

Disabled scholars say they often rely on ad hoc agreements to get the accommodations they need to do their jobs. The lack of formal recognition has left many feeling unprotected and unwelcome in the academic workplace

# ABLEISM IN THE ACADEMY

by John Loepky





**W**ÉRO LEDUC DIDN'T intend to become the first Deaf full-time professor at a Quebec university. "I didn't really want to become a university teacher. It was not necessarily my dream career," she says. "I feel, you know, like someone who [got] pregnant and didn't think about it beforehand."

Whether she wanted to or not, Dr. Leduc has been blazing a trail as she builds her career – and it's come with no shortage of barriers. Even now, as the head of a lab called Disability, Deafhood and Innovation at Université du Québec à Montréal, she says she has had to fight to be provided with her own LSQ (Langue des signes québécoise) interpreter. And though her employer did eventually meet some of her requests, it was up to her to find funding from the province for other workplace accommodations that seemingly fell outside the normal scope of resources available to employees, like notetaking and assistance with vetting uncaptioned videos for class use. "It was a very chaotic process," she says.

The persistence that Dr. Leduc has had to demonstrate and the institutional reluctance that she's encountered in getting her needs recognized and attended to – not to mention the professional needs of those who support Dr. Leduc in her work, like the interpreter – have, throughout her career, discouraged the scholar. "It's still an issue today," she says. "There's still a lot of work to do."

Faculty who are Deaf, disabled and Mad (a term some with mental illness have reclaimed) have a different path to accommodations than students. At most Canadian universities, student accommodations are handled by a central accessibility office. The system that students follow has been criticized as being convoluted, dehumanizing and often poorly managed, but at least a formal, consistent system exists. At the University of Regina, for example, students can complete a form with their health-care providers that lists specific accommodations to be put into place and includes diagnostic criteria for the health professional to fill out. Universities across the country offer similar versions of this approach. For many disabled students, if you don't have a diagnosis, you don't get the supports you need.

When it comes to accommodations for faculty members and staff, however, the process is even more difficult. Many say that they face an opaque system of informal agreements, battles with human resources departments and frustrating conversations with various levels of university bureaucracy. Jay Dolmage, professor at the University of Waterloo and the founding editor of the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* (CJDS), says that this distinct lack of reliable and actionable accessibility policies for employees nationwide has dire consequences.

"The policies that do exist largely do not centrally fund accommodations. This means that accommodations come out of individual department and unit budgets, and [they] compel faculty to disclose to their chairs and deans," he says. "The result is a culture of silence and passing [as non-disabled]. The result is the attrition of disabled teachers and researchers."

The number of disabled faculty in Canada is difficult to quantify. Anecdotally, the vast majority don't choose to disclose. One reason may be that there is little to nothing to be gained from doing so. Recent research published in CJDS by the University of Ottawa's Natasha Saltes found that in the 2017-18 academic year, only 42 of 96 Canadian universities surveyed had a staff accessibility and accommodations policy on their website or available directly through human resources.

One disabled academic at a postsecondary institution in western Canada, who asked to speak without attribution, says their university insists on addressing accommodations on a case-by-case basis, which has left them without the support they need. The scholar points out that by treating workplace accommodations as a personal issue rather than a systemic one, universities have undercut disabled employees' ability to organize for better working conditions.

"[With] the process to get accommodations, there's a lot of privacy and confidentiality involved," the faculty member says. "I think people are ashamed of it [and] the university is, in a way, trying to make me feel ashamed, or like I don't deserve accommodations." The personal and professional toll of seeking accommodations is why some disabled faculty choose not to disclose a disability to their university – and it's why they often suggest that their disabled colleagues do the same.

Sarah Madoka Currie, a PhD candidate at U of Waterloo who also serves in a teaching role, says the same approach applies to mental-health disabilities and accommodations. “Particularly in the case of mental disability or madness, a lot of them [faculty members] choose to just not disclose at all and do off-the-books deals with their department, with as little of it in writing as possible,” she says. “The obvious problem is if that plan starts to fail or go awry, nothing is in writing and you can’t challenge it .... You’re basically operating on good faith.”

It’s a tendency that has left Ms. Currie wondering if she wants to continue down the academic path and seek out a more permanent faculty gig. She worries that by working in this environment, she’s letting the university off the hook from engaging in widespread institutional change.

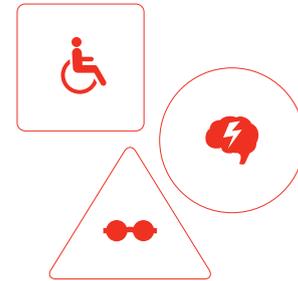
Some also choose not to seek accommodations because of harmful stereotypes associated with disability. Danielle Lorenz, who is pursuing a PhD at the University of Alberta and is an associate editor at CJSD, says that few people she knows in higher education disclose their disabilities because of the perception that it will prevent them from putting in the work necessary to land a rare tenured position.

“Just because the whole tenure and promotion process is based on output and quantitative measure, if you’re not producing because you’re sick, well, according to the academy, you’re obviously not a good fit,” she says. These judgements are made, she adds, even though the circumstances impacting that person’s productivity are often outside of their control.

Dr. Dolmage, who does not identify as disabled, says he’s heard countless similar stories from disabled colleagues. Taken together, these experiences demonstrate just how deeply ableism (discrimination or systemic bias based on one’s disability) runs in university operations and structures.

