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Sustaining Learning Initiatives through a Student-Led Accessibility Planning Committee

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Introduction to the Accessibility Planning Committee

The University of Windsor's School of Social Work and Disability Studies Accessibility Planning Committee (APC) was created in 2001 by Dr. Donald Leslie after the implementation of the Ontarians with Disabilities Act (Leslie, 2012). At this time, according to an interview with Leslie, the government of Ontario introduced a passport initiative through the Council of Ontario Universities to examine appropriate criteria and expectations to enact in order to assist students with disabilities attending postsecondary institutions (Leslie, 2012). To address these concerns, the University of Windsor created a campus-wide Accessibility Committee which consisted of various faculty and staff members, administrative personnel, and students (Leslie, 2012). Through his work as co-chair of the campus Accessibility Committee, Leslie (2012) strengthened his belief that an accessibility planning committee was necessary for the School of Social Work:

One of the things that is evident from the work that was going in to the preparation for the Ontarians with Disabilities Act was that accessibility planning was going to become a mandatory process for all public institutions, including universities. So it made sense that the school look at what its particular issues were. So I proposed that through our school council, and . . . a mandate to establish the committee was adopted.

When the passport initiative was being enacted in 2001, the University of Windsor, according to Leslie (2012), was like many postsecondary institutions at the time in their consideration of accessi-

bility issues. While an office for special needs students had been established, many faculty and staff members were unaware of, or hesitant to enact, various coursework or syllabus accommodations for students with disabilities, fearing that it would change the nature of the course (Leslie, 2012). Physical accessibility was also a concern, as many campus buildings were inaccessible for students using wheelchairs or other mobility devices (Leslie, 2012).

The main goal of the APC is to encourage collaboration between university students, staff, and faculty members to create change in the areas of accessibility and disability issues. At the time that the School of Social Work APC was created, no formal structure or legislation, such as a Terms of Reference, were in place (Leslie, 2012). During this time, the committee engaged in several initiatives to raise accessibility and disability awareness on campus. The APC had committee members give a presentation on disability and accessibility challenges to faculty and staff members of the School of Social Work, and the committee also worked with the Human Resources Department and the field placement office in the School of Social Work to create placements for students with disabilities within the Employment Equity and Student Disability Services offices (Leslie, 2012). The committee structure was eventually changed to include two student co-chairs, Frank DiPierdomenico and James Malone (Leslie, 2012). When interviewed, DiPierdomenico (2012) recalled, "It was really highly instrumental having the students involved rather than just the staff going in and telling people how to run things. It was a joint force, a joint task, between the students and the faculty, and I found that very

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positive.”

The nature of the APC experienced additional changes with the establishment of the Disability Studies program, created by the collaborative efforts of the School of Social Work and Department of Psychology (Leslie, 2012). Students enrolled in the Disability Studies program became involved in the committee and increased the membership base of the committee, resulting in the committee being renamed the School of Social Work and Disability Studies Accessibility Planning Committee (Leslie, 2012).

In 2005, Leslie stepped down from the APC to focus his work on the development of the Disability Studies program and his involvement in the campus-wide accessibility committee (Leslie, 2012). About this time, Dr. Irene Carter became a faculty chair of the APC (Carter, 2012). When asked about student and faculty interest in the committee, Carter (2012) stated that at the time of her initial involvement, the committee had become very popular with students, and that when membership recruitment for the committee was advertised in 2006, between 30 and 40 students attended the meeting. At this time, structural changes led to the completion of a Terms of Reference that was approved by the School of Social Work Council in 2007 (University of Windsor Accessibility Planning Committee [APC], 2007, p.4). Carter (2012) mentioned that a mandate was eventually added to the Terms of Reference stating that at least one faculty member must be in attendance at committee meetings, and since then the committee has often maintained two faculty members in the event that one is not able to be in attendance.

In January of 2008, it was decided by the committee that student members would chair the committee through a rotation process, allowing all interested students to have an opportunity to develop leadership skills (University of Windsor APC, 2008, p. 1). Since that time, members of the committee have researched accessibility initiatives at educational institutions in Canada and the United States in order to create an accessibility plan to assist individuals with disabilities within the School of Social Work and the Disability Studies program (Carter, 2012). During their re-

search, Carter (2012) stated that students noted that while there were other institutions with campus-wide accessibility committees and legislation, they could not find evidence of any similar student-led, specialized committees, indicating the distinctiveness of the committee.

