Centre for Learning and Teaching

focus

on university teaching and learning

Graduate Student Issue

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From the Director

A genuine curiosity about the world around us - and the people in it - drives many facets of academic work. Quite often, the genesis of that curiosity is an unexpected encounter with diversity. The contributors to this second annual Graduate Teaching Assistant issue of *Focus* challenge us to think deeply about how engaging diversity in our academic community enriches the experiences of both learners and teachers.

Lynn Taylor
Centre for Learning and Teaching

EDITORS
Suzanne Le-May Sheffield

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS
Kim Humes
Janice Fuller

PUBLISHED BY
Centre for Learning and Teaching
Dalhousie University
Halifax, NS B3H 4R2
Ph: (902) 494-1622
Fx: (902) 494-3767
Email: CLT@Dal.Ca

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY
Inspiring Minds

Perspectives on Equality in Higher Education

Abu Kamara, *Graduate Teaching Associate-CLT IDPhD Program*

Higher education's ability to recruit and support students' development has come under increasing scrutiny, in part as a consequence of its role as a key developer of human resources for the knowledge economy. With most universities raising their tuitions, equal access to higher education and the provision of more support services is receiving increased attention. In particular shifts in the discourses surrounding university support resources have injected new life into discussions about the importance of institutional commitment to these much-needed resources. The growth of key student groups within the university, most notably international students, visible minority students, students with accessibility needs, and students from low-income families, has highlighted some gaps in university support structures. Although some level of student support resources currently exists on most university campuses, such as advising, international student offices, accessibility services, writing centres, financial aid, and transition year programs, the available resources are not always finely tuned to address the unique challenges of international students and historically underrepresented students. Cultural differences and historical problems with discrimination increase the likelihood that these students will encounter circumstances, whether on or off-campus, that may pose serious challenges to their success.

This second annual Graduate Student Edition of *Focus* presents four different views on equality in higher education. Though the topics addressed in the articles vary across the authors, each author provides a convincing perspective on the value of revisiting the issues of access and support resources on university campuses. All of the authors share, as part of the core message of their recommendations, the central premise of student empowerment in addressing resource needs. Natasha Hanson's article identifies increasing tuition costs in higher education as a strong barrier to student access and simultaneously makes the case for countering low enrollment of underrepresented students by increasing financial and non-financial resources. She also calls for student awareness raising activities around issues of access to higher education. (*continued on page 2*) >

(continued from page 1) > Taking on the timely issue of international students, Cheluchi Onyemelukwe's article illuminates the benefits of international student enrollments by providing examples of their academic, economic and cultural contributions and argues for the importance of the supports students can provide to one another. On the issue of equality in the classroom, Moeza Merchant's article presents a thought-provoking example of how a faculty member can implement an inclusive teaching methodology where students can negotiate what is taught and how they learn. Finally, Gaia Aish gives her unique and insightful perspective on the challenges facing students with accessibility issues by arguing that such students need to be proactive in seeking and accessing resources. While all the authors demonstrate an underlying commitment to student empowerment, they also all recognize and highlight the importance of institutional accountability to support all students who are admitted to the university.

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DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY
Inspiring Minds

Postsecondary Education Costs and Equality Pays

Natasha Hanson
Sociology & Social Anthropology

Considering the looming threats of increased tuition for post-secondary education in Nova Scotia, I think that we need to consider the equality of access to such education. How is it possible to have equality in access to post-secondary education when the costs are becoming increasingly prohibitive? While there are increasingly more students enrolled in post-secondary institutions (due to the "baby boom echo" youth population), participation rates have declined, in terms of the proportion of high school students opting to take post-secondary studies (Berger, 2009, p. 61). Also, many students are leaving with large amounts of personal debt due to these rising costs. This increasing debt load then affects students for a considerable time afterward.

Considering the high tuition and debt levels that current students sustain, the employment outcome after schooling becomes increasingly important. Without successful employment (that is gaining fulltime and lucrative work) the likelihood of paying student debts back in a timely and efficient manner becomes unlikely.

