

Help Wanted: What Student Services Professionals Can Do to Help Post-Secondary Students and Recent Graduates with Disabilities Find Work

*by Catherine Fichten, Mary Jorgensen, Laura King, Alice Havel,
Gilda Boffa, Alex Lussier and Christine Vo*

The increasing number of students with disabilities in our colleges and universities has resulted in large numbers of students and recent graduates with disabilities looking for meaningful employment. To better understand this trend, the Adaptech Research Network and the Quebec Association for Equity and Inclusion in Post-Secondary Education (AQEIPS) teamed up to conduct a two-phase pilot study wherein we carried out structured conversations with 10 professionals involved with student employment and distributed questionnaires to 25 students and recent graduates with disabilities who were currently employed. The goal of this study was to provide information for college professionals regarding what can – and should – be done to assist students and recent graduates with disabilities in their search for employment.

Professionals we talked with include leaders of community disability organizations and specialized employment counsellors, as well as to campus-based disability service providers, employment counsellors, and career counsellors. We asked them who in their institution helps potential graduates with and without disabilities find jobs, who they believe should be doing this, what they think that students with disabilities want when it comes to employment services, what potential barriers students with disabilities face when seeking employment, and what has helped them get jobs.

Students and recent graduates included 11 recent junior/community college graduates (9 females, 2 males) and 14 university students and recent graduates (6 females, 6 males, 2 agender or transgender). Participants' self-identified disabilities included, in descending order of frequency, mental illness, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, learning disability, autism spectrum disorder, mobility impairment, blindness/low vision, limitation in use of hands/arms, chronic health problems, neurological impairment, and hearing impairment. We asked students and recent graduates how they found out about their present job; what helped them get their job; how long it took them to find their job; and if, when, and how they disclosed their disability. We also asked them what they thought that post-secondary professionals could do to help students and recent graduates with disabilities find a job.

Students and recent graduates indicated that the following, in descending order, helped students with disabilities find out about job opportunities:

- contacts/networking
- employment websites
- already working in the field
- internship/co-op/apprenticeship
- volunteering
- campus professionals (employment counsellor, disability service provider, etc.)
- community employment services
- specialized disability related employment services

As for what helped students actually get their jobs, students and recent graduates indicated the following, in descending order:

- job skills
- resumé/curriculum vitae (CV)
- contacts/networking
- academic credentials
- interview skills
- internship/co-op/apprenticeship

Our results also show that the college graduates took, on average, 3½ months to find their job (range was 2 to 12 months) and that they worked an average of 28 hours per week (range was 8 to 40 hours/week). None of the participants disclosed their disability on their cover letter or on their CV. Given the literature on disability disclosure (e.g. Devlin, 2015; Whaley, 2016), this seems to be a common and appropriate strategy. The results also show that college graduates seem to be poorly informed about the services available at their college to help them find a job.

In response to the question regarding what campus professionals could do to help students and recent graduates with disabilities find jobs, the results indicate the following, in descending order:

- provide information on job search strategies
- maintain an updated job bank
- present CV-writing workshops
- offer one-on-one employment counselling
- host job fairs
- present interview skills workshops
- arrange for volunteer opportunities
- identify employers who hire students with disabilities
- make referrals to external employment services
- identify employers in the student's field of study
- provide web resources on disclosure (see: McMaster University, undated, in the reference list).

An accessible online tip sheet (available at http://adaptech.org/wp-content/uploads/Tips_for_Students_a18MJ.docx) was prepared for students and recent graduates with disabilities. This highlights the importance of contacts and networking when looking for a job. Being proactive before the interview is of utmost importance. To be proactive, it is important that students and recent graduates with disabilities decide, in advance, whether or not they are going to disclose their disability during the interview, and if they are, when and how they are going to do this while putting their best foot forward. If the employer is aware of their disability, the candidate should anticipate concerns they may have and be prepared to address them. Being proactive also involves doing research about the company and the job before the interview. When looking for a job, students and recent graduates need to keep an open mind and consider whether part-time employment may be a better fit. Finally, in preparation for applying for a job, applicants must also be aware of how to optimize their chances of being selected for an interview and ultimately being hired. This can be achieved by preparing a two-page CV (as opposed to one page – see: Yang, undated, in the reference list) and developing job-specific skills as well as other skills, such as bilingualism, to make them ideal candidates for the job.

