

SRA MAROON PAPERS

THE McMASTER STUDENTS UNION | KEY POINTS & RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SRA POLICY PAPERS

POLICY PAPER UNIVERSITY ACCESSIBILITY POLICY

PREAMBLE

At McMaster University, students with disabilities can face additional barriers to accessing and succeeding in education. In order to ensure equitable access for all, it is important that steps be taken by the University and the provincial government to eliminate these barriers. The MSU believes that by making changes in various areas including physical barriers, universal design of learning and courses, student life, university transition, university services, and funding & financial aid, we can make McMaster University a more accessible university for all.

PRINCIPLES

The MSU believes that:

- All students should be able to succeed in their academic pursuits and environments, free from any barriers or obstacles.
- All needs of students with disabilities should be taken into account in the development of courses at McMaster University.
- Informed discussions surrounding disability theory create a community of ideas and work to reduce stigma at McMaster.
- All aspects of student life extending beyond academics should be accessible to all students, including (but not limited to) extracurricular seminars, skill-building workshops, mentoring opportunities, etc.
- Adequate information on Student Accessibility Services (SAS) should be available and publicized to all prospective students throughout the University registration process.
- It is the duty of the McMaster University to provide accommodations to students who require them.
- Students should not be forced to disclose any diagnosis (including mental health diagnoses) to McMaster University in order to receive accommodations.



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- Students should not be mandated to disclose that they have a disability unless necessary to academic accommodations.
- Students should be making informed and autonomous decisions surrounding the accommodations they receive.
- Students should be able to access support and resources from SAS in a timely manner particularly when they involving changing or accessing new accommodations.
- Academic accommodations should be centralized throughout the University so there is no confusion when attempting to access them.
- Students should have access to timely and sufficient mental health care on campus offered through the University.
- Students with disabilities must be provided with additional financial assistance to meet the higher costs associated with obtaining their education and documenting their disability.
- Student Accessibility Services should be equipped to adequately ensure the success of all students on campus with disabilities.

CONCERNS

The MSU is concerned that:

- Inclement weather conditions pose significant transportation barriers for students with physical disabilities.
- Students with disabilities struggle with physical campus accessibility barriers that prevent this demographic from learning effectively.
- DARTS bus drivers are unaware that the MSU Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) Bus Pass is compatible with DARTS.
- The course instruction delivered by course instructors and teaching assistants is not uniformly accessible to students.
- Given that methods of online learning, including designs and deliveries, are often incompatible with diverse learning styles, students with disabilities struggle to thrive in these models.
- Faculty and course instructors are not required to upload course syllabi online, which impedes student access to essential course information.
- There are currently no formal opportunities at McMaster for education on disability theory.



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- Students with disabilities often struggle to participate in events hosted by faculties, University working groups, Student Affairs, Student Success Centre, Residence Life, and more, due to barriers of structure and engagement.
- Information on Student Accessibility Services and relevant summer transition programs like the Shifting Gears Program are not effectively communicated to incoming students.
- Students often avoid disclosing their disabilities due to the stigma associated with disabilities.
- Forced disclosure of a diagnosis to SAS is a barrier to accessing accommodations.
- There are several barriers associated with the current letter signing process that prevent students from accessing their accommodations or create unsafe situations.
- Students cite that they were unaware of an accommodation offered through SAS that would have benefited them had they know about it sooner.
- Yearly intake appointments for individuals are often unnecessary and increase the wait time for students who more regularly see their SAS counsellor.
- The process for retroactive accommodations is currently unclear and varies from faculty office to faculty office creating confusion.
- Over 22,000 undergraduate students, as well as additional graduate students at McMaster are serviced by the Student Wellness Centre. Students experience extensive wait times.
- There is a lack of funding available for which to hire additional counsellors and mental health professionals.
- There are additional costs associated with receiving education at McMaster University as a student with a disability.
- Many students are unaware of scholarships for students with disabilities.
- Wait times and cost for psychosocial assessments can prevent some students from receiving accommodation when they need it.
- Student Accessibility Services often grapples with insufficient resources and excess demands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The MSU recommends that:

- Where possible, McMaster University should strive to create proactive solutions to weather-related barriers on campus.



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- Students with disabilities should register for their classes on MOSAIC before students without disabilities.
- The University should effectively communicate with students when there is an accessibility barrier on campus, such as deep snow on a ramp.
- There should be full compliance with all provincial accessibility laws and legislations at McMaster University.
- DARTS should increase their number of approved drop-off centers on campus.
- DARTS should ensure that all bus drivers are aware that the MSU Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) Bus Pass is compatible with DARTS.
- Methods and modules of online learning should be accessible for with students with disabilities.
- All course instructors at McMaster University should upload course syllabi online where all students can easily access the documentation.
- McMaster University should adopt a universal instructional design philosophy when appropriate where accessibility is built into instructional standards and campus infrastructure outside of traditional spaces for students with disabilities.
- Disabilities studies courses should be taught at McMaster University.
- Professors and teaching assistants should have formalized training on classroom accessibility and disability theory.
- University bodies need to embrace best practices surrounding accessibility in all events being offered to students, by following accessibility best practices.
- Both a University representative from Student Accessibility Services (SAS) or from the Office of Human Rights and Equity Service (HRES) and a MSU representative from MSU Maccess should hold a seat on the Welcome Week Planning and Implementation Committee (WWPIC).
- McMaster University should send information on disability services, summer transition programs, and disability accommodation requirements to all students in the acceptance package.
- McMaster University should ensure that Summer Transition Programs meet existing best practices and cater to the needs of all students with disabilities.
- McMaster University should pursue comprehensive training strategies for faculty and staff to help reduce or eliminate stigma as a barrier for students accessing services.
- Student Accessibility Services should provide accommodations based on barriers to learning.
- SAS should not mandate students to discuss their accommodation plan directly with their professor through the letter signing process instead options should be



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presented and the student should decide which plan is the best for them. Options should include: the student may email their letters to the professor, SAS may email the letters to the professor, the student may deliver the letters in person.

- Information about accommodations should be available on the SAS website and an optional form should be circulated on the the SAS website and in office that asks questions to help students consider what supports would be useful to them ahead of time, so they can make an informed decision after being aware of the available options.
- Retroactive accommodations for students registered with SAS should be provided by SAS and not faculty offices.
- There should a University wide policy on what circumstances qualify for retroactive accommodations and how they are offered.
- The University should implement a minimum ratio of one to one thousand counsellors to students/appointments.
- The University should hire a greater number of support professionals available on campus during times of high stress.
- The provincial government should provide additional funding to McMaster University to hire more counsellors and mental health professionals.
- There should be greater support for students with mental illness and complex mental health diagnosis through increased availability of professionals with specialized skills.
- The University should introduce formal policy on student leave for mental health concerns.
- McMaster University should offer additional funding or supports for students with disabilities who require the use of Personal Support Workers to succeed as students at McMaster University
- The government should increase the amount of funding provided to OSDs (Student Accessibility Services) to better reflect their time and resource demands and to increase the outreach efforts necessary to connect all students with recognized or self-identified students.

FURTHER READING

For more information about the University Accessibility Policy, visit the **General Policies section** of the MSU website to read the full Policy Paper.



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POLICY PAPER

University Accessibility

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SRA University Affairs Commissioner 2015-2016

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Physical Barriers	4
Universal Design of Learning and Courses	7
Student Life	11
University Transition	13
University Services: Student Accessibility Services & the Student Wellness Centre	16
Funding & Financial Aid	25
Policy Statement	30
Related Documents & Policies	34
Glossary of Terms	35

Introduction

Throughout Canadian history, persons with disabilities have struggled to achieve equity as members of a predominantly able-bodied society. Persons with disabilities have a history of being forcibly sterilized, institutionalized, and executed in societies that were not accepting of the many differences among bodies and minds that have, throughout history, existed and continue to exist among human beings. Persons with disabilities are the largest minority in the world, because such persons can belong to every ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age group, LGBTQ+ community, and religion around the world. Ableism, a term coined in the 1960's as a part of the growing social justice movement in Canada, is a type of discrimination one faces when said discrimination occurs solely due to the presence of one's visible or invisible disabilities. This sort of discrimination can occur in the forms of micro or macro aggressions, consciously or unconsciously.

In a University setting, this demographic of students has had a history of struggling to succeed in postsecondary institutions. In fact, Ontario has only recently seen an upsurge in the amount of students with disabilities moving forward to attend post-secondary institutions. Together, we should work to recognize that not only are students with disabilities valuable members of the McMaster community, they are some of the most vulnerable.

There are institutional and societal barriers in place that can make this harder for this demographic to succeed at McMaster University and fully experience all it has to offer. McMaster should take a proactive stance to eliminating all barriers on campus for students with disabilities, while always working towards universal design to make McMaster University an accessible place for all students.

The following principles, concerns, and recommendations outlined in this policy seek to erase ableism within McMaster University, identify barriers to accessibility within the University, and continue the ongoing discussion around supporting students with visible or invisible disabilities, chronic health concerns, or undiagnosed illnesses.

