

Work-In-Progress Investigation on Academic Accommodations: Needs and Barriers for Support

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Adopting an inductive, exploratory approach, a study is being conducted for all students at the University of Prince Edward Island to document the met and unmet academic accommodation needs of the student body, as well as the barriers to receiving support. Four participant groups are of interest: (1) students without accessibility needs, students with accessibility needs who: (2) are registered with the university's Accessibility Services office, (3) are in the process of registering, and (4) have not tried to register.

In particular, this study aims to identify the population of students who would benefit from academic accommodation but who have not been registered for support. Many reasons could cause this: stigma surrounding disability either from peers or instructors, lack of previous documentation for their disability, high financial or time requirements for acquiring formal documentation, or the perception that offered academic accommodations are not sufficient for fulfilling needs, among others. Much of the current literature on academic accommodations for invisible disabilities focuses on the need for Universal Design in curriculum creation, as well as the stigma surrounding self-declaration of said disabilities.

This work-in-progress paper provides literature on academic accommodations to document the need for such a study. Additionally, using mixed-method quantitative and qualitative analyses, preliminary results indicate 25% of participants do not feel they have an advocate, 62% believe there is a negative perception towards those who receive academic accommodations from teachers and instructors, and on the whole, needs are being met. Barriers include the necessity for diagnosis or psychological evaluation for certain conditions, unsupportive instructors, and test accommodations requiring a week's notice.

Introduction

As the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) prepares to revise their policy on Academic Accommodations for Students with Disabilities, the opinions of students must be carefully considered, as the availability of appropriate academic accommodations may determine if some UPEI students are able to participate fully in university or participate at all. By collecting student opinions of the current academic accommodation system, this institutional research board-approved study aims to inform the undergraduate representative for the policy revision committee on the needs of students who already receive academic accommodation, as well as students who may need academic accommodation but do not possess the necessary documentation or encounter other barriers.

As Mullins and Preyde describe, "Invisible disabilities can be considered an umbrella term to refer to disabilities that interfere with day-to-day functioning but do not have a physical manifestation" [1]. The nature of invisible disabilities means that a student will always be

overlooked by their institution unless formal documentation is provided by the student. The current academic accommodation software system at UPEI and most universities require students in need to self-declare their disability to the university. Self-disclosure can lead students to feel that they may be discriminated against based on their disability, or that their instructors may be unwilling to meet their needs [2]. The literature documents a specific case where the cost for academic accommodations was prohibitive, while the student also had to face stigmatization. In the auto-ethnographic study of the student's experience registering with her school's Accessibility Office, she had to pay \$250 – \$350 to have a specific doctor diagnose her with ADHD, even though she had a pre-existing diagnosis. The student was told that her current diagnosis would not be sufficient as she was diagnosed after high school, and her insurance company would not pay for this additional diagnosis because she was “older” [3]. This example shows that different factors such as age, disability, and economic status can compound to make situations even worse for students who are already struggling with their studies.

Mullins and Preyde conducted interviews with ten students, all of whom reported an invisible disability and had already registered with their university's Accessibility Office. Recommendations from the students included a higher budget for adaptive technology and additional support staff, as well as for the university to develop disability awareness programs for staff and faculty [1]. This study aims to gather similar feedback from students who use UPEI's Accessibility Services office for academic accommodations to determine whether students are receiving necessary supports. Also, a secondary objective is to identify the population of students who are not able to provide formal documentation of their disability and may suffer academically as a consequence. This topic is briefly discussed in a case study by Couzens et al., which indicated that one-quarter of students who contacted their university's Accessibility Office did not present adequate documentation of their disability [4].

The full study will be a thematic analysis of qualitative items to answer the following three research questions:

- (1) What are the accessibility needs for students at UPEI?
- (2) Are the accessibility needs being met? and
- (3) What are the barriers to receiving support?

However, as this is a work-in-progress, this article will report preliminary data on accessibility needs, advocacy, registration, and perception of negative opinions regarding students who seek or receive academic accommodations. The intention of this article is to identify preliminary findings and discussion points to investigate further. It is too early to make recommendations or draw conclusions.

This research was conducted in Epekwitk, Mi'kma'ki, the traditional, unceded, and unsundered lands of the Mi'kmaq people. We, the authors, are appreciative to live, work, and study within these lands. We are a man and a woman, both of European descent. One author identifies as having multiple neurodivergences and had the privilege of possessing previous documentation of his disabilities, allowing him to register with UPEI's Accessibility Services at the beginning of his engineering degree. Without the support of academic accommodations, the author believes that he would not have been able to succeed academically, which has inspired him to pursue this work to ensure that all students in need of support are able to receive it.

