

# Employment Opportunities for College Graduates with Disabilities: A Step Forward

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## Research Articles

**Abstract:** Since data show that students with disabilities graduate from college at the same rate as their nondisabled peers, it is time to examine employment of recent graduates. Here we report on a trend toward higher levels of employment for college graduates who were integrated into "regular" educational settings since the 1990s. To illustrate this phenomenon, we summarize our findings of a study on graduates with and without disabilities at three Canadian junior/community colleges.

**Key Words:** employment, college, students

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### Introduction

Our goal is to examine the employment picture of individuals with disabilities, with a focus on recent college graduates. In doing so, we review trends in employment of Canadians with disabilities and highlight aspects of the current realities. Within the disability rights movement, any time the issues of unemployment and poverty have been discussed in the last three decades, the discrepancy between more and less optimistic data has been debated. Here, we focus on discrepancies among our findings on recent junior/community college graduates, census information, and perceptions within the disability community. In particular, we examine the reasons for discrepancies and attempt an integration of views.

### The Perception

In the last decade, it has been reported that persons with disabilities make up an economi-

cally marginalized group with a high level of unemployment (Shier, Graham, & Jones, 2009). For example, Statistics Canada, a federal government agency that collects census information and analyzes data, reported that between 1993 and 2001, "people who had not graduated from high school were over-represented in the population of 'chronically unemployed,' as were ... people with disabilities" (2005, p. 1). Many people, including persons with disabilities, believe that over 70% of people with disabilities are unemployed (see Taylor, 1998). The view that having a disability precludes individuals from employment may influence some non-disabled individuals, including high school and employment professionals, to fail to encourage the current generation of individuals with disabilities to pursue postsecondary education to the same extent as those without disabilities.

### The Reality

Statistics Canada (2008b) reported census data for 2006. This showed that in 2006, 51% of Canadians with disabilities, compared to 75% of nondisabled Canadians, were employed and that only 5% of each group were unemployed. However, in the same report they also reported that 44% of Canadians with disabilities, compared to 20% of nondisabled Canadians, were not in the labor force (i.e., those who "were unwilling or unable to offer or supply labor services under conditions existing in their labor markets, that is, they were neither employed nor unemployed"<sup>1</sup>).

Why is there such a large discrepancy between views of people with disabilities and the statisticians? First, perceptions of "unemploy-

ment" may reflect the large numbers of people with disabilities who are "not in the labor force." Difficulties finding jobs, inadequate job accommodations, widespread views about job discrimination (Shier, Graham, & Jones, 2009), such as not being granted a job interview, negative attitudes, lack of support networks, difficulties with adapted transit systems and irregular scheduling of overtime work, and social policies that discourage work (e.g. loss of disability benefits may have prevented people from looking for a job, making them part of the "not in the labor force" group).

Second, the perception of massive unemployment may be based on the period of the late 1990s to early 2000s, during which many persons with disabilities in the 35 to 60 age group found themselves consistently unemployed or underemployed, despite some college or university education (R. Arcuri, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

Third, another justification for the high unemployment view may be that unemployment statistics do not take into account duration of disability (i.e., acquired in childhood vs. adulthood). The group of people with disabilities who acquired a disability during childhood are now part of the baby boomer generation. They acquired less than an equal education at the elementary and high school levels, since large numbers of them attended segregated schools before the "Year of Disabled Persons" proclamation by the United Nations in 1981. This generation, most of whom are still of working age, did not have access to needed educational accommodations or to remedial education, such as literacy programs, available to the rest of the population (Fichten, Bourdon, Creti, & Martos, 1987). One consistent piece of information mentioned within the disability community is the lack of opportunity for persons whose disability was present from an early age (R. Arcuri, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

## Social Model Lenses

According to the social model of disability, it is not the impairment, per se, but barriers, such as segregated education, lack of access to mainstream educational opportunities, inadequate financial resources, and problematic attitudes that have negative consequences throughout the life cycle. The consequences extend to areas such as employment, the quality of services for which one is able to advocate, as well as to where one could live and, in some cases, with whom one can live. It is not surprising that the disability rights movement contends that it is the difficulties that are encountered by people with disabilities that pose barriers that disable them and curtail their life chances. These barriers include lack of schooling and higher education and extend to finding work and suitable work environments (Oliver, 1990).