Physical Barriers

There are a variety of physical barriers on campus that impact students with disabilities in many different ways. In particular, physical barriers due to inclement weather, in the structure of the classroom, in accessing transportation, and when generally navigating campus are large concerns that many students have expressed. This section puts forward recommendations for eliminating these barriers in order to ensure that the University is physically accessible at all times.

Principle One: All students should be able to succeed in their academic pursuits and environments, free from any barriers or obstacles.

At McMaster University, there are over 1,700 students with disabilities registered with SAS as of 2016¹, and many more who are not registered. In order for McMaster University to be truly accessible, all students - including students with disabilities - must be able to excel and thrive. Students with disabilities often face various barriers or obstacles at McMaster that may interfere with their access to a variety of services or aspects of university. However, the University should ensure that these obstacles are overcome for students in order to ensure an equitable and inclusive experience at McMaster.

Concern One: Inclement weather conditions pose significant transportation barriers for students with physical disabilities.

During the winter months, McMaster University often has school closures due to inclement weather. In the past, some of these closures have occurred late in the day. As some students with disabilities rely on DARTS, which takes at least seven days of notice to offer rides to and from school, this can often leave students stranded on campus without a ride home.

Recommendation One: Where possible, McMaster University should strive to create proactive solutions to weather-related barriers on campus.

The school closure policy should be rewritten with student consultation to ensure that student safety and accessibility is a higher priority when the school is closed. For instance, the policy could include a pre-commute school closure announcement policy, which would mandate that the University determine closures before a time that students would begin commuting to school. In lieu of this, McMaster University could also provide funding for students with disabilities who are registered with SAS in the event that a closure is called after a student's commute has begun, or the student is already on campus.

Concern Two: Students with disabilities struggle with physical campus accessibility barriers that prevent this demographic from learning effectively.

Students with disabilities at the 2014 MSU Accessibility Forum brought up several concerns regarding physical accessibility on campus and in classrooms that prevented them from

¹ Sean Van Koughnett. (February 26 2016). "Update on the Student Health and Well-Being Strategy, Discussion on Student Mental Health Support Presentation"

equitably participating in various academic opportunities. For instance, seating for students with disabilities is typically at the back of lecture halls on campus (MDCL 1305, CNH 104, TSH 120, ITB 137, and many others). When students need to present at the front of the classroom, they may be blocked by stairs. In addition, oftentimes this seating is used by able-bodied students that do not require them, causing a shortage of appropriate space for students who require these seats².

Students also voiced that they had difficulties with making it to their classes within the allotted travel time between back-to-back classes. This can be caused by many different factors, including classes that go over their allotted time, bad weather conditions, or a “student rush” that typically occurs before and after classes, blocking typically accessible pathways. In addition, tutorial rooms at McMaster often have a lack of space between desks, causing barriers for students with mobility aids.

Recommendation Two: Students with disabilities should register for their classes on MOSAIC before students without disabilities.

McMaster University should provide students with disabilities the opportunity to register for classes early. This will allow students with disabilities to ensure that they take classes in buildings that they can access, within a schedule that works for their needs, and with a course structure that works best for them. For instance, some students may not be able to participate in morning tutorials due to a medication that impairs their ability to fully participate during that time. For students in this situation and others, having advanced access to enroll in courses will allow them to enroll in courses that make their schedule accessible.

Recommendation Three: The University should communicate effectively with students when there is an accessibility barrier on campus, such as deep snow on a ramp.

In order to aid students in navigating potential barriers on campus, the University should develop a strategy to ensure that these barriers are communicated effectively to students. One of these ways could include using the new Cartographr app, which currently allows students to pinpoint barriers on a campus map that is shared with other students. By working with the Cartographr app, the University can better communicate with students about these accessibility concerns. However, the University should ensure that this is not the only avenue that they are using to communicate with students, and should employ a wide variety of communication strategies in the event that there is a campus accessibility concern.

Recommendation Four: There should be full compliance with all provincial accessibility laws and legislations at McMaster University.

There are many laws and legislations with regard to accessibility in Ontario, including the Ontario Disabilities Act, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, and the Ontario Building Code. McMaster University should always adhere to all provincial standards in these laws and legislations specific to accessibility.

² SRA University Affairs Committee. (2014). *MSU Accessibility Forum Report, 2014*.

Concern Three: There is a lack of approved DARTS drop off centers on campus.

The current drop-off areas for DARTS are at MUSC, IWC, and JHE. Students have indicated that the MUSC drop off area is often inaccessible as many cars idle in front of the curb, blocking student access³. As well, often these drop off areas are far away from where a student may have class, adding extra time to their commute and potentially forcing them to travel over an inaccessible path to get to classes.

Concern Four: DARTS bus drivers are unaware that the MSU Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) Bus Pass is compatible with DARTS.

Students have reported that bus drivers are often unaware that the MSU HSR Bus Pass is compatible with DARTS and allows students to access DARTS. This has caused issues for students when accessing transportation⁴.

Recommendation Five: DARTS should increase their number of approved drop-off centres on campus.

To improve the experience and accessibility of their service, DARTS should increase their current number of approved drop-off centres by consulting with students and Facility Services to determine what locations on campus would be the most accessible and most beneficial for students.

Recommendation Six: DARTS should ensure that all bus drivers are aware that the MSU Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) Bus Pass is compatible with DARTS.

In order to ensure that all students are able to fairly use their purchased HSR bus pass, DARTS should ensure that all drivers are fully aware of the MSU HSR Bus Pass and its compatibility with DARTS. Furthermore, if any drivers are unaware, there must be a formalized process for students to report the miscommunication and ensure that the driver is educated about the use of the HSR Bus Pass.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

Universal Design of Learning and Courses

In order to achieve a truly fully accessible University, no student should require accommodations in order to succeed. This philosophy is known in Universal Instructional Design, and is focused on building a classroom model where all students, with or without disabilities, can be successful. This section focuses on how we can integrate Universal Instructional Design into McMaster, through course instruction, online learning, making materials accessible, differentiated evaluation, and blended learning models. This section also addresses the need for Disability Studies courses to be offered at McMaster University.

Principle Two: All needs of students with disabilities should be taken into account in the development of courses at McMaster University.

The needs of all students, including students with disabilities, should be integral to the design of courses at McMaster University. This includes how students are taught by instructors, as well as how they are assessed. As students have a wide variety of needs, instructors should make an effort to make their classroom environments accessible to all diverse needs.

Concern Five: The course instruction delivered by course instructors and teaching assistants is not uniformly accessible to students.

In some instances, courses are delivered in a way that is only accessible to some students. For instance, students at the 2014 Accessibility Forum noted that professors often do not post slides before lectures, or occasionally at all⁵. As well, professors may not use podcast equipment to record lectures and later post them, even when the technology is available to them.

Students also noted barriers in classroom assignments, where some assessment methods (like being forced to answer questions on the spot in tutorial) were inaccessible to students. Students were also concerned with the lack of variety in tests, with many classes using a solely multiple choice method of evaluation. Students felt as though this was a barrier, and that having more options for evaluation would lead to greater success in courses.

As well, some professors may use delivery methods that make the classroom more inaccessible. Students at the Accessibility Forum pointed out several barriers including poor handwriting, low speaking volume while refusing to wear a microphone, hard to understand accents, and even an unwillingness to answer student questions about the material.

Concern Six: Given that methods of online learning, including designs and deliveries, are often incompatible with diverse learning styles, students with disabilities struggle to thrive in these models.

Many courses at McMaster employ some type of online learning component, whether that be a module, online quiz, online reading, or other required online content. However, not all online learning methods are designed with students with disabilities in mind. For instance, many

⁵ Ibid

modules lack described video features, which is a barrier for students with low vision. As well, oftentimes online materials are not subtitled or formatted to accommodate students with low vision or hearing impairments.

“Everything was visual and interactive and [my] screen reader didn’t recognize images-only text. [I] couldn’t get onto there and do the same learnings of everyone else. I had the need to drop out because this [course] was not accessible enough”

- Student with a disability, 2014, MSU Accessibility Forum

Concern Seven: Faculty and course instructors are not required to upload course syllabi online, which impedes student access to essential course information.

Currently, many course instructors may only hand out a physical copy of syllabi in the first lecture, and may never post this information online for students to access. For some students, who may not be able to attend the first lecture due to a mobility or other disability-related reason, or who may not be able to use physical handouts, this is inaccessible. Course syllabi contains essential information such as instructor office hours, assessments, due dates, and even information about how to access academic accommodations and SAS. When a student is not able to access their course syllabi, it prevents them from being able to succeed in the course.

Recommendation Seven: Methods and modules of online learning should be accessible for with students with disabilities.

All online learning content for courses should be accessible to all students, including those with low vision and hearing impairments. Course instructors, including faculty and staff, should work with Student Accessibility Services and Library Accessibility Services to ensure that all video modules employ subtitles and described video, and that all reading materials are available in alternative formats compatible with screen readers.

