MYTHS AND MISPERCEPTIONS

Overview of "Gaps" in the Graduate Experience for Students with Disabilities

The key findings of the research undertaken by the Taskforce can be distilled down to a series of "gaps" in the nature of the graduate experience for students with disabilities, which in turn lead to the deconstruction of a series of myths and misperceptions that we identified were commonly held about graduate education. These misperceptions, enumerated in the subsequent parts of this section, were identified in our research and were held by students, faculty and/or service provider/student life professionals. However, our integrated analytic approach showed these misperceptions to be unfounded. Disconnects in understanding the graduate experience included the following:

The actual vs. expected time to program completion was found to be highest for professional-stream master's students and lowest for PhD students and, in the context of research stream programs, the longer the program, the less likely the student was to report increased time to completion.

Although students with disabilities reported overall good working relationships with their supervisors, room for improvement around essential requirements and accommodation management remain.

Professional-stream students reported better relationships with their department and faculty, which were more respectful of disability and accommodation, than those of research stream students. However, professional-stream students were more likely to attribute a bad relationship to disability-related issues.

Professional-stream students funded their graduate studies differently than did research-stream students, but this was a reflection of the structural differences between those types of programs and the structure of the Canadian financial aid landscape as a whole.

Research accommodations were identified as a gap by students with disabilities in research-stream programs. Disability services offices were less likely to be reported to be helpful with research accommodations than course accommodations, and less likely to be helpful to research-stream students than to professional-stream students.

DSOs and faculty were less likely to collaborate on accommodations for students in research-stream programs.

Accommodations were more likely to come from sources other than the DSO for students in research-stream programs.

Graduate students with disabilities were likely to modify or develop their own accommodation.

Students in research-stream programs reported accommodation needs across the breadth of their program requirements.

Deconstructing Myths: Expected vs. actual times to program completion

Anecdotal evidence indicates that there is an expectation that graduate students with disabilities may take longer to complete their programs of study than their peers. This expectation is based on the corresponding expectation at the undergraduate level, where students with disabilities are reported to take lower course loads and thus will take longer to complete their undergraduate degree requirements. However, this expectation fails to account for the breadth and diversity of graduate programming and graduate education environments, as well as the fundamental structural differences between professional-stream programs and research-stream graduate programs.

In our analyses, graduate students with disabilities, as well as recent graduates of master's and doctoral programs, indicated a range of different experiences with respect to time to completion. While many students did indeed take longer to complete their programs of study – or expected to take longer to complete their programs of study – a significant proportion of students indicated no such expectation or experience. In further analysis, it became clear that the structure of the graduate program (professional vs. research stream, expected length, discipline type) significantly impacts student expectations and experiences around time to completion. Based on student comments in the National Graduate Experience Survey, it became evident that disability type and accommodations requirements were also factors. However, for several of these variables, it became impossible to do statistical analysis due to small sample sizes. The breadth of student expectations and experiences around time to completion can be summarized as follows:

a. Students in professional-stream programs, who have specific course requirements and prerequisites, reported taking longer to complete these programs. The shorter the program and less flexible the requirements, the more likely it was that students reported expecting and experiencing longer times to completion.

b. Students in research-stream programs – particularly at the doctoral level – do not have to manage significant course loads compared to the length and complexity of their programs of study. As a result, the impacts of course

prerequisites and workload issues due to classroom accommodations on their times to completion were significantly less.

c. While students with disabilities in research-stream programs may identify as taking longer than expected to complete their programs, the rationale behind that delay was driven by the progression of the research project, which is an issue shared in large part with the general graduate student population, and is expected to be very discipline- and field-specific.

d. Students' life experiences could impact time to completion, based on student comments in the National Graduate Experience Survey, but this does not distinguish graduate students with disabilities from the general population of graduate students.

e. Disability type could impact time to completion with respect to the need for medical leaves or decreased workload. This was most frequently reported to be an issue for students with chronic medical conditions and/or mental health disabilities.

f. Finally, accommodation needs and time to access accommodations (e.g., alternative formats; expensive assistive technologies) could – but did not have to – impact expectations and experiences around time to completion, depending on what workarounds the students, their supervisors and the disability services offices were able to implement.

