

"Partners in Success"
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Over the past decade, colleges and universities in Ontario, Canada have opened their doors to an ever-increasing numbers of students with identified learning disabilities. These students represent the largest proportion of students with disabilities at most post-secondary institutions. In 1995 they numbered approximately 12,000 in the province of Ontario. This proportion, however, continues to be well below the approximate ten percent of the general population believed to have learning disabilities. Given these factors and the understanding that persons with learning disabilities are a high-risk group both educationally and socially, it was time for the post-secondary educational system in this province to become more responsive to the needs of these individuals. Only in this way could persons with learning disabilities be empowered to achieve their educational and vocational goals and become fully participating members of Ontario's society in the next millennium.

In the Spring of 1997, the Ontario Minister of Finance, Hon. Ernie Eves, announced that the province of Ontario would establish the Learning Opportunities Task Force (LOTF) to look at ways of improving access to post-secondary education for students in Ontario with specific learning disabilities.

The Task Force, chaired by the Hon. Dr. Bette Stephenson, former Minister of Education for Ontario, began its work by establishing a research team of consultants to examine the current situation in Ontario for students with learning disabilities at the post-secondary level.

The Task Force carried out its research phase using the following tools:

- On-site and/or telephone interviews at Ontario colleges and universities
- Surveys of faculty for attitudes/beliefs
- Surveys of staff of Special Needs Offices.

Their findings listed the following barriers to LD student success at the post-secondary level:

- Faculty attitudes/beliefs were not the biggest barrier to success at the post-secondary level for students with Learning Disabilities.

- Faculty listed one of the main difficulties in accommodating students' needs as was the student's inability to clearly articulate their needs.
- Student-based problems existed such as:
 - a lack of self-advocacy skills
 - inappropriate study/ learning skills
 - inadequate understanding of and ability to understand their LD
 - Inappropriate course selection
- Inadequate or incomplete documentation of the disability served as a barrier.
- Faculty reported having an inadequate understanding of fair and appropriate accommodation as a barrier.
- A lack of transition support services to assist students with LD in preparing for the post-secondary learning environment was reported as another barrier.

The next phase in the work of the Task Force was to call for proposals aimed at unique and innovative pilot projects to assist students with learning disabilities at the post-secondary level. Twenty-five proposals were submitted and eight were selected for funding over a four-year period. This presentation is about one of those pilot projects - The Virtual Centre of Excellence in Learning Disability Integration.

This presentation describes the development of this pilot project and some of the findings to date at the mid-point of the project.

The pilot provides for a unique partnership among four post-secondary institutions in Ontario. It encompasses the development of a model of access and support for students with learning disabilities. The key components of the support program model presented in this pilot are:

- a) accommodation**
- b) skills development**
- c) peer and community education.**

These elements combine to produce a support program leading to integration and independence. Such a program, allows the student to pursue their academic and vocational goals in a way which provides for the growth of these students from adolescence to adulthood as committed, involved, members of the society in which they live and learn.

The model consists of program components designed to address the support areas outlined above. The implementation sites for this program include two colleges and two universities in the province. These sites were selected to

provide a wide range of program choices for students participating in this pilot. In an era when post-secondary institutions in Ontario are faced by economic realities forcing specialization in program offerings, there must exist support programs at enough institutions to allow the student with a learning disability a choice of programs similar to the choice available to their non-disabled peers. This partnership involves institutions which share the attributes of relatively small size, a commitment to the individual student, and a strong focus on quality teaching. These attributes provide these students with a supported educational environment. The partnership also engages institutions in both northern and southern Ontario to allow for an evaluation of any differences which might pertain to geographic location.

This pilot program involves up to 25 students per year at each of the partner institutions. In the first phase, the students self-identified as learning disabled during the admissions process for the 1998-1999 academic year. Participation in the pilot is voluntary and at no cost to the student. At institutions where the number of new students with learning disabilities exceeded the pilot limit, the students not participating in the pilot form the control group for the evaluation of the pilot.