“The message is, clearly, that universities do not expect to have disabled faculty or staff, and the culture of ableism helps to ensure that most disabled faculty will feel it is dangerous to disclose a disability.” And yet, he says that change is possible.

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Universities in Canada have a duty to accommodate disabled employees according to provincial human rights law and other provincial policies. In Ontario, universities must meet certain employment and workplace accessibility standards as set out by the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). Both pieces of legislation advise employers to take a case-by-case approach to workplace accommodations.

Under the AODA specifically, public sector employers and organizations with 50 or more employees are also expected to create and document a process for individualized accommodation plans. At U of Waterloo, the human resources department offers a set of guidelines for employees on how to proceed with an accommodation request directly through the institution’s occupational health team.

“The university prioritizes assisting employees with disabilities in a manner which respects the dignity of each employee and works to find a solution that meets the unique needs of each individual, promotes integration and full participation in campus life, and ensures confidentiality,” says Rebecca Elming, senior manager of media relations at U of Waterloo.

Work is underway at the university to take those guidelines a step further by replacing them with an official policy outlining employee accommodations. A policy stands to make the pathway to accommodations enforceable in a way that the guidelines are not, and the policy-development process at the university would open those guidelines to employee feedback as they are revised and approved. The faculty association (which the policy-development committee has already consulted, along with the University of Waterloo Staff Association, the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 793, the provost and specific university employees) says one of its main priorities for this policy is the creation of a central office separate from the human resources department to manage and facilitate accommodations. It’s also aiming for a centralized or cost-recovery approach to funding accommodations as a way of preventing reasonable requests from possibly being rejected due to limited funds in a unit (accommodations are currently funded through the employee’s home faculty or department).

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Dr. Dolmage is among the staff members who have been consulted during the drafting of the new policy. He emphasizes that the document could go a long way in making positive change for disabled employees at U of Waterloo and adds that it could set an important standard for universities across the country.

For her part, Dr. Leduc is a little more skeptical about new policies and practices. She says she feels that as of late, they are at the whim of whatever new equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiative is put in place and disabled faculty members like her are along for the ride. She adds that most of the postsecondary sector’s efforts at EDI are “like a façade” created to suit the requirements of federal funding agencies like the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), instead of sincerely aspiring to tangible equity and inclusion that people with disabilities are still seeking.

Dr. Leduc holds the Canada Research Chair (CRC) in cultural citizenship of Deaf people and cultural equity practices, and in this role she and the researchers in her lab are examining the social and cultural participation of Deaf people. The researcher points to the CRC program itself, which is administered by SSHRC, as an example of one such EDI initiative that in practice, she says, hasn’t done much to help disabled scholars. Universities must show proof of a formal EDI plan in order to be eligible for CRC funding. Yet even with these EDI plans in place “it’s still very hard for Deaf and disabled people to have real access to the university,” Dr. Leduc says.

Despite her criticism of universities, Dr. Leduc says it’s important for her to simultaneously hold the dueling beliefs that academic institutions are largely inaccessible and that things are starting to shift for the better. Earlier this year, UQAM struck a committee on equity and inclusion for disabled people under the banner of a two-year inclusion strategy. The committee will soon begin community consultations on how to improve accessibility, specifically in the recruitment and retention of disabled staff and faculty members, with the end goal of providing administration with actionable recommendations.

“Critique can be perceived sometimes as pessimistic, but I’m not a pessimist,” Dr. Leduc says. “I can be both discouraged by the slowness of change in the university and, at the same time, I can also be optimistic .... I think it’s important to honour the complexity.”

Part of the benefit of bringing more disabled faculty into public academic life, according to those interviewed for this story, is that their lived experience can inform their teaching in a way that welcomes more disabled students into universities. For Ms. Currie, her identity as Mad is key to what she brings to pedagogical discussions.

“I do feel like a lot of my value to my university is ... actually how I think so much differently than everyone else at the table,” she says. “Had you not included me, or had the system worked and eliminated me, I think some of those ideas would be lost.”

For the faculty member working in western Canada, lived experience with disability has led to a more inclusive classroom environment. “My own experience has made me a much better teacher,” they say. “My class is more [focused on] slow pedagogy now: less work, less speed, more time to think and reflect, and work. My own slowness slowed it down for everybody and I think that’s better for all of us.”

Ms. Lorenz agrees. By taking up space in these environments, disabled instructors are disrupting outdated professional expectations. “I think a lot of the academy still replicates or wants to replicate the old guard. And in that way disability ... is foreign or scary,” she says. Creating a truly inclusive workplace means “making space for difference, whatever difference looks like or sounds like, and not seeing it as a deficiency.”

When asked how faculty and students can show solidarity with their disabled colleagues, Dr. Dolmage says that administrative structures need to move away from seeing disability as something to be fixed, and towards an understanding of disability as a key pillar in any institution’s knowledge base.

“There are no ‘big problems’ that we face as a society for which disabled people’s knowledge and understanding are not essential,” he says. “This also cues us to find ways to create spaces on our campuses for disability as a positive identity, a resource. This is the opposite of the medicalized, legalized understandings of disability we see in most of the curriculum, and certainly in the system of simply ‘accommodating’ disability.”

For Dr. Leduc, her message to disabled faculty seeking support is simple: fight like hell.

“You clearly have to make your space,” she says. “Equity is not something that will come on a silver plate.” <sup>UA</sup>

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