Method

The instrument used for the study was an online, anonymous survey using Google Forms, and 74 participants responded. The demographic items report that 73% of participants are female, 16% are male, 10% are non-binary, and 1% preferred not to answer. Also, 11% of participants identify as a racialized person or visible minority, and 7% preferred not to answer. Prince Edward Island residents represented 55% of survey participants, 31% are from other parts of Canada, 19% are from outside Canada, and 1% are from an Indigenous community. Note that participants could select more than one location. Every faculty was represented in the survey, with the largest percentage of participants currently studying in the Faculty of Science (38%), Arts (22%), and Engineering (16%). Undergraduate students in all years of study were represented (16%, 24%, 21%, and 28% from first-year through fourth and higher), as well as graduate students (11%).

Participants (N = 74) were separated into four different groups based on their responses. Group 1 ($n_1 = 48$) consisted of participants who need academic accommodations and were registered with Accessibility Services (30 items). Group 2 ($n_2 = 5$) represents participants who need academic accommodations and were not registered with Accessibility Services (21 items). Group 3 ($n_3 = 6$) is for participants who need academic accommodations and had not tried registering with Accessibility Services (16 items), and Group 4 ($n_4 = 14$) contains participants who do not need academic accommodations (11 items).

Results & Discussion

Over 62% of survey respondents (N=73, Groups 1 – 4) believe that there is a negative perception toward students who seek academic accommodations, as shown in Figure 1. Some participants specified that this feeling of a negative perception was attributed to both other students as well as instructors. One participant explained, “Absolutely [there is a negative perception], although there is less stigma than in the past. I think that many students wait until they are desperate to ask for help because they do not want to be perceived as weaker than their classmates.” If a student feels that they will be perceived negatively based on their usage of academic accommodations, they may be hesitant to ask for academic accommodations, or may not register with Accessibility Services in the first place [2].

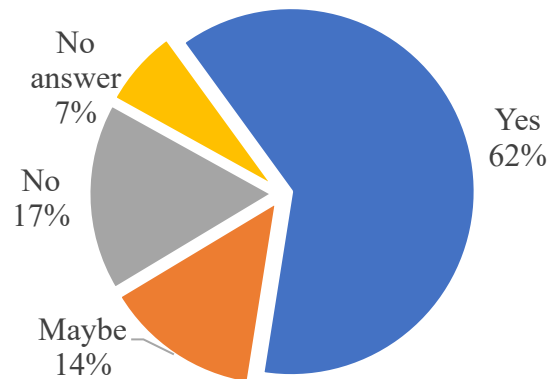


Figure 1: Participants who feel there is a negative perception towards seeking academic accommodations (N=73).

Next, 59 (81%) of the 73 participants (Groups 1–4) reported that they could benefit from academic accommodations, however only 48 participants were currently registered with Accessibility Services, as shown in Figure 2. Six of the participants have not tried to register, one was in the process, two abandoned trying to register, and one registered but was denied.

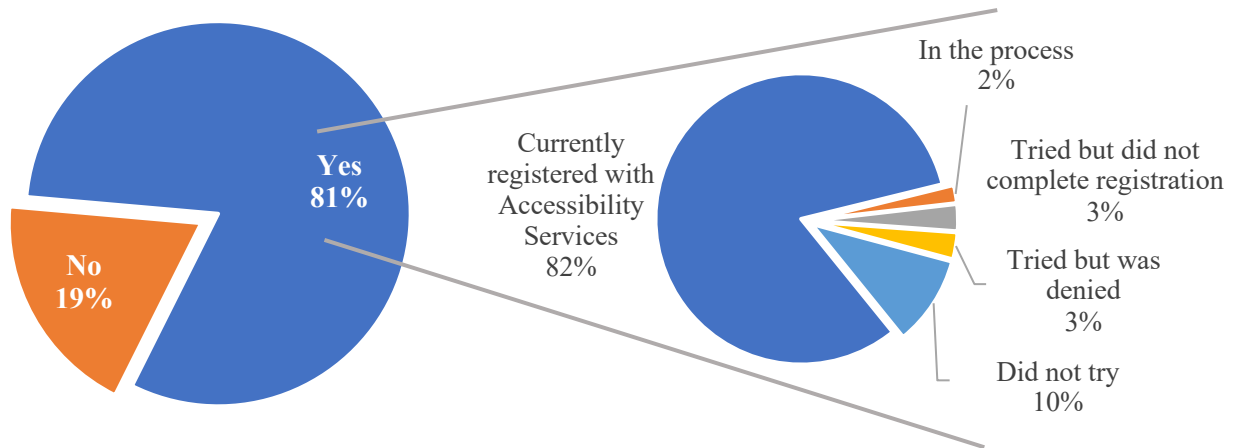


Figure 2: a) Participants who would benefit from academic accommodations (N=73) and b) Registration status with Accessibility Services (n₁₋₃=59).