Recommendation Eight: All course instructors at McMaster University should upload course syllabi online where all students can easily access the documentation.

All essential course information should be available for students online in an accessible format. The course syllabus is the most essential piece of any course, with information about all aspects of the course that are necessary for a student’s success. As such, all instructors at McMaster should ensure that course syllabi are uploaded onto Avenue to Learn or another accessible online format for each course.

Recommendation Nine: McMaster University should adopt a universal instructional design philosophy when appropriate where accessibility is built into instructional standards and campus infrastructure outside of traditional spaces for students with disabilities.

For McMaster University to be truly accessible to all students, the University should proactively work towards a system-wide barrier-free model in which the University is accessible to all students, regardless of disability, without any form of accommodation. This

system, Universal Instructional Design (UID), would allow not just students registered with SAS to excel, but also all undiagnosed and unregistered students with disabilities that are not registered with SAS but currently face barriers. The goal of this system would be for educators to maximize the learning opportunities of all students.

A definition of UID is a classroom where the “design of instruction is usable by all students, without the need for adaptation or specialized design”⁶. This field can be used to enact a culture shift at McMaster, where students would no longer be required to seek accommodation, but would simply be able to access each course and opportunity on campus barrier-free. This shifts the onus from the student, who is currently required to seek out accommodations, onto the institution, who would be required to ensure that no student faces a barrier.

There are many ways in which UID can be implemented in classes at McMaster University. For instance, employing differentiated evaluation in classrooms can be a form of UID. Differentiated evaluation gives students the opportunity to choose between alternative assessment formats or additional assignments that recognize and address differences in student skills⁷. For students with disabilities who may not be able to complete a type of assessment, but can still achieve the learning outcome through different means, differentiated evaluation is a way to make the classroom accessible without requiring accommodations.

Another way that McMaster University can emphasize UID is through blended learning models in courses. McMaster already employs blended learning in a number of classrooms, most notably, PSYCH 1X03 and 1XX3⁸. In a blended learning model, students are given the opportunity to master concepts in a variety of different ways - for instance, a course may provide the same material in a podcast, textbook reading, and tutorial discussion. This way, students may achieve the same learning outcomes through a variety of different methods, again without the need for an academic accommodation.

Principle Three: Informed discussions surrounding disability theory create a community of ideas and work to reduce stigma at McMaster.

At the 2015 MSU Accessibility Forum, many students found that it was difficult to navigate academia as a student with a disability due to the stigmatization that many students face on campus⁹. Students felt as though presumptive practices, including the pressure to disclose, often made them feel as though the legitimacy of their disability was questioned. For instance, students reported that professors would often ask invasive and irrelevant questions following a disclosure. Ultimately, students felt as though opportunities for their peers, professors, and teaching assistants to learn would have decreased the stigma and barriers that they faced in and outside of academia.

⁶ Ontario Undergraduate Students Alliance. (2012). *Policy Paper on Students with Disabilities*.

⁷ Ontario Undergraduate Students Alliance. (2015). *Policy Paper on Teaching and Assessment*.

⁸ Sana, F., Fenesi, B., Kim, J. (2011). *A Case Study of the Introductory Psychology Blended Learning Model at McMaster University*. The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Volume 2, Issue 1.

⁹ SRA University Affairs Committee. (2015). *MSU Accessibility Forum Report, 2015*.

Concern Eight: There are currently no formal opportunities at McMaster for education on disability theory.

Currently, professors, teaching assistants, and even students have no formalized opportunities to learn about disability theory. However, students with disabilities constantly face stigma on campus surrounding disability and accessibility. Students from both the 2014 and 2015 MSU Accessibility Forums indicated that the lack of training for teaching assistants and professors, as well as the lack of education received by the peers, led to increased stigmatization and increased barriers for students with disabilities¹⁰.

Recommendation 10: Disabilities studies courses should be taught at McMaster University.

Several universities across Ontario offer courses in critical disability theory or disability studies, including Ryerson University¹¹, York University¹², Brock University¹³, University of Windsor¹⁴, and Western University¹⁵. These courses include topics such as intersectionality, ableism, human rights, mentalism/sanism, disability theory, intersecting oppressions, and invisible privilege. Students at the 2014 Accessibility Forum indicated that a disability studies course at McMaster could be focused on research and advocacy work around disability issues¹⁶. This type of course could teach students without disabilities the importance of disability awareness, and also provide students with disabilities the tools they need to advocate.

Recommendation 11: Professors and teaching assistants should have formalized training on classroom accessibility and disability theory.

Students at the 2015 and 2015 MSU Accessibility Forum identified that both teaching assistants and professors are not trained enough with regards to accommodating students with disabilities. Students recommended that teaching assistants and professors receive training about the academic accommodations process through Student Accessibility Services and how to promote accessibility in the classroom. For more information about this recommendation, please see *recommendation 16*.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ryerson University. (2015). *2015-16 Undergraduate Calendar*. Retrieved from <http://www.ryerson.ca/calendar/>

¹² York University. (2015). *Undergraduate Calendar 2015-2016*. Retrieved from <http://calendars.registrar.yorku.ca/>

¹³ Brock University. (2015). *2015-2016 Undergraduate Calendar*. Retrieved from <https://www.brocku.ca/webcal/undergrad/>

¹⁴ University of Windsor. (2016). *Winter 2016 Undergraduate Calendar*. Retrieved from <http://web4.uwindsor.ca/units/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/winter2016.nsf>

¹⁵ Western University. (2016). *Academic Calendar 2016*. Retrieved from <http://westerncalendar.uwo.ca/2016/index.html>

¹⁶ Ibid

Student Life

There is much more to student life at McMaster than simply participating in class. Outside of academics, McMaster University offers countless opportunities for students to participate in their community, develop friendships, engage in co-curricular activities, and learn outside of their field of study. All of these opportunities should be accessible in the same manner that all classrooms should be accessible. In this section, the necessity of accessibility best practices when event planning and the accessibility of Welcome Week are priorities.

Principle Four: All aspects of student life extending beyond academics should be accessible to all students, including (but not limited to) extracurricular seminars, skill-building workshops, mentoring opportunities, etc.

The University offers several extracurricular activities, from skill-building workshops in the Student Success Centre to enriching presentations and lectures by a host of different faculties and initiatives. These opportunities for growth and success need to be equally accessible to students with disabilities as they are to any other student. Students with disabilities should feel welcomed and be encouraged to attend and participate in all aspects of student life to the fullest extent that each student wishes to.

Concern Nine: Students with disabilities often struggle to participate in events hosted by faculties, University working groups, Student Affairs, Student Success Centre, Residence Life, and more, due to barriers of structure and engagement.

Oftentimes students with disabilities may feel unwelcomed or be unable to participate in events being run by these University groups because of accessibility concerns. This may be because the event is being held in a physically inaccessible location, or because the student is unaware of if accessible methods of communication will be available. For example, the student may be unsure if slides from a presentation could be printed out or if an American Sign Language interpreter could be present, and those may be essential to ensuring everyone has access to the information being presented. Because these options are not advertised and there is rarely contact information provided to inquire about an event's accessibility, many students are discouraged from attending or cannot attend events.

Recommendation 12: University bodies need to embrace best practices surrounding accessibility in all events being offered to students, by following accessibility best practices.

Resources already exist to assist in planning accessible events, embracing these resources, considering accessibility at all stages of event planning, and communicating in advance about accessibility concerns will aid in removing barriers associated with attending these events. The Office of Human Rights and Equity Services *Planning for Accessibility A Checklist for Inclusion* should be consulted when planning any event (See Relevant Documents and

Policies).¹⁷ Furthermore, Housing and Conference Services should provide and promote this resource to event organizers. In addition, event contact information should be included on all promotional materials so students with questions may contact the event organizers. Overall the accessibility of an event should be a prioritized consideration at all stages of event planning and promotion.

Recommendation 13: Both a University representative from Student Accessibility Services (SAS) or from the Office of Human Rights and Equity Service (HRES) and a MSU representative from MSU Maccess should hold a seat on the Welcome Week Planning and Implementation Committee (WWPIC).

Welcome Week is the first opportunity for many students interact with McMaster and the McMaster Community. In addition, Welcome Week exists as a social opportunity where many students build connections and learn about opportunities. This experience should be universally accessible to all students and as such, both student (MSU Maccess) and university stakeholders (SAS or HRES) invested in accessibility should be present in the planning stages. The voices of these stakeholders would help to facilitate a Welcome Week experience that all students can partake in fully, including students with disabilities.

¹⁷ "Planning for Accessibility: A Checklist for Inclusion", *Office of Human Rights and Equity Services, McMaster University*, (2016).

University Transition

Transitioning into University is difficult for any student, but particularly so for students with disabilities. When transitioning, students are often moving away from home for the first time, in a new and unfamiliar environment, and encountering a much larger educational institution than they have previously experienced. With that in mind, it is essential that students with disabilities have a smooth transition into McMaster University. In this section, the transition program Shifting Gears as well as information dissemination to incoming students are discussed.

