MSU Accessibility Forum Report 2015-16: Breaking the Stigma

Introduction:

Building off the success of last year, the McMaster Students Union's Second Annual Accessibility Forum was hosted by MSU Diversity Services and the SRA University Affairs Committee on October 21, 2015. The theme of this year's Forum was "Breaking the Stigma" and provided a space to have deep conversations related to the everyday aspects of being a person who identifies as having a disability. The topic facilitation was split such that each table was assigned a facilitator, notetaker, and a table topic, and students were free to move between the tables and partake in whichever discussions they wished. The table topics this year were:

1. Accessing Accommodations and (Self) Advocacy
2. Navigating Academia with an Invisible Illness
3. Transitioning from High School to University, and from University to the Big Wide World
4. Sex Sideways: Sexuality, Relationships, and Gender Identity as a Person with a Disability
5. Chronic Illness and Interpersonal Relationships
6. Social Events and University Life as Students with Disabilities
7. Intersecting Oppressions and Responsible Allyship

The event ran for two hours and was open to everyone. Attendance was similar to last year, with about 40-50 people in attendance. The MSU Vice-President (Education) Spencer Nestico-Semianiw spoke during the middle of the Forum to discuss the progress the MSU and McMaster has made regarding accessibility. The outcomes and discussions that took place at the event are reported below by table topic.

1. Accessing Accommodations and (Self) Advocacy:

The primary source for students to access accommodations is through Student Accessibility Services. Those with a diagnosed condition often go through SAS or their online services. For many students, a barrier to accessing accommodations is that many students do not know they exist, especially those in first year. SAS will try and do transition programs, but many students are not diagnosed upon entering university, or they do not find out about SAS until their later years. A proposed solution to this was increased presence and promotion of SAS during Welcome Week. Aside from going to SAS, there are a few other informal methods by which students go to access accommodations. Students will often contact professors directly for an accommodation on a needs basis. This can help those with undiagnosed conditions; however, not all professors or TA's are receptive to this and it often forces students to disclose on a continual basis, every time they have a new professor. Those with undiagnosed conditions face increased barriers in accessing accommodations because oftentimes both SAS and professors will accuse students of not actually having an invisible disability. It is generally agreed upon that course coordinators and professors should not be skeptical of students, especially upon disclosure of a disability, and these attitudes further prevent students from attempting to access their accommodations.

2. Navigating Academia with an Invisible Illness:

Common Experiences of Students Who Identify as Having an Invisible Disability:
Students who identify with invisible disabilities share common experiences navigating systems of access at McMaster University. While experiences are unique to the individuals, some shared barriers include the decision to disclose (to professors, teaching assistants, support services, etc.) and the navigation of other label-centric mediums. From these discussions, students brought forward that, while accessing support, the legitimacy of their disability and/or accommodations was questioned. Another shared sentiment was sometimes it was too much effort to get the support or accommodations required and students would make academic or personal sacrifices as a result.

How can we better support individuals with invisible and visible disabilities?
- *In General*
  Several options were discussed to both reduce the stigmatization many students face on campus as well as structural changes to ease navigation of these services. Efforts should be made to break the stigma around invisible disabilities. Emphasis should be put on non-assumptive practices regardless of diagnosis. Efforts like these should work towards decreasing feelings of illegitimacy and feelings of being a burden that students with disabilities face.
- *In the Classroom*
  Another need discussed was that professors, across all faculties, should be employing accessible information in their classroom. This should in part be done through the integration of technology, such as podcasting, posting lecture slides on Avenue to Learn (in both PDF and PowerPoint format), and using pre-recorded lectures (modules) with scripts. Classrooms should be designed with the following principles in mind:
    - Professors should be providing resources and alternative means of assessment to students and not putting students in positions where they must ask for an exception to be made.
    - Everyone should have equal access to the classroom and varied types of assessments to ensure success and students do not feel overwhelmed with one form of assessment.
    - Student absence can be a result of accessibility concerns and not laziness, and interactions with students should be carried out accordingly
    - Accommodations exist because of barriers within the learning environment and are not the fault of the students using them. Revisions to make classrooms universally accessible would decrease the usage of accommodations.
- *Through Student Accessibility Services (SAS)*
  More information about the services offered by Student Accessibility Services (SAS) should be made available to incoming students, including but not limited to: services offered, accommodations available, first time registration as a student with a disability, and transferring accommodations from high school or another academic institution to university. In addition, many students felt unnecessary disclosures were mandated

throughout academia and that policies on the disclosure of sensitive information between governing services should be created or revisited to ensure it is only occuring when actually necessary. A need for more SAS staff was also discussed.

