

Accessibility to eCampusAlberta for Persons with Disabilities: Systemic Challenges and Proposed Solutions

Final Report

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Accessibility to eCampusAlberta for persons with disabilities: Systemic challenges and proposed solutions

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Accessibility to eCampusAlberta for Persons with Disabilities: Systemic Challenges and Proposed Solutions

Background to the Project¹

In the past 20 years, the number of persons with disabilities studying at the post-secondary level has increased dramatically. Most post-secondary institutions have specialized staff and facilities to accommodate the unique needs of individuals enrolled in their “on-site” programs. A systemic infrastructure exists to fund the supports necessary to accommodate learners with disabilities, and each college or university addresses the needs of students enrolled in their institution. Funding for disability-related supports is the responsibility of the institution, and additional funding is available through provincial and federal government grants.

The emerging popularity of online learning made possible through eCampusAlberta has given Albertans the opportunity to access courses offered by institutions throughout the province. Learners can access these courses from the convenience of their community’s post-secondary institution or from home. Online learning is a boon to learners with disabilities. Those with mobility impairments can remain in their communities where they often have well-established support systems and can avoid costly and inconvenient travel. Those who use specialized hardware or software are able to use their equipment in a familiar learning environment.

The trend towards increased online offerings of post-secondary courses, certificates, diplomas, and even applied degree programs is expected to continue, and persons with disabilities have the desire and right to be included in these offerings. Prior to support for the present research project, eCampusAlberta recognized the importance of ensuring accessibility to the services and courses offered through their consortium of post-secondary institutions. The eCampusAlberta webpage was redesigned and now includes a link to a more accessible version of the site. eCampusAlberta also commissioned the development of a paper entitled “Accessibility to E-Learning for Persons With Disabilities: Strategies, Guidelines, and Standards,”² as well as modules that guide course developers through key matters that they must consider when designing accessible online courses.³ As eCampusAlberta expands access to its high-quality course offerings to learners with disabilities, participating institutions must have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in accommodating and supporting this group of learners and also have access to funding to fulfill the institution’s obligation to accommodate. When a student enrolls in an eCampusAlberta course and does not identify a Partner Institution (the institution identified by the student as closest in physical proximity to him or her) from whom supports are expected, the disability services unit of the Lead Institution (the institution offering the course) assumes full responsibility for the provision of disability-related supports.

Under the present registration system, when a student registers for a course through eCampusAlberta, neither the Lead Institution nor the Partner Institution (if one is identified by the student) is notified that the student

¹ The terms used in this paper are defined in Appendix A.

² NorQuest College & eCampusAlberta. (2008). Accessibility to e-learning for persons with disabilities: Strategies, guidelines, and standards. Available at <http://www.eCampusAlbertaalberta.ca/index.php?q=content/member-resources>

³ NorQuest College, Mount Royal College, & eCampusAlberta. (2009). *Designing accessible learning for persons with disabilities*. Contact eCampusAlberta for information on how to access these four modules.

has a disability that will require support services. Without a timely notification, institutions are often left scrambling to develop and fund an accommodation strategy for each individual. At present, there are no clear accommodation guidelines in place, often leading to frustration for the learner and additional expenses for institutions. This paper seeks to identify challenges and suggest recommendations to avoid possible conflicts between the Lead and Partner institutions so that learners with disabilities can enjoy their online program and receive the supports that are necessary for their success.

Goals of the Project

The goals of our system-wide project were to work with Post-Secondary Providers of Services to Students with Disabilities (PSPSSD) to achieve the following:

1. Identify the accommodation supports that learners with disabilities need in order to access courses offered through eCampusAlberta.
2. Propose a systemic structure for the provision of supports to learners with disabilities that includes recommended roles and responsibilities for Lead Institutions and for Partner Institutions.
3. Outline the process for funding learners with disabilities who are accessing courses through eCampusAlberta.

Activities Undertaken in This Project⁴

1. Establishment of an advisory committee
2. Research into existing processes related to accessing student support and accessing funding and compilation of results
3. Development of questions and issues raised by current processes
4. Vetting of questions and issues with advisory committee
5. Development of a survey for all disability service providers that outlines questions and issues and seeks solutions
6. Analysis of survey results and development of recommendations
7. Vetting of recommendations with Post-Secondary Providers of Services to Students with Disabilities (PSPSSD)
8. Incorporation of advisory committee feedback and development of final recommendations
9. Preparation of final report for eCampusAlberta
10. Dissemination of final results

⁴ Further information on these activities is available in Appendix B.

Findings, Challenges, and Recommendations

Finding A	The present systemic structure and processes in eCampusAlberta make it difficult to identify in a timely manner students with disabilities who may require supports.
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The current organizational structure for the provision of courses through eCampusAlberta is based on a relatively informal Lead and Partner Institution model. The Lead Institution is charged with delivering the course, and the Partner Institution provides learner support.⁵ This collegial model is based on the understanding that each institution, whether the Lead or the Partner, will treat the students as their own. The definition of “learner support” is broad and includes access to library resources, as well as supports for students with disabilities. When a student registers for an eCampusAlberta course, the registrar’s department of the Lead Institution is notified that a registration is in progress. Confirmation of registration follows payment of fees. When the student’s registration with the Lead Institution has been confirmed, the Lead Institution notifies the registrar’s office of the Partner Institution that it has been identified as the Partner Institution and that the student may require supports.