The Committee Today

Over the past few years, the structure and goals of the APC have remained relatively stable. At the initial meetings of the APC each year the Terms of Reference are reviewed. It is at this time that members can suggest changes to the structure or goals of the committee (University of Windsor APC, 2010, p.1). The Terms of Reference outline the mission and vision statements of the committee, the roles of student members and the committee graduate assistant, and the current goals and objectives the APC intends to achieve (University of Windsor APC, 2012a). The committee remains responsible to the School of Social Work School Council and is chaired on a revolving student basis, with the faculty members and Graduate Assistant providing support (University of Windsor APC, 2012a). Decisions are made utilizing a consensus approach, and voting takes place when discussing specific tasks to be achieved (University of Windsor APC, 2012a). Currently, the committee operates from September to April, and members meet once a month (University of Windsor APC, 2012a). When student recruitment is considered necessary, faculty and student members will contact professors in the Schools of Social Work and Disability Studies to arrange for committee members to make brief classroom presentations outlining the goals and structure of the committee (University of Windsor APC, 2010, p.1).

The hiring of a graduate assistant to support the committee has proven to be a tremendous asset in recent years. The graduate assistant is responsible for maintaining the committee website and information binder to ensure that all individuals involved with the committee are aware of recent plans and meetings. The graduate assistant is also required to create and disseminate the meeting agendas and minutes to committee mem-

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bers, as well as to the Director of the School of Social work and the Chair of Disability Studies (University of Windsor APC, 2012a). Additional responsibilities of the graduate assistant include monitoring the discussions which occur on the APC's online discussion board and updating the committee's website with recent research and articles relevant to the areas of accessibility and disability (University of Windsor APC, 2012a). Finally, the graduate assistant acts as a liaison between the APC and other relevant university committees to disseminate information on the goals and achievements of the committee and to encourage members of other committees to present at APC meetings or assist with projects in which the APC is currently engaged (University of Windsor APC, 2012a).

The accessibility plan recently completed by the APC was the product of years of discussion, brainstorming, and research. Currently the accessibility plan is focused within the School of Social Work and Disability Studies, but it is intended that the APC will disseminate their plan to the wider university community in the near future (University of Windsor APC, 2011a, p.1). The accessibility plan created by the APC consists of five main areas for change: (a) physical environment, (b) instruction and education, (c) technology, (d) services, and (e) social and recreational services (University of Windsor APC, 2012a). Two of these sections are further broken down into subsections; parking and accessibility routes are further detailed under the section on physical accessibility, and website accessibility within the School of Social Work and Disability Studies is discussed within the technology section (University of Windsor APC, 2012a). The accessibility plan also includes appendices which detail the various university sources researched during the development of the plan, as well as the information obtained from each source (University of Windsor APC, 2012a).

In February of 2012 the members of the APC held a vote which approved their School of Social Work and Disability Studies Accessibility Plan and began to plan how best to disseminate it to the Social Work School Council in order to get it approved (University of Windsor APC, 2012b, p.

2). Though this phase of their work is over, members have many plans for moving forward in promoting accessibility within the School of Social Work and Disability Studies and the University of Windsor. After a presentation to the APC, a member of the campus accessibility committee discussed the possibility of APC members becoming involved in various subcommittees connected with the wider campus accessibility committee (University of Windsor APC, 2012c, p. 1). Members of the APC have also discussed distribution of the accessibility plan to the individuals involved with the design of the new campus building in downtown Windsor which will become the new location of the School of Social Work (University of Windsor APC, 2011b, p. 2). This will allow the APC to not only increase their involvement in the wider community, but also provide the opportunity for the committee to be involved in the initial stages of planning and development.