Principle Five: Adequate information on Student Accessibility Services (SAS) should be available and publicized to all prospective students throughout the University registration process.

There are approximately 1,700 (2013-2014) students with one or more disability at McMaster University registered with Student Accessibility Services (SAS).¹⁸ Because of the nature of stigma around disability, and because many students are often diagnosed with an invisible disability during their time at McMaster University, there are many students with disabilities not registered with SAS but who are eligible, or who simply do not realize they are eligible to, and could register.^{19,20,21}

When students do not make full use of the campus support resources available to them, it is frequently due to a lack of understanding of what services are offered and how they might help a student succeed at University. For many students, the services offered by SAS could greatly impact their academic success by removing or ameliorating the effects of barriers on campus. Students should have complete and easy access to this information throughout the University registration process. Detailed information should be presented to incoming McMaster students as they register to ensure that they have the opportunity to make full use of the supports available to them.

Concern 10: Information on Student Accessibility Services and relevant summer transition programs like the Shifting Gears Program are not effectively communicated to incoming students.

The Ontario University Students Alliance's 2012 Students with Disabilities Policy Paper outlines concerns with how promotion of disability services and summer transition programs are promoted to students. The central problem being despite being information being available online the onus is on students to find out about the program in order to register and participate. There is a documented benefit to attending summer transition programs for students who will seek accommodations and use services during their school career; therefore information on these programs should be readily available to all interested students throughout the University Application process.²²

¹⁸ "SRA Minutes Meeting 14Q - March 22, 2015", *Student Representative Assembly, McMaster Student's Union*, (2015).

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ "Academic Accommodations, January 12, 2016", *Nolan, T.*, (2016).

²² Ibid

Recommendation 14: McMaster University should send information on disability services, summer transition programs, and disability accommodation requirements to all students in the acceptance package.

Early access to information on Disability Services like Student Accessibility Services and summer transition programs for students with disabilities like SAS's Shifting Gears workshop is central to improving student awareness of these programs and services overall. When the only information available to students regarding accessibility is on the SAS website, students often miss out on key dates, information, and opportunities because they are focused on finishing secondary school and/or may be unaware of the SAS website.^{23,24} It has also been noted that of all students who use Summer Transition Programs, a greater proportion of students make use of disability related programming.^{25,26} In addition, "these students tended to make more efficient use of these services, utilizing the service less frequently in upper years, allowing the office to focus on transitioning first-year students into university life".²⁷ Both McMaster University and prospective students with disabilities benefit from increased and earlier outreach from McMaster to incoming students around these topics.

Given all these benefits, McMaster University should send each student information on Student Accessibility Services and Summer Transition Programs in the letter of acceptance sent to prospective students. In addition to this, highlights on what requirements or documentation are required to access these service should also be included so that students are able to access accommodations once the semester begins. This is important as requirements for assessments are poorly communicated at the secondary school level and the assessments themselves can often be expensive and timely and planning for them can help ameliorate these concerns.²⁸ Including this information in letters of acceptance increases student awareness of the services offered at McMaster, which is especially important in the case of students with undiagnosed disabilities.

Recommendation 15: McMaster University should ensure that Summer Transition Programs meet existing best practices and cater to the needs of all students with disabilities.

The National Education Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) has compiled a list of topics and practices that all summer transition programs should incorporate. This includes²⁹:

Topics

- Differences between high school and university/college for students with a disability and how to be successful in a post-secondary education environment

²³ National Educational Association of Disabled Students. (n.d.). Enhancing accessibility in post-secondary education institutions. Retrieved from, www.neads.ca/en/norc/eag/eag_en.pdf

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ National Educational Association of Disabled Students. (n.d.). Enhancing accessibility in post-secondary education institutions. Retrieved from, www.neads.ca/en/norc/eag/eag_en.pdf

- Self-awareness and self-advocacy
- Accommodations, services and personal strategies to meet academic, social, physical and emotional needs
- Determining strengths and weaknesses
- Academic and study skills including note-taking strategies, time management, organization skills, and critical reading and writing skills, etc.
- Campus supports and library resources
- Community and/or Government based supports
- Academic and exam accommodations
- Documentation requirements and expectations for submission
- Assistive technology options and applications
- Campus life, including social areas and events, accessible transportation and accessible housing

Practices

- Host informative speakers, such as successful students with disabilities, key support staff, and graduates with disabilities
- Offer some opportunity for prospective students to socialize, discuss and ask questions
- Provide meeting opportunities with key support staff and orient students to available facilities
- Offer an introduction to assistive technology, what it does and how to access it

McMaster University should ensure that its summer transition programs discuss and contain information on all of these topics and incorporate all of these practices.

University Services: Student Accessibility Services and the Student Wellness Centre

University services like Student Accessibility Services and the Student Wellness Centre are an essential component of student success for students with disabilities. Student Accessibility Services should strive to provide academic accommodations with dignity, inclusion, and individualization in mind, and thus this section outlines changes to current documentation and procedures that would align the service with these principles. As well, the Student Wellness Centre is a great and essential resource for students with disabilities but is over capacity and must explore avenues for expansion of mental health services provided.

Principle Six: It is the duty of the McMaster University to provide accommodations to students who require them.

As outlined by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, post secondary education institutions, like McMaster University, are responsible for ensuring that students who require accommodations because of their disabilities are accommodated to the point of undue hardship. In addition, educators and course instructors are responsible for participating in the provision of specific accommodations, being knowledgeable about and sensitive to disability issues, and maintaining student confidentiality.³⁰

Concern 11: Students often avoid disclosing their disabilities due to the stigma associated with disabilities.

Sometimes students, particularly those with invisible disabilities, do not register with Student Accessibility Services as an attempt to avoid any stigma associated with having a disability. Additionally, concerns exist around being singled out, separated or othered by peers and professors. However, by not registering with SAS, there is limited their access to the assistive technologies and services offered by SAS.³¹ For some students, these assistive technologies and/or services are essential to success at McMaster University.

Recommendation 16: McMaster University should pursue comprehensive training strategies for faculty and staff to help reduce or eliminate stigma as a barrier for students accessing services.

There is a need for comprehensive and continuous training opportunities for faculty and staff particularly in terms of changing mindsets and attitudes, this should extend beyond small recurring presentations that only reach select interested faculty members.³²

Already, resources exist for the purposes of training faculty and staff on AODA requirements, as well as promotion of accessible culture on campus. For instance, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) has launched accessibility toolkits for this very reason. All departments at

³⁰ Ontario Human Rights Commission, (2016). Accommodating Students With Disabilities - Roles And Responsibilities (Fact Sheet). Retrieved from, <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/accommodating-students-disabilities-roles-and-responsibilities-fact-sheet>.

³¹ "Students with Disabilities Policy Paper", *Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance*, (2012).

³² Ibid

McMaster University should employ these toolkits as a training for staff and faculty to ensure that all instructors are aware of AODA standards as well as how to make their classrooms as accessible as possible.

Principle Seven: Students should not be forced to disclose any diagnosis (including mental health diagnoses) to McMaster University in order to receive accommodations.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission dictates that “wherever possible, an accommodation provider must make genuine efforts to provide needed accommodations without requiring a person to disclose a diagnosis, or otherwise provide medical information that is not absolutely necessary”.³³ In accordance with this stance, SAS medical documentation forms should have no mention of specific diagnoses and the disclosure of these diagnoses should be optional and at the student’s discretion. Many Universities in Ontario, including York University and Western University, already do not require students to disclose their diagnosis to receive accommodations.

Concern 12: Forced disclosure of a diagnosis to SAS is a barrier to accessing accommodations.

Accommodations should not be standardized based on diagnosis. As every student will experience barriers differently (i.e. a student with one diagnosis may have very different barriers than another student with the same diagnosis), assumptive practices like this create more barriers for students attempting to access these services as they may feel misrepresented or not listened to. In addition, not all students who need accommodations have a formalized diagnosis, however this does not mean the student does not experience disability. Diagnosis-centered approaches create barriers to students who do not have or want a diagnosis but are willing to seek medical documentation of their disability.

Recommendation 17: Student Accessibility Services should provide accommodations based on barriers to learning.

Instead of requiring a diagnosis and providing accommodations based on that level, Student Accessibility Services should require medical documentation that simply corroborates that the student has a disability and outlines the student’s functional barriers to learning or success in the classroom environment.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) outlines three principles for accommodating students with disabilities: (1) Respect for Dignity, (2) Individualized Accommodation, and (3) Inclusion and Full Participation³⁴. In not requiring students to disclose when they may not feel comfortable doing so, McMaster takes a further step in respecting the dignity of the students with disabilities who access accommodations in order to succeed. As well, by not requiring a

³³ Ontario Human Rights Commission, (2016). 13. Duty To Accommodate. Retrieved from: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-preventing-discrimination-based-mental-health-disabilities-and-addictions/13-duty-accommodate>.