Challenges and Recommendations

There is no formalized way for students to identify their need for disability-related support services at the time they register for an eCampusAlberta course. As a result, neither Lead nor Partner institutions are formally notified of the need for supports in a timely manner. The registration process must be restructured to include a mechanism that allows students to identify themselves as needing supports and also allows the Lead and Partner Institutions to be informed of this without delay. Supports for learners who have disabilities could then be addressed at the time of registration. We therefore recommend a review and possible revisions to the application form and process, as well as modifications to the notification processes. Possible revisions and modifications include the following:

- The eCampusAlberta registration form should be revised so that students can indicate that they will require supports to address their disability.
- A “hold” should be placed on the registration of a student who has a disability and requires supports until appropriate supports can be put in place. If a student has identified a Partner Institution, the student should be directed to contact the Partner Institution’s disability services unit to discuss his or her needs. If the student does not identify a Partner Institution, the Lead Institution should notify its disabilities services unit so that appropriate supports may be initiated.
- Communication between the registrar’s office of the Lead Institution and that of the Partner Institution should be initiated as soon as the student indicates a need for support services during registration. The support services unit of the Partner Institution needs to be involved as soon as its registrar’s office has been notified.
- A formal agreement for support services for students with disabilities needs to be negotiated between the Lead and Partner Institution before the student is accepted into a course. This ensures that adequate services are available to students at the beginning of a course and throughout their term of enrolment.
- eCampusAlberta should consider establishing a “student advisor” position or role. This service could facilitate communication among the various stakeholders. In addition to requiring supports for disabilities, students in eCampusAlberta courses may also require other supports such as personal counselling, career

⁵ eCampusAlberta. (2008, September 20). *Operations committee orientation manual*.

counselling, and financial advice. The student advisor could act as a clearinghouse directing and facilitating communication with appropriate staff in Lead or Partner institutions.

- Students with disabilities should also bear some responsibility for informing an institution of their disability when their disability requires extensive resources and planning in order to implement supports. The registration form and information on the eCampusAlberta website should clearly state that students requiring extensive or specialized accommodations, such as materials in alternative format, sign language, or CART, should provide as much notice and information about their needs as possible.

Finding B	Support services available for students with disabilities enrolled in eCampusAlberta courses are similar across the province, but rural or smaller post-secondary institutions cannot offer the same levels of support available at some large urban institutions.
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Institutions that belong to the eCampusAlberta consortium have long recognized the need to provide accessibility to their course offerings. Instructors, staff, and administrators are being challenged to incorporate Universal Design principles in campus, curriculum, instruction, and service design.

Support services for students with disabilities are available in most major post-secondary institutions in Alberta, and the types of services offered to students with disabilities are similar from one institution to another. These services include assessment of student needs, development of accommodation plans, referral and assistance to access appropriate outside funding, case management, access to assistive technology equipment on loan, access to assistive technology labs and training, provision of materials in alternative format, accommodations for exams, and provision of sign language interpreting or CART. The variety of assistive technology software and hardware available differs from one institution to another, as does the way a student accesses assistive technology supports. Some services for blind, Deaf, or hard-of-hearing students are unavailable or limited in some areas of the province because to date there have been few, if any, requests for these supports. Access to additional funding, outside of that budgeted by the post-secondary institution for disability supports, also varies across the province.

Up to now, the type of support requested for students in eCampusAlberta courses has varied. If there has been a request for specific support, the support has been provided. Some institutions have not had any requests for specialized support for students with disabilities in eCampusAlberta courses. Of those who have, the supports most often accessed have been material preparation in alternative format, exam accommodations, and learning strategies supports. But with increased enrolment in distance courses and growing awareness of the benefits of online learning for students with disabilities, it is conceivable that demand for supports for students with a variety of disabilities will increase in the future.

Challenges and Recommendations

eCampusAlberta is encouraged to take a proactive stance and consider the following challenges and recommendations in order to meet the needs of this potential pool of students.

- a. Funding for disability-related supports is a challenge faced by many post-secondary institutions in Alberta, and access to funding varies across the province. One challenge that this research has identified is that many rural and urban institutions that serve as partners in the present Lead/Partner relationship have limited resources (funding or expertise) to support students with disabilities. For example, an institution may have limited access to equipment to produce materials in Braille or in audio format. Due to limited resources, it is not feasible to demand that each participating institution supply a minimum standard of services and supports.

The challenge presented by limited resources for funding specialized supports underscores the need for clear delineation of Partner and Lead responsibilities and the need for agreements that allow a Partner Institution to access assistance from the Lead Institution if the Partner institution is unable to provide the specialized supports. When a Partner Institution is unable to provide necessary supports, the Lead Institution must assume responsibility and may have to defer registration to such time as the necessary supports are available. To avoid claims of discrimination by students with disabilities, a deferral in order to establish necessary supports must include a definite timeline during which support options are explored and supports are established. In addition to clearly articulating responsibilities, eCampusAlberta should consider establishing a contingency fund so that institutions that do not have sufficient funds to support students with disabilities have some access to resources to offset their expenses.

