

But I am well aware of the universities and colleges who argue to maintain their funds for basic office supplies, let alone, projects like this one. My suggestion is in starvation comes creativity. As an example, I consulted with a local college who implemented a similar program in September 2012. Their solution to restricted resources was to partner with their school's professional program certifying Applied Behaviour Analysts. Students will be meeting their practicum requirements by acting as mentors in a volunteer/apprentice capacity.

### Future implications/practice

In the second year of implementation, we added the topic of "Transition" and specifically targeted first year or transferring students to begin the program by mid-August or early September, in hopes of easing the enormity that can be involved in starting university studies. We received just a few responses to participate. A challenge is engaging students in their summer months. I recognize that we need to be realistic that these are students first after all. We all enjoy our summer vacations and rest and relaxation is ever more important for students who are likely to have co-morbid anxiety and depression. We also identified the need to have more formal ongoing training (based on feedback and requests from mentors). Some mentees expressed an interest in meeting each other and we are very open to helping facilitate this in the future.

### Sharing with the professional community

Through word of mouth of the program and specific proposals, we were invited to present at three different conferences by end of school year. Responses from all audiences appeared to be positive. I freely shared our program materials (templates, job descriptions, etc.) to all audience members. It was such a funny response to see the attendees' reaction, "Free? What's the catch?" My response was, "Try it out, use the resources as you wish, and just share back your experiences and learning so we can help each other build better tools and programming to best serve our students." I believe in good karma in the end and what goes around, comes around.

As I departed on maternity leave in August, my colleagues took over the program for Year Two. I am told that ten students have enrolled, and we will continue informal and formal evaluation and general program re-jigging along the way. I look forward to hearing how the program evolved this year at UBC and other institutions' ventures I may have inspired along the way.

### Acknowledgements

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### Resources/Additional Reading:

Wolf, L., Brown, J., & Bork, G. (2009). *Students with Asperger Syndrome: A Guide for College Personnel*.

Harpur, J., Lawlor, M., & Fitzgerald, M. (2004). *Succeeding in College with Asperger Syndrome: A Student Guide*.

UK National Autistic Society Mentor Guide (downloadable guide) [www.autism.org.uk/studentmentors](http://www.autism.org.uk/studentmentors)

Navigating College (downloadable handbook) <http://navigatingcollege.org/>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2012/10/02/the-new-mental-health-disorder-internet-addiction/>

<http://www.universityaffairs.ca/confronting-aspergers-in-the-classroom.aspx>

# Employment of Postsecondary Graduates with Disabilities

## Some Myths and Realities

BY MARY JORGENSEN, CATHERINE S. FICHTEN, NATALIE MARTINIELLO, MAI N. NGUYEN, MARIA BARILE, JILLIAN BUDD, AND RHONDA AMSEL

**B**etween 10% and 14% of current junior/community college and university students have a disability (Ministry of Training, Colleges & Universities, 2012; Snyder & Dillow, 2007). What happens to these well-educated youth with disabilities when they graduate?

There are many misconceptions that contribute to the employment realities of individuals with disabilities. These can cause angst among students with disabilities who are currently enrolled and pose barriers for recent graduates in their search for meaningful employment. Therefore, here we focus on three of these troublesome myths and use data from our recent investigation of employment among 133 recent junior/community college and university graduates and 39 individuals who dropped out without completing their qualification (leavers). In what we call the GradSWD Study, online data gathering was done during 2010 and 2011, after the 2008 Canadian economic downturn. We also use findings from our research to make recommendations about what could be done to help ensure that recent graduates with disabilities succeed in transition from school to the work force.

The GradSWD Study findings are similar to those of previous investigations of postsecondary graduates. For example, a study conducted by the Nova Scotia Department of Education (2008) showed that 82% of junior/community college graduates with disabilities and 80% of university graduates with disabilities were employed approximately one year after graduation. In one of our previous investigations, too, the employment rate of junior/community college graduates with (n=182) and without (n=1304) disabilities was the same, and this was true for both full-time and part-time students (Fichten, Jorgensen, Havel, Barile, Ferraro, Landry, Fiset, Juhel, Chwojka, Nguyen, & Asuncion, 2012). Moreover, the same proportion of graduates with and without disabilities were working in jobs related to their studies. Very few graduates were "not in the labour force" (i.e. not looking for employment) unless they were continuing their studies. What is especially encouraging is that while our investigation of junior/community college students took place while Canada's economy was still flourishing, our GradSWD Study findings reflect the employment picture of graduates with disabilities after the economic downturn of 2008.

