

29 Examples of this viewpoint can be found in Robert Whitaker’s works “*Anatomy of an Epidemic*” and “*Mad in America*”, as well as Juli McGrunder’s 2001 article “Life Experience is not a Disease or Why Medicalizing Madness is Counterproductive to Recovery”.

“permanent” requirement. Moreover, it is unfair to expect these students to arrange all of their accommodation support themselves, resulting in forced self-disclosure. These students have a right to the services provided through DSOs.

Recommendation 7: *Post-secondary institutions must establish policy regulations and/or guidelines to ensure any student who is removed from school for medical reasons, or is granted a medical deferral, receives information about Disability Services.*

Not everyone who withdraws from or defers their studies for medical reasons will need or qualify for disability and/or counseling services. There is a relatively high likelihood, however, that these services could help them to be more successful, most notably when they return to school. Explicit effort to increase awareness that mental health conditions qualify a student to register for support is especially important.

Recommendation 8: *Accommodations Policies should allow ‘extended timeline’ accommodations when requested by a medical professional, especially in cases of episodic illness.*

Despite being an area of contention amongst DRFs across the country, DRFs have no right to deny extended timeline accommodations when a medical professional has explicitly stated that they are needed and the student has confirmed this need. DRFs may caution against using this accommodation and should provide tools to avert the need for it when possible, but ultimately the student must have access to this accommodation when necessary.

Recommendation 9: *Accommodations Policies should outline a formal appeals process for students who are unable to obtain requested accommodations.*

Ultimately, DSOs have the ability to deny accommodation requests that they do not feel are appropriate for a student. There must be a way for students to challenge the judgments of DSOs in this area, especially when the accommodation is requested through medical documentation.

Institutions should address this issue with a two-pronged appeals process: one to appeal the denial of accommodations, and another to have grades overturned and/or have the lack of accommodations factored into the student’s overall grade. The former process would focus on the DSO, the latter on the registrar’s office or the equivalent body handling academic appeals, although the DSO staff should be prepared to help guide students with disabilities through the academic appeals process. The appeal processes should include at least one committee member who is fully informed on disability issues, possibly with lived experience, but not directly involved in the DSO. The inclusion of a student voice would also be very valuable, again especially if they have lived experience having sought accommodations as a person with a disability.

Finally, syllabi need to be used more effectively to inform students of their rights.

Recommendation 10: *Institutions should ensure that the disability-related information included in course syllabi explicitly states that mental health and episodic illnesses fall under the heading of ‘disability’.*

Students with mental illnesses and episodic conditions often do not qualify for most federal and provincial disability supports such as the disability tax credit or RDSPs. Therefore, they may be unaware they qualify for disability supports in PSE. Moreover, as many psychological illnesses’ onset period is late adolescence, students suffering from mental health issues often did not have supports during high school, and have significantly less knowledge about the support systems available to them. It is important to clarify this to ensure students are accessing the help they need.

Utilizing course syllabi to disseminate this information is a simple, cost-free method of educating students in this area. Every student receives them at the beginning of the semester, and they should already include information about how to access disability services and go about receiving accommodations.

Recommendation 11: *Information on how students experiencing disabling, recoverable illnesses can access supports should be included in course syllabi.*

Similarly, students with temporary conditions may not realize they can access accommodations. As previously mentioned, we strongly believe that students with temporary conditions should have access to the DSO and the resources available to those with permanent disabilities. However, if this is not the case, institutions need to be especially clear on how these students can receive supports.

Including information about accommodations for temporary disabilities is particularly important because any member of the general student body has the possibility of being affected by an affliction that would require accommodation. Moreover, students without permanent disabilities are unlikely to be familiar with how to obtain accommodations should they need them.

Recommendation 12: *Post-secondary institutions should ensure that students with disabilities taking 40% course loads are eligible as full-time students for institutional scholarships.*

Students taking reduced course loads due to their disability are still considered full time students according to both PSE institutions and the student financial assistance system. Yet, because students are not necessarily identified as students with disabilities in institution/department files, they may be unfairly taken out of contention for bursary and scholarship opportunities that require students to take a full course load. Institutions should develop a back-end system that will identify

students registered with disability services as full-time students on a reduced course load for the purposes of determining scholarship eligibility, without displaying this information to employees outside of the DSOs and perhaps financial aid offices.

7.1.2 SERVICES

The services provided to students with disabilities demand improvement to ensure students' needs are being met in a view to supporting their lifelong success. The first step is to make services accessible to students, and the second is to improve coordination and integration across different services often required by these students.

Recommendation 13: *Institutions should situate Disability Services Offices in the same physical area as academic advising, or with other wellness services (e.g. health services, meditation and prayer rooms, counseling services, etc.).*

There are three basic ways that institutions can better integrate DSOs into their campuses. First, they can approach the DSO as a preventative measure to help support student success through academic planning, and situate the DSO within the Academic Advising department. Alternatively, an institution may focus on the accommodation aspects of the DSOs services, in which case all forms of accommodations (e.g. religious, temporary medical, bereavement, disability, etc.), and/or inclusion-based resources (e.g. prayer rooms, etc.) should be run out of the same general location (perhaps referring to this broader scope as “Accommodation Services” as opposed to just the DSO). Finally, they may focus on the DSO as a general health and wellness service, and situate it with other wellness services such as Counseling Services, Health Services, Women’s Centers, etc. making a singular Health and Wellness Department.

All of these options are beneficial because make it less clear why the student is entering the department, helping to significantly reduce the stigma of being associated with the office. This in turn will make students less reluctant to engage with the office. Finally, it will help breakdown silos between departments.

Recommendation 14: *The name ‘Disability Services’ should be changed to avoid language that may alienate students.*

Due to cultural stigma surrounding being seen as disabled, the name “Disability Services” is causing students to avoid registering or utilizing services to the fullest. Young people do not like to ‘stand out’ from their peers in ways that point out perceived disadvantages or insufficiencies. Unfortunately, requiring students to enter an office called “Disability Services” often serves make them feel self-conscious or *othered* (Personal Communication, 2013).

There are several more inclusive and less stigmatizing terms that may be used, such as Access Services or Accommodation Services, particularly if the institution implements the recommendation above. In fact, if the DSO was merged with Academic Advising, it may not need a separate name at all.

