

# **McMaster Students Union's First Annual Accessibility Forum: Report**



# Introduction:

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The McMaster Students Union's First Annual Accessibility Forum was hosted by Diversity Services and the University Affairs Committee on November 28<sup>th</sup> 2014. The purpose of this forum was to allow students with visible or invisible disabilities to a safe space to bring up accessibility concerns related to their ability to learn successfully at McMaster University. There were seven topics at seven different tables: physical accessibility, assessment accommodations, instructional accessibility, support services, peer support, digital learning resources, and financial barriers. At the end, the entire group of students participated in a general discussion so that they could express issues they may have wanted to express. An anonymous online form was also left online for students who could not attend to submit concerns.

The event was two and a half hours long, and was open to students with and without disabilities, so as to avoid pressuring students to disclose their disabilities. There were roughly 40-50 students in attendance. The event also featured a keynote address by David Lepofsky, Chair of the AODA Commission of Ontario, and Tim Nolan, McMaster University's Director of Student Accessibility Services.

Below is a summary of the twenty four pages of notes collected from the discussion at this forum. In this summary, there are areas of concerns and suggestions for improvements that students have voiced. All of the notes collected preserve the anonymity of the students in attendance.

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# 1. Physical Accessibility on Campus:

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## **General Building Complaints:**

- Students mentioned that seating for persons with disabilities is usually at the back of lecture rooms and not at the front. This causes problems for students that want to make presentations in lecture rooms but are blocked by stairs. It is felt that sometimes the seats designated for students with disabilities get occupied by able-bodied students who may not require those specific seats. Tutorial rooms were also brought up in that they are smaller and the lack of spaces between desks causes barriers for persons with mobility aids. It was said that we need better maps and signs for accessible entrances and washrooms in buildings. It was suggested that an easier way to solve accessibility infrastructure problems without putting a work order. Specific concerns were raised about KTH, JHE, TSH, UH, HH, HSC, MDCL. For more information, please contact the authors of this report.

## **Non Academic Building Concerns:**

- Students noted that there is not enough seating allocated to students with disability outside of lecture halls or classrooms. An example could be the lack of accessible tables in front of La Piazza. It was suggested that this sort of space allocation be relooked at.

## **Accessible Parking:**

- Students noted that undergraduate parking lots include LOT M and Ron Joyce Stadium. It was suggested that more information on accessible parking on campus should be provided to students with disabilities.

## **Residence Buildings:**

- Students noted that many traditional residences have no elevators. Many students with physical disabilities are placed in Mary Keyes which is accessible, but is farther away from campus buildings and more costly to live in. This makes it harder to get to classes in the winter and financially inaccessible. Students do not think it's fair to pay more to reside in Mary Keyes if they are being forced to reside there because the other residences aren't accessible

## **Barriers to Degree Requirements:**

- Some students said that lack of accessibility and the ten minute dash poses restrictions on academic degree, because they choose which courses they are taking each term based on which building the lectures are in, not based on their requirements or what they enjoy.
- Students suggested allowing students with disabilities who are registered with SAS access to course selection before the general student body to allow for accessible class schedules and flexibility planning around medical appointments.

### **Time Travel between Classes:**

- Travel time between classes was also brought up as an issue, because of factors like classes that go overtime, or bad weather conditions. A solution to this would be to offer increased time allocated in schedules or student transportation across campus, or to send reminders for professors to end classes in a timely manner.
- It was noted that when classes end, there is a student rush in terms of exit and entry which creates traffic that blocks in students with disabilities for long periods of time. One student recommended that bus transportation across campus should run daily with designated stops for students with mobility challenges.
- With regard to commuting from off campus, there were complaints about the few drop off areas that the Disabled and Aged Regional Transit System (DARTS) can load and unload from (MUSC, JHE, and IWC). The MUSC pick up and drop off area is not accessible for students, since cars tend to idle in front of the curb cuts. A solution is for a designated DARTS drop off zones agreed on by both DARTS and the university, with appropriate signage. Increasing the number of drop off zones would also make it easier for students to get to class on time.