Disclosures:
Disclosing that you identify with a disability can oftentimes be very stressful and negative for students. Some professors react to disclosures with invasive and irrelevant questions. In addition, this is private information and should not be forced or mandated. Yet several advantages to disclosing exist that oftentimes necessitate disclosure to access accommodations.
- *Advantages to disclosing information*
Students found that if they disclosed information about their disability to their professors they were more willing to offer help and were more approachable and sensitive to the needs of the student. If they disclose they may be connected to other support services.
- *When should you need to disclose a disability with a professor?*
A student should never be required to disclose to a professor yet disclosures are often necessitated when a professor emphasizes that things are going to happen a certain way, and is not sensitive to the way this is being interpreted by students. Students felt that without the perceived "legitimacy" tied to a specific diagnosis professors are not willing to offer help.
- *How could we make these disclosure experiences better?*
Students shouldn't need to disclose this information. Registering with SAS can mean that there is less of a pressure to disclose to professors. Within SAS, sometimes focusing on barriers to access (functional limitations) over a diagnosis disclosure ensures that only necessary information is being disclosed. Participants cited a lack of clarity when navigating the system with regards to tutorial participation due to the relationship between SAS, the professor and the teaching assistant. Sensitivity and awareness training in addition to AODA training should be available to all teaching assistants and professors.

3. Transitioning from High School to University, and from University to the Big Wide World:

Of the several difficulties associated with transitioning into university, the most prominent in discussion at the forum were the feelings of isolation and unfamiliarity in the university environment. Participating in extracurricular activities and being more outgoing to be involved can mitigate those feelings and instill a sense of belonging. However, finding one's place through such means is not always a simple achievement. There are a plethora of services and opportunities available to help students ease the transition including the SWC, SSC, Spark, PSL. Despite the numerous available services, persons with disabilities (PWD) shared the difficulty in choosing a certain service or opportunity that would benefit them the most. It can also be overwhelming for students to manage their time to engage in such opportunities that promote personal wellness and assist in easing the transition for persons with disabilities. To address these concerns, it was suggested that the services can

reach out more to the student body and better accommodate their schedule (based on program specificity). This can be done through class talks and presentations, at the start or end of a lecture (possibly a mandatory required course for a program). This will provide more information to the students on available services, and develop a more inviting milieu to attract students to reach out to such services. It was suggested that the SSC have extended hours to be more available and accommodating to persons seeking support.

To further ease the transition, the great benefits of mentorship programs within a faculty or society also was shared at the forum. These should continue to be heavily encouraged. With respect to accessibility in the new university setting, the issue of able-bodied students using and occupying wheelchair access ramps/entrances was addressed. It is essential that an MSU club/service, such as Maccess, reminds the student body or informs profs to relay the message to students that the accessibility ramps and spaces are for PWDs. To help PWDs transition to the academic aspect of university, it was suggested that there should be podcasts and recordings in all classes with subtitles. With respect to transitioning out of university, it was not a popular topic of discussion due to the demographic of first and second year students in attendance.

4. Sex Sideways: Sexuality, Relationships, and Gender Identity as a Person with a Disability:

Disclosure in Romantic Relationships and When Dating
We are told that a healthy relationship is built on a foundation of honesty, and as a result there is often a very large pressure to disclose the nature of your disability and how it affects you. Yet this is not often easy and is often a cause of stress for students entering into relationships. Students said they regularly experienced fear of opening up because of judgment or lack of support from their partner(s). If partner(s) were supportive students stated they wouldn't know what type of support they would want in a relationship particularly at the beginning. Other concerns were that they would be taken advantage of after disclosure due to the vulnerability associated with disclosing. In regards of when to disclose in a relationship students mentioned waiting until they know the person(s) would make them feel safer but they might have to deal with feelings that they are lying to their partner. In addition, there was the common experience that sometimes when disclosing to people without disabilities they react by being offended that the student did not "trust them enough" to disclose earlier or that they would become too invested or overly concerned in their partner's wellbeing. Overall conflicting feelings surrounding safety, being honest (disclosing) in an effort to build a relationship, and uncertainty about their partner's reaction, were said to lead to feelings of fear, anxiety, and cognitive dissonance. Due to the difference in expectations students cited platonic relationships as generally being more accepting to disclosure.

Gender Performance and Presentation for Students with Disabilities
Students talked about several barriers and additional areas of stress associated with gender performance and presentation and being a student with a disability. For example, sensory considerations may limit the types or styles of clothing/makeup being worn. This

can act as a barrier to students that have to dress a certain way (i.e professional) for an event. Students also discussed the expectations on how they presented themselves as a person with a disability and that sometimes they or others were assumed to have a disability as a result of the way they presented themselves. In addition, it was discussed that changes in presentation from day to day were often met with comments from friends and family.

Clothing and makeup can be used expressively, and can be particularly important in gender expression. However, mental health can also influence presentation and it is difficult when this is different than the way a student wanted to present themselves in a different way. Dressing in ways that are considered not 'normal' was mentioned as something that resulted in judgment, which is often triggering particularly in social spaces.

The large intersection between Queerness/LGBT and negative mental health was also discussed. Students felt that it was stressful to have to deal with all of these things at once. In addition, health care systems are often singularly focused and it was a common experience that doctors avoided conversations about sexuality. However, a concern with having doctors and healthcare professionals more sensitive to LGBT and Queer students is that a student's queerness would be used as an explanation of negative mental health and the student would not be treated complexly. Overall, it was agreed that doctors having a complete picture of the student's life was the most important thing, yet barriers exist that often make students uncomfortable sharing this information.

