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Jobs then – and now

Catherine S. Fichten

It was 1981 - the International Year of Disabled Persons. I was a new PhD applying for my first research grant on prejudice and discrimination. My 6-foot tall purchasing agent dad, to whom I had always looked up, both literally and figuratively, was new to using a wheelchair. He was able to continue working because he was fortunate enough to be one of the first Montrealers to get a seat on the new adapted transport bus. There was only one such bus in those days.

One day I accompanied him to the bank. I sat on the sidelines while he did his banking. A young guy came out from behind the counter that was too high for my dad to use. He patted him on the head, and politely said, "What can I do for you gramps?" My dad was flabbergasted. Everyone was addressed as "Sir" or "Madam" in those days. And NOBODY ever patted my dad's head. Well... maybe my mother. Since the teller spoke to my dad very slowly and loudly, everyone at the bank heard him. The message was clear: people who used a wheelchair were child-like, mentally slow, and without dignity.

I needed to look no further in my search for a suitable research topic on prejudice and discrimination. Now, 30 years later, I, too, have joined the ranks of people who use a wheelchair on occasion. But things are very different now, especially for young postsecondary students with disabilities.

I work at Dawson College. In the context of my work with the Adaptech Research Network, which I co-direct with Maria Barile and Jennison Asuncion, I have been studying facilitators and obstacles to postsecondary students with disabilities. Although things are by no means perfect, our research shows that many of the fights on behalf of college and university students with disabilities have been won.

For example, my college enrolls approximately 8000 students. About 1000 of them have a disability. The entire campus is accessible to students with all kinds of disabilities. Students have access to adapted software and hardware without too many hassles. Most professors are willing to grant needed accommodations. Faculty generally post PowerPoints online. Things are by no means perfect, but there have been many changes since 1981 and our findings show that students with disabilities are graduating in record numbers.

But how are graduates' job prospects? This is the focus of our current work, which is funded by a research grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Are there jobs out there for grads? What helps and what hampers getting a desirable job? What could be done to improve things? Our preliminary results show that about 2/3 of Canadian college and university students are employed a year after graduation and that most of them are satisfied with their jobs. Is this good? Well, it is certainly an improvement over my father's day, when my college enrolled fewer than 5 students with disabilities. Jobs for graduates with disabilities were not a concern. Why should it have been? There were virtually no new graduates. The main concern was getting in the door. Now, our findings show that students with disabilities are graduating in record numbers. Is a 2/3 employment rate good? Well, it is not horrible in these lean economic times. But is it good enough? Absolutely not!

What do students say prevents them from getting a job? In rank order, these are: their health, their disability, the possibility of losing some or all of their current income / additional supports, and being discouraged with looking. It is here that one can make changes. Changes to: policies that make it unattractive to hold a part-time job, policies that prevent people from getting work experience while in school, and policies that encourage (compel?) employers to hire graduates with disabilities. Job-related workshops sponsored by colleges and universities that are tailored towards concerns of students with disabilities could also help.

For my part, I think that such changes are now merely a matter of time. As the baby boomer generation retires, there will be lower unemployment and a greater need for "knowledge workers." The future looks good for newly minted college and university graduates.

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My employment story

Paula Ann Stewart

I would like to start this story by saying the single most important approach that I have adopted for anything in my life is to focus on wellness and not illness; to focus on ability