Recommendation 15: *Post-secondary institutions should create working groups with students, Disability Services staff and Academic Advising to ensure students with disabilities' advising needs are being met, and that services are not being duplicated.*

Students with disabilities have been identified as a group facing unique challenges when planning their academic careers. Institutions must provide academic advising that reflects proper consideration of the student's individual needs and abilities. In short, it is imperative that those providing advice not only understand students' program requirements, but also how different disabilities can affect student learning. Each PSE institution may need its own approach to providing this service. We therefore recommend a collaborative approach between academic advising, DSOs and the students they serve to discern the best course of action for each campus.

In essence, we have a population of students who have inadvertently self-identified as being at high-risk for illness or complications during their studies. We have the ability to create plans to lessen the impact that personal crises have on their educational experience. Long-term, this reduces the burden for both the student and the institution, increasing student success and student retention rates.

A critical part of ensuring this happens is reducing the need for students to follow a bureaucratic, red-tape-filled system while in the middle of a physical or mental crisis. To this end, it is necessary to establish a system so that if/when students with a documented illness experience periods of crisis as a direct result of said illness, they can avoid jumping through hoops to achieve class extensions or exam rescheduling. This is particularly relevant for students whose medical documentation states that the illness is episodic, subject to flare-ups in severity, or requests extended timeline accommodations.

Ideally, the process for registered students with disabilities to receive incompletes/ medical deferrals would be as follows:

1. The student contacts their DRF identifying that they are experiencing a major medical event related to their disability.
2. The DRF contacts the Registrar's Office indicating the student is in crisis and has medical documentation on file. Exam rescheduling or the granting of an 'incomplete' extension should be approved automatically.

3. The DSOs contact relevant faculty members. If necessary, a medical note stating the expected duration of symptoms could be provided to extend an ‘incomplete’ extension into a ‘medical deferral’.

Being required to get new medical documentation and navigate a complicated system of paperwork for short extensions to inform the school about something they have already been made aware of and agreed to accommodate is detrimental to both institutional productivity and student health.

Recommendation 16: *Training should be provided to Disability Services staff to familiarize them with the medical deferral and withdrawal policies at their institution as well as the impacts of deferrals or withdrawals on student financial assistance eligibility.*

Understanding the institution’s incomplete and medical deferral policy is crucial for DSO staff. Again, these policies are assets that they should be utilizing to help students experiencing a medical emergency to be able to complete their courses, instead of losing credits they have already done a significant amount of work for, not to mention paid for. Moreover, these supports may provide a buffer system for students transitioning from high school, who may underestimate their disabilities’ implications for PSE.

Finally, because students with disabilities are more likely to remove themselves from class partway through semester, it is important that staff understand the financial impacts these decisions have. This will allow them to present all of the options and their consequences to the student before they decide to skip over the deferral policies in favor of simply dropping the course (lightening their workload). Even if the institution allows a retroactive withdrawal in these circumstances, the CSLP and NSSAP are often not as forgiving.

Recommendation 17: *Disability Services Offices should work with students without medical documentation to the best of their ability while waiting for updated testing and/or medical documentation.*

Leeway must be given to students placed on long wait lists to see a medical professional qualified to provide documentation. Understanding that some accommodations that could jeopardize the academic integrity of the course if given to non-disabled students, DSOs may simply aid the student in discussing the issue with professors. Alternatively, if the student can provide outdated documentation, DSOs should make judgment calls regarding the services the student can access until new medical documentation is provided. Limiting this support to one semester could be generally appropriate, except in extenuating circumstances that are beyond the student’s control.

Recommendation 18: *Disability Services Offices should require that students and faculty directly discuss accommodations via student-faculty agreements before implementing them, particularly when requesting in-class, schedule or point allocation modifications.*

Student-faculty agreements provide an effective space for students to develop self-advocacy skills, while also promising to strengthen student and faculty understanding and buy-in when it comes to academic accommodations. How DSOs wish to facilitate this discussion is up to the individual institution and the course structure they use. However, it must be required that students and faculty both officially sign off on accommodations that impact how the course will be instructed, marked or otherwise taught.

There are downsides to Student-Faculty Agreements, but three steps could improve this method: finding a way to automate or reduce at least part of the administrative burden, improving students' self-advocacy skills, and educating faculty to encourage conversation before signing agreements. We will discuss the last step in greater detail in section 4.2.2

An online form that automatically feeds information to the DSO may be the most feasible solution to reduce the administrative burden. Both faculty and students can review and agree upon the form during their conversation and submit it at the end. Software can be developed to simplify this process, such as that developed by Frostbyte Interactive mentioned in the Acadia Case Study in Section 6.1. Because this is an issue across the region, practicality would suggest that DSOs could work together to fund the development of this system.

Recommendation 19: *Disability Services Offices should undertake targeted programming to develop students' self-advocacy skills.*

Students cannot be expected to jump in to having full-fledged open-communication with professors about their accommodation needs. However, there are many simple steps that DRFs could implement to encourage this:

1. Have direct conversations with students about how to approach instructors, what information they need, and why this process is important. This could be done in groups to reduce the feeling that they are alone in their requests.
2. Help individual students identify potential barriers they may face within each class, and how they would like to address them should they come up before they meet with professors. Addressing possible lengthy absences is especially relevant for students with mental health issues and medical conditions.
3. Train faculty to ask accommodation-oriented questions before signing agreements without straightforward guidelines. For example, if a student is not

to be marked on attendance/participation, they should know to clarify how these marks will be made up/reallocated before signing.

4. If a student has a social/communication barrier, DSOs should follow up with professors and the student to ensure an adequate understanding was reached. Ideally, a DSO staff member would provide 'coaching' to the student on how to improve the conversations in the future if needed.
5. DSO should always be available to assist students in this process when necessary.

These discussions will make students more competent self-advocates as they enter the workforce, increasing the likelihood that they will obtain and maintain employment (Linkow, Barrington, Bruyere, Figueroa, & Wright, 2013). Increasing persons with disabilities' participation in the labour force is the purpose of the C-NS-LMAPD, and is the mandate of PSDS (2013). Developing students' self-advocacy skills and independence should be at the forefront of DSO's goals.

Recommendation 20: *Nova Scotia post-secondary institutions should share assistive technology resources and allow students from across the province to access these supports when needed.*

With respect to equipment and other physical resources, many students have need of expensive assistive technology, but are unable to access financial supports to aid in its purchase. Many institutions own a variety of assistive technologies and accessible publications that are going unused. Sharing materials across the province's PSE institutions would help to save time, work and funds. The sharing of these resources could work through the pre-existing NovaNet system, making this a very low cost solution to increase the ability of students to access the supports they need, but cannot necessarily afford.

