

# **UNIVERSITY GRADUATES WITH A DISABILITY: THE TRANSITION FROM UNIVERSITY INTO THE COMMUNITY AT LARGE**

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In recent years, there has been an increase in legislation to compel universities and employers to be more accessible and attainable for persons with a disability (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Heckhausen, 2002; Ontario Government, 2001; Duquette, 2000). While greater employment opportunities exist today, it appears that persons with disabilities still encounter a myriad of restrictive barriers while they are in the transitional stage from the school environment to their new community (Heckhausen, 2002; Wehman, 1996). It has been recognized that support services within a university environment can better prepare students with a disability for the transition from school to work and for a new life within their community (Siperstein, 1988), but the transition by graduates with a disability from university into the greater community has not been fully explored, and their perceptions of this evolutionary process have also been commonly ignored. The existing research has not fully examined engagement in, or the varied influences of, community recreation and leisure activities throughout graduates' transitions into the community. These activities have been described as an important aspect in people's lives by increasing self-esteem and mastery (Csikszentmihalyi, 1979; Kelly, 1996). Consideration of these factors will assist in understanding people's community connections and everyday life experiences. The purpose of this study then was to understand the graduates' overall experiences, while focusing on their current life, their transition from university, and support factors that influenced the transitional process. The primary research questions were related to the participants' current daily life experiences within their new community, and the factors that helped or hindered their transitional experience from university into the community at large.

## **Method**

This qualitative study incorporated aspects of the phenomenological and grounded theory approach for analysis (Patton, 2002). Study participants were recruited both via snowball sampling and with the assistance from the university's Services for Students with Disabilities and the Alumni Office. A request to participate in this study was made to those who met the criteria (university alumni with a disability who graduated within the past five years) and who lived in Ontario. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with ten (10) university graduates (3 male and 7 female) with varying disabilities, who resided in several different cities across Ontario. Five of the participants had a physical disability, three had a sensory disability, and two had a learning disability. All but two of the participants were employed, and one was in between employment opportunities. All of the participants graduated at least six months prior to the interview, and were living within their community for no longer than three years. The majority of the participants had additional schooling credentials beyond their initial university degree, in this regard, three participants had a Master of Arts degree, one had a Teacher's College diploma, two had additional college diplomas, and two other participants were planning on attending Teacher's College and Law School. The interviews lasted approximately 1.25 hours. The framework for data analysis was Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach, where the researcher identified possible

relationships among concepts and sets of concepts, but interpretations aimed to maintain the integrity of the data by including the perspectives and voices directly from the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher utilized Kirby and McKenna's (1989) method for preparing and doing analysis whereby the researcher constantly moved between the data, concepts, and categories to fully understand and explain what was being researched. Once the researcher identified categories and patterns within the data, themes began to emerge which allowed for the creation of a grounded theory (Patton, 2002). Analysis of the data continued until saturation occurred. The researcher triangulated the data analysis using the interviews, member checking of major emergent themes, and peer reviews. Ideas and constructs were also clarified both throughout and following the interview process. The researcher attempted to identify any biases prior to the interviews, and self-reflection was documented in the researcher's journal, these procedures assist in establishing rigor and trustworthiness.

### **Findings**

The experiences of the participants suggested three main themes. The first theme identified the participants' daily experiences, which included their employment, leisure lifestyle, volunteer experiences, education, disability related matters, and community life (including geographic community, disability community, and university community). Within these six elements, there were several extended factors that either increased or diminished the participants' engagement with these elements. The element of leisure, for example, played an important and integral part in the participants' daily lives, and it comprised of a blend of social and independent activities. While the participants believed that leisure had benefits, they further noted several barriers to leisure, which prohibited them from participating to their full potential, which ultimately influenced their perception and experience of community connection. The negative barriers encountered within their elements of life separated the participants from aspects of their community, whereas the positive experiences within those elements acted to strengthen their connection with the greater community. The second theme related to their transitional process, which suggested three main experiences: the transition met their expectations, the transition was not as expected, or the participants did not experience any notable transition. While the participants' transition from university was typically viewed as a positive experience, some still felt they were not where they expected themselves to be at this point in their lives. This recognition was often upsetting for them, and was typically tied to either unemployment issues, or unsatisfactory employment opportunities. Nonetheless, supports from home, the university environment, through social interaction, and within the community greatly assisted the participants in feeling comfortable with their new life stage, and further assisted them to feel connected to their new environment. The third theme related to legislative policies and advocacy, and the importance of accessibility and inclusion. The participants viewed advocacy as a means for people to initiate action themselves to create change within their community. They identified several ways of achieving this goal, and the general consensus of the group was that a collective and communal method of educating the public about disabilities would be beneficial; therefore, positive awareness should be the goal. This objective could be achieved through the organization of various community events that help celebrate abilities, in contrast to disabilities.

## **Discussion**

The analysis of the data revealed the ease of the transition depended upon how connected individuals were to their communities, and the strength of these connections. When connections were maintained or enhanced throughout the participants' transition from university, the transition was viewed as successful. When the participants' connections were severed, the transition was then viewed as being more strenuous. The participants' transition blueprint led to the creation of the Roots Connection Model, which explains how being connected with a community supports a person throughout a transition, while also assisting in one's general feeling of being connected to the greater community. In accordance with social construction theory, when a person with a disability is prominent within their neighbourhood, and plays an integral role within their community, then they help to raise awareness about disabilities which may, in turn, help to create a more positive and powerful message about the realities of disabilities, thus challenging the current social construction of disability. It is important to critique the construction of disability, especially since many disabilities are the result of environmental, social, attitudinal and other created conditions, because doing so can help alter one's social, economic, and political position within the larger community (Gadacz, 1994).

While the findings are not to be generalized to the public at large, they do represent a better understanding of how this group of university graduates with disabilities experienced the transition from university to the greater community. While the transitional framework, Roots Connection Model, depicted how the participants experienced their transition, and identified how imperative it is to create positive connections within the community, two questions remain: why do some persons have stronger connections than others, and what factors contribute to a person being able to create these connections? The examination then sought to explain this by providing two key elements. One factor related to personal choice and motivation which was supported by motivational theory (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Heidenborg, 1981). The second factor related to the availability of and opportunity for connections. The analysis of the findings concluded that all aspects of community life must continue to work towards becoming both inclusive and accessible. While progress to date provides some measure of optimism towards the realization of this objective, we must be vigilant to ensure that disability awareness and inclusive practices continue to be an essential component in any future society.

## **Recommendations and Practical Applications**

The participants highlighted several recommendations to both employers and universities, and the study also highlighted areas of future research. In relation to employment, the two main areas of suggestions for improvement were the implementation of a 'person first attitude' within the workplace, and a disability awareness credo as part of company and service providers' formal policy. The participants also suggested practical suggestions for transitional support from universities which would create a better link between the university and the employment sector. Such examples included a) providing specific information sessions regarding employment for persons with disabilities, b) creating a transitional support worker who would assist both incoming and exiting students with disabilities with the transition, and c) that there be a

position of an employment consultant who would inform employers and service providers about disabilities in general, and practical tips on how to accommodate people with varying needs. Increased research regarding the transition from university to the workforce or greater community may be beneficial, as it will allow for a greater understanding of the needs and barriers that are encountered with these transitions. This will reveal their experiences within the community, and the role of the social and physical environment in the citizen's lives. Such research will further explore how disability is socially constructed in order to identify aspects of our communities that need improvement and ultimately play an integral role in enriching the lives of persons with disabilities.

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