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## Newsletter 58

### What Makes Studying at College Easier?

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What are the factors that make college studies easier for you? More difficult? These are the questions we posed to 70 students with disabilities registered to receive disability related services and to 143 students without disabilities at Dawson College. Dawson, located in Montreal, is the largest English language college (Cégep) in Quebec. It is important to note that due to restrictions set by our provincial granting agency, responses from students who had only a learning disability could not be included in our initial analysis. Nevertheless, about a third of the 70 students in our sample who had another impairment also indicated that they had a learning disability. The good news is that we plan to analyze the responses of students with learning disabilities in our own independent study. We will let you know what they had to say in another issue of the newsletter.

#### **What makes studying in college easier?**

About half of the items mentioned most frequently by students with disabilities were not disability-specific but were shared by students without disabilities. These include: good teachers, the overall college environment, availability of computers on campus, availability of support and help, and the Dawson Learning Centre. This centre provides tutoring and assists with studying, writing, and exam taking skills.

The most important difference between students with and without disabilities concerned disability-related accommodations. It was not surprising that disability-specific accommodations were the most frequently noted items by students with disabilities. Helpful accommodations included: specialized services for students with disabilities in general, including the opportunity to preregister for courses, having a quiet place to take exams, extended time for exams and assignments, a note taker in class, and policies which permit students with disabilities to take a reduced number of courses and still be considered "full time students."

Important items unique to non-disabled students were the facilitating role of: friends, the library, a good schedule, the diversity of course offerings, their financial situation, and good study skills.

#### **What makes studying at college harder?**

Again, most issues noted by students with disabilities were also cited by non-disabled students: bad teachers, too many and difficult courses, poor study skills, bad schedules, the college environment, and language issues such as not being sufficiently fluent in the language of instruction and professors with heavy accents.

Students with disabilities also noted that their impairment and their health were obstacles, that there were problems related to the accessibility of their courses, and that the nature of accommodations and services for students with disabilities also caused difficulties.

Non-disabled students also mentioned obstacles that students with disabilities did not bring up. These include: difficulties with finances, holding a job, transportation problems, personal issues, high stress, and poor exam and assignment schedules.

#### **What do these findings mean?**

First, the results show that students, whether they have a disability or not, are first and foremost students and subject to the same conditions as their classmates who have no disabilities. Teachers, schedules, the availability of computers, the campus environment and the like affect everyone. Second, the results show that disability related accommodations are important and

that when these work well they make things a lot easier for students.

### **What can colleges do to improve the quality of life and the academic success of their students?**

Do adapted services in colleges help students with disabilities succeed? Do student services professionals have an active role to play in facilitating these achievements? The answer, according to the students in our study is clearly, "Yes."

Our studies at Dawson College support the assertion that students see disability-related services and accommodations as absolutely essential to their academic success. Such findings should encourage government agencies to maintain, if not increase, the financing available for these types of accommodations.

The large numbers of students with multiple impairments and the high incidence of learning disabilities, even among students who had other impairments, suggests that college services which help students with learning skills and strategies are vital. Our findings show that not only do such services help students with disabilities but that these also facilitate success for "multicultural," second language, and foreign students as well as non-disabled students in general.

If you want to know more about the study you can download the full report in English in either PDF (<http://adaptech.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/pubs/PAREA05FinalReport.pdf>) or Word (<http://adaptech.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/pubs/PAREA05FinalReport.doc>). The executive summary is available in French, also in PDF (<http://adaptech.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/pubs/PAREA05FinalReportExF.pdf>) and Word (<http://adaptech.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/pubs/PAREA05FinalReportExF.doc>).

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