Review of the Literature

Student-driven committees are aimed at encouraging collaborative learning between students in an environment with little or no faculty supervision. When students learn together in a group there is the opportunity to encourage active learning, wherein students engage in the learning process in more than a passive manner (Koulish, 1998). Active learning is not always possible in the traditional classroom due to the associated time restrictions and large class sizes. Active learning differs from passive learning in that it requires the development of skills in problem solving, planning, critical thinking, leadership, and team work.

The learning process in student-led committees is advantageous not just to students, but also to faculty and the wider university. Student-led committees aimed at looking at curriculum review can provide important feedback to faculty on the quality of students' learning experiences and what potential issues might exist (Peterson, Wittstrom, & Smith, 2011). Students can also offer possible solutions for barriers to education, as a result of their firsthand experience with is-

sues in the classroom. Furthermore, as students work collaboratively with each other, the faculty, and the wider community, they begin to develop important professional networks (Mastran, 2008). These professional networks can then help students find employment and volunteer opportunities post-graduation, as well as provide an important source of professional advice should it be necessary.

The literature also reveals that there are several drawbacks to student-driven committees in stimulating a collaborative learning process. For one thing, students have limited access to university funding, which can severely limit the type of activities they can engage in and their ability to engage in outreach activities (Mastran, 2008). Faculty members have much more access to funding than students, and where possible faculty are encouraged to support student-driven initiatives by helping students obtain necessary finances. There might also be significant issues with efficiency – students are not always able to keep to the task on hand as interests change or attention wanes (Koulish, 1998). In addition, the committee's direction might suddenly shift as membership changes, leaving activities incomplete. The short time students might be involved in a committee can also be an issue. As students graduate and leave the committee, high turnover can result in issues of efficiency, as each new group might focus most on issues of interest, rather than what has already been initiated in previous years (Koulish, 1998).

All of these disadvantages can be addressed in order to facilitate the collaborative learning processes. Mastran (2008) notes that when there is a "clear path for student participation and recognition" (p. 53) through regular meetings and clear guidelines about student involvement, participation increases and problems with attendance and retention can be addressed.

Collecting the Data

In order to examine the specific benefits and challenges of the APC, we conducted one-on-one interviews with previous student and faculty members of the committee, as well as individuals engaged in similar accessibility and disability

advocacy. The individuals interviewed were Dr. Donald Leslie, one of the founding faculty members of the committee; Dr. Karen Roland, a faculty member who co-chaired the campus-wide accessibility committee at the University of Windsor with Dr. Leslie; Anthony Gomez, a staff member of the Student Disability Services department at the University of Windsor who has provided assistance to the APC; Frank DiPierdomenico, a former student member of the committee; Cameron Wells, the host of an accessibility and disability-focused radio program called Handi-Link on the University of Windsor's radio station CJAM; Dr. Irene Carter, one of the recent faculty chairs of the committee; and a member of the organization Students for Barrier-free Access, located at the University of Toronto.

Prior to interviewing the participants, an interview guide was created which focused on the participants' experiences and involvement with the APC or accessibility-related organization, as well as the benefits and challenges that they experienced. Participants were also asked to give advice to the committee. Before the interviews began, participants were asked to sign forms detailing the purpose of the research, consent to record the interview, and consent for their names to be mentioned in future papers in connection to their statements. Participants who wished to remain anonymous were told that their names would be listed as Anonymous in connection with their statements. The interviews were then transcribed and coded for themes.

Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed that there are many benefits to having a student-driven committee. One of the most mentioned benefits was the practical experience that students gained from committee membership: "a real life training ground" as it was named by Leslie (2012). Another benefit was the development of leadership skills in committee members. For example, as one interviewee noted, "the students themselves established a weekly radio program on CJAM and worked the first year at bringing issues forward out of the planning process" (Dr. Leslie, 2012). Other benefits noted by participants included ca-

capacity development and community advocacy. Committee members tried to “give the students with disabilities at the University a foothold in the community” (Dr. Leslie, 2012). And though the impact was restricted to the School of Social Work, the “slow, patient development of community capacity and awareness that the committee achieved” (Dr. Leslie, 2012) was beneficial to both students and the faculty and staff in the department. For example, Leslie (2012) mentioned that other faculty and staff have come up to him with accessibility barriers that should be referred to the committee. Leslie (2012) saw this growing identification of accessibility barriers as a sign that people are becoming more aware of accessibility; not necessarily that the barriers are new, but that something that was before ignored was starting to come to the forefront of people’s perceptions. Roland (2012) stated that giving students a voice also allowed the students to act as a link between the broader university community and Disability Student Services, and relay the concerns felt by students about the available services and accommodations. Also, Roland (2012) noted that through this process the students become agents of change at the university, modeling a belief in equity and social justice that can spread to other areas of the university. Stemming from the committee’s work was a general increase in standards of accessibility, not only for committee members, but for faculty as well as students, who “set up a training session for the faculty and staff” (Roland, 2012).