The Intersection of Queer/LGBT Activism and Anti-Ableism
Students felt that despite the extremely large intersection between people who identify as queer/LGBT and people who identify as having a disability, there were many organizational limitations in this area. Spaces are often distinct spaces and while peer spaces were mentioned to be better at recognizing the intersectionality that exists, but are still singular in scope. Spaces and organizations should be able to work together, yet often cross-over programming is received as an afterthought. Student-aged people were commented on as being more progressive in comparison to older generations for example, medical practitioners. Because so many students interact with both of these areas there needs to be more acceptance to both especially since they are so connected.

Students mentioned that some people felt safer or more included in one style of space over another which shouldn't be the case. Students discussed that at different times one consideration may be more prevalent or important to a person's life than another, thus making it difficult to build solidarity within a community. When de-stigmatizing campaigns promote the idea that Queer/LGBT people are "just a little different to straight people" it can be hurtful especially to students who also experience mental illness as they may identify as very different.

Chronic Illness/Fatigue and the Relationship with Oneself
Students discussed that chronic fatigue can make them feel inadequate to the standards society thinks we need to meet. Chronic fatigue can just make you feel weak, not just tired. Students felt judged for not being awake and peppy like they felt they "should".

5. Chronic Illness and Interpersonal Relationships:

Students with chronic illness expressed their struggles in building relationships with peers and professors. In particular, those with invisible disabilities shared their greater susceptibility to being judged. Certain characteristics may be assumed as part of their defining identity, and not something they are living with. Depending on the debilitating extent of their condition, students may or may not be willing to share their personal information of their struggles to others. If it permeates so much into their daily life that it is tough to perform certain tasks, then it must be disclosed to avoid assumptions and judgments from others. Disclosure of information with professors is further analyzed in a previous section of this report (Disclosures in Academia).

Running awareness campaigns could better inform the general student body, and ease relationship building for students with chronic illnesses. More importantly, sensitivity training for professors could be improved. This could be done by holding more workshops for instructional staff at the start of each semester, or academic year. The President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community (PACBIC) needs to continue their efforts in implementing a program where professors are paired with someone who can provide them with more information regarding disability and accommodation. Furthermore, the possibility of a third party being involved in creating accommodations/talking with professors was also discussed. Essentially, this third party service would represent and support the student in their relationship with the professor. Students discussed the potential benefits to have a third party (peer, university personnel, SAS employee) in conversations with professors about their accommodations. However, it was also expressed that whether there is a benefit of a third party is situation dependent. Students may feel more effective self-advocating rather than a third party representing them to be justly accommodated. Due to the situational and individual nature of accommodations, having third parties involved optionally would be best.

A common issue expressed amongst first year students with disabilities is the lack of knowledge in the necessary steps required to seek accommodation. Students continuously having to advocate for themselves to receive equitable attention expressed discouragement and fatigue. It is hard for students to repeatedly explain their situation and justify their actions taken, and accommodations they receive. Students recounted on experiences with professors not empathetic to their situation. A professor needs be cognizant of the fine balance between access and accommodation. By professors taking a more willing active role in helping students, we can work to break the stigma with confidence.

Students also discussed the struggle associated with explaining their disabilities and what it explicitly entails. One's ability to fully disclose is quite challenging in professional settings, as it may lead to misconceived judgments and hinder overall experience.

6. Social Events and University Life as Students with Disabilities:

Students discussed that many MSU events are for extroverted students, and do not cater to the interests of introverts. A concern of students in attending parties and events was the lack of ramps, and elevators in community places. Students expressed that participating in social events is more trouble than its worth, as depending on their disability they may to have repeatedly explain their disability. With the intention of enhancing one's student life outside of the academic environment, persons with disabilities could be left with feelings of exhaustion and isolation. Students shared how it is easier to lie in a social setting to avoid those potential feelings.

To address and meet concerns and needs of students with disabilities, certain criteria should be kept in mind when planning an event. The planned activity should try to include and be accepting to all. This includes accommodating for physical capabilities, diet, and various other aspects. It was suggested that spaces at events with reduced crowd and noise are created for students with disabilities to better enjoy the event. However, this could further isolate students, and needs to be handled and implemented with caution. It was suggested that there should be a sign that reminds people that it is okay if someone does not drink at events such as in TwelveEighty.

7. Intersecting Oppressions and Responsible Allyship

This table discussion became something of a Q&A session for the facilitator, as most people had questions on how to be a good ally rather than ideas. Some of the key points that were discussed were the need for a wholesome approach to allyship - one that humanizes issues, takes into account intersectionality, and listening to and uplifting marginalized voices. Humanizing issues involves not reducing people to their disability and recognizing that that is only one aspect of a person's identity. Listening to and uplifting marginalized voices is the most involved, and starts from the premise that allyship is a process where allies need to empower others and not speak over them. Being aware of their privilege and using it for the betterment of the marginalized communities is also very important.