- b. A second challenge that the research has identified is the lack of information available to potential students on the variety of supports for disabilities that may be available to them. Even institutions and instructors may not be aware of the supports that are available or could be made available. It is recommended that eCampusAlberta place on its website information about supports for disabilities that outlines the process students follow to receive supports and provides contact information and links to each institution’s disability service providers for students who have additional questions. The Open University in the United Kingdom (www.open.ac.uk) is a good model for this practice, as it incorporates information on its website about supports available for students interested in its distance education offerings.

Finding C	The roles and responsibilities of the Lead Institution and the Partner Institution require greater formalization when learners with disabilities who need specialized supports are enrolled in eCampusAlberta courses.
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Presently, arrangements for who is responsible to provide supports (Lead or Partner) vary from one situation to the next. Collaboration has often resulted, but there have been instances where the Partner Institution has borne the burden of responsibility and costs to support the student.

Challenges and Recommendations

Regardless of whether the student has named a Partner Institution, the Lead Institution bears the responsibility for providing supports as per the Duty to Accommodate legislation.⁶ The Duty to Accommodate legislation, which was designed to ensure equitable and fair treatment to students and employees with disabilities, does not directly address the issue of students involved in distance delivery programs like the model used by eCampusAlberta, but the provision of supports by the Partner Institution is comparable to the institutional responsibilities when students are in clinical or practicum placements.

In those cases, the practicum placement is viewed as an agent of the institution, but the institution is responsible for facilitating accommodations. If the placement is paid, then both the practicum placement and the institution bear responsibility for accommodations. Extrapolating from this specific example, it follows that the Lead Institution, which receives payment for a course, is responsible for the provision of accommodations

⁶ Alberta Human Rights Commission. (2004, August). Duty to accommodate students with disabilities in post-secondary educational institutions. [Interpretive bulletin]. Retrieved December 5, 2009 from the Alberta Human Rights Commission website:
http://www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca/publications/bulletins_sheets_booklets/bulletins/duty_to_accommodate_students_PDF.asp

and supports.⁷ Several recommendations that could be implemented to address this challenge are described in the “Challenges and Recommendations” segment under Finding D. Again, this challenge underscores the need for a clear agreement, including financial details, between Partner and Lead institutions.

Finding D	Although Lead and Partner institutions seem somewhat unclear on funding of supports for students with disabilities, the funders and the Duty to Accommodate in human rights legislation clearly indicate financial responsibilities.
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Facilitating the flow of funds to the institution that is providing disability-related supports can be an issue in the present informal Lead/Partner structure. Government departments that fund disability-related supports have strict guidelines in terms of how students qualify for funding and how institutions are compensated for providing supports. At present, there are several stipulations that must be considered.

- a. Foreign students with disabilities, those who are not citizens of Canada, are ineligible for government-sponsored disability-related supports from either the federal or the provincial government, but according to the Duty to Accommodate in federal and provincial human rights legislation, they must be supported.
- b. There are residency requirements for students from other provinces who register at post-secondary institutions in Alberta and require funding for disability-related supports. Residents of another province must apply for disability-related supports in their home province. If a student from another province resides in Alberta, the student is eligible for disability-related employment and education supports (DRES) through provincial funding and disabled student grants⁸ (DSG) through federal funding. There is a three-month residency requirement for loans through Alberta Employment and Immigration (AEI), which support tuition fees, books, and living expenses. DSG funding is available only to students enrolled in post-secondary programs, while DRES is available to students in adult upgrading as well as in post-secondary programs.
- c. Funding for disability-related supports is available only if the student has a career or employment destination.
- d. At the time of publication of this document, information from DRES indicates that funds for disability-related supports can be dispersed only to the institution that the student is enrolled in, the Lead Institution. This practice is not however strictly followed across the province. A review of the process is currently underway.
- e. Access to a computer is a prerequisite for enrolling in an online course, but computers are ineligible as funded assistive technology requests.⁹

Challenges and Recommendations

- As foreign students and students who are not residents of Alberta are ineligible for disability-related support funds, the Lead Institution has an obligation to work with the Partner Institution to cover the costs of supporting these students if they register in a course offered in Alberta. eCampusAlbert should also partner with these institutions to provide contingency funds to cover the cost of these supports. For students who are residents of another province, but are taking courses through an institution in Alberta, the Lead Institution should ensure that students are aware that they can apply for disability-related supports from the federal government and/or the provincial government where they reside. eCampusAlberta can include

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities and Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities. For further information about these programs, go to:
http://www.canlearn.ca/eng/main/publications/info/guide2/section_1.shtml

⁹ Interview with DRES Supervisor, Kevin Kinney, on November 17, 2009.

this information on its site and facilitate information flow between Lead, Partner, and out-of-province support networks.