The committee is not without its challenges. Low recruitment, scheduling conflicts, attendance issues, and high turnover often resulted in low membership rates during some years. As well, there was often a tension between maintaining the student-driven process and achieving the wider agenda of the APC. Leslie (2012) noted that “those were difficult moments because to be true to where many of us wanted to see the committee go, it meant we had to stand back and let the process unfold, and to some extent sometimes flounder, because if we were to simply jump in and try and correct what was going wrong, then how is that a student-driven process?” Some committee members were also frustrated with the limitations

of the committee’s influence: as a school-based committee, the influence to the wider university is often limited, and even more so when factors like postgraduate employment and support are considered.

Several factors were found to help alleviate some of the challenges. For instance, the committee website and the use of a graduate assistant for keeping track of meeting minutes and updating the website helped to keep students involved even when they could not attend meetings. The maintenance of a binder of all meeting activities has ensured that work is not lost as one cohort is replaced by another (Carter, 2012). Furthermore, the presence of a faculty liaison helped the committee to advocate for space and funding and to provide direction as needed, though at times this was a challenging role to play while still maintaining the student-driven process.

Implications for Education and Students

The interviews highlight several important implications for the field of social work. First, student-driven committees offer social work students the chance to practice social work skills in a safe and supported environment. Working effectively with vulnerable populations requires skills that are honed through practice, and the committee provides the training ground for this practice while also giving students faculty support should it become necessary. Second, the APC has worked to raise awareness on the social justice issues associated with accessibility – one of the core values of the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2005). Introducing students early on to the practice of social justice and civic engagement will help to encourage them to continue with the practice as they graduate and begin working with client populations. Third, the APC works to empower all those associated with it; the students involved and those impacted by the issues being raised are given a voice.

Disability issues are becoming an increasing concern, as 14.3 percent of Canadians identified themselves as being diagnosed with a disability in 2006, and the number of individuals is expected to increase in the future with the increased aver-

age age of the population (Statistics Canada, 2009). It has also been noted that individuals with disabilities are more likely to experience unemployment, lower degrees of educational attainment, and lower incomes than individuals without a disability, issues which numerous governments have been slow to act on (Prince, 2004). Additionally, many workplaces lack knowledge of disability and accessibility issues and as a result cannot properly accommodate individuals with various disabilities (Leslie, 2008). Social work students involved with committees like the APC are in the perfect position to use their knowledge to create a dialogue with government officials and business owners in order to share knowledge of disability and accessibility concerns, as well as suggestions on how to approve policies and accommodation for individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, the values promoted in the social work profession through the Code of Ethics make the social work profession one of the most appropriate to advocate for improvements in accessibility and disability awareness (Leslie, 2008).

Research has demonstrated that many schools of social work can improve on their knowledge and policies surrounding disability and accessibility issues; a survey conducted in 2003 indicated that only one-third of the schools of social work who participated in the survey had implemented policies designed to assist students with disabilities, and 17% of those schools had detailed those policies in writing (Carter, Hanes, & MacDonald, 2012). In 2011, Carter, Hanes, and MacDonald (2012) surveyed 27 schools of social work in Canada and found that the majority of programs offered at least one course on disability issues, but less than half of the schools offered committees centered on accessibility and disability concerns, and only four of those committees were student-led. Furthermore, many social work programs continue to discuss disability issues in relation to the medical model, which often further stigmatizes individuals with disabilities (Carter, Leslie, Angell, Towson, & Hernandez Jozefowicz, 2012). Promoting the creation of committees similar to the APC in schools of social work would assist in moving away from the medical model through highlighting the multiplic-

ity of disabilities and the issues that they face. This could result in discussion leading to the implementation of further policies to assist individuals with disabilities through their postsecondary educational experience.