Recommendation 21: *Institutions should collaborate with the province to increase the availability of accessible materials (e.g. textbooks) to post-secondary students.*

Similarly, some students require access to textbooks in alternative formats, such as enlarged print or audio recordings, and the process to obtain or create accessible versions often involves intensive work with the book publisher. Given that many of our institutions use the same textbooks for various classes, and we already have an integrated library system, it would seem logical for institutions to work together to enable students from all schools to be able to access these materials once they have been created. Enlarging every page of a textbook is a time intensive process that need not be repeated at Acadia if it has already been done at SMU.

At a minimum, it should be possible for any readings of textbooks that have been tape-recorded to be included in the Ferguson Tape Library at SMU and made

available to students at other institutions either online or through the NovaNet Library system.

Recommendation 22: *Post-secondary institutions must continue to improve the accessibility of older campus structures.*

It is no secret that many of the academic institutions in the province face challenges due to the age of their buildings. StudentsNS will be looking at these challenges in more detail in a later report. Nevertheless, the need to make campuses accessible to all students cannot be ignored by institutions and neither will we entirely delay voicing our support for changes in this area.

Although it is understood that updating these buildings is not only costly, but also often fraught with the complications of maintaining historic elements, the push to create inclusive physical spaces must remain near the top of institutions' priority lists. It is recommended that schools organize working groups consisting of administration, building management, maintenance and students with physical impairments to prioritize construction projects. Given that the construction modifications needed may take several years to complete, it is important that schools properly identify the most pressing needs of students with disabilities and address these areas first. The accessibility of critical services such as DSOs, registrar's offices, student financial aid offices, cafeterias and dining halls, health services, student union offices and at least a portion of residences should be a top priority.

Recommendation 24: *Post-secondary institutions should map mobility barriers on each campus for the public, and adopt systems to spread awareness of any unusual disruptions (e.g. broken elevators).*

Institutions should also develop maps indicating which areas of campus are fully accessible, partially acceptable or completely inaccessible to students with impairments. Uncontrollable factors such as the weather, road conditions, or broken elevators can impact on physical accessibility. There is no way an institution can prevent these occurrences, though they can and should respond to them as quickly as possible. Still, it is recommended that institutions work together to develop a real time system such as a smart phone app to alert students of any unusual disruptions. Notably, this would be especially useful in the winter when snowstorms require areas be shoveled/salted before someone with impairments could easily travel through them. Institutions could work with services such as Mapability, which would allow students to view and rate the accessibility of different areas, as well as get accessible directions around campus.

7.1.3 OUTREACH

It is imperative that DSOs move beyond simply adjusting classrooms, and focus instead on increasing the wellbeing of their students and their campus communities.

To this end, outreach is one of the most important, if not the most important, tasks the DSO should be doing.

Recommendation 25: *Outreach and advocacy must be made a primary role of Disability Services on campus.*

The mandate of Disability Services needs to be updated. It is no longer sufficient to simply deal with students that come to the office by providing direct academic accommodations and leaving the rest to play out as it may. A conscious effort must be made to actively further students' knowledge and understanding of disability, and to improve post-secondary culture for those for whom disability is a reality.



If the DSO is to be viewed as a program to remove barriers to PSE for students with disabilities, outreach is an activity that simply cannot be ignored. “Accommodating” students with disabilities in a post-secondary environment does not begin and end in the classroom. Stigma is widely regarded as one of the primary barriers facing students with disabilities. The less stigma present on campus, the more efficient DSOs’ academic work will become. Students with disabilities deserve better than the atmosphere their institutions are currently providing.

DSOs need to become the institutional face of equality for this group of students. They must engage with people outside of their clients, working with student unions/ associations, Student Services, External Affairs, and other institutional partners. Changing the environment to be more inclusive and better serving to students with disabilities needs to be a stated and recognized part of their mandate. Moreover, DSOs should be consulted to ensure that PSE events are accessible.

This may require updated training for DSO staff to learn methods of dispersing information and effectively communicating with large groups of youth, as these skills

were likely not part of their education and have not been a large part of their jobs to date.

Recommendation 26: *Post-secondary institutions should view Disability Services Offices as increasing student health and wellness, and include them in the development of wellness initiatives on campus.*

DSOs' purpose is to mitigate the negative effects the academic system has on a student due to their individual characteristics. In short, the purpose of accommodations is to change the academic environment to prevent health conditions from impacting a student's ability to learn. By definition, this makes them a wellness service.

Recognizing the DSO as a health and wellness service may have benefits for all students with disabilities. For example, determining the best method of managing the 'mental health crisis' on campuses has become increasingly important in recent years. Unfortunately, the majority of the solutions proposed involve Counseling Services and other programs that are meant to support or treat those who are already in crisis. One of the primary triggers for mental health symptoms is excess stress. Accommodations, when used properly, can reduce the stress the academic environment imposes onto students, and thus reduce the number and/or intensity of their symptoms. When managed properly, they have a significant impact on students with mental illness and generally increase the mental wellness of all the students they serve.

Institutions need to stop viewing the DSO as an auxiliary academic service and start acknowledging the significant impact it can, and does, have on student wellness. They are, in fact, among the few prevention-oriented health and wellness services currently offered in our PSE system.

Recommendation 27: *Post-secondary institutions and their student organizations should run Summer Orientation Programs aimed at students with disabilities just before or in tandem with the standard orientation week.*

The beginning of students' PSE experiences presents an important space for DSOs to reach students in an impactful way. The transition from high school into PSE is more complicated for students with disabilities. Information sessions on the services available can prove invaluable to improving this process.

It is suggested that schools move away from the lecture style overviews provided during Orientation in favor of creating an interactive environment with social components to facilitate student engagement and peer bonding. Because of the small size of many of Nova Scotia's institutions, it could be beneficial for several schools within one region to work together to host a single event (e.g. Acadia and

NSCC Kingstec Campus; all of the HRM-based NSCC campuses; CBU and NSCC Marconi Campus, etc.). This approach would limit the cost of the occasion, and could provide greater student turnout. Breakout groups could be used when school-specific content is necessary.

Secondly, Nova Scotia's post-secondary and secondary school systems could come together to determine the best method of transitioning students into higher education. The two systems operate very differently and have different requirements, expectations and definitions of disability and students with disabilities. These differences need to be outlined early and clearly for students. Ideally, secondary school systems would begin transitioning students into support programs more similar to those available in PSE while still in high school, should the student wish to pursue PSE. In addition to PSE institutions working together to provide orientation programming, the regional school boards could work together to host these orientation/transition workshops, having break-off groups based on school or type of schooling when required.