The whole point of post-secondary education is to gain further employment options and higher rates of pay (from a functional point of view); these opportunities should then be available to as many Canadians as possible. Sadly equity in access to post-secondary education seems to be diminishing, not growing (Berger, 2009). Tuition rates have been rising since 1990 and this factor alone has been shown to negatively affect the number of people attending university (Johnson & Rahman, 2005). Of course there are many other costs associated with attending a post-secondary institution such as books, accommodation and transportation; these costs have also been on the rise (above even the rate of inflation) (Motte et al., 2009, p. 123). However, the resources that students have access to, with which to pay these rising costs, have not grown as quickly (Ibid). Particularly in the case of low-income families, there is a growing divide in resources between those high and low income Canadians. This growing economic inequality also translates to inequality in access to post-secondary education. It is important to consider whether parental income plays a role in their children being able to afford to pursue post-secondary education. Current research shows that sadly it does because there are not enough effective programs offered by institutions themselves or by government to help them financially achieve this goal (Motte et al., 2009; Berger, 2009). In fact people from low-income families have historically been under-represented within post-secondary educational institutions. This is also true for First Nations people and various immigrant ethnic groups, both of which could clearly coincide with the grouping low-income (Motte et al., 2009; Berger, 2009) The frightening reality is that youth from higher-income families are twice as likely to get a post-secondary education, compared to their lower-income counterparts (Berger, 2009, p. 61).

"The whole point of post-secondary education is to gain further employment options and higher rates of pay (from a functional point of view); these opportunities should then be available to as many Canadians as possible."

The facts that lower- income and minority groups face inequitable access to post-secondary education are disturbing and increased tuition costs feed these inequalities because "the higher the costs of education, the lower the returns" (Motte et al., 2009, p. 123). In other words, the income difference between those with and without post-secondary education is not growing at the same rate as tuition increases. This means that low-income students would increasingly struggle to pay back loans because the employment gained after schooling is not increasing pay at the same rate as tuition increases. This situation places increased importance on access to financial resources such as grants and loans, particularly for students from low-income families. It has been shown that grants are more effective forms of financial assistance than loans (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009, p. 9), which should be taken into future policy considerations by institutions and government.

However, there is more to equality in education than economic resources. From an access to post-secondary education point of view, there needs to be early intervention with under-represented groups, in high school and earlier levels (Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994). Post-secondary institutions need to continue to reach out to these groups, especially considering that population decline will soon start to affect enrolment levels (Berger, 2009, p. 61). Also, it has been argued that for post-secondary education to truly be equitable there also has to be in-place

non-financial support to encourage completion of programs (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009, p. 13). Examples of non-financial support include: career counselling, which would include relevant program information so that career goals could be achieved; academic support, in the form of tutoring and workshops on study techniques; and encouragement through peer mentoring (Berger, 2009). Once in educational systems, there needs to be resources in-place to encourage students, particularly those with backgrounds which may make completion of a post-secondary program difficult (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009, p. 13). Given the business model that universities are further adopting higher tuition fees seem likely to stay; however within the business model there may be hope because increasingly universities will be challenged in meeting current enrolment levels and hopefully they will consider reaching out further to under-represented groups.

Also, I think that it is crucial that Canadians in general be made aware of the inequalities in our post-secondary education system. There are organizations with exactly this goal in mind; for example, The Alliance of Nova Scotia Student Associations (ANSSA), a non-partisan advocacy group, have set up a website (www.tappedout.ca). Their website contains a discussion on the potential increase in Nova Scotia postsecondary tuitions by 3% in order to deal with provincial debt load. Not only are such groups important, students need to actively critique the educational systems of which they are a part by demanding change.

Clearly equitable access to and completion of post-secondary education is not currently happening; instead, there is a reflection of deeper structural inequalities found in Canadian society. Students who come from low income families or are visible minorities continue to struggle with ever-increasing post-secondary education costs. In order to strive for increased equity there needs to be a commitment made by governments and universities alike to reach out and support these potential students. Fundamentally students and the general Canadian population need to be better informed and critical of the education systems to which we all contribute.