### Myth # 1: 70% of people with disabilities are unemployed

It is a common belief that individuals with disabilities have an unemployment rate around 70% (Center for an Accessible Society, undated). Not only is this

an overestimation for the entire population of individuals with disabilities, many of whom are older (Statistics Canada, 2008), but it is certainly untrue for Canadian junior/community college and university graduates with disabilities. For example, in our GradSWD Study of graduates and leavers with disabilities, 91% were “in the labour force,” meaning that they were either employed or looking for a job. Among those in the labour force, 67% were employed, a virtual reversal of the “70% unemployed” figure. Moreover, most (75%) employed individuals were satisfied with their job. Graduates were significantly more likely to be employed than those who dropped out (leavers). Although most of our sample was employed, the lowest employment rates were found among those with low vision (46%) and those with a neurological impairment (33%). We were surprised – and delighted – to find that in our small sub-sample of graduates who were totally blind, all 4 were employed (a 100% employment rate!). Relatively high employment rates were also found among individuals with a limitation in the use of their arms and/or hands (71%), and those who have a learning disability (69%). Furthermore, individuals “in the labour force” were just as likely to be employed, regardless of whether they had a single or multiple disabilities, although we need to note that those with multiple disabilities were over-represented among those “not in the labour force.”

What helped participants obtain employment? Our findings show that an internship or co-op experience was a slight help, as were personal factors such as adequate finances, motivation, and a supportive family. But nothing stood out as a key contributor to employment. Therefore, in research we hope to undertake in the near future we will be looking, in particular, at environmental, community and school-based “facilitators” to obtaining employment upon graduation. Perhaps it is worth noting, as students will no doubt be pleased to learn, that their grades and academic standing had no impact whatsoever on their likelihood of finding a job. In our sample, neither did level of education (junior/community college, Bachelor’s, graduate degree). Really, we need larger samples and a more extensive set of questions to make definite comments in this realm.

### **Myth # 2: People with Disabilities Do Not Have the Required Educational Qualifications**

Another myth is related to people with disabilities being uneducated and lacking appropriate job skills (Government of New Brunswick, undated). Of course, in our sample, most participants had recently graduated from – or at least had attended - junior/community college or university. Even among those who had dropped out, a large proportion (92%) had already completed a credential (e.g., dropping out of a Bachelor’s program but already having a junior/community college diploma; dropping out of a Master’s program but already holding a Bachelor’s degree).

Although they take additional time, students with disabilities graduate from PSE at the same rate as nondisabled students (Jorgensen, Fichten, Havel, Lamb, James, & Barile, 2005; Wessel, Jones, Markle, & Westfall, 2009) so the number of young, well-educated individuals with disabilities is expected to grow.

In fact, the data show that when it comes to junior/community college graduates, the proportion of individuals with and without disabilities is very similar (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2009), although the proportion of university graduates with disabilities continues to be substantially lower. Nevertheless, in Ontario, approximately 40% of adults with disabilities have a post-secondary education, compared to 48% of the nondisabled population (Toronto District School Board, undated).

In our GradSWD Study, the junior/community college-university ratio was reversed: 78% of the employed sample had completed a university degree, while 22% had obtained a junior/community college diploma or certificate. The proportions in the unemployed sample were similar, showing that our study oversampled university graduates. For example, the highest qualification

achieved in our sample revealed that 18% had completed graduate studies, 56% had completed a Bachelor’s degree, and 25% had completed a junior/community college or trade school diploma or certificate.

It should be noted, however, that the most common reason attributed by unemployed individuals for being unable to find work was lack of qualifications / training / experience / required certification, but only 22% of individuals noted this as a concern. Other reasons mentioned were the lack of availability of jobs (18%) and disability and health related concerns (13%). Furthermore, among the 9% of graduates who were “not in the labour force,” the main reasons for not looking for a job were health concerns (43%), disability related concerns (43%), loss of some or all of one’s current income or disability related supports (36%), being discouraged with looking (21%), and considering going back to school (21%). Thus, there is no great need to be concerned about youth individuals with disabilities lacking the required educational qualifications.

### **Myth # 3: Providing Accommodations in the Workplace is Very Expensive**

There is a pervasive belief, mainly among those without disabilities, that workplace accommodations are very costly (Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres, 2007). In fact, in 2005 the estimated average cost was \$500 (Williams, 2006).