### **Travel and Snow:**

- There were complaints with regard to late school closures. School closures due to snow can be announced at any time the university sees fit, which were later than noon on a few occasions in 2014. Late closures pose barriers to students with disabilities who rely on the Disabled and Aged Regional Transit System (DARTS) to get to school and back home, as DARTS needs at least seven days of notice to offer rides to and from school at specific times. A solution suggested was that McMaster should come up with a system to school closures as early as possible (i.e. before students tend to commute to campus), similar to the public school board structure. With regard to snow on campus, students with disabilities identified that leaves and snow left piled in front of ramps should be cleared to prevent accidents.

### **Lack of CCAC Services:**

- There were also complaints about Community Care Access Centre Services posing barriers for Persons with Disabilities in that choosing universities in other regions is made difficult because of reliance on CCAC Services.

## **2. Assessment Accommodations:**

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### **Slides and Podcasts:**

- Students mentioned that sometimes professors do not want to post slides before class because they think students will skip lecture. According to students, the professors don't realize that posting the slides before class can help students with certain disabilities learn the information being taught. Students also mentioned that professors are not making it there due-diligence to accommodate the different learning styles students have, by

posting podcasts or other mediums outside of lecture. Podcasts work better for students with disabilities who miss class for disability related reasons, or who use podcasts to digest the information taught in lecture easily.

- Students recommended that slides and podcasts should be available for all classes at McMaster University, including upper year courses.

### **Requesting Accommodations:**

- In terms of requesting accommodations through SAS, some students state they have not used accommodations because they do not want to identify themselves to professors as a person with a disability. It was noted that accommodations are useless unless one feels comfortable disclosing their disability. It was recommended that accommodation letters be sent electronically to professors, so that students can avoid self-identifying. It was also suggested that SAS consent forms be filled out electronically if possible, to save time and reduce pressure to disclose.
- Students said this would be easier if all professors were obligated to explain Student Accessibility Services at the beginning of all classes, as well as include SAS information in all syllabuses provided to students.

### **Faculty Members that Stigmatize or Shame Students:**

- Students said that staff, when offering accommodations, will often do it from their perspectives with opinions and biases. Many do not understand or believe that mental illness can cause barriers to learning. Some will blame students for falling behind in course work due to disability related reasoning. Others will refuse SAS notes and request doctors notes. An example of this is when a student asks for an extension because of disability related concerns, and is treated as though this is asking for a favour. Students recommended there should be work done to educate faculty at McMaster in more ways than Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act training, so that faculty at McMaster have a better understanding of disability. There should not be so much inconsistency in the ways professors respond to accommodation requests.

### **Restructuring Assignments:**

- Students identified barriers in classroom assignments. Students with various disabilities may struggle to excel in certain courses simply because of the structure. An example of this struggle was given at the Accessibility Forum, where one student stopped going to class because in tutorial a question would pop up on the screen and the student would be forced to answer in front of everyone. The student's anxiety prevented her from learning in this manner. The way students are evaluated should be via multiple ways that allow for multiple learning styles.
- A suggestion that was mentioned was that students should have the option of completing online discussion questions through Avenue to Learn in lieu of receiving participation marks in class. This would be more inclusive toward students with various anxiety disorders, or who have trouble with forced-recall, note-bank and barriers. Humanities courses offer many of these options, but it is not so noticeable in other faculties. Another

suggestion that was made was that courses should be restructured so that assignments you do well on will count more in your final grade than assignments you do poor on.

#### **T.A. Training:**

- Students identified that TAs are not trained enough with regards to accommodating students with disabilities. Self-identifying was also a concern with TAs because students did not want to be treated differently from their peers. Solutions to this could be training TA's more about disability awareness so that students feel more comfortable disclosing.

#### **Disability Studies Courses at McMaster University:**

- Students suggested that Disability Studies Courses should begin to be taught at McMaster. A project course for students could be taught with a focus on research and advocacy work around disability related issues surrounding this. Students said that courses like these would give students with disabilities the tools they need to advocate, and could teach students without disabilities the importance of disability awareness.

#### **Student Accessibility Services Testing Centre:**

- Students have to individually message SAS for accommodations of upcoming tests and quizzes, making it hard to stay on top of if one is taking multiple courses, or courses with a quiz every week. A solution would be figuring out a way for tests and quizzes to be automatically booked through the SAS testing centre according to each student's class schedule and course syllabuses.
- Students also mentioned that accommodations are not individualized, and that extra time in a private room might not be what every student needs. These accommodations are standardized. A solution to this would be asking each student what would help them succeed in the classroom, and providing more individualized accommodations.