For example, Kapsalis (1999) clearly linked poor literacy skills to unemployment. The Canadian Council on Learning (2009) summarized findings about the barriers adults learners with disabilities encountered, as well as about the strategies and changes they recommended for overcoming these:

- *Physical accessibility.* In many cases, buildings or classrooms were inaccessible, while in other cases accessible public transportation was not available, and learners had no way to get to school.
- *Financial issues.* Programs and courses were often unaffordable for learners with disabilities, who also found it difficult to successfully negotiate the administrative demands of applying for student aid.
- *Attitudes.* Learners with disabilities reported that their instructors did not always allow for the disability related resources they required to learn, such as note-takers or additional time for tests. (p. 4)

## **A More Optimistic View**

On the other side of the coin, in recent years there has been a more optimistic outlook for two groups of persons with disabilities. The first group consists of people who became disabled in adulthood. The second group is made up of individuals who became disabled in childhood and were sent to regular schools – this group would have been students in the primary school system in the 1990s. The first group, having benefited from "regular" schooling, at least had equitable education. They likely also had work experience as well. The second group is the one that we concentrate on here: people with disabilities who had been "integrated" into the regular elementary and high school system. This provided them with better opportunities for subsequent postsecondary education and for entry into the labor market. We must note, however, that integrated education was not inclusive at all levels. Although things had changed in the academic realm, in extra-curricular areas of education, such as student activities, equal access was not always available.

## **Canadian Efforts to Equalize Opportunities**

In Canada, a number of programs have been put in place for persons with disabilities to rectify inequities in education and employment opportunities. Prior to 1980, when generations of persons with disabilities were attending segregated schools, it seemed obvious that dissimilar educational opportunities would be followed by unequal employment opportunities. As one product of this segregated approach explained, "I was slated to enter a sheltered workshop after I finished (segregated) school. But, because of my cerebral palsy, I failed the manual dexterity test. It is this fortunate failure that resulted in 'Plan B,' which ended in further education and a Master's degree in counseling" (F. Schipper, personal communication, December, 1987). It is only since the 1980s that Canada has put into place various programs to improve both the ed-

ucational and employment situations of persons with disabilities (Federal/Provincial/Territorial Social Services Ministers, 1998; Office des Personnes Handicapées du Québec, 1984).

In addition to programs related to employment, since the 1980s, as we noted earlier, there has been a trend to "integrate" children with disabilities into the regular educational system (Kierstead & Hanvey, 2001). Consequently, Canadian children with disabilities generally attended elementary and high school with their nondisabled peers. Data from the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS - a census based survey conducted by Statistics Canada) show that in 2001, 49% of youth with disabilities aged from fifteen to twenty-four and 53% of nondisabled youth successfully graduated from high school (Human Resources Development Canada, 2003). This qualified about half of both groups to continue to college and university. Although it would be of interest to know what proportion of high school graduates have a disability and what proportion of graduates with disabilities continues its education, we have not been able to find this information for Canada. This is an empirical question and research needs to address this topic.

Although estimates vary, over the last decade the number of students with disabilities attending postsecondary education has increased dramatically (AQICEBS, 2009; Bouchard & Veillette, 2005; CADSPPE, 1999; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2005), and we estimate that approximately 10% of North American postsecondary students have a disability of some sort (Fichten et al., 2003; Fichten, Jorgensen, Havel, & Barile, 2006; National Science Foundation, 2010; United States Government Accountability Office, 2009).

## **Work as a Vehicle of Social Participation**

A report prepared for the Office des Personnes Handicapées du Québec (Dugas & Guay, 2007) cites several studies acknowledging the importance of employment. These indicate

that a job is often seen not only as a means of earning a living and a vehicle for social participation, but also as much more. A job is seen as conferring status or social legitimacy, as well as rights. As such, its absence is recognized as one of the main risk factors of social exclusion (cf. Dumont, 2003). Indeed, lack of job security increases the risk of deterioration of interpersonal relations and various aspects of health. Similarly, unemployment often leads to loss of self-esteem (Beresford, 1996). This insecurity is also directly linked to various indicators of poverty and less favorable housing conditions; studies have shown that income inequality is associated with health inequalities, as reflected in lower life expectancy and premature mortality (Dugas & Guay, 2007; Hainard, 2003). Inadequate education, lack of employment experience, severity of the disability, and poor availability of needed work adaptations are cited as some of the most important causes of unemployment (Dugas & Guay, 2007).