- As provincial and federal government funds for supports are usually dispersed only to the institution that receives tuition fees for the course or the institution with which the student is enrolled, some modifications could be made to the registration process for courses. Perhaps the student could be registered in both the Lead and Partner Institutions so that the disability service providers at the Partner Institution could apply directly for funding. Or it may be possible for the Partner Institution to act as a vendor or an agent of the Lead Institution and bill the Lead Institution for support services. Both of these options need to be discussed with representatives of provincial and federal funding departments.
- There may be additional costs to support students at a distance that are over and above the costs that would normally be incurred in face-to-face delivery of instruction. Equipment and alternative-format materials may have to be delivered by courier or post. Assessments, meetings, and individualized program planning may necessitate travel expenses incurred by disability service providers. These additional expenses need to be considered in articulating an agreement between the Lead and Partner institutions and these expenses could also be supported through eCampusAlberta.

Finding E	There is a need to provide support for instructors who teach students with disabilities in their distance courses, and communication between disability service providers and instructors needs to be facilitated.
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At present, in partnering situations, it is not clear who is responsible for supporting instructors who teach eCampusAlberta courses when they have a student with a disability enrolled in their course. As a result, instructors may not receive the support and information they need to best address the needs of students with disabilities in their online classes. As well, a student may ask for modifications to assignments, alternative formatting of materials, and exam accommodations, but it is the disabilities service provider that implements these supports, a fact that further highlights the need for communication between an instructor and the disability support service provider. The free flow of information among the student, instructor, and support services ensures optimum support for the student and the instructor.

Challenges and Recommendations

- There is an assumption that the disabilities unit of the Lead Institution is available to the instructor for questions or concerns, but this has not been articulated. While the student's right to confidentiality must be protected, the student's potential for achieving success is greatly enhanced when there is clear communication between the Partner Institution that may be providing specialized supports and the instructor who is teaching the course. To this end, eCampusAlberta should establish a disability services liaison position that would provide an avenue for communication between disability service providers in the Partner Institution and the instructor in the Lead Institution.
- As is the case for students receiving face-to-face instruction, students with disabilities who are taking a course online and require supports from the instructor should be encouraged to disclose their needs to the instructor. The disability service provider, whether provided by the Lead or the Partner Institution, will discuss disclosure with a student at the time that accommodations or services are determined. If the student permits sharing of information, an avenue for communication between the disability service provider and the instructor should be established. This is particularly important when students require classroom materials in alternative formats and when exams are invigilated by a Partner Institution's disability service provider. In addition, instructors need to be offered support and information regarding effective strategies to accommodate their diverse student population, which may include meeting the needs

of learners with disabilities. Disability service units, as well as eCampusAlberta, play a role in meeting this need.

Conclusion

The present Partner/Lead model is based on a collegial and co-operative spirit that characterizes the philosophy behind expanding access to post-secondary education through eCampusAlberta. This same spirit of collaboration and reciprocity between Partner and Lead institutions has generally characterized the support of students with disabilities. The supports for students with disabilities enrolled in eCampusAlberta courses who are affiliated with a Partner Institution are dealt with largely on an ad hoc or case-by-case basis by the Partner Institution. But as the popularity of eCampusAlberta offerings increases and more Albertans choose distance delivery to access post-secondary instruction, the numbers of students with disabilities who may also choose this avenue will also increase. The challenges identified in this study are limited to the incidents disability service providers have experienced or foresee experiencing. There may be more unforeseen challenges ahead; but the ad hoc provision of supports that characterizes the present model is unsustainable, and eCampusAlberta should be proactive in implementing changes that facilitate the communication and processes necessary to provide equitable learning opportunities for learners with disabilities.

In summary, the findings and recommendations are as follows:

Finding A: The present systemic structure and processes in eCampusAlberta make it difficult to identify in a timely manner students with disabilities who may require supports.

- Revisions to the eCampusAlberta registration form should be implemented so that students can indicate on the form that they will require supports to address their disability.
- A “hold” should be placed on the registration of a student who has a disability and requires supports until appropriate supports can be put in place.
- Communication between the registrar’s office of the Lead Institution and that of the Partner Institution should be initiated immediately upon notification of the need for support services, and the appropriate support services unit(s) should be involved at that time.
- A formal agreement for support services for students with disabilities needs to be negotiated between the Lead Institution and the Partner Institution before the student is accepted into a course.
- eCampusAlberta should consider establishing a “student advisor” position or role.
- The registration form and information on the eCampusAlberta website should clearly state that students requiring extensive or specialized accommodations should provide as much notice and information about their needs as possible.

Finding B: Support services available for students with disabilities enrolled in eCampusAlberta courses are similar across the province, but rural or smaller post-secondary institutions cannot offer the same levels of support available at some large urban institutions.

- An agreement between Lead and Partner institutions needs to be articulated that allows a Partner Institution to access assistance from the Lead Institution if the Partner Institutions is unable to provide specialized supports.
- eCampusAlberta should place on its website information about supports for disabilities that outlines the process students follow to receive supports and provides contact information and links to each institution’s disability service providers for students who have additional questions.

Finding C: The roles and responsibilities of the Lead Institution and the Partner Institution require greater formalization when learners with disabilities who need specialized supports are enrolled in eCampusAlberta courses.