Program Components

As a preliminary step to the development of this pilot, a group of students with learning disabilities and faculty at each of the four institutions were surveyed concerning their perspectives on the barriers to integration into the post-secondary environment. The key barriers identified were

- understanding of the individual learning style,
- development of appropriate coping skills and techniques,
- community understanding of the effects of learning disabilities on academic work.

These barriers can all be viewed as contributing to a lack of control over some aspects of the student's life.

Reif et al.(1997) in their book, *Exceeding Expectations: Successful Adults with Learning Disabilities*, identified the ability to gain control over one's life as the number one component of success for adults with learning disabilities. This control can be gained when internal decision making such as goal setting, is combined with external adaptability measures, such as coping strategies and techniques.

The program outlined in this presentation was designed to provide the student with the ability to exercise a greater degree of control over their life in post-secondary education and beyond. It takes into consideration factors and interventions leading to better control and preparation for the less structured

adult life with its increased demands for autonomy . This model provides the student with opportunities for personal growth, understanding of their individual learning style, and control through programming in the following areas :

- **Admissions:** development of admissions policies and/or practices which are open and equitable
- **Assessments:** which are appropriate to the level of study being pursued and contain enough information and recommendations to be translatable into action by the student.
- **Advising:** which is ongoing and informed to assist the student in utilizing their individual strengths while minimizing the impact of their learning weaknesses.
- **Learning strategist/intervenor :**counselling to provide the student with an interpretation of the assessment findings into a better understanding of their specific learning style and ways in which academic accommodations can be employed to level the field for the student with the learning disability
- **Counselling :** personal (to address the psycho-social aspects of learning disabilities), academic and career enhancement
- **Mentoring:** utilizing the experience of other students with learning disabilities as an aid to breaking down barriers present in the learning environment. The program also provides opportunities for the students to perform a mentoring role for other students with learning disabilities.
- **Adaptive technology:** using specialized software can assist students with learning disabilities to better accommodate their specific learning style.
- **Secondary school transition :** planning for accommodations and supports is an essential component of any program aimed at increasing the success of students with learning disabilities at preparing for post-secondary studies.
- **Community Collaboration:** involving community -based resources to instruct the student in self-advocacy and career development.

Findings at the mid-point:

&As we examine our findings to date, we find that the students in this pilot are embracing the pilot components and activities. This pilot involvement is illustrated by Table 1. In addition, retention is higher for these students than for their non-disabled peers and they are achieving solid academic success.

Pilot Component	# Students Year 1	# Students Year 2
Admission in Pilot	76	88
Assessment	56	55
Advising	76	86
Learning Strategist	72	88
Counselling	55	65
Mentoring/Peer Support	48	65
Adaptive Technology	62	67
Transition/Orientation	64	47
Students Exiting Pilot - not through graduation	17	13

&The students, through one-on-one and group sessions are increasing, developing and honing their self-advocacy skills. In this way, they will serve as the role models and leaders for students in the future. They will be better prepared to become the peer and alumni mentors who will guide the students of the future on their path of exploration through the post-secondary maze and beyond.

&Each of us has seen an increased awareness and sensitivity to the learning needs of students with LD develop over the past two years. Through ongoing awareness training, peer-facilitated discussion and leadership on the part of the pilot students we continue to make inroads in spreading the message of universal teaching and learning techniques. Through the development of strategic alliances with other groups within our institutions, we have all been able to put forward ideas, which result in a more accessible learning environment for our students.

&We, as partners in this endeavour are working to identify those areas of the pilot which can be continued on for the future benefit of students with LD at our institutions. One of the main ways in which this can be achieved is to develop the self-advocacy skills of our students. In this way, they will serve as the role models and leaders for students in the future. They will be better prepared to become the peer and alumni mentors who will guide the students of the future on their path of exploration through the post-secondary maze and beyond.

&The students are succeeding; the students are developing as individuals; the students are leading and, in the end, our students are the greatest legacy that this pilot can provide. It is through these students' ongoing involvement and commitment to students coming after them that this pilot's greatest legacy will be

determined. The real legacy of this and the other LOTF pilot projects is the development of the pilot students as successful graduates and leaders of tomorrow.

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