Academic Accommodation in Higher Education Institutions:
Pitfalls, Practices & Aspirations

This research study sought to uncover the pathways to access-centred education that exist to provide an alternative to traditional accommodation and disclosure of disability status that are currently being used in higher education institutions (HEI).

Using an anti-oppressive, anti-racist, anti-ableist lens, we sought to bring attention to the multiply marginalized and underrepresented groups who already have limited access.

Methods

Our qualitative, cross-sectional study included three methods:

1. **Environmental scan** on alternative pathways and the early adopters of radical access work and leadership among administration, faculty, and student activists

2. **Interviews** from 37 people *(24 students, 12 faculty, 1 administrator)* were identified from the environmental scan, snowball sampling, and student groups at universities in Toronto, Canada.

3. **Literature review** on disability, ableism and historically white institutions

Findings

A team analysis of transcripts using *Dedoose* software identified the following 3 categories: *Pitfalls, Practices & Aspirations.*

These categories and associated themes are explored in the following illustration.

ACCESS PATHWAY
INCLUSION FOR ALL

PITFALL Promises of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) often conflict with student experiences.

Prove to us that you need accommodation

PITFALL There is a gap between disabled students' lived experiences vs. what is medically and legally validated as a disability.

PITFALL Low-income students cannot afford the fees for medical documentation

PITFALL Racialized students are deterred by medical racism

MEDICAL VALIDATION · MEDICAL FEES · MEDICAL RACISM

PITFALL Responsibility to navigate the academic accommodation processes falls to individual students, many of whom do not have their basic needs met.

PITFALL Students who are approved for academic accommodations are often not provided appropriate accommodations.

PITFALL Power imbalance between faculty and students with disabilities may prevent students from informally procuring accommodation needs from faculty.

PITFALL Disability is often separated from the classroom. Faculty may not have the resources, or skills required to meet access needs adequately.

Sorry, this is all I can offer you.

ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

CLASSROOM

I don't know how I'm going to provide those accommodations.

PITFALL The burden to bridge the gap between students' access needs and academic accommodations processes falls on student advocacy and peer support groups.

PITFALL Students are exhausted and humiliated by repeatedly legitimizing their experiences and entitlements in the academic accommodation process.

Where are you going? You have to do this every year.

PEER SUPPORT

PRACTICE **Build Campus Wide Access Capacity:** Find ways to connect with instructors, administrators, and other staff and support them in implementing accessible design in their work.

PRACTICE **Prioritize Lived Experience:** In place of medical documentation, students' self-report is used to guide and inform accommodation plans.

ASPIRATION **Deliver the Promises of the Public University:** Although most universities in Canada are public, they adopt a corporatized approach to EDI. Public universities must turn away from a private sector approach to education.

ASPIRATION **Address Systemic Problems with Systemic Responses:** By implementing upstream approaches and fostering a shared responsibility for access, universities can weave accessibility into the fabric of their operations.

ASPIRATION **Ease the Accommodation Processes:** Accept alternative documentation and trust what students say and know about their own access needs. If processes require medical documentation, the financial burden cannot fall on individual students.

PRACTICE **Support Without Documentation:** Accessibility advisers are finding ways to support students without documentation even in the absence of institutional mechanisms, which opens non-documentation pathways to accommodations.

PRACTICE **Beyond Accessibility Statements & Accommodation Letters:** Rewriting the access statement signals to HEIs that standard practice is not good enough. Refusing to rely on accommodation letters signals to students that they are believed and belong in our classrooms.

PRACTICE **Non-Traditional Teaching & Assessment Techniques:** Adopting diverse teaching techniques and assessment methods enriches the learning experiences of students with access needs and can reduce the power imbalance between students and faculty.

ASPIRATION **Improve Instructor Resourcing:** Academic accommodation systems rely on the unpaid and invisible labour of instructors. This labour must be fairly compensated and resourced.

PRACTICE **Peer Support:** Students provide guidance and advice to their peers about the accommodation process.

PRACTICE **Anti-Ableism Education:** Students take an active role in training instructors to build accessible teaching capacity.

ASPIRATION **Improve Student Advocacy Group Resourcing:** Student advocacy groups demonstrate the possibility of delivering public services. Public universities can follow their lead by creating more collaborative relationships with underserved communities.

ASPIRATION **Improve Individual Student Resourcing:** HEIs need to go beyond a single-issue framework to ensure students' basic needs are met, including access to housing, transportation, hybrid options, health care, and funding.

COLLECTIVE INCLUSION PATHWAYS TO ACCESS