### **Postsecondary Graduates with Disabilities**

A number of studies have shown that postsecondary graduates with and without disabilities have better employment outcomes than their counterparts with no postsecondary education and that the rates of employment for people who have a university degree are higher than that of individuals who did not complete university who, in turn, generally fare better than those who never went to college (e.g. Canadian Council on Social Development, nd, 2002, 2004; Horn & Berktold, 1999; Government of Canada, 1996; Nichols, 1998; Statistics Canada, 2008b; Stodden & Dowrick, 2000). In fact, Horn and Berktold (1999) reported over a decade ago that 67% of university graduates with disabilities and 73% of graduates without disabilities had full-time employment a year after obtaining their diploma. In Canada, recent findings of a study by the Nova Scotia Department of Education (2008) support these findings, as it shows strong similarities in employment between postsecondary graduates with

and without disabilities: 82% of junior/community college graduates and 80% of university graduates with disabilities were employed approximately a year after graduation.

### **Higher Education of People with Disabilities**

Many people acquire a disability later in life. For example, in 2001, the PALS census-based survey of the population of Canadians aged 15 and over showed that the proportion of junior/community college (i.e., mainly two year colleges) graduates with and without disabilities was very similar (16% for individuals with disabilities and 17% for those without; Human Resources Development Canada, 2003). The proportion of Canadian university graduates with disabilities, however, was considerably lower (11% and 20%, respectively), even though the sample with disabilities was much older than the general population (Human Resources Development Canada, 2003, Table C.6). By 2006, the percentage of nondisabled university graduates in Canada was 24%, but this represents individuals aged twenty-five to sixty-four rather than the fifteen to sixty-four age range reported in the 2001 PALS survey (Conference Board of Canada, 2009). Corresponding figures for individuals with disabilities are not available, making comparisons difficult.

Data from our studies (Jorgensen et al., 2003, 2005), as well as those of others both in Canada (e.g. Outcomes Group, 1998) and the United States (e.g. Wessel, Jones, Markle, & Westfall, 2009), show that students with disabilities, once they enter postsecondary education, have similar grades and that they graduate at the same rate as their nondisabled peers. Data on postsecondary students and graduates with disabilities indicate that most want to work (Hubka & Killean, 1996).

### **Recent Postsecondary Graduates: An Illustrative Example**

Most people entering postsecondary education do so with two objectives: to continue their education and to eventually find employment.

Recently, we examined employment outcomes of junior/community college graduates with and without disabilities. In 2005, we conducted a survey of graduates with and without disabilities from three of our province's largest junior/community colleges (these only enroll high school graduates) about 10 months after they obtained their diplomas (see Fichten et al., 2006 for additional details). We asked graduates what they were doing now and, if they were employed, how closely their job was linked to their program of studies. About one third of the 1,486 graduates from both three-year career/technical programs and two-year pre-university programs completed the survey. Twelve percent (i.e. 182) self-identified as having a disability such as a mobility impairment, a visual impairment, a learning disability, etc. Two-thirds of graduates with and without disabilities were women. Data on race were not collected, but the vast majority of the students (over 95%, we estimate) in the colleges in question are white. Approximately 60% of graduates with and without disabilities had been enrolled in a two-year pre-university program, while the remaining 40% graduated from three-year career/technical programs, such as nursing, mechanical engineering technology, and graphic design. Because over 80% of pre-university graduates, both with and without disabilities, continued their studies following graduation, here we summarize only the outcomes of graduates from three-year career/technical programs.

As can be seen in Table 1, the percentages of career/technical program graduates show few differences between those with and without disabilities. Approximately half of the graduates

were working full-time, whether they had a disability or not. An additional 14% to 15% were working part-time, and almost one third of each group was continuing their studies. A statistical test showed no significant difference between graduates with and without disabilities concerning whether their employment was related to their field of study. Indeed, the only important difference we found between graduates with and without disabilities was that graduates with disabilities in career/technical programs were less likely than their nondisabled counterparts to obtain employment in a field "closely" related to their field of study (Fichten et al., 2006). That employment of graduates with disabilities is related to their studies was also recently found both at McGill University (Wolforth, 2006) as well as in a very early large American study of university graduates (see Horn & Berkold, 1999).

Canadian statistics for people with and without disabilities in 2001 also show little difference in the employment rate of adults with and without disabilities (e.g. 89% vs. 93%, respectively; Statistics Canada, 2001, 2003). There is an important caveat, however, because the overall Statistics Canada (2008b) data show a substantial difference between the proportions of people with and without disabilities who are not in the labor force (i.e. 51% vs. 20%, respectively). Studies, such as the large scale British Household Panel Study (Bell & Heitmueller, 2009), which include individuals not actively in the labor force in their calculations, have shown a large gap between employment rates of people with and without disabilities.