- Duty to Accommodate legislation indicates that the Lead Institution is responsible for providing services to students with disabilities. This legislative provision underscores the need for a clear agreement that includes financial details between Partner and Lead institutions.

Finding D: Although Lead and Partner institutions seem somewhat unclear on funding of supports for students with disabilities, the funders and the Duty to Accommodate provision in human rights legislation clearly indicate financial responsibilities.

- When students are ineligible for disability-related support funds, the Lead Institution has an obligation to work with the Partner Institution to cover the costs of supporting these students if the student is registered in a course offered in Alberta.
- eCampusAlberta should consider providing contingency funds to cover these supports and facilitate information flow between Lead, Partner, and out-of-province support networks.
- eCampusAlberta should initiate discussions with representatives of provincial and federal funding departments to clarify funding for disability-related supports in an online environment.
- The additional costs of supporting students with a disability at a distance that are over and above the costs that would normally be incurred in face-to-face delivery of instruction need to be considered in articulating agreements between the Lead and Partner institutions and could also be supported through eCampusAlberta.

Finding E: There is a need to provide support for instructors who teach students with disabilities in their distance courses, and communication between disability service providers and instructors needs to be facilitated.

- An eCampusAlberta disability services liaison position could provide an avenue for communication between disability service providers in a Partner Institution and the instructor in the Lead Institution.
- Disability service units as well as eCampusAlberta play a role in meeting instructors' need for support and information regarding effective strategies to accommodate their diverse student population, which may include learners with disabilities.

Appendix A – Terms

For the purposes of this paper, the following definitions apply:

AEI: Alberta Employment and Immigration. This provincial government department supports students through grants while they attend training programs such as upgrading programs. Funds are used to cover living expenses, tuition, and books.

AT: Assistive technology. Assistive technology includes equipment or technology that students with disabilities need in order to function at home, at work, or in an educational environment.

DRES: Disability-Related Employment Supports. This provincial program provides funds to support to adult persons with disabilities so they can be employed or pursue educational opportunities.

DSG: Disabled student grants. These federal government grants are available to students attending post-secondary education anywhere in Canada. Students may receive grants of up to \$2,000.00 per year for any expenses incurred while studying and a maximum of \$8,000.00 during their post-secondary studies for disability-related services and equipment.

Duty to Accommodate: For the purposes of this document, Duty to Accommodate refers to the responsibilities to accommodate students with disabilities outlined by the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission in the document entitled *Duty to Accommodate Students with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Educational Institutions*, which is available at http://www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca/documents/Bull_Duty_to_accom_students.pdf.

Lead Institution: The Lead Institution is the post-secondary institution that develops and delivers a course on eCampusAlberta. The Lead Institution receives tuition and registers the student.

Partner Institution: The Partner Institution is responsible for providing supports to students enrolled in eCampusAlberta courses. Students select the post-secondary institution that is closest to where they live, and this institution becomes the Partner Institution.

PSPSSD: Post-secondary providers of services to students with disabilities. Each post-secondary institution in Alberta provides supports to students with disabilities through a disabilities services office. The office may exist in one of many forms: as an independent unit within the institution, as part of general student services, affiliated with a counselling department, or as part of the registrar's department.

Appendix B – Sub-Committee Members

eCampus Alberta Duty to Accommodate Sub-Committee

A meeting was held January 17, 2008 to identify the need to research the current legal requirements of and best practices in regard to the duty to accommodate and the principle of reasonable accommodation as these relate to online learning design, development, and delivery practices.

Abigail Parrish-Craig (MacEwan)	Flo Brokop (NorQuest)	Paul Reid (NorQuest)
Russell Solowoniuk (MacEwan)	Barb Pearce (NorQuest)	Shelia Semper (NAIT)
Jennifer deForest (Portage)	Denise Theunissen (Bow Valley)	Trisha Smith (Lakeland)
Brenda Lindquist (Grande Prairie)	Russ Wilde (Bow Valley)	Wanda Beaupre (Lakeland)
Tracy Hetman (U of A)	Tracy Inaba (Bow Valley)	Mary Finlin (Lakeland)
Paul Szymanowski (Alberta College)	Carrie Anton (Athabasca)	Brenda Moore (Athabasca)
Absent: Ron Whitford (SAIT)		
Robert Rock (Alberta Advanced Education)		

Signature

I certify that I have read and understand the policies, procedures, and guidelines developed by NorQuest College for ensuring ethical conduct in research and that I intend to comply fully with the letter and spirit of those policies, procedures, and guidelines; that all the information I have included in this application is, to the best of my knowledge, true; and that I have not knowingly omitted any information from this application that is relevant to the task of the NorQuest College Research Ethics Review Committee. I further acknowledge my responsibility to report any significant changes in the project and to obtain written approval for those changes, as required by relevant College policies, procedures, and guidelines, prior to implementing those changes.

