

COU Academic Colleagues Committee Report to the Ontario Tech U AC

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Synopsis

This report provides an overview of two meetings held on December 13 & 14, 2022. The meetings focused on accessibility and the experiences of students with disabilities. The meetings were held in a hybrid format (both in-person and online).

Background

The objective of the COU Academic Colleagues committee is to support the COU council, consisting of the executive heads of the institution members of the COU, with feedback from academic colleagues concerning COU initiatives.

Meeting Summaries

COU Colleagues Meeting (December 13 & 14, 2022)

Evening meeting, December 13, 2022

Accessibility and the experiences of students with disabilities

Kim Clark, Professor, Department of Anthropology, and Assistant Dean (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Decolonization), Faculty of Social Science, Western University, shared the preliminary findings of her research on accessibility and the experiences of students with disabilities. The project was conducted over the summer (2022). The research team was troubled by the “rush back to ‘normal.’” They wished to harness the lessons learned during the pandemic that was beneficial for (some) students. Dr. Clark believes that we are going to see more disabled students and colleagues with this ‘mass disabling project’ that is the pandemic. She also noted that concerns with disability is one of the first things to drop away with the push for EDID (equity, diversity, Indigenization, and decolonization). Both equity and disability always have workload issues; it is more work for instructors to teach with care for equity and disability. For Dr. Clark, the pandemic and concerns about COVID-accessibility has led to a ‘reset of her teaching.’ It led to her concern that there should be alternative ways to access the course materials, especially since all kinds of things can happen. She also wondered what would happen if learning outcomes were prioritized, rather than focussing on controlling behavior (e.g., being in class)? What would happen if her teaching focused on helping students to meet learning outcomes?

Dr. Clark’s research team included students with lived experience of disability. They conducted a survey and received 83 responses. This was followed by 15 interviews of about 45 mins. Students did interviews with their peers. The students wanted to say a lot about their experiences. Rather than focussing on services, they approached students as experts on what makes the university accessible or not. The survey used open-ended questions rather than trying to predict responses. The focus was on what makes them feel welcomed and feel like they belonged, or not. The vast majority of the students had an invisible disability, and many had multiple disabilities. One quarter of the students were undiagnosed, and one third were not registered with accessibility services. Thirty-four percent declared problems with their mental health; 35 % had cognitive/learning related disabilities; fewer had sensory/physical issues.

The researchers found that students identified:

1. hidden curriculum issues – don't assume students know how to do things or where to find them; they may not know how to ask for help;
2. instructors need to provide information (like instructions) in multiple formats, not just as announcements in class. This is important even for those who are present in class;
3. instructors can provide lecture slides in advance to facilitate note-taking;
4. accessible formatting for documents and websites is needed: e.g., the heading function helps with screen readers; PDFs may be inaccessible, but ppt is accessible because screen readers work well with ppt; in documents, contrasts between font and background need to be sharp; readings need to have audio versions or accessible PDFs;
5. always have a break in classes longer than one hour (in person or remote synchronous) – don't ask if a break is needed because some students need predictable timing for medical reasons; at the start of class, announce when the break will occur;
6. Provide multiple ways to participate and demonstrate learning: e.g., flexible opportunities for participation; participate with/without camera, microphone or chat; preference for the chat is gendered (women tend to prefer the chat, while men often prefer speaking aloud);
7. Flexible deadlines is the top accessibility need; there are way to implement flexible deadlines that help both you & students; e.g., late days bank (6 days allowed over the term; use a form to register that students are using the late days as needed, so they don't need to email, ask permissions, etc.); the form will create a spreadsheet;
8. hybrid delivery is very important for students; most students prefer in-person learning, but also like having the option for bad days when feeling unwell; lectures can be live stream or recorded with captioning; recordings are useful for many students, such as students with ADHD who may listen at twice the speed to help them focus on the content;
9. asynchronous delivery was highly rated by many of the students because it allowed for flexibility in managing their daily lives.

There are many policy and systemic changes needed in universities, but there are also small changes that can be done at the instructor level. Dr. Clark also noted the issue of "access friction," where some things that may help one student may also make things more inaccessible for other students. Equal numbers of students said they preferred in-person vs. asynchronous. Few students liked synchronous online lectures (perhaps due to the requirements of camera on, etc.). Many students use recordings, as well as synchronous classes, to reinforce their learning.

The research also found that by requiring students to be in the classroom, you may be ableist. It is also important to have sufficient support in the classroom for hybrid or hi-flex classes to work well. The hybrid or hi-flex classes have the potential for being the most inclusive in terms of accessibility. Good practice would use inclusive and trauma-informed pedagogy. It is important to think about what **MUST** be in person, and *why*, versus doing things the same way because it is the *only* way we've done it. The main thing to think about is whether or not the students are meeting the learning outcomes.

Professor Clark's article, "How accessibility for disabled university students can benefit all students" in *The Conversation* can be found at <https://theconversation.com/how-accessibility-for-disabled-university-students-can-benefit-all-students-189180>. COU's resources are located at: <https://accessiblecampus.ca/>.

Morning meeting, December 14, 2022

1. Information Sharing

- The group shared some of the challenges that their universities are facing.
- Issues include: huge skill gaps, especially in math and chemistry, and regarding ability to read articles; metacognition is a challenge; group work problems; student performance; financial struggles. There is a mismatch in high school preparation not matching what is taught in university. Some folks are developing diagnostic tests for students to do some self-preparation based on diagnostic test.
- Fiscal challenges are growing with fewer students enrolling.
- Students are struggling with in-person communication skills and interpersonal skills. Mediating conflict is hard for students.
- The process around EDI+ hires seems to get bogged down easily.

2. COU President's Report (Steve Orsini)

- The 60th anniversary event was successful.
- Four universities underwent audits by the Auditor General and the reports were recently released.

3. COU Internal Updates

- The remainder of the meeting was composed of updates from various committees.