Taken together, these data argue against a "one size fits all" approach to thinking about and accommodating disability in graduate education, and strongly suggest that the expectation of longer times to completion for graduate students with disabilities needs to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Interestingly, in researching the issue of undergraduate time to completion as an analogy to the graduate data, it was difficult for us to ascertain the root cause of the expectation at the undergraduate level. In particular, as higher education continues to evolve in Canada and as costs for higher education continue to spiral, students are generally turning to different modes of completion in order to make ends meet. Indeed, among the general population, many students are themselves completing their undergraduate programs while registered as a full-time student but with a reduced course load, in order to factor in working to pay for their education. It is possible that the notion of longer times to completion for students with disabilities in general needs to be re-evaluated against our changing expectations and experiences of the general student population and the drivers of the student experience as a whole.

Deconstructing Myths: The Impact of Disability Accommodations on Academic Rigor

A prior publication discussing accommodating graduate students with disabilities, developed in response to the Customer Services Standard of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (2005), described the potential for academic accommodations to contravene the academic rigor of programs and disciplines (Rose, 2009). It is easy to envision the evolution of this argument if one accepts the premise that academic accommodations for students with disabilities are synonymous with "getting help" or "not doing things on your own" for the student, and if one takes the position that graduate education – particularly in the research stream – involves a student exerting effort on their project in isolation and only through relating to their supervisor and thesis advisory committee. However, it became clear from our consultations throughout the project and from the student responses to the National Graduate Experience Survey that the vast majority of academic accommodations do not fall within the category of "getting help" – and, even when they did, that many supervisors and disability services offices would not consider them to threaten academic rigor. As discussed in Appendix D, creativity around designing effective and successful accommodation solutions in the context of academic rigor and essential requirements is often necessary, and in the experiences reported throughout the course of this project were often on display among the faculty and student services professionals working with graduate students with disabilities.

It is important to note here that as the nature of research itself evolves, particularly in the sciences, graduate students often find themselves part of large, complex, multi-disciplinary research teams, and it is no longer easy to design totally self-contained projects for a student in those contexts. Thus, even in the general population, accommodations notwithstanding, students might be engaged in research for their master's or doctoral theses that requires collaboration to complete. Indeed, as graduate theses in the sciences in particular transition to a publication model, wherein each chapter of data is a separate (often collaborative) manuscript, the notion that students must work on their projects independently is already getting deconstructed in significant ways. In the context of academic accommodation, one can envision an "acknowledgement of contribution" for technical or editorial aid, much the same way collaborative contributions are enumerated now in students' theses.

Finally, it should be noted that there are indeed times where it is likely that the academic accommodation can contravene the rigor of the discipline or program (in particular in professional-stream programs, where requirements have been more firmly established than in research-stream programs). In these instances, the burden is on the university to demonstrate that it has done its due diligence to ensure that this is indeed the case, and it is important that the student be at the table for discussions around alternatives and next steps.

Deconstructing Myths: Academic Integrity vs. Academic Rigor

Related to the issues defined in the preceding section is the apparent perceptual disconnect with respect to the use of the term "academic integrity." While it was clear

from Rose (2009) and from our own consultations with faculty and deans of graduate studies that the term referred to the concepts of academic rigor and essential requirements, it was just as clear that students used the term in the context of plagiarism and cheating and in the context of the academic integrity training that many students receive as part of their first year of graduate study. In delving deeper into this issue, it became evident that the real issues that faculty and deans were concerned about had to do with responsible conduct of research, as well as intellectual property and authorship.

With these nuances in mind, it is worthwhile noting the following key points, which highlight the orthogonal paths dialogue on this issue has taken in the minds of students and faculty:

a.   Students are trained by their institution or department on both intellectual property and responsible conduct of research practices, albeit not at the frequency students report for academic integrity training.

b.   Training often happens relatively early in the student's program, either during orientation or during a research methods course.

c.   A small but nontrivial percentage of students declare having authorship issues and intellectual property challenges associated with their disability during their graduate program, despite the appropriate training.

d.   Most students indicate that they have had no conversations about the potential impact of disability on responsible conduct of research or intellectual property issues.

Thus, it became evident that, while faculty, deans and service providers may at times have real concerns around the impact of disability accommodation on academic rigor, the appropriate discussions with – and even education of – the student with respect to the impact of disability on intellectual property and responsible conduct of research were not being undertaken at any point in the graduate program, despite several points across the process of disclosure, accommodation and integration into the graduate program where this discussion could reasonably take place.

Deconstructing Myths: Ability to achieve the "necessary competencies" of graduate programs and disciplines

Throughout the course of this project, it became clear that there is a perception, largely on the part of faculty and departments, that students with disabilities are often unable to complete the "necessary competencies" (or essential requirements – see the discussion paper contained within Appendix D) of their program – and in particular that unaided completion of these necessary competencies was a crucial part of graduate education. There appears to be confusion across disciplines about what constitutes "necessary competencies," as well as the different types of competencies that might be

deemed necessary and the means necessary to complete these tasks. Many students who participated in the project reported that, with the proper supports and understanding, they were able to complete the "necessary competencies" of their program.