³⁴ Ontario Human Rights Commission. (nd). *Accommodating Students with Disabilities – Principles*. Retrieved from <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/accommodating-students-disabilities-principles-fact-sheet>

diagnosis but instead on the student's particular barriers, accommodations become more individualized, as the student's needs are taken into consideration above the label of the student's disability. Finally, this approach allows the student to participate more fully in discussions and plans for their own accommodation, and gives them a better opportunity to be fully included in the classroom environment.

Recently, a project funded by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities' Mental Health Innovation Fund by Dr. Michael Condra released a report entitled "Developing Documentation Standards and Guidelines for Academic Accommodations for Students with Mental Health Disabilities Attending Post-Secondary Institutions in Ontario."³⁵ This report detailed fourteen recommendations for academic accommodations in postsecondary institutions in Ontario based on research from five stakeholder groups (faculty, students with mental health disabilities, disability advisors, administrators, and campus physicians), consultations with the OHRC, psychiatrists and family physicians, visits to best practice sites, and a literature review. The first one of these recommendations was that functional limitations should be the basis of academic accommodations. With this recommendation, the project developed a sample form called "Functional Limitations Assessment Form for Post-Secondary Students with Disabilities"³⁶. This form is to be completed by a physician and is broken into nine areas of potential barriers: (1) cognitive skill and abilities, (2) physical skills and abilities, (3) social-emotional skills and abilities, (4) fieldwork - specific skills and abilities, (5) vision, (6) hearing, (7) speech, (8) safety, and (9) specialized equipment and services. McMaster University should use this sample form to create comprehensive documentation requirements for students at McMaster to access Student Accessibility Services.

As well, following a case in January 2016 at York University that concluded with York University no longer requiring students to disclose their diagnosis to register for accommodations, the OHRC has recently released new documentation guidelines in which they "urge other post-secondary to follow suit by reviewing and implementing the recommendations of the Academic Accommodations Project and the Commission's Policy on preventing discrimination based on mental health disabilities and addictions."³⁷ It is clear that the OHRC does not view a diagnosis as essential information for planning accommodation. McMaster University should update their documentation requirements in order to remain in line with the OHRC.

Principle Eight: Students should not be mandated to disclose that they have a disability unless necessary to academic accommodations.

Congruent with the Ontario Human Rights Commission, it is essential to preserve the dignity of students with disabilities when receiving academic accommodations. Thus, as disabilities

³⁵ Condra, M. & Condra E, M. (2015) *Recommendations for Documentation Standards and Guidelines for Academic Accommodations for Post-Secondary Students in Ontario with Mental Health Disabilities*. Queen's University and St. Lawrence College Partnership Project, Kingston, ON.

³⁶ Condra, M. & Condra E, M. (2015) *Recommendations for Documentation Standards and Guidelines for Academic Accommodations for Post-Secondary Students in Ontario with Mental Health Disabilities, Appendix C*. Queen's University and St. Lawrence College Partnership Project, Kingston, ON.

³⁷ Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2016). *New documentation guidelines for accommodating students with mental health disabilities*. Retrieved from http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/news_centre/new-documentation-guidelines-accommodating-students-mental-health-disabilities

are still often heavily stigmatized, it is essential that students not be forced to disclose that they have a disability unless it is a necessity when receiving their accommodations. For instance, while involving the professor in the accommodation process is important in most cases, the method of this involvement should not be prescribed. Students should have say in how their professor is notified and how involved they personally are in the process.

Concern 13: There are several barriers associated with the current letter signing process that prevent students from accessing their accommodations or create unsafe situations.

There are several barriers associated with the current accommodation letter signing process that create a variety of barriers for students to access their accommodations. The idea of changing or removing this process has been brought up with great support at both the 2014 and 2015 MSU Accessibility forums because of these associated barriers. For example, it is extremely physically inaccessible to mandate students attend each of their professor's office hours to have the letters signed and then brought back to SAS. Office hours are often located in buildings the student doesn't have class in and sometimes in locations that are inaccessible to students with mobility devices. This process creates undue strain for students attempting to access accommodations.^{38,39}

In addition to physical barriers, students have reported worrying degrees of disrespect and devaluation from meeting with professors to have their SAS letters signed. As teaching faculty receive no mandatory inclusivity or accommodation training many students are often met with uncomfortable or prying questions from their professor in the letter signing process. These interactions often result in students feeling stigmatized and uncomfortable correcting or not answering the question because of the power dynamic within the situation.^{40,41}

Recommendation 18: SAS should not mandate students to discuss their accommodation plan directly with their professor through the letter signing process instead options should be presented and the student should decide which plan is the best for them. Options should include: the student may email their letters to the professor, SAS may email the letters to the professor, and the student may deliver the letters in person.

In the *Recommendations for Documentation Standards and Guidelines for Academic Accommodations for Post-Secondary Students in Ontario with Mental Health Disabilities* by Dr. Condra, one recommendation is for Offices for Students with Disabilities (Student Accessibility Services) to communicate accommodation needs to professors, rather than students doing it themselves⁴². When the study surveyed faculty members, twenty-seven percent responded that they believed that students were required to share disability-related information with professors to receive their academic accommodations. Thus, it is no surprise

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

that in delivering accommodation letters, students are often asked intrusive questions out of line with the OHRC.

“They [professors] almost make you feel like if you need this (accommodation) then you are not good enough The stigma is too much sometimes.”

- student, Recommendations for Documentation Standards and Guidelines for Academic Accommodations for Post-Secondary Students in Ontario with Mental Health Disabilities focus groups

Individualization and autonomy should be priorities when providing accommodations. The current letter signing process presents a myriad of barriers to students because of its standardization. For some students, an in person discussion may be best to ensure effectively provided accommodations, however for others it presents as an obstacle pressuring students to forgo accommodations. Options in addition to this process should be provided to the student. These options should include the student may email their letters to the professor and that SAS may email the letters to the professor. If the instructor has questions the student may answer these after having time to reflect on the question ensuring they are comfortable with their answer. This also strives to protect the confidentiality of the student as only their student number or email is being disclosed rather than their appearance.

Principle Nine: Students should be making informed and autonomous decisions surrounding the accommodations they receive.

When deciding on an accommodation plan, students should know what their options are so they can make an informed decision. Accommodation options should not be presented to students preferentially. The decision on the best accommodation plan for the student, should ultimately be the student’s decision. SAS should be informing and empowering students to make these decisions.

Concern 14: Students cite that they were unaware of an accommodation offered through SAS that would have benefited them had they know about it sooner.

Students registered with SAS at both the 2014 and 2015 MSU Accessibility forums reported finding out about an accommodation from a friend or an online group that would have benefited them had they known about its availability sooner⁴³. The students’ program coordinators had not made knowledge of the accommodation available to them. This is often reported around some of the more system based accommodations such as what time of day students may write exams or alternative assessment for tutorials. Students reported that barriers they faced around these topics never arose in communication with their program coordinator because they didn’t think any accommodations could be offered.

⁴³ Ibid

Recommendation 19: Information about accommodations should be available on the SAS website and an optional form should be circulated on the SAS website and in office that asks questions to help students consider what supports would be useful to them ahead of time, so they can make an informed decision after being aware of the available options.

Students are the most knowledgeable and are the experts on their own disabilities and SAS should be informing and empowering to make decisions around accommodation. Having a list of available accommodations on the SAS website as well as in the office would allow students to review the list before meeting with their program coordinator and decide what accommodations they need. An optional questionnaire focusing on functional limitations should also be created that students have an opportunity to think about if an area of their study are being impacted or in the case of first year students would be impacted negatively for disability related reasons. Program Coordinators can then discuss available accommodations with students who have had the opportunity to become informed on their options.

Principle 10: Students should be able to access support and resources from SAS in a timely manner particularly when they involving changing or accessing new accommodations.

Students may need to revise their accommodations throughout the year to better suit their needs or due to a new diagnosis. When meeting with a program coordinator to make these changes students should be able to access support and resources in a timely manner so they are not negatively impacted in their academics.

Concern 15: Yearly intake appointments for individuals are often unnecessary and increase the wait time for students who more regularly see their SAS counsellor.

Students attempting to meet with their program coordinator at specific times of the year, such as the beginning of the Fall Semester, have reported waiting over a month for an appointment. During this time, new students meet with their Program Coordinators for the first time and returning students are mandated to book a yearly intake appointment. However, many returning students do not require any changes in their accommodations from year to year. To this end many students have reported that they find these appointments to be unnecessary and unhelpful.^{44,45}

Removing or reducing the frequency of mandatory check in appointments would reduce strain during busy times and allow more students to meet with their program coordinators in a timelier manner. This would also ensure that the students who do not need to meet with their Program Coordinator do not take up appointment spaces from those who do.

Principle 11: Yearly intake appointments for individuals are often unnecessary and increase the wait time for students who more regularly see their SAS counsellor.