## **3. Instructional Accessibility:**

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#### **Classroom Size:**

- Students said that smaller classes were more accessible than larger classes, because smaller class sizes allow for active learning. Students who don't like large groups tend to feel uncomfortable in large classes. A recommended solution would be to make first year course sizes smaller.

#### **Teaching Habits:**

- Students said that sometimes professors are just bad professors. They have bad handwriting, (in math especially), or suffer from an illusion of the expert (i.e. they don't understand why students don't understand a concept because it's second nature to them). Professors move through course materials at their own pace, and sometimes ignore in class questions. Professors with accents were also highlighted as a barrier to learning, as well as professors who refuse to wear microphones in their classrooms.

- Students recommended making course materials such as power point slides available through Avenue to Learn as well as podcasts would help to tackle these teaching habits. More focus should be put on training faculty with regards to accessibility, accommodations, and learning styles.

### **Testing Styles:**

- Many students said that they would prefer testing options. Some do well on multiple choice tests while others do better on short answer. Having students more involved in selecting their evaluation styles will be more accessible and would ensure success in the classroom. If students do poorly on tests, it can be because of the chosen testing style.
- Students also mentioned that in some humanities classes there were many options for how our marks were broken down so that students would not be forced into a particular marking process. This fluid approach would make learning more accessible to those who have different preferred learning styles.

### **Rubrics:**

- Students agreed that rubrics should be made available for assignments, so that students completely understand what is being asked of them.

## **4. Support Services:**

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### **Student Accessibility Services: Lack of Communication:**

- Students said that there is a poor communication between SAS and the general student body. Many students who use SAS have heard of the service through friends of friends and are not sure if they are qualified to register for the services. Students recommended having SAS focus more on outreach.

### **Student Accessibility Services: Lack of Individualized Approaches:**

- Students also said there is a lack of individualized approaches in terms of accommodations that are offered. Students can receive certain standardized accommodations, but aren't really involved in the planning or customization of their accommodations. This is also a reason why some students choose not to register with SAS. Students suggested that a new method needs to be developed that includes students in the creation of various accommodations.

### **Student Accessibility Services: Lack of Intersectional Approaches:**

- Students also noted that SAS' method of approach doesn't acknowledge intersectionality. An example is that SAS does not acknowledge barriers relating to disability and socioeconomic status or disability and race. Accommodations are rigid. Many students end up not using SAS because of this, because they feel as though their individual cases in terms of needed accommodations will not be understood.

### **Student Accessibility Services: Lack of Staff:**

Students acknowledged that SAS staff are limited which makes it hard to access a coordinator in the beginning of a term or exam period.

### **Clinical Placements:**

- Students said a lot of clinical placement accommodations are very sophisticated, which makes it hard to get accommodations. It's easier to get accommodations for a test than it is for a placement in a surgery room.

### **Student Accessibility Services Testing Centre:**

- Students said that the SAS testing centre should be closer to the main areas of campus, and that it's at an obscure location. Students also mentioned that the cubicles that can really loud and that ear plugs don't help. A solution to this problem would be to find a bigger testing space closer to Student Accessibility Services.

## **5. Peer Support and Communication**

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### **Need for Community:**

- Students said that they desire a community at McMaster created for students with visible and invisible disabilities. Student Accessibility Services and the Student Wellness Centre are only related to accommodations or immediate health concerns, but there is nowhere on campus for students to go who are seeking peer support, or a community, or friends who have similar lived experiences. The events hosted through SAS get low turnout because it's run by staff and not peers with disabilities themselves. Students suggested starting a peer support service for students with disabilities that is run by a student staff, through the McMaster Students Union.

## **6. Digital Learning Resources:**

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### **Online Courses:**

- Students said that learning through a computer often allows opportunity for distractions while watching modules. While it was agreed that podcasts should always be available online, students were against the idea of teaching strictly through online modules.