An accessible online tip sheet for professionals (available at http://adaptech.org/wp-content/uploads/Tips_for_Professionals_a18MJ.docx) is also online. Most importantly, this tip sheet highlights the need for collaboration between disability service providers and employment and career counsellors in colleges. By working together, they can offer workshops on CV preparation and mock interviews that meet the needs of students with disabilities. Collaboration among college personnel can help in the organization of events and activities that can help students and recent graduates with disabilities get jobs. These include the following: hosting job fairs that include representatives from organizations and employers who have a history of equity employment, hiring students for part-time work on campus, organizing job shadowing and on-site visits to various work settings, and creating opportunities to volunteer on campus. Professionals helping students in their job search also need to prepare applicants to address any questions about their disability and its impact on employment. This includes whether or not they should disclose their disability; if they choose to disclose, when and how they should do this, and if and when they should request accommodations. Employment counsellors can also publicize the employment services and resources that are available on campus in an accessible manner. Professionals helping students with disabilities find a job may wish to look through an updated online job bank with the student and identify postings that are well-matched to their needs and interests. To facilitate the transition to the workforce, professionals can, before graduation, refer students with disabilities to community organizations that will help in their job search. Furthermore, it is important for the college to publicize programs such as the Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) (more information available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/funding/canada-summer-jobs.html>), which provides wage subsidies to employers to create employment for those in underrepresented groups, including youth with disabilities. Finally, a useful strategy for colleges is to allow recent graduates continued access to the college employment website.

Consistent with the findings of Marcil et al. (2016/2017), our results also show the importance of contacts and networking, prior work, internship or volunteering experience, one's skill set, and the recommendation not to initially disclose one's disability in the cover letter or CV unless it is absolutely necessary (see Devlin, 2015; Whaley, 2016).

Although these findings are not unique, they are important in several ways. First, they reflect not only the opinions of professionals but also those of the 25 students and recent graduates surveyed who were successful in finding work. Students looking for employment may find this encouraging and may be more apt to follow the advice given by their peers. The findings also provided the content for the tip sheets that are available online.

Professionals were asked who on campus they believed should be helping students with disabilities find employment. Professionals felt that disability service providers often know their students and have their confidence, while employment counsellors have the benefit of extensive expertise in job hunting. Students with disabilities also expressed concern that disability-related issues, including disclosure and accommodations, were not always addressed by employment counsellors and posed a challenge for them. Disability service providers felt that even though they had some knowledge of job search techniques, helping students and recent graduates find jobs was not part of their mandate, nor did they have the expertise or the time required to provide this additional service. Employment counsellors, on the other hand, did not feel they had adequate knowledge of the wide array of needs of students with disabilities. This highlights the importance of collaboration among campus career counsellors, employment counsellors, and disability service providers.

Universities often have career planning and employment services that offer many services to help students find jobs. McGill University and Concordia University in Montreal are but two examples of such institutions. Some go so far as to host disability-specific activities, such as company information sessions for students with disabilities. Meanwhile, other universities have incorporated employment services directly within their campus disability office (e.g. Queens University).

As most colleges are smaller than universities, they may not have the resources required to provide a full array of services. They could, however, work collaboratively within cities and regions to provide more comprehensive services for their students and recent graduates with and without disabilities. For example, collaborative efforts could facilitate the development of resources, such as sharing a common job bank and tips on CV preparation and cover letter writing. The two tip sheets prepared and put online by Adaptech serve as another example of material that can be useful to college disability service providers, as well as to career and employment counsellors across colleges.

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Dr. Catherine Fichten teaches Psychology at Dawson College, where she co-directs the Adaptech Research Network/Réseau de Recherche Adaptech, a bilingual multidisciplinary research team that conducts research on higher education and disability. She can be reached at catherine.fichten@mcgill.ca.

Mary Jorgensen received a BA in Psychology from Bishop's University and is currently pursuing a Master's degree at Athabasca University. She is a Research Associate at the Adaptech Research Network. She can be reached at mjorgensen07@ubishops.ca.

Laura King works as a teacher-researcher at Cégep André-Laurendeau where she has taught English as a Second Language for over 18 years. A Research Associate with the Adaptech Research Network, she offers workshops and lectures on student success, screening and accommodation, and ICTs for students with reading problems, LDs, and other disabilities. She can be reached at laura.king@clairendeau.qc.ca.

Dr. Alice Havel was until recently the Coordinator of the Student AccessAbility Centre at Dawson College. Currently, she is a Research Associate with the Adaptech Research Network, where her focus is on the development of inclusive teaching practices through universal design. She can be reached at ahavel@dawsoncollege.qc.ca.

Gilda Boffa received a Bachelor's degree in Communication Studies and a Master's degree in Film Studies from Concordia University, a certificate in Arabic Language and Culture from UQAM, and a Bachelor's degree in translation from the Université de Montréal. She is currently the Director of Communications and Linguistic Services at AQEIPS (Quebec Association for Equity and Inclusion in Post-Secondary Education). She can be reached at communications@aqeips.qc.ca.

Alex Lussier is an undergraduate at the Université de Montréal where she is studying International Relations; she has been a research assistant at the Adaptech Research Network and Cégep Andre-Laurendeau since January 2015. She can be reached at alex.lussier@hotmail.com

Christine Vo is a student at Concordia University and a tech specialist for the Adaptech Research Network, and she can be reached at christine.vo@hyperqube.ca