The project showed the need for greater understanding, both on the part of the student and of the faculty/department, of "necessary competencies," as well as the need to work together to ensure that the student is able to show they have learned a certain competency, even if it varies from the way in which it is traditionally demonstrated.

Deconstructing Myths: Nature and cost of academic accommodations and undue hardship

Throughout the course of the project, it was found that many faculty and departments felt that the cost of academic accommodations could be prohibitive and therefore would cause undue hardship for the thesis supervisor, department or university. As a result of this, faculty and departments were reported to be reluctant to provide certain accommodations to students with disabilities in graduate programs. Therefore, students felt either discouraged from asking for them or reported feeling as if doing so would cause more issues. This includes students being labeled as difficult or needy. Students also reported that supervisors either would not include them on grant applications or would give promised money to other (nondisabled) students, based on needing disability accommodations.

In reality, the cost of approximately 90% of accommodations is less than $500 (Freeden, Wafer, Birch & Martin, 2013), with many having no actual monetary cost, instead resulting from creative thought about how the requirements of the graduate program might be accomplished. Indeed, many accommodations simply take some trial and error and willingness to be flexible.

Deconstructing Myths: Differences between the accommodation requirements of undergraduate and graduate programs of study

When asked about the difference in their accommodation requirements between undergraduate and graduate programs of study, many students reported that their needs greatly varied based on the type of program, as well as during the progression of their program. Students reported that due to the decrease in course work in graduate school, classroom accommodations such as note-takers and extended times for exams, while still needed, were not as crucial. In comparison, the need for field or research assistants became much more important. Other common accommodations needed for graduate programs included editors and assistive technologies.

Many students also reported not being prepared for the difference between undergraduate and graduate education, or being unaware that they could ask for accommodations in graduate education. There also seemed to be a lack of understanding of the role that the DSO is to play in providing accommodations in graduate education. The perception among many students was that many DSOs are not aware of graduate education policies.

Deconstructing Myths: Importance of faculty education in understanding the complexities of the interface between disability issues and graduate education

Finally, throughout the course of the project it became evident that there was much confusion from both faculty and departments and students surrounding the complexities of the interface between disability issues and graduate education. Students with disabilities not only face issues faced by all students but also those caused by having a disability. The issues surrounding disability are often not well understood, in part due to the competitive nature of graduate education and the expectation that everyone will be able to compete within the program structure. This highlights the need for faculty to be properly educated on disability and the role they play in supporting students with disabilities.

> *"I was required to withdraw from the PhD program and graduate with a MSc instead because my school wasn't equipped to deal with my disability in the sciences. No help was provided, all presented options were not sufficient for me to complete my PhD degree and completion of an MSc was presented as the best available option. The disability services center was useless and did not know where to begin aiding graduate students in the sciences. It was upon me to facilitate and coordinate meetings with key players to facilitate my accommodation."*

> *"There is still a ways to go before graduate programs are fully accessible to people with disabilities. Right now there is still the lack of awareness that people with disabilities go on to do graduate studies (or would like to). There is a lack of reduced-course load options which make being successful very difficult. Many of the programs have been around for many years in an inaccessible format which can face huge resistance to change. There is a lack of resources available to properly accommodate (e.g. government funds only cover certain things, such as mandatory course related accommodations, but not things like "mental health first aid" that are 'highly recommended' but run by a volunteer and therefore don't have accessibility funds). There is a shortage of interpreters which limited the schools I could attend. There were*

attitude problems from another school I was accepted to and I really did not believe they would have the proper attitude to accommodate me. There is a time delay in accessing resources (such as movies in the library that need to be sent out for captioning when I decide I would like to watch them). There are difficulties accessing accessibility accommodations throughout the school if you don't have a lot of experience self-advocating and not accepting 'no' (e.g. - to use the gym I NEED a locker, but lockers are given by a lottery system at the gym. I had to speak to several people before I finally found someone who knew that they kept a row of "VIP" lockers that I could access). Campus events are often not advertised far enough ahead for interpreters to be arranged and are therefore not accessible to me. Even when I do find them out far enough ahead, the organizers don't have funds for accessibility accommodations even though they are supposed to. There is a lack of mentors with my disability who I can contact for advice, as well as no mentorship system to help me find one."