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

All academic accommodations, including retroactive accommodations and temporary accommodations, should be centralized within the University. There should be no confusion surrounding which office a student should go to if they require accommodation at any time.

Concern 16: Yearly intake appointments for individuals are often unnecessary and increase the wait time for students who more regularly see their SAS counsellor.

The availability and process for receiving retroactive accommodations varies greatly across the University and lacks standardization. Students registered with SAS must consult with their faculty office where they may feel forced into a disclosure of their disability. Faculty offices sometimes redirect students to SAS for disability related retroactive accommodations only for them referred back. This process requires standardization and for the jurisdictional concerns to be sorted out to avoid confusion.

Recommendation 20: Retroactive accommodations for students registered with SAS should be provided by SAS and not faculty offices.

Students already registered with SAS should be able to access retroactive accommodations through SAS. Whether this is done by allowing SAS to provide these accommodations or by having SAS liaise with the faculty office on behalf of the student, students should not have to contact multiple offices in order to be accommodated. In addition, SAS already keeps confidential information for the student and many students feel safer talking to their Program Coordinator about disability related accommodations.

Recommendation 21: Retroactive accommodations for students registered with SAS should be provided by SAS and not faculty offices.

Students who do not have a disability and students who are not registered with SAS may still need retroactive accommodations for other valid reasons. However, because of the inconsistency between faculty offices, students are unclear on what constitutes a valid request for retroactive accommodations and what may be provided. A clear policy should be developed that standardizes and clearly defines the process for retroactive accommodations at McMaster University.

Principle 12: Students should have access to timely and sufficient mental health care on campus offered through the University.

Mental health and mental illness related appointments are becoming increasingly prevalent on University Campuses, with the number of students registered at Student Accessibility Services with a psychiatric illness increasing by over 100 students within two academic years⁴⁶. As well, in the 2014-15 year, there were 10,620 counselling visits to the Student Wellness Centre, a 946 person increase from the previous year⁴⁷. Students should have access to timely and sufficient mental health care offered through the Student Wellness

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Sean Van Koughnett. (February 26 2016). "Update on the Student Health and Well-Being Strategy, Discussion on Student Mental Health Support."

Centre. Students should have access to relevant medical professionals and they should be able to access these professional in a timely manner.

Concern 17: Over 22,000 undergraduate students, as well as additional graduate students at McMaster are serviced by the Student Wellness Centre. Students experience extensive wait times.

The McMaster Student Wellness Centre (SWC) services over 22 000 undergraduate students yet the counselling area of the SWC consists of eight full time equivalent counsellors. Students report significant wait times and mention being turned away from drop-in counselling multiple days in a row because of overcapacity.

Recommendation 22: The University should implement a minimum ratio of one to one thousand five hundred (1:1500) counsellors to students.

Staff at the SWC should increase corresponding to student need. In addition, there should be a sufficient number of counsellors to offer timely and sufficient care. The University should implement a minimum ratio of one to one thousand five hundred (1:1500) counsellors to students in order to ensure the SWC is meeting student need. The current shortage of counsellors is creating a massive service problem for students. This ratio is the number determined by OUSA in 2014 after extensive consultation. In their 2014 Student Health and Wellness Policy Paper OUSA states:

*“The average wait times are such that help is often not available to students when they need it most. Establishing a minimum ratio of counsellors to students will ensure that students’ needs can be addressed, that early intervention programs are successful, and that consistent care is provided across all Ontario campuses. Based on consultations with counselling service providers on Ontario campuses, the suggested ratio would be 1 for every 1,500 students”.*⁴⁸

Recommendation 23: The University should hire a greater number of support professionals available on campus during times of high stress.

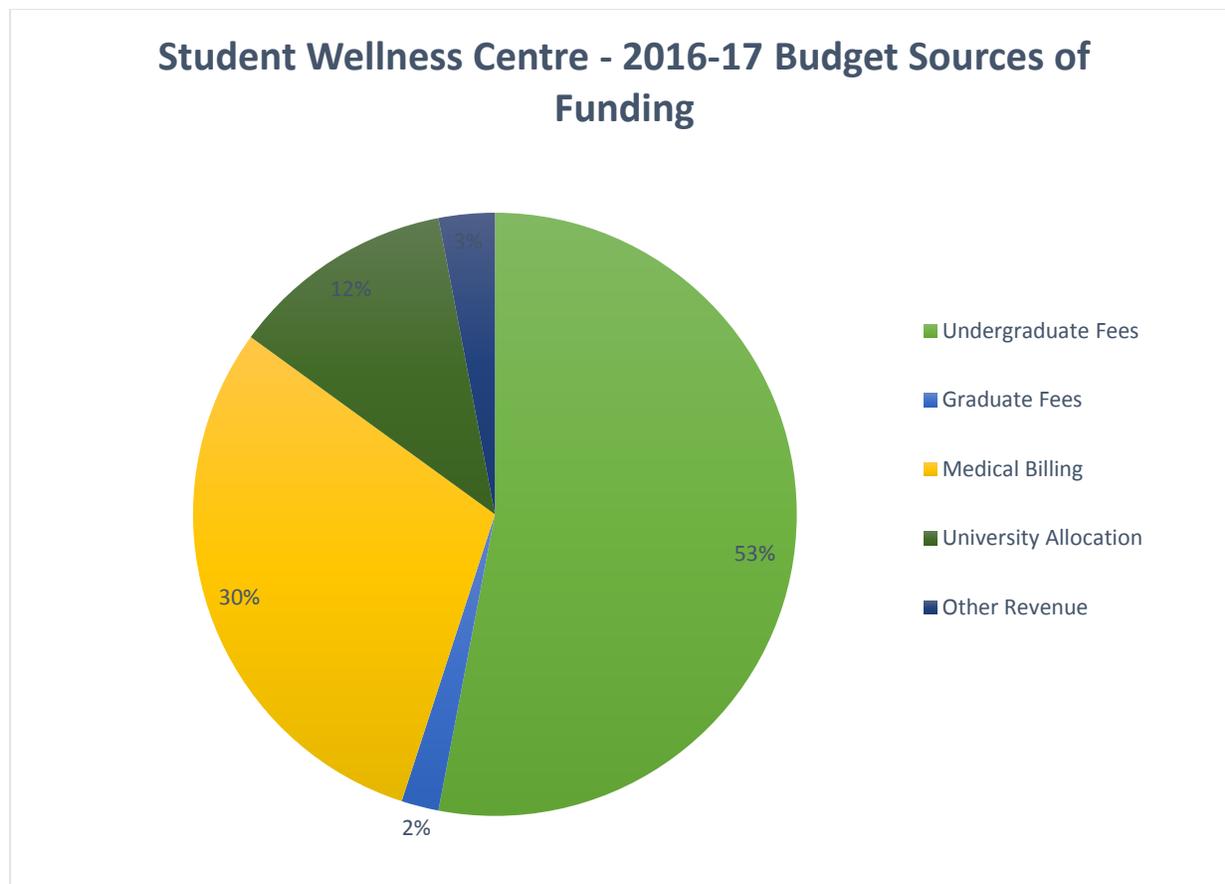
The Student Wellness Center sees huge influxes of students during September and exam season and should be adequately equipped to accommodate this. By hiring more professionals during these times of increased usage wait times can be reduced. More space for counselling should also be a priority in the Living and Learning Centre to ensure there are spaces to conduct these appointments.

Concern 18: There is a lack of funding available for which to hire additional counsellors and mental health professionals.

As of 2016, McMaster undergraduate student ancillary fees are the largest source of funding for the Student Wellness Centre at 53 percent of the operating budget, followed by medical billing at 30 percent. University allocation of \$874,000 makes up 12 percent of the fund, with

⁴⁸ “Student Health and Wellness Policy Paper”, *Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance*, (2014).

the additional 5 percent being made up of graduate student ancillary fees and miscellaneous revenue. See graph below for a detailed breakdown. Student Wellness is currently in a deficit of over \$350,000 dollars, leaving them with no additional funds to hire new mental health professionals⁴⁹.



Recommendation 24: The provincial government should provide additional funding to McMaster University to hire more counsellors and mental health professionals.

Without additional funding, the Student Wellness Centre will be unable to hire additional counsellors. However, undergraduate students already pay \$59.40 each to Student Health Services in their ancillary fees⁵⁰, on top of tuition that is amongst the highest in the country⁵¹. Without higher contribution from the University, which has already increased substantially over the past decade, the capacity at the Student Wellness Centre cannot be solved unless there is governmental aid.

Students should not be asked to pay higher fees in order to hire additional counsellors that are essential to their success at McMaster University. The provincial government should

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ McMaster University. (2015). Undergraduate Calendar 2015-2016. Retrieved from <http://academiccalendars.romcmaster.ca/index.php>

⁵¹ Toronto Star. (2015). Ontario's tuition fees highest in the country, says new report

prioritize mental health services on University campuses and invest into hiring additional mental health professionals at McMaster.

Recommendation 25: There should be greater support for students with mental illness and complex mental health diagnosis through increased availability of professionals with specialized skills.