Applicant: _____ Date: _____

For RERC Use Only
Received Date: _____ Review Type: Expedited Referred to Committee
Meeting Date: _____
Approval Date: _____

Section 2: Project Information

Project Title Accessibility to eCampus for Persons with Disabilities: Systemic Challenges and Proposed Solutions

Start and end dates January 1, 2009 – December 31, 2009

Institution(s) at which research will be conducted:
NorQuest College

Describe ethics approval received or sought at other institutions:

Funding sources:

Obtained: eCampus Alberta Online Curriculum Development Fund

Applied for: _____

Section 3: Project Details

1. Please provide a short summary of the project, including the research objectives/hypotheses and principal research methods to be used.

In the past 20 years, the number of persons with disabilities studying at the post-secondary level has increased dramatically. Most post-secondary institutions have specialized staff and facilities to accommodate the unique needs of individuals enrolled in their “on-site” programs. A systemic infrastructure exists to fund the supports necessary to accommodate learners with disabilities, and each institution addresses the needs of students enrolled in their institution.

The emerging popularity of online learning made possible through eCampus Alberta has offered Albertans the opportunity to access courses offered anywhere in the province from the convenience of their community post-secondary or even from home. The possibility of accessing online learning is a boon to learners with disabilities. Those with mobility impairments are able to remain in their communities, where they often have well established support systems and can avoid costly and inconvenient travel. Those who use specialized hardware or software are able to use their equipment in a familiar learning environment.

But post-secondary institutions that admit persons with disabilities into distance delivery programs are often left scrambling to develop and fund an accommodation strategy for each individual. At present, there are no clear accommodation guidelines in place, which often leads to frustration for the learner and additional expenses for institutions.

The goal of our system-wide project is work with Post-Secondary Providers of Services to Students with Disabilities (PSPSSD) to:

1. Identify what accommodation supports are needed for learners with disabilities wishing to access courses offered through eCampus Alberta through phone interviews with PSPSSD faculty/staff.
2. Propose a systemic structure for the provision of supports to learners with disabilities, which includes recommended roles and responsibilities for the lead institution (offering a course) and for partner institutions (those hosting a course).
3. Outline the process for funding learners with disabilities who are accessing courses through eCampus Alberta.

2. Describe the source, number, age range and type of research participants that will be sought. Describe the manner in which participation will be solicited and the nature of any inducements or promises offered for participation.

Participants will be PSPSSD staff or faculty at participating eCampus institutions. Participants will be initially contacted via e-mail requesting participation in a phone interview. The investigator will schedule interviews at participants’ convenience with approximately ten participants over the age of 18.

3. Describe the procedure(s) used to collect and analyze data.

Interviews will be conducted via telephone and the investigator will record detailed notes. Interview data will be summarized and used to develop recommendations for eCampus.

4. Describe how you will address issues of informed consent and continuing voluntary participation in the research project. For minors, describe how you will obtain consent of guardians.

Participants will be provided with project details and objectives in the initial e-mail contact. An e-mail response agreeing to participate in a telephone interview will be considered participants' informed consent.

5. Describe how you will grant anonymity to participants and how participants' responses will be kept confidential. If names or other identifying information are coded with data, describe how access to data will be limited and safeguarded. Indicate who will have access. If appropriate, describe how consent is obtained from participants for exceptions to anonymity/confidentiality safeguards (e.g. focus groups).

No names or identifying labels will be included in detailed interview notes, reports, or correspondence regarding the project. Participant information will be stored separately from interview data.

6. Describe your plan for the retention and disposal of data (e.g. provide location of storage).

Written notes will be stored in the Research Assistant's locked filing cabinet for a period of 3 years in the Centre for Innovation and Development. A soft copy of the notes will be kept in a restricted-access folder on NorQuest College's network server.

7. If concealment of the hypothesis or deception of participants is to be employed, provide explicit justification. Indicate how and when participants will be informed of the concealment and/or deception.

No concealment or deception will be used during the project.

8. Describe the nature of any risk to the physical or psychological well-being or integrity of participants that might arise from your procedures, and discuss your justifications, safeguards, and resolutions for these risks where appropriate.

Risk to participants in the study is minimal. Participants' interview responses will be kept confidential and will have no impact on their or their college's relationship with eCampus.

9. Indicate when participants will be debriefed and describe the nature and extent of debriefing. Indicate how participants may follow-up with researchers to ask questions or obtain information about the study.

Results and drafts of recommendations will be e-mailed to PSPSSD members and presented at a PSPSSD meeting in order to provide an opportunity for members to review and provide feedback prior to submission to eCampus.

10. Indicate all documents submitted with this application.

Participant Consent Form

Information Sheet for Participants

Questionnaire or Survey Items

Interview Script/Focus Group Questions

Ethics Approval from Other Institutions

Advertisement for Participant Recruitment

Other (List here) _____

Initial Interviews

Methodology

Participants were recruited through the PSPSSD listserv. An e-mail invitation was sent to all PSPSSD listserv members inviting them to participate in an interview regarding experiences, issues, and concerns with providing supports and services to eCampus students. Interested members contacted the researcher directly via e-mail. The researcher then sent them a detailed letter of information regarding the project.

Six participants were interviewed from five different institutions either in person or by telephone. Interviews were approximately 30 to 45 minutes each. The researcher made notes during the interview, which were then transcribed.