7.2 Provincial Leadership

Recommendation 28: *The Provincial Government should lobby the Federal Government to adopt a formal, broadly inclusive definition of disability as it relates to post-secondary education, ensuring that all post-secondary students with equivalent diagnoses are able to access provincial supports for students with disabilities.*

Currently, federal law does not formally define what constitutes a 'mental or physical disability', but provincial laws do. This is particularly concerning within a post-secondary context because it means that students with equivalent diagnosis are receiving different levels of support depending on their province of origin. Luckily, the NSHRA recognizes a greater number impairments as being disabling than many other provinces, meaning a greater number of Nova Scotian students with disabilities are able to access disability supports. However, other provinces do not recognize as many of the impairments Nova Scotia views as disabling, potentially putting out of province students with disabilities at a severe disadvantage in comparison to other students. For example, Quebecois students with learning disorders will not be able to access provincial disability funding, whereas Nova Scotian students will.

Perhaps the best solution to this problem is the have CSLP provide a *minimum* list of impairments that are eligible for disability funding (leaving room for persons with disabling conditions that may fall outside of this realm), and attempt to have each province's provincial loan program adopt the same definition.

7.2.1 DISABILITY SERVICES FUNDING

There have been dramatic decreases in per student funding in the past seven years, as our population of students with registered disabilities has more than doubled. Every DSO in Nova Scotia identified significant challenges of underfunding relative to increased demands. Government and institutions share in the responsibility ensuring our PSE system is accessible. Government must help PSE institutions fulfill their human rights responsibilities and meet the demand for services to support students with disabilities.

Recommendation 29: *The Province and post-secondary institutions must increase funding for Disability Services Offices to reflect increased service uptake.*

Many of our recommendations for improved disability services on each campus will be impossible to fulfill without additional funding. It is difficult to envision DSOs conducting outreach to attract more students to services that risk being overwhelmed. It is unfair to expect DSO staff to do much more with only the resources that they already have available.

PSDS has not yet indicated if modifications will be made to its funding formulas in 2015. It is crucial that the province acknowledges the importance of supporting students with disabilities, and provides the funding schools need to improve our current system. The Province also needs to be careful in how it distributes funding among institutions.

Recommendation 30: *Post-Secondary Disability Services should provide funding for an additional Disability Services staff member throughout the school year at institutions with a 110:1 or greater student-to-staff ratio.*

Individualized services are fundamental part to effectively accommodating students with disabilities and making the academic environment accessible. The more students an individual staff member is responsible for, the less time they have to dedicate to each. As this trend continues, we run serious risk of compromising the level support available, and ultimately the education of students with disabilities.

Acadia, CBU and NSCAD would be in line for additional staff pursuant to this recommendation, while modest increases in the enrolment of students with disabilities at Dalhousie and StFX would bring them across the 110 threshold as well. Similarly six of the 13 NSCC campuses have a staff to student ratio higher than 1:110 (only two by a significant margin, however), with the Waterfront campus having the highest student to staff ratio, and two NSCC campuses (Cumberland and Annapolis Valley) lack a full-time staff member all together. It should be left to institutions to decide whether their positions should be dedicated to specific jobs (e.g. a learning strategist, exam or outreach coordinator, or another DRF). Ideally, DSOs would

have approximately 70 students per staff member, or higher ratios but other staff/ departments adequately aiding in the delivery of services.

Basing funding on the number of students utilizing the service makes more sense than distributing it based on overall school size. It does not matter if a DSO has 1000 more students walking by the office to attend class if another has 100 more walking through its door to access services. However, there is a base cost to running a DSO that cannot be removed regardless of service uptake, and unique institutional contexts may require extra considerations.

Recommendation 31: *Post-Secondary Disability Services should increase Saint Francis Xavier University's base funding to match the provincial average per student.*

In 2012-13, StFX received \$55,000 of discretionary funding, or approximately \$176 per student registered with the DSO. This was over \$125 less per student than StFX received seven years earlier. StFX is allocated \$35,000 less funding than CBU despite having nearly double the number of registered students, and \$5000 less than MSVU despite having fewer local resources and one-third more registered students with disabilities. Provincially, the average amount of per student funding a university receives is \$220 dollars: \$44 more than at StFX. Given these facts, it is recommended that PSDS increase StFX's discretionary funding to at least match the provincial funding per student average, a total increase of about \$7400.

Recommendation 32: *The Department of Labour and Advanced Education should create a special grant for post-secondary institutions to improve Disability Services systems or frameworks.*

The automation of paperwork and administrative tasks is now necessary at all of our institutions because of the substantial and unforeseen increase in service uptake. Once systems are established, administrative burdens should be reduced so that staff can spend more time working directly with students. However, establishing new administrative systems will likely introduce significant up-front costs; with small payments for updates being needed down the line. It is therefore recommended that PSDS provide a grant that schools can apply for to update or automate parts of their administrative tasks, with the institutions being responsible for maintaining the service. This will hopefully help to curtail the increasing need for additional discretionary funding in the future.

Recommendation 33: *Post-Secondary Disability Services should utilize special project funding to aid in the creation of a testing center at Saint Francis Xavier University.*

The sheer number of exams the StFX DSO handles each year has the potential to be completely overwhelming. Exam accommodations are extremely important, however,

and must be handled well while still enabling the DSO to offer the level of service and programming available at other universities. Having a testing center would greatly decrease the administrative burden StFX's DSO is facing.

With respect to the NSCC, it is difficult to be as precise in our recommendations related to resources relative to need because campus-by-campus funding information is inaccessible. Unfortunately, it seems as though the Province is equally ill equipped to understand how disability services are operating at the NSCC.

Recommendation 34: *Post-Secondary Disability Services must keep track of how the Nova Scotia Community College divides its Memorandum of Understanding funding between staffing and discretionary spending, and how these funds are distributed across the province.*

It is basic good sense to keep track of how an entity is spending the more than \$1 million dollars provided to support students with disabilities, and to ensure that they are providing high quality services. Moreover, it is important to know how many students are accessing DSO services on each campus to make informed funding decisions. Every university must provide detailed report-backs to PSDS including not only the number of students served, but break downs by impairment and place of origin, but not even basic information is required from the NSCC. Without this data, it is difficult to discern how the province is determining how much funding the NSCC requires to deliver services to students. It is also difficult to identify salient impairments on campus, making recognizing the pressing accommodation-related needs of NSCC students nearly impossible, let alone adequately addressing these needs.