The commonality of a student's diagnosis or experience should not influence the care they receive. Students who require more frequent or more specialized treatment or appointments should still be able to access this care through McMaster. The SWC should increase the availability of professionals with specialized skills. This may be accomplished through targeted hiring, or through greater partnerships with community groups.

Recommendation 26: The University should introduce formal policy on student leave for mental health concerns.

Sometimes the demands associated with a specific treatment plan or the frequency of appointments make it difficult for students to excel academically while pursuing a treatment plan. McMaster University should make it easier for students to get the professional support they need without risking academic penalty by introducing a formal policy on student leave for mental health concerns so students do not have to make the sacrifice.

Financial Aid & Funding

Students with disabilities often incur higher costs than average when attending McMaster University. This section is concerned with providing equitable and accessible access to McMaster University by providing financial support for students who require various costly items and services related to their disability, such as personal support workers and psychosocial assessments. In addition, this section recognizes the limitation of Student Accessibility Services based on the current funding model, and advocates for increased funding to this service.

Principle 13: Students with disabilities must be provided with additional financial assistance to meet the higher costs associated with obtaining their education and documenting their disability.

Students with disabilities often incur additional costs that students without disabilities do not. Students with disabilities may have to purchase items such as: “walking, visual and auditory aids; medications; assistive and adaptive technologies; off-campus healthcare; and accessing alternative formats for various course-related materials.”⁵² In a recent study of students with disabilities in Ontario, findings indicated that a large number of students in fact do have to purchase these various items associated with their disability. 40 percent of students required medication, 37 percent required specialized or assistive forms of technology, and 18 percent required walking aids, hearing aids, or wheelchairs⁵³.

These cost barriers were echoed in the MSU’s 2014 Accessibility Forum⁵⁴. In order to maintain equitable access to McMaster University, students with disabilities must be provided with additional financial assistance to make up for the substantial costs that these students incur to attend university.

Concern 19: There are additional costs associated with receiving education at McMaster University as a student with a disability.

There are several extra costs that students may incur related to their disability. These costs could include, but are not limited to, communication boards, guide dogs, white canes, sign language interpreters, attendant care services, transportation, wheelchairs/scooters, crutches or other walking aids, alternative formats, specialized or adaptive technology, and drugs and medical supplies⁵⁵. In addition, students may also experience higher costs in off-campus living, when trying to find accessible accommodations that may need costly renovations. As well, students reported having to undergo psychosocial assessments in order to provide proof of their functional limitations, which typically cost between \$1,800 - \$2,400 out of students’ own pockets⁵⁶.

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation. (2009). *The price of knowledge: Access and student finance in Canada*. Retrieved from <http://qspace.library.queensu.ca/handle/1974/5783>.

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Tsagris, D. & Muirhead, B. “Evaluating Postsecondary Supports for Ontario Students With Learning Disabilities,” Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, <http://heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/EvaluatingPSESupportsForStudentsWithLearningDisabilities.pdf>.

Specifically, at McMaster, students have indicated that they may require personal support workers or personal assistants in order to succeed. However, the cost for these services is prohibitively high. For students who require this type of help, they often have to bring in family members to provide the assistance that they need. Students have reported that resorting to this was degrading, limiting, and socially isolating.

Concern 20: Many students are unaware of scholarships for students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities are often not aware of the financial assistance that is available to them. A survey conducted by OUSA found that only 58 percent of students with disabilities applied for government assistance - this was lower than first generation students (74 percent) and low-income students (87 percent). The most common reason that students did not apply for assistance was that students believed they would not qualify for financial assistance. In order to ensure that students have equitable access to postsecondary education at McMaster University, it must be clear to students with disabilities the assistance that they are able to access.

Concern 21: Wait times and cost for psychosocial assessments can prevent some students from receiving accommodation when they need it.

Students at McMaster University have reported having to undergo psychosocial assessments in order to provide proof of their functional limitations to access academic accommodations, which typically cost between \$1 800 - \$2 400 out of students' own pockets. In addition, wait times for these assessments can also be a deterrent for accessing them, and eventually accessing accommodations.

Recommendation 27: McMaster University should offer additional funding or supports for students with disabilities who require the use of Personal Support Workers to succeed as students at McMaster University.

Students who require Personal Support Workers should be able to access education at McMaster University in an equitable manner. Students at the MSU's 2014 Accessibility Forum stated that they may need personal support workers for help like eating, using washrooms, transportation, writing notes, and other essential tasks throughout the day⁵⁷. However, personal support workers are very expensive and some students cannot afford them. McMaster University should offer additional financial aid to students who require Personal Support Workers so that students who require support workers can also access McMaster.

An alternative to this could be for McMaster University to hire Personal Support Workers through Student Accessibility Services. A similar program runs through Mohawk College, which uses external funding from the non-profit organization March of Dimes to fund the Personal Support Workers. These Personal Support Workers provide assistance to students

⁵⁷ Ibid

on campus with personal care, as well as to student in residence. McMaster could provide a similar program to ensure that students receive equitable access to the support they need.

Principle 14: Student Accessibility Services should be equipped to adequately ensure the success of all students on campus with disabilities.

Student Accessibility Services is the main point of contact for students with disabilities. It is the only way that students can access academic accommodations, the note-taking program, the transition program for students with disabilities, as well as countless resources for students. At McMaster, over 1,700 students are registered with SAS as of 2016⁵⁸. It is absolutely vital that SAS is equipped with the resources that they need to ensure the success of each student who requires their services.

Concern 22: Student Accessibility Services often grapples with insufficient resources and excess demands.

Student Accessibility Services has received a high increase in demand over the past years as enrollment at McMaster has increased. From the year 2011-2012 to 2013-2014, students who access Student Accessibility Services increased by 280 (see table below)⁵⁹. This represents over seven percent of total enrolments. As SAS employs eight full time equivalent caseworkers with only one case worker employed full-time⁶⁰, this implies that each FTE is responsible for over 200 students each.

Although there have been some funding increases for Offices for Students with Disabilities in Ontario, the current model is unsustainable and SAS simply does not have the resources to meet with their demand. Students in the MSU 2014 Accessibility Forum noted that SAS staff are limited, which makes it difficult for students to access a coordinator during the beginning of a term or an exam period⁶¹.

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Student Accessibility Services, February 2016

⁶¹ Ibid

	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
01 - Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)	50	42	54
02 - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD)	155	195	215
03 - Chronic Illness/Systemic/Medical	167	165	204
04 - Deaf, deaf, Deafened, Hard of Hearing	31	30	22
05 - Learning Disability (includes confirmed LD and non-confirmed LD)	279	280	310
06 - Low Vision, Blind	22	23	30
07 - Mobility/Functional	99	103	109
08 - Psychiatric	585	630	710
08A - Autism Spectrum Disorder	23	0	-
09 - Other - A (Aspergers)	0	32	37
Total	1411	1500	1691

Recommendation 28: The government should increase the amount of funding provided to OSDs (Student Accessibility Services) to better reflect their time and resource demands and to increase the outreach efforts necessary to connect all students with recognized or self-identified students.

It is essential that the provincial government increase the amount of funding that is currently provided to Student Accessibility Services in order to meet the demand in resources for these services. Student Accessibility Services could use this funding to better outreach to students and make them aware of their services, hire more caseworkers to lessen the overwhelming burden on the ones that currently exist, and expand their resources. As well, SAS could better provide the additional services as outlined in the “University Services: Student Accessibility Services and Student Wellness Centre” section of this policy.

Policy Statement

Whereas: Inclement weather conditions pose significant transportation barriers for students with physical disabilities.

Whereas: Students with disabilities struggle with physical campus accessibility barriers that prevent this demographic from learning effectively.

Whereas: DARTS bus drivers are unaware that the MSU Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) Bus Pass is compatible with DARTS.

Whereas: The course instruction delivered by course instructors and teaching assistants is not uniformly accessible to students.

Whereas: Given that methods of online learning, including designs and deliveries, are often incompatible with diverse learning styles, students with disabilities struggle to thrive in these models.

Whereas: Faculty and course instructors are not required to upload course syllabi online, which impedes student access to essential course information.

Whereas: There are currently no formal opportunities at McMaster for education on disability theory.

Whereas: Students with disabilities often struggle to participate in events hosted by faculties, University working groups, Student Affairs, Student Success Centre, Residence Life, and more, due to barriers of structure and engagement.

Whereas: Information on Student Accessibility Services and relevant summer transition programs like the Shifting Gears Program are not effectively communicated to incoming students.

Whereas: Students often avoid disclosing their disabilities due to the stigma associated with disabilities.

Whereas: Forced disclosure of a diagnosis to SAS is a barrier to accessing accommodations.

Whereas: There are several barriers associated with the current letter signing process that prevent students from accessing their accommodations or create unsafe situations.

Whereas: Students cite that they were unaware of an accommodation offered through SAS that would have benefited them had they know about it sooner.