Of the participants who did not try to register (n₃ = 6), they cited barriers in finding the time to get an official diagnosis, uncertainty whether they would receive an official diagnosis, and the fear of victimization, as one participant explained, “[due to] Politics in the department. Everyone [would] rather stay quiet and not raise an issue for fear of victimization.” Another participant did not want to receive backlash from instructors, as they described, “Many professors do not want to add supports because they want their courses to remain difficult.” Similar attitudes from faculty were identified by Weatherton, Mayes, and Villanueva-Perez, which documented how instructors questioned diagnoses as they did not want to give specific students unfair leniency [5]. Faculty members also felt burdened by the amount of extra work required to accommodate students with disabilities [5].

Many of the problems participants identified with the process of receiving academic accommodations are ironically due to the process not being accessible enough. Many participants noted that they needed to have a doctor sign their academic accommodation paperwork, which they need to pay for, even if they have a previous diagnosis. As one participant stated, “Having to pay \$30 for accommodations forms to be signed is a barrier and ableist” and another participant described the process as “time consuming and expensive.” Similarly, an auto-ethnographic study found that the cost to receive a diagnosis delayed the student from receiving accommodations and impacted her academic performance [3].

For some students, the barrier to register is more permanent, as one participant reported, “My accessibility needs are not being met because it is challenging with my disabilities I have to get in to see a physician to get medical documentation - Tried to register but did not complete the registration.” As noted by Weatherton, Mayes, and Villanueva-Perez, learning disabilities and ADHD can have an impact on student’s concentration and planning, which could make acquiring academic accommodations inaccessible in the first place [5].

Thirdly, 25% of participants who need academic accommodations ($n_{1-3}=59$) indicated that they did not have an advocate, as shown in Table 1. One participant asked, “Does myself count?” Alternatively, 75% feel they have an advocate, with 12% being supported by a friend or partner and 44% receiving support from a parent, guardian, or close relative. Lastly, 51% identified their case worker as an advocate, and one graduate student also identified “supervisors and professors” as advocates in addition to their caseworker. This positively indicates that assigning students a case manager to contact about accessibility issues provides an advocate that some students may not have had otherwise.

Table 1: Advocates for participants ($n_{1-3}=59$).

<i>Advocate</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>(%)</i>
None	15	(25%)
Friend/partner	7	(12%)
Parent/guardian/close relative	26	(44%)
Case worker	30	(51%)

* *Note: Participants can select multiple answers*

Of the participants who were registered with Accessibility Services ($n_1=48$), only 17% were “dissatisfied” and 4% were “very dissatisfied.” They cited the lack of available private space, long wait times to see case managers, and scheduling software as most problematic. Positively, 79% were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their services (39.5% in each group). As one participant explained, “The services provided by accessibility services once registered are very good. They are very accommodating, send multiple reminders for important information, and are willing to assist in any way they can and answer any question.” Though this participant was satisfied with the services they receive, they imply they may have had difficulty registering.

Figure 3 shows the length of time to register, with 28% of participants ($n_1=48$) registering during enrollment and only 8% taking longer than a semester to enroll. However, for students who ultimately receive accommodations, that is an entire semester that they were unable to receive support.

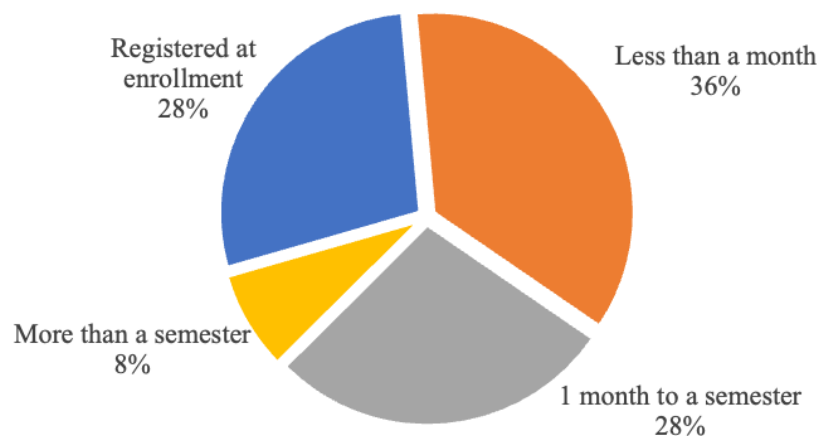


Figure 3: Length of time for each participant to complete the registration process ($n_1=48$).

While not specified in the wording of the survey questions, the amount of time to register for academic accommodations may be due to waitlists to get appointments with doctors or psychologists but could also be related to registration processing time at Accessibility Services. If an exceedingly long amount of time is required to get proper documentation, students may suffer academically, which can then further impact their eligibility for scholarships, grants, or in extreme cases, may result in removal from their program [3].