7.2.2 PROGRAMMING

PSDS can also support improved outcomes for students with disabilities through developing programming. Developing programming provincially can also be more cost-effective than campus-by-campus approaches that create unnecessary duplication of efforts. PSDS should give special attention to its mandate to support employment outcomes, as this is an area where not enough appears to be getting done.

Recommendation 35: *Post-Secondary Disability Services should provide workforce information and workshops to support students with disabilities during job placements, increase their knowledge of accommodations available in the workplace, and increase self-advocacy skills.*

PSDS can accumulate expertise on students with disabilities' transition from PSE into the workforce and then transmit that expertise to students through campus-level DSOs. Useful mechanisms could include training programming to assist DSO staff in learning about the workforce transition, an information packet for students

that clearly outlines the difference between accommodations available in PSE and in the workplace, and student workshops on navigating the transition, the rights of persons with disabilities in the workplace, etc. PSDS should also support students with disabilities as they search for cooperative education placements, perhaps by collecting a list of employers who are engaged and wish to hire students with disabilities or through other forms of direct support to cooperative education offices and career counselors.

Beyond training DSO staff, PSDS can also support faculty training. Some faculty members' inadequate understanding of disabilities significantly impacts their interactions with students, at times to the point of prejudicial behavior, and this must be addressed.

Recommendation 36: *Post-Secondary Disability Services should develop a disability-related training webinar in partnership with the National Educational Association of Disabled Students and/or the Disabled Persons Commission and post-secondary institution representatives.*

Faculty members need to understand how to effectively teach students with disabilities to create accessible classes. The program could consist of short modules on each of the prevalent disorders, the role and function of DSOs for staff, appropriate etiquette, and how to facilitate conversation about student needs. DSOs are provincially funded and regulated. Differences between campus services should therefore be minor enough for a brief addition of any points of difference to suffice.

The Province of New Brunswick actually introduced a similar program just recently.³⁰ However, we believe the course should become mandatory for faculty members teaching at public PSE institutions in Nova Scotia. Ideally, the course would be repeated every three-to-five years to ensure that faculty are kept up to date on new measures, procedures and technologies.

7.2.3 STUDENT FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Students with disabilities are more likely to rely on student assistance programs because they have both higher costs and more limited resources. Student assistance programs have made some accommodations for this through both targeted programming and policy flexibility within general programs, but more needs to be done.

Recommendation 37: *The Provincial Government should allow students with temporary disabilities to access disability-related grants and other forms of Student Assistance, and encourage the Federal government to do the same.*

³⁰ More information about the newly launched NB program can be found here: http://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/post-secondary_education_training_and_labour/news/news_release.2014.06.0636.html

Students with non-permanent disabilities face many of the same financial challenges as students with permanent disabilities. Nova Scotia should follow Ontario's lead and allow students with non-permanent impairments to access disability-related funding while affected, by modifying the Provincial Access Grant and/or the Goods and Services Grant.

These same principles apply to the CSLP. The Employment Insurance (EI) framework for disability benefits could provide a basic model. EI covers both Short-Term Disability and Long-Term Disability, with the person on short-term receiving benefits only until the date stated by a medical professional, whereas those who are on long-term disability or qualify through the severe and prolonged framework, receive more substantial support for a greater period of time.

Recommendation 38: *Psycho-educational assessments should be funded through the province.*

All students must be able to access the medical testing they need to pursue PSE successfully. Yet, many students simply cannot afford the upfront cost for psycho-educational assessments, especially students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, reimbursing only 75% of the cost of psych-ed assessments (through the SFA system) ensures that students still pay a significant amount for the process. Perhaps most concerning is that the amount of the reimbursement is deducted from the total amount of funds the student is able to access under the CSG-SEPD, which may limit their ability to access other resources.

Province should finance the cost of psych-ed assessments. Ideally, Nova Scotia should implement a Learning Disorder Bursary program through the NSSAP, similarly to British Columbia. This bursary could be made available to students as they enter grade 12 so they are able to enter PSE with the proper documentation. If a student who accessed the bursary is found to have a learning disorder (thus qualifying for additional funding), the amount received through the bursary could then be deducted from the funds available to the student through the Provincial Goods and Services Grant for the upcoming school year, depending on whether the student needs these resources for other disability-related supports.

Recommendation 39: *Post-Secondary Disability Services should accept psycho-educational assessments that are more than five years old if they are accompanied by a recent statement from a medical professional, and encourage the Federal government to do the same.*

Additionally, the details of specific accommodations needs are not necessary for the provision of many disability related grants. Accepting outdated psych-ed with a recent medical note would both confirm that they still hold the diagnosis, and result in reduced need for testing. Should the Province implement the bursary program

suggested above, or even under current circumstances where the Province covers 75% of the cost of psych-eds, this policy would reduce the uptake of this service, reducing the financial burden on the Province.

In terms of general SFA policy, there are a number of additional changes that should be made to better accommodate students with disabilities.

Recommendation 40: *The Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program should allow students with disabilities, permanent or otherwise, one additional semester without successfully completing a full-time course-load before suspending eligibility.*

Health crises are a legitimate reason for poor academic performance or withdrawal from courses. The NSSAP should allow students who have certifiable disabilities, permanent or otherwise, greater leniency with respect to suspension of eligibility for student financial assistance. Currently, these students can enter the NSSAP appeals process, but it would be preferable if they did not have to do so. This recommendation would likely require cooperation with the CSLP, including possibly a Federal policy change.

Recommendation 41: *The Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program should allow the Repayment Assistance Plan to apply retroactively for eligible graduates who failed to apply for the program because they were unaware of its existence or who were not previously diagnosed with a disability.*

This policy would apply equally to students with and without disabilities, allowing them to claim their RAP entitlements when they become aware of them, potentially freeing many graduates from the shackles of loan default. Critically, the only cost for government to implement this recommendation would be in funds that they are saving as a result of individuals being unaware of their entitlements; we cannot see how applying the RAP retroactively would cost more than applying it progressively.

StudentsNS completed a report on general improvement to the NSSAP that provides a large number of important recommendations that are relevant to all current and prospective student assistance recipients. Students with disabilities would benefit disproportionately from these recommendations, again because they are more likely to rely on student financial assistance, have more financial need, and are more likely to have difficulty finding employment that allows them to pay their loans back. Important recommendations include eliminating the cap on maximum financial assistance and converting all NSSAP loans to grants; replacing the debt cap program that is not accommodating of students with disabilities who generally take longer than four years to complete their degrees. We also recommend changes to expectations for parental and spousal contributions, which, in particular, bear repeating in this report.