Whereas: Yearly intake appointments for individuals are often unnecessary and increase the wait time for students who more regularly see their SAS counsellor.

Whereas: The process for retroactive accommodations is currently unclear and varies from faculty office to faculty office creating confusion.

Whereas: Over 22,000 undergraduate students, as well as additional graduate students at McMaster are serviced by the Student Wellness Centre. Students experience extensive wait times.

Whereas: There is a lack of funding available for which to hire additional counsellors and mental health professionals.

Whereas: There are additional costs associated with receiving education at McMaster University as a student with a disability.

Whereas: Many students are unaware of scholarships for students with disabilities.

Whereas: Wait times and cost for psychosocial assessments can prevent some students from receiving accommodation when they need it.

Whereas: Student Accessibility Services often grapples with insufficient resources and excess demands.

Be It Resolved That: Where possible, McMaster University should strive to create proactive solutions to weather-related barriers on campus.

Be It Further Resolved That: Students with disabilities should register for their classes on MOSAIC before students without disabilities.

BIFRT: The University should communicate effectively with students when there is an accessibility barrier on campus, such as deep snow on a ramp.

BIFRT: There should be full compliance with all provincial accessibility laws and legislations at McMaster University.

BIFRT: DARTS should increase their number of approved drop-off centers on campus.

BIFRT: DARTS should ensure that all bus drivers are aware that the MSU Hamilton Street Railway (HSR) Bus Pass is compatible with DARTS.

BIFRT: Methods and modules of online learning should be accessible for with students with disabilities.

BIFRT: All course instructors at McMaster University should upload course syllabi online where all students can easily access the documentation.

BIFRT: McMaster University should adopt a universal instructional design philosophy when appropriate where accessibility is built into instructional standards and campus infrastructure outside of traditional spaces for students with disabilities.

BIFRT: Disabilities studies courses should be taught at McMaster University.

BIFRT: Professors and teaching assistants should have formalized training on classroom accessibility and disability theory.

BIFRT: University bodies need to embrace best practices surrounding accessibility in all events being offered to students, by following accessibility best practices.

BIFRT: Both a University representative from Student Accessibility Services (SAS) or from the Office of Human Rights and Equity Service (HRES) and a MSU representative from MSU Maccess should hold a seat on the Welcome Week Planning and Implementation Committee (WWPIC).

BIFRT: McMaster University should send information on disability services, summer transition programs, and disability accommodation requirements to all students in the acceptance package.

BIFRT: McMaster University should ensure that Summer Transition Programs meet existing best practices and cater to the needs of all students with disabilities.

BIFRT: McMaster University should pursue comprehensive training strategies for faculty and staff to help reduce or eliminate stigma as a barrier for students accessing services.

BIFRT: Student Accessibility Services should provide accommodations based on barriers to learning.

BIFRT: SAS should not mandate students to discuss their accommodation plan directly with their professor through the letter signing process instead options should be presented and the student should decide which plan is the best for them. Options should include: the student may email their letters to the professor, SAS may email the letters to the professor, and the student may deliver the letters in person.

BIFRT: Information about accommodations should be available on the SAS website and an optional form should be circulated on the the SAS website and in office that asks questions to help students consider what supports would be useful to them ahead of time, so they can make an informed decision after being aware of the available options.

BIFRT: Retroactive accommodations for students registered with SAS should be provided by SAS and not faculty offices.

BIFRT: There should be a University wide policy on what circumstances qualify for retroactive accommodations and how they are offered.

BIFRT: The University should implement a minimum ratio of one to one thousand five hundred (1:1500) counsellors to students/appointments.

BIFRT: The University should hire a greater number of support professionals available on campus during times of high stress.

BIFRT: The provincial government should provide additional funding to McMaster University to hire more counsellors and mental health professionals.

BIFRT: There should be greater support for students with mental illness and complex mental health diagnosis through increased availability of professionals with specialized skills.

BIFRT: The University should introduce formal policy on student leave for mental health concerns.

BIFRT: McMaster University should offer additional funding or supports for students with disabilities who require the use of Personal Support Workers to succeed as students at McMaster University.

BIFRT: The government should increase the amount of funding provided to OSDs (Student Accessibility Services) to better reflect their time and resource demands and to increase the outreach efforts necessary to connect all students with recognized or self-identified students.

Related Documents & Policies

[MSU Accessibility Forum Report, 2015](#)

[MSU Accessibility Forum Report, 2014](#)

[MSU Mental Health Policy Paper](#)

[Ontario Undergraduate Students Alliance Policy Paper on Students with Disabilities](#)

[Ontario Undergraduate Students Alliance Policy Paper on Student Health and Wellness, 2014](#)

[Recommendations for Documentation Standards and Guidelines for Academic Accommodations for Post-Secondary Students in Ontario with Mental Health Disabilities](#)

[Planning for Accessibility: A Checklist for Inclusion from McMaster Human Rights and Equity Services](#)

[McMaster University's Policy for Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#)

Glossary of Terms:

AODA: AODA stands for the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act. The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (AODA) became law on June 13, 2005. Ontario is the first province in Canada to pass legislation that will develop mandatory accessibility standards with the goal of identifying, removing, and preventing barriers for people with disabilities in key areas of daily living. The goal is to make Ontario accessible to people with disabilities by 2025.

Accessibility Forum: The MSU's annual Accessibility Forum is hosted by the Diversity Services Abilities Committee in collaboration with the University Affairs Committee. The forum allows students with disabilities to provide feedback on related issues relating to this topic. The feedback is recorded anonymously and used to provide focus for this policy paper.

Barrier: According to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), a barrier is "anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects of society because of his or her disability, including a physical barrier, an architectural barrier, information or communications barrier, an attitudinal barrier, a technological barrier, a policy or a practice"

DARTS: DARTS is the Disabled and Aged Regional Transit System. It is a service offered through the HSR that provides door to door transportation services to Hamiltonians with disabilities.

Disability: According to the Ontarians with Disabilities Act and the Ontario Human Rights Commission: "disability means the person has or has had, or is believed to have or have had, 1. Any degree of physical disability, infirmity, malformation or disfigurement that is caused by bodily injury, birth defect or illness and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, includes diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, a brain injury, any degree of paralysis, amputation, lack of physical co-ordination, blindness or visual impediment, deafness or hearing impediment, muteness or speech impediment, or physical reliance on a guide dog or other animal or on a wheelchair or other remedial appliance or device, 2. a condition of mental impairment or a developmental disability, 3. a learning disability, or a dysfunction in one or more of the processes involved in understanding or using symbols or spoken language, 4. a mental disorder, or 5. an injury or disability for which benefits were claimed or received under the insurance plan established under the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act, 1997"

HRES: McMaster's Human Rights and Equity Services, consisting of the Human Rights program that provides confidential complaint resolution according to the University's Sexual Harassment, Anti-Discrimination, and Accessibility Policies; the Equity Services program which provides educational opportunities related to harassment, discrimination, anti-oppression, accessibility, accommodation, and other human rights-related issue; and AccessMAC, which provides consultation and advice on the identification, removal, and prevention of barriers to accessibility within the University's system, structures, and policies.

HSR: Hamilton Streetcar Railway, the operator of Hamilton’s transit system, including busses. Also operates DARTS (see above).

LAS: The Library Accessibility Services office provides assistance to students referred by Student Accessibility Services (SAS). The LAS office can be found on the 2nd floor of Mills Library just outside of the Learning Commons. Please visit the LAS Services page for a complete list of the services available.

Maccess: An MSU service piloted in 2015 under the mandate of providing peer support and resources for students who identify as having a disability.

MOSAIC: McMaster’s course registration and management system.

MSU: As taken from the McMaster Students Union website “The McMaster Students Union (MSU) is the largest group on campus. Representing the approximately 21,000 undergraduate students of McMaster, all students enrolled in 18 (or more units) are members of the MSU”

ODA: As defined in the legislation, the purpose of the Ontarians with Disabilities Act “is to improve opportunities for persons with disabilities and to provide for their involvement in the identification, removal and prevention of barriers to their full participation in the life of the province.”

OHRC: The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) is one part of Ontario’s system for protecting human rights; plays an important role in preventing discrimination and promoting and advancing human rights in Ontario.

OSD: A general term for an Office for Students with Disabilities. At McMaster, our office is known as Student Accessibility services (see SAS below).

OUSA: The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) is a coalition of student associations from across Ontario. They have come together to protect the interests of Ontario’s undergraduate students by providing research and ideas to governments on how to improve the affordability, accessibility, accountability and quality of post-secondary education in the province. These elected student representatives work together to set OUSA’s policies and direction.

SAS: Student Accessibility Service is a McMaster University service that supports students who have been diagnosed with a disability with academic related concerns and accommodations.

SWC: The Student Wellness Centre is operated by McMaster University, and addresses wellness for all students by providing a range of counselling options, medical services, and wellness education resources.

UID: Universal Instructional Design, which focuses on creating an instructional environment where all students are barrier-free.

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