**Table 1 Activities After Graduation – Career/Technical Graduates**

Group	Sample Size	Working Full-Time	Working Part-Time	Looking for Work	Studying	Unavailable for Work	Total
With a Disability	86	51%	15%	1%	30%	2%	100%
No Disability	540	49%	14%	3%	31%	3%	100%

The "not in the labor force" artifact was not present in our study of junior/community college graduates as the proportion of graduates with and without disabilities who were studying or not available to the labor force for other reasons were very similar. It is also noteworthy that our findings about what happens after graduation are similar to the results of a recent survey of Quebec university graduates (AQICEBS, 2006), which found that approximately two-thirds of the 61 university graduate respondents, all of whom had been registered for disability related services from their school, were employed. Similarly, recent data from McGill University show that 60% of a sample of individuals with disabilities who graduated two to three years earlier indicated that they were employed; most of the remaining 40% reported being enrolled in a graduate program, pursuing mainly Master's or Ph.D. degrees (Wolforth, 2006).

Such positive findings are also very similar to the results of a recent survey of 44,309 Ontario junior/community college graduates, most of whom did not have a disability (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2006). Here, the results show that, overall, for the entire student population, six months after graduation 55% of graduates were employed full time, 12% were employed part-time, 8% were unemployed and 25% were "Not in Labor Force - Graduates who were not looking for work, including those attending school full-time, traveling, or staying home for health reasons or because of family responsibilities" (p. 18). Results such as these are encouraging for high school graduates with disabilities who may be considering pursuing their education at the postsecondary level as well as for their families.

### **Moving Forward**

For future generations of persons with disabilities, many of whom will have postsecondary education, there will be more opportunities than in the past. Although the 2011 labor market is by no means as favorable as that in

2005, when we conducted our study, nevertheless, there are grounds for optimism. "Declining birth rates, concomitant slower growth of population and labor force is reducing the inflow of new workers. At the same time, aging population and the impending retirement years of the baby boomers will create a huge new demand for replacement workers" (WCG International Consultants Ltd., 2004, p. 119).

The present North American economy is knowledge-based and technology-driven, where physical ability and sensory acuity may not be prerequisites for employment or involvement in community life. Therefore, people with disabilities may have a greater opportunity to participate in the workforce and in all aspects of society. To realize this potential they, like others, must succeed in postsecondary education. Thus, it is vital that colleges and universities do everything they can to remove obstacles and provide conditions that support success for all learners, including those with disabilities. To remove barriers and support success for students with disabilities in our postsecondary institutions while further informing policy development, it is imperative that accurate information reflecting the realities of postsecondary communities is made available to concerned groups and individuals. This information should be made available in the hopes that it will: (a) help recruit, retain, and graduate students with disabilities, (b) ensure that these students have appropriate opportunities for further education and employment after they graduate, and (c) determine factors which influence academic outcomes that are unique to them and that are not evident from studies of nondisabled students. The overall goal of the research of the Adaptech Research Network, which participated in conducting our research on employment (Fichten et al., 2006), is to provide such information which, ultimately, will help students with disabilities graduate and successfully compete for positions in the workplace.

Here, we suggested that there may be a positive employment trend for persons with disabilities who pursue postsecondary education. This trend is already evident from the Canadian census data, which showed improvement for youth with disabilities in employment between 2001 and 2006 (Statistics Canada 2008a). Moreover, recent studies of both university (e.g. AQ-ICEBS, 2006) and junior/community college graduates show positive employment outcomes. For example, a recent report by the Nova Scotia Department of Education (2008) showed that 82% of junior/community college graduates and 80% of university graduates with disabilities were employed approximately one year after graduation. These findings differ substantially from the "70% of individuals with disabilities are unemployed" assumption of the past.

Another encouraging event for our positive outlook is that both education and employment were included as important articles in the United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Articles 24 (education) and 27 (employment). Recently, Canada has become a signatory of the Convention. This is an important event for Canada where both education and employment are under the jurisdictions of our 10 provinces, resulting in policy lags due to intergovernmental disagreements. The authors expect that the signing of this Convention will reduce administrative snafus and help achieve similarities among the provinces in education and employment policies and practices.

## Conclusion

The information we provide here is of crucial importance to all those working in the disability field. A key conclusion is the demonstration that when they are provided with the tools that diminish or eliminate barriers to equal education, individuals with disabilities can have the same opportunities as their nondisabled peers to obtain employment. Thus, our most important recommendation is that members of the disabili-

ty community, researchers, academics, rehabilitation counselors, campus disability service providers, and all others who work with individuals with disabilities engage in massive knowledge transfer to inform parents, students, and people who work at the high school level that employment opportunities for college and university graduates with disabilities are very promising indeed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Definitions are those used by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (see Statistics Canada, 2010).