Recommendation 42: *When assessing student assistance applications, the Nova Scotia Student Assistance Program's calculation of expected resources should give consideration to additional student and/or family costs, including registered disability savings plans.*

The Federal government created RDSPs in recognition of the higher costs and lower earnings of persons with disabilities and the financial burden that these persons' families must often bear to help offset these realities. It is illogical and unfair to not recognize these same realities through the student assistance program's resource allocation, especially given that many impairments have genetic origins, so disabilities can cluster among family members with accumulated financial impacts.

Recommendation 43: *Students with significant daily living costs associated with their disability, such as attendant care, should be permitted to appeal for additional financial assistance.*

Currently, both the federal and provincial governments make allowances for students with disabilities through grants, and in particular, Nova Scotian students may access up to \$16,000 worth of grant money for goods and services (if awarded the maximum amount for both the Federal and Provincial grants). Although this sounds like a considerable sum, this still may not cover the cost of what a student needs to attend and excel in school in some cases. For example, a student requiring attendant care while on campus is essentially paying another person's salary out of these grants, in addition to any technology, tutors or other help they may need. It is unlikely that it is feasible to cover all of these costs with \$16,000, even if they are awarded the maximum amount of (non-disability related) SFA.

PSDS is responsible for dispersing the disability related grants given to Nova Scotian students, and they determine how much funding a student will receive for goods and services. We believe that this system requires an appeals process similar to that of NSSAP, giving students the opportunity to appeal for greater funds if they do not feel they will be able to access the resources they need without further funding. Similarly, this appeals process should consider raising the maximum amount of funds given to students who must employ others in order to attend school, ensuring that they are able to fairly compensate these individuals for their time.

8. Conclusion

Persons with disabilities are underrepresented in our educational system, and in turn their presence is lacking in Nova Scotia's workforce and senior leadership roles. PSE institutions, DSOs, the LAE, and the NSSAP and CSLP all play key roles in making our PSE system the accessible, inclusive and diverse environments that Nova Scotians expect them to be. It is fundamentally important that each of these entities begins to view the full inclusion of students with disabilities not as auxiliary, but as integral to the realization of a superior educational experience. It is not only access to education for students with disabilities that matters, but also the quality of that education both in and out of the classroom.

Our PSE system must show respect for its students and create an environment where all students feel safe, included and valued. As the Canadian Senate Report "Opening the Door: Reducing Barriers to Post-Secondary Education" (2011) suggested, a change in attitude is required. *StudentsNS* echoes the call to all levels of government to seriously address the attitudes surrounding disability, and challenge institutions to do the same.

Again, many of the barriers faced by persons with disabilities in education are cultural. Unfortunately, much of the policy/practice reform currently happening is occurring too late in people's lives. To improve access and foster the success of people with disabilities in PSE, we must also support initiatives addressing issues at a much younger age. It is imperative that we encourage youth with disabilities' aspirations involving PSE during childhood, and that we continue to improve access to resources for these students.

We hope this report will initiate a larger conversation between Government, Institutions, Disability Service Providers, and students to identify how we can best advance the PSE system toward a more inclusive reality. We have made a series of recommendations that we believe will improve the PSE system, and more importantly will improve the quality of education that students with disabilities receive. Students with disabilities should not have to continually fight for an education equal to that of their peers. All students should be welcome, discrimination cannot be.

9. Policy Resolutions

Whereas StudentsNS holds the following Principles:

Principle 1: *The post-secondary education system should prioritize inclusivity as a principal goal.*

Principle 2: *The cost of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia should not cause undue hardship upon any student, restrict their ability to pursue the career path they choose, or make them financially unable to live in the community that they choose.*

Principle 3: *Increased participation in the workforce is of critical importance for persons with disabilities as this enables them to be independent and self-sufficient citizens who feel they are contributing to society.*

Principle 4: *Persons with disabilities offer talents and perspectives that enrich Nova Scotia communities socially, economically and culturally, and must be supported and included for our communities to realize their full potential.*

Principle 5: *Students may attend post-secondary education for diverse reasons based on their personal lived experiences and life goals.*

Principle 6: *Every qualified Nova Scotia resident who wishes to pursue post-secondary education should be able to do so, irrespective of their financial situation, socioeconomic or ethnic background, physical, psychological or mental disability, age, sexual orientation, geographic location, or any other factor other than qualification.*

Principle 7: *Disability Services is a necessary equity resource that aids in the prevention of discrimination against students with disabilities and enables them to complete their studies.*

Principle 8: *Self-advocacy skills are critically important for persons with disabilities and post-secondary education policies should support the development of these skills.*

Principle 9: *Successful accommodations address student, faculty and institutional needs.*

Principle 10: *Government and institutions share responsibility for providing supports to students with disabilities.*

Principle 11: *Disability Services must provide individualized support.*

Principle 12: *All Nova Scotians must have access to information, including medical testing, necessary to make informed choices about their physical and mental health.*

Principle 13: *When implemented correctly, academic accommodations do not compromise academic integrity.*

Principle 14: *All students should be treated with respect and dignity, and a student's differences should not negatively impact how faculty/ staff to treat them.*

Principle 15: *For students with disabilities, accommodations are human rights, not privileges.*

Principle 16: *Students should be aware of and informed of their legal rights as citizens with disabilities.*

Principle 17: *Nova Scotia students must be empowered to actively participate in setting their post-secondary system's direction via engagement through their representative student bodies, within their post-secondary institutions, and through the broader democratic process.*

Principle 18: *A high-quality post-secondary education should be challenging, but all reasonable efforts should be made to mitigate threats to students' health and recognize the diversity in how individuals learn.*

Principle 19: *Creating healthy environments and other prevention initiatives, delivering effective crisis-response, and supporting full recovery from crises are equally important elements in a holistic approach to student wellness.*

Principle 20: *Proactive programming is as important as crisis-oriented solutions.*

Principle 21: *Disability Services should facilitate persons with disabilities participation in the workforce.*

Whereas StudentsNS has identified the following Concerns:

Concern 1: *There is no standard definition of disability used for disability resources in post-secondary education across the country, putting some out-of-province students with disabilities at a severe disadvantage in comparison to other students.*

Concern 2: *Post Secondary Disability Services does not mandate nor track the division of the Nova Scotia Community College's Memorandum of Understanding money between discretionary/staff funds, nor how much each campus actually receives.*

Concern 3: *Many incoming students are not aware that the process of receiving support services during post-secondary education is substantially different from high school.*

Concern 4: *Poor communication between students with accommodation needs and faculty at the beginning of the semester results in greater difficulty achieving accommodations later.*