Letter

To: Post-Secondary Providers of Services to Students with Disabilities (PSPSSD)

We would like to invite you to participate in a project that addresses the issues and barriers for students with disabilities to participating in courses offered through eCampus Alberta.

Researchers: Christen Rachul, Brenda Reitsma, Flo Brokop, Learning Resource Services, NorQuest College

Purpose of the Study – Accessibility to eCampus for Persons with Disabilities: Systemic Challenges and Proposed Solutions

In the past 20 years, the number of persons with disabilities studying at the post-secondary level has increased dramatically. While most post-secondary institutions have specialized staff and facilities for “on-site” programs, there are no clear guidelines in place for providing supports for those students who wish to study online through eCampus Alberta, including guidelines for funding these learners. NorQuest College is conducting a research project in order to identify the support needs of e-Campus users with disabilities, to propose a structure for providing those supports, and finally to outline a process for funding these learners.

Commitment for the Participant

In this study, key informants will include approximately ten PSPSSD members who will be asked to participate in an interview to discuss issues with accessibility to eCampus Alberta for persons with disabilities. The discussion will be focused on specific issues that have arisen at the informant’s institution as well as concerns informants may have with providing supports for students with disabilities who take courses through eCampus Alberta. The interview will take approximately **one hour** to complete.

The results of this study will be used to develop recommendations to create a systemic structure for providing supports to learners with disabilities, which includes recommended roles and responsibilities for the lead institution (offering a course) and for partner institutions (those hosting a course). Results will also be used to outline the process for funding learners with disabilities who are accessing courses through eCampus Alberta. These recommendations will be validated and reviewed with PSPSSD members. Final results will be forwarded to eCampus Alberta for inclusion on the Accessibility Matters webpage and will be presented at the Alberta Student Association Conference.

Potential Benefits

You may not benefit personally from your participation in this study. However, the information obtained from this research will potentially benefit participating eCampus institutions by minimizing potential issues and expenses associated with providing supports for learners with disabilities.

Potential Risks

There are minimal anticipated risks or discomforts you will experience from your participation in this study. Researchers will try to make your participation in the study as comfortable as is reasonably possible. If you experience any discomfort during your participation in the study, you can discontinue participation, either temporarily or completely.

Voluntary Participation

You may choose not to participate in this study without any impact on your relationship with NorQuest College or eCampus Alberta. You may also withdraw from the study at any time by telling the researchers. We will simply not include information collected through the interviews. Please note that once information has been compiled together, the researchers will be unable to remove your specific information. It is anticipated that the information will be compiled by June 2009.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The researchers will ensure the confidentiality of participants is protected through the following steps:

1. The information collected through the interviews will be compiled and analyzed. Any comments or information that identifies a specific institution or a specific individual will be removed.
2. Individuals or institution names will not appear in any report, publication, or presentation resulting from this study.
3. All the information collected related to the study will be available only to the researchers.

The research data, with identifying information removed, will be kept for a period of three years and will be securely stored in a locked cabinet in the Centre for Innovation and Development at NorQuest College.

Sharing of Results

Results and drafts of recommendations will be e-mailed to PSPSSD members and presented at a PSPSSD meeting in order to provide an opportunity for members to review and provide feedback prior to submission to eCampus.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Christen Rachul at 780-644-6261 or christen.rachul@norquest.ca.

This project has been approved by the NorQuest Research Ethics Review Committee. In the event you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Cheryl Whitelaw at (780) 644-6263 or 1-866-534-7218.

If you agree to participate, please respond to this e-mail at christen.rachul@norquest.ca. Your response will be considered your informed consent.

PSPSSD – eCampus: Interview Script/Questions

I want to thank you for taking the time to discuss issues with accessibility to eCampus for persons with disabilities. First, I will explain the purpose of this project. I would like to identify support needs of eCampus users with disabilities, then to propose a structure for providing those supports including recommended roles for lead and partner colleges, and finally to outline a process for funding these learners. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes. Please don't hesitate to ask me questions or for clarification at any time. I will be writing detailed notes. Is this okay? Do you have any questions before I begin?

1. Do you provide the following services to students at your college?
 - a. Assessment of student needs, accommodation plans, case management
 - b. Assistive technologies, including equipment loans and lab access (If so, which ones?)
 - c. Alternative formats (If so, which ones?)
 - d. Exam accommodation
 - e. Learning Assistance
 - f. Interpreting/CART
2. Which services have you provided to students for eCampus courses?
3. Have you had requests for services that you do not offer to your eCampus students? If so, which ones?
4. How are you notified, or how do students with disabilities identify themselves when taking courses through eCampus?
5. What processes are in place when students identify themselves as needing support for eCampus courses?
6. What are some of the difficulties, barriers, issues you have encountered either as a lead or partner institute in providing services/supports to students with disabilities?
7. What solutions have worked?
8. Do you have any suggestions for how to deal with these problems when they arise again at your or other institutions?
9. Do you collaborate with the other institution in the partnership in these cases?
10. Which institute (partner or lead) deals with the funding body in cases where funding is required? Does this process work well?
11. Do you understand your role and responsibilities as either lead or partner institution in respect to providing supports for students with disabilities?
12. What areas of responsibility still remain unclear?
13. What suggestions do you have regarding how services for students with disabilities should be delivered through partner and lead institutions? What is the process you would like to have in place?

