Focus Group

AccessAbility Knows No Limits (June 24, 2020)

Capilano Students' Union

Context

On June 24, 2020, the Capilano Students' Union hosted a focus group to better understand how students with accessibility needs are navigating post-secondary education at Capilano University during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

This focus group was scheduled to coincide with the 2020 theme of accessibility awareness week, "AccessAbility Knows No Limits," and so we hoped to focus on how students are persevering and innovatively overcoming barriers and obstacles.

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We are grateful to the Social Planning and Research Council of British Columbia (SPARC BC) for providing the Capilano Students' Union with a $500 grant, without whom this focus group engaging students would not have been possible.

Leadership

Facilitator

Emily Bridge
President
Email: president@csu.bc.ca

Staff Lead

Lori Kosciuw
Director, Advocacy
Email: lkosciuw@csu.bc.ca

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Summary

Students with accessibility needs are very proactive in ensuring that they have the right support systems in place to succeed as a student. They seem very comfortable with approaching Accessibility Services when they encounter roadblocks. Most students deal directly with faculty members to communicate their accommodation needs at the beginning of their course. Faculty members' responses can be varied but, on the whole, we heard from this group that students' accommodation requests are honoured.

Students with accessibility needs are often in the position of acting as an advocate or support for other students in the class. As people who experience these barriers, they step up to help their peers — but this emotional labour can have a toll on one's mental health, and so more support services would help them set up appropriate boundaries.

We heard that students with accessibility needs sometimes hesitate to use additional support services at Capilano University, as they feel that other students may need the resources more. Their needs are complex and specific, which leads to a feeling that the support services available may not be enough to support them.

The main issue surfaced in the focus group was the importance of communication. Living in the online world makes communication that much more essential in feeling supported and heard. We heard that regular lines of communication with faculty members in terms of expectations, office hours, and accommodations are keys to success. We heard that adopting clear, consistent, and uniform approaches to using online learning platforms would support student productivity and comfort in completing course work. This would reduce the time needed to learn each course's platform.

In terms of positive outcomes, students with accessibility needs were grateful for family, friends, and support systems that they have put in place in their life. We heard that not commuting to campus provides more time for hobbies, time with friends, and down time. Learning from home has also provided a quieter, softer environment. This was a relief for students that had trouble concentrating in a noisier environment.

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What we asked, and what we heard

Have you experienced additional barriers due to COVID-19?

→ The format of some online exams has not been compatible with accommodation software; one participant was forced to hire a private tutor to translate for them

→ Students in music programs have no tools for online assessments

→ There are challenges accessing instructors and university services; some respond quickly, others only after several days

→ All courses should be delivered through a consistent platform

→ Participation marks changing from physical presence to additional written work is a challenge, and takes more time and energy to meet expectation

→ Students are having to play additional support roles for one another in the classroom (assisting others with technology or the platform, for example)

Have you approached Accessibility Services for accommodations?

40% YES

60% NO
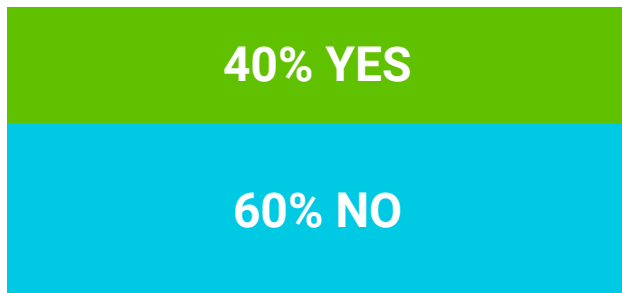
→ It is difficult to get reimbursed for having to hire private tutors

→ Allowing more time for exams is not an appropriate "one size fits all" approach for online platforms

Have you received support from faculty members and, if so, how?

→ Some students have the same faculty members consistently, who become more familiar and comfortable with the process for students' accommodations

→ Some faculty members have been very supportive in

demonstrably ensuring that all students' needs are met

→ A faculty member allowed for an assignment to be handed in as a video recording instead of in writing as an accommodation

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Did you rely more heavily on personal support systems, or CapU's services?

➔ Students reported relying on personal support systems, such as family or friends, more than the university's systems

➔ Students were worried about "taking" university support services from students who might need the support more

➔ Students were hesitant to create support systems at the university that wouldn't follow them after completing post-secondary

➔ Students felt that their needs were too complex for CapU counselling services, especially drop-in sessions

What "surprise" positive outcomes has COVID-19 surfaced for you?

➔ Freedom learning from home

➔ More free time to enjoy hobbies and spend time with friends, without the challenging commute to one of the campuses

➔ The "old way" [before the pandemic] was too loud and noisy, making it difficult

➔ Students didn't feel like they needed to "fight for a seat at the table," because everyone else was experiencing challenges

➔ This has been an opportunity for students to see who around them in life is genuinely supportive; support systems really shine

➔ This has been an opportunity for people to demonstrate how much they care for one another

➔ Some students reported more on-on-one time with instructors