As seen above, the analysis of the interviews indicates that the committee's sustainability is influenced by several factors that were also seen in the literature. While keeping the committee student-led can be a challenge, there are also many benefits that both students and faculty can derive from the process. Strong collaboration between faculty representatives and student leaders can make it possible for the committee to continue functioning from year to year despite high turnover and attendance issues. The faculty provide a guiding hand when needed, though they must ensure that their participation remains minimal in order to make sure a genuine student-led process occurs.

The presence of the committee website and the Terms of Reference also help to keep the committee on track as membership changes year to year. The Terms of Reference lay out the goals of the committee, while the website ensures that members who are unable to attend meetings can still keep up-to-date with committee work. Both the website and the Terms of Reference can be updated as needed to make sure that the committee's work continues to be relevant to the needs of the constituents. All of these factors help the committee to continue working on their accessibility-related initiatives, including interdisciplinary education on accessibility issues.

Future Directions

Koulish (1998) wrote that increasing the communication and involvement between the non-university community and a student-led committee increases the experience of students, providing them with the opportunity to engage in knowledge exchange with community members, broadening the students' horizons. Another recommendation was to encourage individuals from the higher administration of the University of Windsor to become members of the APC (Gomez, 2012). A member of Students for Barrier-free Access, located at the University of Toronto,

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discussed supporting other accessibility groups, stating:

I think because of the different structures of each group things play out differently, but we can still support each other, go to each other's events, and tell people in the wider community about each other's events, and can also share and help with each other or share knowledge with each other (Anonymous, 2012).

Some individuals would like to see the committee leave the School of Social Work entirely and focus on the wider university community; as Leslie (2012) states, "I would love to see . . . the Accessibility Committee outgrow the School of Social Work and become a broader vehicle that becomes entrenched with the overall student association and so forth." Focusing on ways to increase and retain committee members were also suggested as priorities for the APC (Carter, 2012). Jabr (2011) found that the majority of students are willing to use social networking sites in conjunction with, or in place of, traditional classroom time. The same principle can be applied to committee meetings, where members who cannot attend meetings are encouraged to contribute ideas and share information through social networking sites. This has already been started at the APC, with Skype being used several times to allow out of town students to attend meetings. Broadened membership would also allow for cross-disciplinary learning to occur within the committee as the committee members learn alternative perspectives from the multiple disciplines involved (Koulish, 1998). Harvey, Higenbottam, Owen, Hulme, and Bion (2012) noted that committee sustainability is improved by increased succession-planning by current members of the committee throughout their membership with the committee. Succession-planning by the students would keep the committee student-driven and not require the intervention by faculty at the beginning of each school year to get the committee going, as was noted by Leslie (2012).

Future research into the committee will look at surveying all past and current members of the committee about their experiences. In addition, in-depth interviews with current members of the

committee will provide a more updated picture of the committee now, over 10 years after its inception. This detailed mixed-methods study will provide a more complete perspective into the benefits and challenges of the committee, as well as possible suggestions into how the committee can be improved. Several future directions for the committee have already been proposed by the current study, including expanding the focus of the committee by looking at facilitating postgraduation employment opportunities for students with disabilities, promoting awareness of accessibility issues to other faculties, increasing networking within the university and the wider community, and liaising between the APC and the wider university accessibility committee. The committee will also continue its work on the Accessibility Plan by ensuring that the plan is implemented and monitoring its progress.

In conclusion, student-driven committees are an innovative method for allowing students to practice skills learned in the classroom and expanding their accessibility knowledge, while being in a structured and supportive environment. As Leslie (2012) stated, "I am very pleased that I had the opportunity to be involved in all kinds of change . . . and I hope that in some small way I contributed to making things better." Accessibility committees in particular allow students to become advocates for themselves and for each other by giving students a voice and allowing for knowledge transfer and collaborative learning between students and the wider university. These committees should be encouraged and supported by learning institutions so that more students benefit from involvement in student-driven initiatives.

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