Preliminary Data Analysis

This data analysis was vetted with PSPSSD members through the PSPSSD Listserv.

Methodology

An e-mail invitation was sent to all PSPSSD listserv members inviting them to respond to the challenges and recommendations gleaned from the initial interviews. Members responded by filling in the response chart with comments. The results were also posted on the recently established PSPSSD discussion forum.

Four participants responded with comments. The comments were incorporated into the final report. The response chart follows.

Accessibility to eCampus for Persons with Disabilities: Systemic Challenges and Proposed Solutions

The goals of this system-wide project are to work with Post-Secondary Providers of Services to Students with Disabilities (PSPSSD) to:

1. Identify what accommodation supports are needed for learners with disabilities wishing to access courses offered through eCampus Alberta.
2. Propose a systemic structure for the provision of supports to learners with disabilities that includes recommended roles and responsibilities for the lead institution (offering the course) and for partner institutions (those hosting the course).
3. Outline the process for funding learners with disabilities who are accessing courses through eCampus Alberta.

The following are the preliminary findings of the research-based interviews with service providers at a number of post-secondary institutions in the province. Please read the findings carefully and respond with your comments. Let us know if you agree with the findings or disagree and have a different understanding of the issue. We sincerely appreciate hearing about your perspective. E-mail or fax your responses by November 30, 2009 to:

Flo Brokop
 NorQuest College
flo.brokop@norquest.ca
 Fax: 780-644-6065

Preliminary Findings	Agree/Comments	Disagree/Comments
<p>There are similar services offered to students with disabilities all across the province. These services include assessment of student needs, accommodation plans, case management, assistive technology loan/lab/training, alternative format of materials, exam accommodations and sign language interpreting or CART. In terms of supports of students in eCampus courses, the type of support varies and depends on student need. If there has been a request for specific support, the support has been provided. Some Colleges have not had any requests for specialized support for students with disabilities in eCampus courses. Of those who had, material preparation in alternative format, exam accommodations, and learning strategies supports have been accessed.</p>		

Preliminary Findings	Agree/Comments	Disagree/Comments
<p>There is no information for students on what supports are available to them and how to access supports when they enrol in eCampus courses.</p>		
<p>Rural colleges have limited resources (\$ or expertise) to support students with disabilities. For example, accessibility to sign language interpreters or CART is often limited to urban areas.</p>		
<p>Students who are currently enrolled at an institution and taking an eCampus course hosted by another institution will identify their campus as the Partner Institution for their eCampus course. Their campus is responsible to provide supports and accommodations for their disability. There is not an issue in terms of supports for services for these students, as they have already been identified by their own campus. Documentation, funding, and accommodation plans are already in place and extend to cover those necessary for the eCampus course.</p>		
<p>Students not already enrolled at an institution who are taking eCampus courses can present challenges.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. During the application process, students are not required to self-identify or there is no opportunity for them to notify the Lead or Partner Institution that they have a disability and will require supports. b. There is no mechanism in place for a Lead or Partner institution to share information on services necessary for students to receive support. c. If students do contact the lead or partner institution about supports they need, there is often very little or no lead time for the Partner or Lead Institution to put supports in place. d. Arrangements for who is responsible to provide supports (Lead or Partner) vary from one situation to the next. Collaboration has often resulted, but 		

Preliminary Findings	Agree/Comments	Disagree/Comments
<p>there have been instances of the partner institution bearing the burden of responsibility and costs to support the student.</p> <p>e. Foreign students and out-of-province students pose a challenge as neither are eligible for funding for disability supports.</p>		
<p>Presently, supports for students with disabilities enrolled in eCampus courses who are affiliated with a Partner Institution are dealt with on an ad hoc or case-by-case basis by the Partner Institution, although legally—because of the Duty to Accommodate—the Lead Institution is responsible to provide reasonable accommodations.</p>		
<p>It is not clear who is responsible to support instructors who teach eCampus courses when they have a student with a disability enrolled in their course. We assume that the disabilities unit of the Lead Institution would be available to the instructor for questions or concerns, but this has not been articulated. Communication between the Partner Institution, which may be providing specialized supports, and the instructor who is teaching the course is not formalized.</p>		

Are there other issues or questions that should be addressed? Do you have solutions or idea on how the issues above or others you have identified can be addressed?

Thank you very much for taking the time to respond and if you have any questions, please feel free to call me or contact me by e-mail.

Flo Brokop

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Appendix D- References

Alberta Human Rights Commission. (2004, August). *Duty to accommodate students with disabilities in post-secondary educational institutions*. [Interpretive bulletin]. Retrieved December 5, 2009 from the Alberta Human Rights Commission website:

http://www.albertahumanrights.ab.ca/publications/bulletins_sheets_booklets/bulletins/duty_to_accommodate_students_PDF.asp

eCampusAlberta. (2008, September 20). *Operations committee orientation manual*.

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