Before determining whether \$500 is “very costly” or not, it is important to consider the value of employees with disabilities. According to Loy (2012) who wrote an article for the Job Accommodation Network, of the employers who contacted the Job Accommodation Network, the vast majority were seeking information and solutions with the goal of retaining or promoting a current employee with a disability. These workers have been with the same company for an average of about 7 years, including those who had just been offered a job or hired, representing significant company loyalty (Loy, 2012).

Nevertheless, the proliferation of the misperception that providing accommodations in the workplace can be very costly leads to significant resistance by employers to hiring individuals with disabilities. However, studies by the Job Accommodation Network reveal that, in fact, most employers report minimal or no cost for accommodating people with disabilities (Loy, 2012). More specifically, of the employers who provided information on the cost of accommodations they had provided, 57% reported that the necessary accommodations cost nothing at all, with 37% experiencing only a one-time cost. Only 4% of employers reported annual, ongoing costs for an accommodation. Furthermore, of those accommodations that did come at a cost, the average amount that employers reported paying was \$500.

The cost of accommodations appeared to be worthwhile as many employers reported experiencing both direct and indirect benefits from employing individuals with disabilities. For example, the most frequently mentioned direct benefits were: retaining a valuable employee (90%), increasing the employee’s productivity (71%), eliminating costs associated with training a new employee (60%), and increased employee attendance (53%). The most commonly reported indirect benefits include: improved interactions with co-workers (66%); improved company morale (61%), increased productivity in the company as a whole (57%), improvement in interactions with customers (45%), and increased work place safety (45%) (Loy, 2012).

### **Recommendations**

People with disabilities are productive workers and are capable of contributing to an enterprise’s success to the same extent as people without disabilities, but there are many barriers that persist in their ability to securing employment. Some of these are misperceptions held by employers, such as the idea that people with disabilities do not have the education required for



the job. Moreover, employment concerns are common amongst students with disabilities before they complete their academic programs. For example, according to Martiniello, Barile, Budd, Nguyen, & Fichten (2011) the number one ranked concern for students with disabilities was employment concerns. Students specifically cited concerns with a perceived lack of job readiness skills, due in part to the extra time that needs to be devoted to the completion of academic tasks. The students reported having little time to develop or refine non-academic skills that are necessary for securing employment, such as interview skills and ways in which to disclose their disability to others. Therefore, to help individuals with disabilities successfully secure employment we provide the following recommendations:

1. Given that students with non-visible disabilities, such as low vision and neurological impairments, have the lowest employment rates, programs or workshops specifically aimed at helping these individuals should be provided by student service professionals. These workshops should have a particular focus on facilitating self-disclosure of their disability in the workplace. Enhancing the self-advocacy skills of students will better enable them to ask and fight for the necessary accommodations that will allow them to be successful in accomplishing assigned tasks at work. Furthermore, these individuals should be made aware of their rights within a working environment.
2. Workshops should be provided to help students develop compensatory strategies and the non-academic skills that are essential for securing employment. Compensatory strategies include recognizing how one's disability can affect job performance, being able to identify one's strengths and weaknesses within the context of a specific job, and knowing how to capitalize on one's strength and to compensate for one's weaknesses. These programs need to be comprehensive and flexible so as to ensure that students with diverse needs can be served equitably.
3. Since the primary reasons that graduates and leavers are not seeking employment and cannot find employment is health and disability related concerns, student services may consider working with students to help them find jobs that provide the necessary accommodations (i.e. being able to work from home and flexible work schedules).
4. Given that the primary reason that students who are unemployed but seeking work cannot find a job is related to lack of qualifications/training/experience/required certifications, programs should be put in place to ensure that the appropriate training is provided for the field in which the individual would like to work. This includes helping individuals determine what they want to study and what type of program (professional versus pre-university) best prepares them for employment in a particular field of study. In addition to providing the qualifications necessary for a particular field of study, it is also necessary to provide training in using the necessary assistive technology (i.e. using JAWS or other screen readers, using adapted

keyboards and mice, etc.) efficiently.

All of the above recommendations are geared towards better preparing individuals with disabilities for employment; however, these may be of no help if biases amongst employers towards individuals with disabilities persist in the professional world. There should be workshops or conferences provided to employers to and provide guidance in hiring individuals with disabilities, so they can better understand the nature of diverse disabilities and the services available to help with accommodation costs. A company that has hired an individual with a disability who has been successful at securing employment could also host a presentation to demonstrate the productivity of the worker and the benefits that having such an employee working there has brought forth for the company.

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