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Your IEP does not count at CEGEP: An official diagnosis is needed to access accommodations

By Jay Jones-Doyle

High school can be challenging for most - disabled or not. It is a time of intense change, experimentation, and for those with disabilities it may be the period where they find accommodation to help them achieve academically. These accommodations become ingrained and integral parts of their toolkit for success, and as such students can become reliant on access to them. When they graduate and gear up for CEGEP they assume that they will be afforded, at minimum, the same accommodations as they had in high school. Sadly, this is not always the case. Here is an overview of why, and why now.

In CEGEP, students *must* have an official diagnosis to be eligible to receive ser-

vices from the Accessibility Centre (or whatever name is given to the centre that provides services to students with disabilities at a particular CEGEP). Technically this has always been the case, but in the past many exceptions were made. A critical point here is that an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is not an official diagnosis. Since official diagnoses can require many steps and sometimes years to acquire (especially in the public system), many schools take the initiative to provide students with IEPs based on observed need. These are wonderful, as they provide students with the support they need without needing to suffer through years of academic inequality while waiting for a piece of paper. The problem is that students and their parents are not always made aware that these accommodations are unofficial, and that they are likely to be refused services in CEGEP.

In talking with Susie Wileman, a psychologist working in Dawson's AccessAbility Centre, it has become apparent that the old leniencies are no longer being offered. Without an official diagnosis, students will be refused services even when the need is apparent. It has become a matter of bureaucracy - funding allocations for the access centres are now tied directly to the number of registered students. Students can only be "officially registered" by presenting their official diagnosis paperwork, whereas before the reporting was more loosely tied to how many students were using their services. By offering services to individuals, without official diagnoses, the Centres would have to do so without funding from the government - something they are no longer willing to do.

The take-home message: If you are a high school student receiving accommo-

dations without an official diagnosis you should start the process of getting that diagnosis as early as possible. Wait times in the public system, especially for neurological disorders, learning disabilities, etc. can be extremely long (two to three years). If you don't have your diagnosis in time for the start of CEGEP you will likely not be able to access the accommodations that helped you achieve your success to date.

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