Concern 5: *Disability Services' programming does not aim to increase the self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities.*

Concern 6: *Many students are not equipped with the skills or confidence to discuss their needs and effectively self-advocate*

Concern 7: *Students often do not understand how to disclose need for accommodation without disclosing their diagnosis.*

Concern 8: *Students with disabilities taking reduced course loads face additional costs to complete their program of studies.*

Concern 9: *The number of students registered with Disability Services has increased dramatically without matching funding or additional staff and as a result it is more difficult for students to obtain the support they need.*

Concern 10: *The current distribution of funding provided by the Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities via Post-Secondary Disability Services does not align with current usage rates at each school causing disadvantages for students at particular institutions.*

Concern 11: *Saint Francis Xavier University's Disability Services Office is responsible for coordinating so many exam invigilations that other aspects of disability support may be suffering.*

Concern 12: *Provincially, Disability Services service uptake at universities has risen 109% in ten years, but Provincial financial support has not compensated for this and offices have not been provided with increased staffing or additional technology.*

Concern 13: *Many students cannot access post-secondary support systems because medical professionals are often reluctant to classify mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety as 'permanent'.*

Concern 14: *The upfront cost of psycho-educational testing represents a significant barrier for students with limited financial resources, who as a result also cannot access disability related financial and academic supports.*

Concern 15: *The Federal Government reimburses only a portion of the cost of psycho-education assessments, resulting in students paying significant amounts to acquire federally mandated supports.*

Concern 16: *The full-time classification for students with disabilities taking reduced course loads is often not applied with respect to scholarship and bursary opportunities, limiting students with disabilities' access to financial assistance.*

Concern 17: *The Debt Cap program disfavours students with disabilities who are more likely to pursue a reduced course-load.*

Concern 18: *The financial support programs available to students with disabilities do not adequately take daily living costs into account.*

Concern 19: *The parental and student contribution assumptions within the Canada Student Loan and Nova Scotia Student Assistance Programs fail to consider important family financial priorities including registered retirement savings, registered education savings for other children, and registered disability savings for any family member.*

Concern 20: *The students assistance appeals process can be an invasive and emotionally challenging experience that may be unhealthy for individuals with wellness-related grounds for appeal.*

Concern 21: *Post-secondary faculty, students, and environments are often not inclusive, accessible, accepting, or informed of disability or disability issues.*

Concern 22: *Post-secondary institution faculty and staff too frequently hold stigmatizing attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, particularly those with invisible or episodic issues.*

Concern 23: *Faculty are not systematically educated on disabilities or how to work with students with disabilities, which can result in discriminatory behavior.*

Concern 24: *Some institutions do not have a policy that formally addresses accommodations or the rights of students with disabilities.*

Concern 25: *Accommodation policies, and more specifically disability policies, often do not formally identify the populations that they serve, which allows for loopholes that may be disadvantageous for students.*

Concern 26: *Many current Disability/Accommodation policies present accommodations as a service as opposed to a human right.*

Concern 27: *The current system prevents students with severely disabling but recoverable or temporary illnesses from accessing supports, even temporarily, from Disability Services, Post Secondary Disability Services and the Federal Government because it requires that the disability be 'permanent'.*

Concern 28: *Many students are unaware that mental illnesses are recognized disabilities.*

Concern 29: *There is no formalized way for students to disagree with Disability Services Offices' decisions regarding their academic accommodations.*

Concern 30: *Many Disability Services staff members are unfamiliar with medical deferral policy and the impacts of deferrals and withdrawals on Student Financial Assistance.*

Concern 31: *Disability Services' mandate has a very narrow scope, limiting their influence on the post-secondary environment and increasing cultural accessibility.*

Concern 32: *Students temporarily leaving school for medical reasons are not informed of the services available to them on campus before leaving or when returning.*

Concern 33: *Post-secondary institutions and government do little to no outreach to ensure that students understand what Disability Services is or why registering with Disability Services could be beneficial.*

Concern 34: *Disability Services only addresses the academic portion of the post-secondary experience, even though its mandate is to make the post-secondary environment more accessible to students with disabilities in general.*

Concern 35: *Despite institutional recognition of the need to create an inclusive environment, Disability Services, one of the departments most qualified to address these issues, is often not involved in outreach*

Concern 36: *The cultural stigma associated with having a disability causes many students to avoid Disability Services and not seek supports that they are entitled to and may need.*

Concern 37: *Improving campus accessibility is often presented as a crisis reduction issue rather than a human rights imperative.*

Concern 38: *Disability Services is meant to be career-oriented rather than focused on education for education's sake, although it should support both.*

Concern 39: *Disability Services Offices do not help prepare students to transition to the labour force either by providing work skills training, or information about the accommodations available in the workplace.*

Be It Resolved that StudentsNS makes the following Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: *The Provincial Government and all Nova Scotia post-secondary institutions should develop long-term strategies to achieve the full realization of Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning.*

Recommendation 2: *All post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia should have written policy formally addressing accommodations and the rights of students with disabilities within their anti-discrimination policy.*

Recommendation 3: *Post-secondary education institutions must ensure that their accommodations-related policy is implemented consistently across all faculties and departments.*

Recommendation 4: *Post-secondary institutions must be mindful of the language used within policies, ensuring they are not using outdated or discriminatory terminology.*

Recommendation 5: *Post-secondary institutions should include the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act definition of disability within their Anti-Discrimination policy.*

Recommendation 6: *Accommodations Policies should allow students suffering from severe but impermanent impairments to access disability supports during the semesters they are affected if they can produce medical documentation of impairment similar to permanent disabilities.*

Recommendation 7: *Post-secondary institutions must establish policy regulations and/or guidelines to ensure any student who is removed from school for medical reasons, or is granted a medical deferral, receives information about Disability Services.*

Recommendation 8: *Accommodations Policies should allow ‘extended timeline’ accommodations when requested by a medical professional, especially in cases of episodic illness.*

Recommendation 9: *Accommodations Policies should outline a formal appeals process for students who are unable to obtain requested accommodations.*

Recommendation 10: *Institutions should ensure that the disability-related information included in course syllabi explicitly states that mental health and episodic illnesses fall under the heading of ‘disability’.*

Recommendation 11: *Information on how students experiencing disabling, recoverable illnesses can access supports should be included in course syllabi.*

Recommendation 12: *Post-secondary institutions should ensure that students with disabilities taking 40% course loads are eligible as full-time students for institutional scholarships.*