Once registered with Accessibility Services, participants stated numerous barriers to receiving academic accommodations. As one participant summarizes, “Accessibilities should be accessible,” and they describe the following barriers, “difficulty contacting accessibility services, the booking system as a whole, unsupportive profs, accessibility case managers are seldom available to meet with students in a timely manner, not having a person that is familiar with my disability (or at least how it affects me in my path of study), and how they cannot provide what I needed.”

A repeated concern is related to the test-booking system, *Accommodate*. Instructors must send any tests or exams to Accessibility Services at least one week prior to the test date, and students are not able to book their academic accommodations before the instructor sends the test. If an instructor does not send the test by the week deadline, then the test cannot be booked using the *Accommodate* system. In these instances of last-minute scheduling, it is the students who suffer. As one participant summarizes, “Getting individual academic accommodations through accessibility services is actually ironically very inaccessible; speaking from an ADHD perspective, the current system for registering for tests is incredibly difficult to navigate and puts so much unnecessary extra steps on us.”

Even when the process is followed correctly, participants identified a lack of private rooms for their testing accommodations. One participant explained, “I am very lucky to have the accommodations I have; however, I am constantly worried about making sure I have a private room for my exam, which puts more stress on me that I shouldn't have to deal with.”

Several participants stated that their instructor did not allow them to receive academic accommodations, citing “these accommodations do not fit the course structure.” One participant relayed that their instructor “thinks I’ll learn better by taking notes during the lecture” instead of providing them with the slides, per their academic accommodation. One participant explained that “accessibility services were generally empathetic but some teachers were not, so I think accessibility should have more authority over professors.” This is the exact reason that accessibility is so important. Institutions prioritize academic freedom over expansive student learning. The current academic system is designed for a specific kind of student, so for any student outside of the intended audience, changes must be made. Similarly, another participant stated a desire for more oversight for instructors, as they explained, “I wish there was some sort of reporting process or more ways to hold professors accountable for causing undue harm by not providing accommodations. I had severe mental distress from my situation.” If institutions want to show that accessibility, and thus students, are a priority then more rigorous processes must be introduced for instructors who are not compliant with providing academic accommodations to students who have documented diagnoses. Students who are registered with the Accessibility Services office have already gone through an onerous diagnostic and registration process and have been recognized by the university as needing extra support. To deny a student with a documented disability their academic accommodations is discriminatory.

One area of investigation for the study could be an exploration of responsibility to ensure student needs are being met. Some perceive the responsibility to be primarily on the student to ensure that their academic needs are being met. However, that requires the students to be aware of their need for accommodations, advocate for themselves, recognize that support is available, and then complete the process to receive support. Ideally, the university could proactively support students instead of responding to their needs. For example, the university already has academic counselling services available to students, where a student can receive advisement on learning strategies and services available through the institution. Perhaps the academic counsellors could attest to a student's need for more support.

At the very least, the university could provide a clearer explanation about available services and how to receive them. When asked about their experience registering with Accessibility Services, one student responded "Very negative; it felt like I was expected to know how to do all of this, when in reality I barely can manage to feed myself at times. The fact that students are expected to know how to do everything just out of high school is unreasonable; and as a student who struggled for 2 years before actually starting to succeed at UPEI, the accessibility services need to change to prevent this from occurring to anyone else." Considering that 68% of participants did not receive academic accommodations in high school, many students may be unaware of possible supports or their need for accommodations.

Lastly, though this is outside the scope of this particular study, two participants requested a similar study to investigate physical accommodations, as one participant requested, "I feel that there should be more said about accommodations and how those who have some form of disability may that be physical or no visual." Another participant stated, "look more into physical disabilities especially for lab components of science courses." Accommodations extend beyond academic and are also needed to support students in cases where they may not have the mobility to fulfill physical tasks or physically access the learning spaces. Although this study is focused on academic accommodations, physical accommodations should have future consideration.

Future Work

This work-in-progress documents a subset of the study results. Preliminary findings indicate that there is a negative perception associated with academic accommodations from students and instructors, participants who are receiving academic accommodations felt their needs were being met, and there is a small percentage of participants who are not receiving support. Barriers include, but are not limited to, prohibitive documentation requirements, test accommodations requiring a week's notice, and particularly unsupportive instructors. Lastly, the preliminary findings reveal that most participants felt they had an advocate. However, future work will examine why the 25% of participants receiving support do not feel they have an advocate. Additionally, a thematic analysis of the met and unmet needs, as well as the barriers will be performed. Recommendations will be compiled to inform the undergraduate representative on the committee to revise UPEI's academic accommodation policy, as well as to provide the Accessibility Services office with constructive feedback to help staff to better support student needs.

Acknowledgements

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