### **Psychology 1X03:**

- Students said this course and other courses offered like it online were completely non accessible. Screen readers for visually impaired students didn't recognize the images, it only recognized the text. Students had to drop out of this course because of difficulties with accessing the modules in an accessible format. It was suggested that Dr. Joe Kim offer these modules in alternative formats.

### **Journal Articles:**

- Students with visual impairments struggle with classes that require one to find journal articles for an essay, because journal articles are often not in an accessible format which makes it hard to find. Then once the journal articles are decided on, the student has to wait for Library Accessibility Services to convert them, which will create a delay in completing the assignments. Students recommending having professors give out a list of preselected journal articles that are accessible, to students.

#### **Turnitin.com and Avenue to Learn Drop Box:**

- Students with visual impairments said that submitting to [www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com) or the drop box on avenue to learn is very complicated. Students would much rather have the options of submitting assignments on a USB, because that is easier to navigate. Students suggested that this should be a welcomed accommodation.

#### **Library Accessibility Services (LAS):**

- For some students, materials need to have information converted to screen reader format, which can take several weeks through Library Accessibility Services. Students mentioned that LAS hires students who are not accessibility specialists and who sometimes make materials inaccessible for PDF readers. Students said there were many typos. A solution recommended by students would be to hire more full time staff for LAS.
- LAS only offers materials as PDFS. Students suggested also making them accessible for Microsoft Word files so that they can be scanned with a variety of screen readers.

## **7. Financial Barriers**

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#### **Health Coverage:**

- Students mentioned that finding health coverage after graduation is a barrier. Sometimes students with disabilities have a mental health issue that requires counsellors and once they leave university it may be difficult for them to find new care. Coverage can also change depending on your full-time/part-time status with universities, which can be a barrier to students with disabilities.

#### **Accommodative Equipment:**

- Students who required accommodative equipment said that this equipment posed a financial barrier. Services and students are having to rely on volunteers (such as scribes) help students with disabilities because of lack of finances, but volunteer scribes can often be unreliable.
- Students said that any additional payments students are needing to make for courses at McMaster University that relate to accommodations should be covered by the university.

### **Personal Support Workers/ Personal Assistants:**

- Students mentioned that they need Personal Assistants who help them write notes carry bags, and help with other activities that they could not perform because of physical limitations. Personal Support Workers and Personal Assistants are expensive. Students suggested having Personal Assistants or Support Workers offered through the University for students that cannot succeed without this help.
- Students mentioned they had to bring family members to help at that this was degrading, limiting, and isolating. They could not go to school events.

### **Graduate School Financial Barriers:**

- Students mentioned it is difficult to receive accommodations in graduate school simply because of funding short comings. Not enough services are available.
- One potential solution is for the program director to look at this on a case by case basis instead of this decision simply being delegated at the top of the board. There should be some sort of tiered system at McMaster University to recognize the differences between students with and without disabilities at the graduate level.
- Students also said programs may not accommodate because accommodations can be more expensive. One graduate student wanted to appeal a decision but felt uncomfortable because the person they were appealing to was their supervisor, who had a significant impact on their graduate work.
- Students who have to extend their semester due to their disability also face barriers in that they would lose funding during their extension.

### **SAS and SWELL Late Charges:**

- Students are charged if they are late to the Student Wellness Center or SAS appointments. Some students with disabilities can be late because the elevators are slow or it takes longer to get to the appointment.

## **8. General Discussion Points:**

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- Students emphasized that professors need to be more educated, as some currently prioritize accommodating students with visible disabilities over those with invisible disabilities.
- Students with visual impairments have a very hard time coming to McMaster University because they have difficulty planning bus routes. It was suggested that McMaster and the community should work together on facilitating this.

- Students recommended that all professors should use podcasts. Note takers for SAS should be able to upload notes in a public form so that students who don't want to self-identify as having a disability don't have to.
- To address the lack of student awareness relating to incoming students, students recommended that a really brief module be created that every first year student has to take in order to access Avenue to Learn. This module can include information about AODA and SAS.
- Students said that professors often cram too much information into a 50 minute class which is ineffective. We need slow down the way things are taught to make it more accessible to everyone.
- Students noted that when professors set an average, it trivializes students who actually want to do well because professors are simply aiming to get a certain average in a course. There is so much focus on research at McMaster University that students with disabilities feel like teaching falls to the wayside.