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Empowering Students in Universities

Moeza Merchant
Community Health & Epidemiology

Learning environments in colleges and universities are expected to be more complex than those found in secondary and middle schools. While it is true that a 10th grade classroom may have some similar elements to a 1st year university lecture hall, educational experiences that are available in the post-secondary domain are logically more advanced. This means that students who have spent thirteen years at educational institutions generally still need time to adjust, adapt to, and learn the norms of classroom behaviour (as well as campus culture) when starting their undergraduate degrees. The class sizes by themselves can significantly influence freshman experiences and alter the way that students interact with their professors. Learning can become passive as students feel themselves distanced from their instructors. At the same time, students are expected to learn critical skills that will make them effective and motivated life-long learners. Are there ways to reconfigure the teacher-student relationship to overcome these challenges at the undergraduate level?

Power Structures and Democracy

Recently, I discovered an entire literature focused on power-sharing in the classroom under the umbrella title of Critical Pedagogy. While there is no majority consensus on the inclusive or exclusive characteristics of this field, its proponents are often interested in raising consciousness about the oppressive qualities of the traditional methods used in education. Teacher-centred practices are seen as ways to marginalize individuals or groups and turn them into banks for the purpose of depositing information. Critical pedagogy is a response to these "architectures of control" that are adversarial to the creative and constructive aspects of the students' personal systems of knowing and knowledge (Shor, 1996).

> *"Shor's purpose is to create a 'critical-democratic' classroom where teachers negotiate the curriculum with students..."*

The idea of power-sharing can seem radical to many educators and is considered a controversial approach due to its potential to backfire in practice. Still, there could be advantages to having an in-depth understanding of this pedagogy which may lead to a desire to make learning and learning environments more active and socially transformative.

An important figure in the field of critical pedagogy is Ira Shor whose book, *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in Critical Pedagogy*, demonstrates how this teaching philosophy can be actualized in a modern institution (Shor, 1996). Furthermore, the book documents his experiences and attempts at creating a democratic college classroom as a professor in New York while teaching about utopian societies.

Shor's purpose is to create a "critical-democratic" classroom where teachers negotiate the curriculum with students and where the classroom can generate a questioning of the status quo. In order to create this utopian classroom, Shor instituted a weekly after-class group meeting that encouraged students to re-evaluate the concepts learned in each class. He paired this strategy with transparency of his expectations and teaching styles. To encourage input, he introduced "protest rights" which students could use to ask for amendments to the established grading contract that Shor had proposed to his students at the beginning of the class – examples of amendments included more flexibility on lateness, absences and assignment-marking criteria that must be fulfilled if an A grade was to be achieved in the class (Roberts, 2001, pp. 81-82).

Shor's work provides some revealing insights into student psychology as well as his efforts at challenging the typical behaviours and attitudes of students that presuppose the teacher as a "unilateral authority" (Shor, 1996, p. 16) His classroom from the beginning is made of "Siberian" exiles; these are students who have positioned themselves as distantly and possibly rebelliously away from the centre authority figure, the professor, to the back of the classroom (Shor, 1996, chap.1). To disrupt these power zones, Shor started teaching from the back of the room, close to those who had distinctly alienated themselves

(Shor, 1996, pp. 21-22). The point was that, by disrupting a routine act, Shor wanted to raise awareness of the act itself, a reflection of "Vygotsky's Law of Awareness" (Shor, 1996, p.22).[1] This included challenging the message that student-teacher hot interaction zones at the front of the class were the university versions of 'cool-kids cafeteria table' seen in high schools. Although I cannot envision many professors conducting their classes from the back of the room so they can focus on endearing themselves to the 'Siberians', Shor's method of observation and teaching has some strong implications for administrators and teachers who want to create a democratic classroom where students learn to desire their own input in higher education.