Recommendation 13: *Institutions should situate Disability Services Offices in the same physical area as academic advising, or with other wellness services (e.g. health services, meditation and prayer rooms, counseling services, etc.).*

Recommendation 14: *The name ‘Disability Services’ should be changed to avoid language that may alienate students.*

Recommendation 15: *Post-secondary institutions should create working groups with students, Disability Services staff and Academic Advising to ensure students with disabilities’ advising needs are being met, and that services are not being duplicated.*

Recommendation 16: *Training should be provided to Disability Services staff to familiarize them with the medical deferral and withdrawal policies at their institution as well as the impacts of deferrals or withdrawals on student financial assistance eligibility.*

Recommendation 17: *Disability Services Offices should work with students without medical documentation to the best of their ability while waiting for updated testing and/or medical documentation.*

Recommendation 18: *Disability Services Offices should require that students and faculty directly discuss accommodations via student-faculty agreements before implementing them, particularly when requesting in-class, schedule or point allocation modifications.*

Recommendation 19: *Disability Services Offices should undertake targeted programming to develop students' self-advocacy skills.*

Recommendation 20: *Nova Scotia post-secondary institutions should share assistive technology resources and allow students from across the province to access these supports when needed.*

Recommendation 21: *Institutions should collaborate to increase the availability of accessible materials (e.g. textbooks) to post-secondary students.*

Recommendation 22: *Post-secondary institutions must continue to improve the accessibility of older campus structures.*

Recommendation 24: *Post-secondary institutions should map mobility barriers on each campus for the public, and adopt systems to spread awareness of any unusual disruptions (e.g. broken elevators).*

Recommendation 25: *Outreach and advocacy must be made a primary role of Disability Services on campus.*

Recommendation 26: *Post-secondary institutions should view Disability Services Offices as increasing student health and wellness, and include them in the development of wellness initiatives on campus.*

Recommendation 27: *Post-secondary institutions and their student organizations should run Summer Orientation Programs aimed at students with disabilities just before or in tandem with the standard orientation week.*

Recommendation 28: *The Provincial Government should lobby the Federal Government to adopt a formal, broadly inclusive definition of disability as it relates to post-secondary education, ensuring that all post-secondary students with equivalent diagnoses are able to access provincial supports for students with disabilities.*

Recommendation 29: *The Province and post-secondary institutions must increase funding for Disability Services Offices to reflect increased service uptake.*

Recommendation 30: *Post-Secondary Disability Services should provide funding for an additional Disability Services staff member throughout the school year at institutions with a 110:1 or greater student-to-staff ratio.*

Recommendation 31: *Post-Secondary Disability Services should increase Saint Francis Xavier University's base funding to match the provincial average per student.*

Recommendation 32: *The Department of Labour and Advanced Education should create a special grant for post-secondary institutions to improve Disability Services systems or frameworks.*

Recommendation 33: *Post-Secondary Disability Services should utilize special project funding to aid in the creation of a testing center at Saint Francis Xavier University.*

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Appendix A

Table 7: Number of Students Registered with Disability Services at Nova Scotian Universities

	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13
Acadia	86	102	136	120	132	155	179	204	275
CBU	126	136	133	191	207	154	145	131	154
Dal	445	497	505	499	567	757	709	756	1009
MSVU	121	112	119	110	102	110	155	181	210
NSCAD	49	87	106	130	125	151	147	161	160
SMU/AST	232	255	259	259	278	302	320	317	380
StFX	155	161	175	181	206	243	248	305	312
US-A	8	12	13	25	30	37	54	44	53
Total Universities	1222	1362	1446	1515	1647	1909	1957	2099	2553
NSCC	684	723	793	947	1094	982	1098	1131	1149
Province	1906	2085	2239	2462	2741	2891	3055	3230	3702

Source: Post-Secondary Disability Services

* Numbers provided by NSCC vary slightly

Table 8: Number of Students Registered with Disability Services at Universities as a Percentage of the Student Body

	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13
Acadia	2.01	2.42	3.37	3.26	3.52	4.09	4.64	4.91	6.18
CBU	3.62	3.97	4.15	6.14	6.78	4.95	4.71	4.12	4.67
Dal	2.6	2.95	3.01	3.02	3.4	4.36	3.9	4.02	5.36
MSVU	2.79	2.65	2.8	2.69	2.66	2.89	4.08	4.8	5.50
NSCAD	4.87	8.6	10.2*	13.3	12.09	14.7	14.1	16.12	17.6
SMU [#]	2.8	3.12	3.35	3.44	3.82	4.16	4.34	4.41	5.06
StFX	2.89	3.05	3.3	3.59	3.98	4.71	4.9	6.1	6.42
US-A	1.48	2.33	2.68	5.14	5.62	6.76	10.3	9.28	12.27
Avg. %	2.88	3.63	4.11	5.07	5.23	5.83	6.38	6.72	7.89
Comprehensive Avg %	2.79	3.06	3.33	3.69	4.03	4.19	4.43	4.73	5.53
Province[^]	2.76	3.12	3.38	3.64	3.99	4.54	4.56	4.82	5.79

Note: Percentages based on total enrollment (Ft and Pt students)

Enrollment numbers source: MPHEC

*First year having an on-site DRF

[#] Number of registered students may have included AST students whereas population statistics did not.

[^]Total number of students registered with DSOs as a % of total provincial enrollment in Universities only

Blue: highest overall, Orange: highest comprehensive

Table 9: Service Uptake at the NSCC (2004/05-2012/13)

	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13
Registered SwD*	684	723	793	947	1094	982	1098	1131	1149
Total Population						10433	10669	10688	10676
% of Student Body						9.41	10.29	10.58	10.76

Source: PSDS; population numbers obtained through NSCC News Briefings on www.nsc.ca
 *Data provided by the NSCC indicates a +/- 5 registered students in comparison to PSDS data.

Table 10: NSCC Students Registered with Disability Services by Campus

CAMPUS	FALL 2010	FALL 2011	FALL 2012	FALL 2013	FALL 2014
Akerley	111	103	112	117	114
Annapolis Valley	42	47	45	51	36
Burridge	77	49	72	81	85
Cumberland	29	18	34	31	60
Institute of Technology	105	84	91	113	112
Kingstec	107	99	66	99	117
Lunenburg	46	47	50	64	59
Marconi	137	119	113	144	135
Pictou	75	53	79	91	86
Shelburne	12	12	11	18	17
Strait Area	88	77	72	93	91
Truro	96	93	113	104	124
Waterfront	238	169	239	272	297

Appendix B

Medical assessment form