Shor acknowledges that the class did challenge him to consider a better process for promoting his principles. However, he asserts that each classroom must recalibrate the "equation of authority and freedom" based on the context (Roberts, 2001, p.84). This does not mean that teachers should lack authority in the academic sense but that they should use this authority in a way that will allow flexibility in the classroom (Roberts, 2001, p.84). Negotiating the quality of the assignments and grading will be a hurdle for most university departments; however, this does not mean that there should not be efforts to more directly include students in the feedback processes to ensure student satisfaction.

Minorities – Pluralism in the Classroom

The quality of teacher-student relationships can clearly depend on multiple factors, such as the institution's authority over their teachers, size of classes as well as the discipline of study. Still, there are some strategies that will empower students and give them opportunities to voice their contributions in the learning process. Promoting dialogue and participation can occur through small groups and presentations, but it needs to be consistent and significant in each class. Writing and giving feedback to the instructor on learning experiences should have some influence on the curriculum and teaching styles as well. The roles that students can have in developing a course can be more transparent than they are now. Universities should find more effective ways to incorporate students' voices since students contribute much through their finances and talent to higher education.

There will still be groups, such as international students, who will feel their minority status more than ever in vocal classrooms. Democracy can have the same effect in universities as it does in the larger society. Just like we encourage citizens to vote, students should use the opportunities they have to evaluate critically and approach their institutions with confidence. Despite our past experiences and personal traits, universities offer us a chance as teachers and learners, more so than high schools did, to reflect and to contribute to the learning process.

1. Vygotsky's Law of Awareness is explained by Shor as "a break in a routine or an impediment to an automatic activity raises awareness of the activity and routine. When the routine is broken, we then have a chance to notice it, question it and consider alternatives." (p. 22)

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Roberts, P. 2001. Making it Matter: Politics, Commitment and the Art of Teaching. *Interchange: A Quarterly Review of Education,* 32(1): 79-90.

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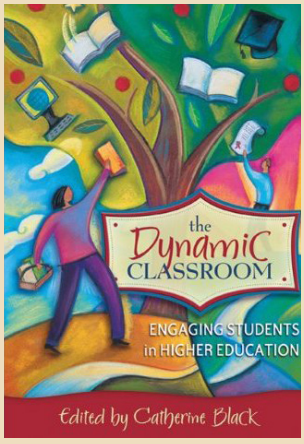
The Dynamic Classroom

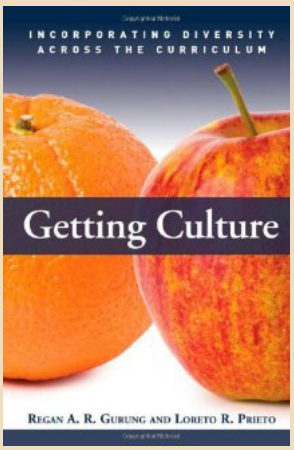
Edited by Catherine Black



With each new era, educators must examine the cultural and technological changes that define the times in order to reflect or incorporate them into teaching practice. As a result of that examination, teachers find ways to use the best, ignore the worst, and strive to create a meaningful and dynamic learning environment. *The Dynamic Classroom: Engaging Students in Higher Education* submits that there is no single method for the current era or any other era, and accordingly approaches this crucial question from multiple angles in a collection of fourteen best-practices papers.

Getting Culture

Edited by Regan A.R. & Loreto R. Prieto



How do we educate our students about cultural diversity and cultural differences, and eliminate cultural ignorance, stereotyping, and prejudice? What are the conceptual issues involved in reaching this goal? How can we integrate these perspectives in disciplinary and diversity courses, and the curriculum? This book is a resource for answering these questions. Within the framework of current scholarship and discussion of essential concepts, it offers practical techniques, and empirically proven "best practices" for teaching about diversity.

International Students and Diversity in the Classroom

Cheluchi Onyemelukwe,
Law

Today, classrooms in Canadian universities are probably very different from what they would have looked like fifty years ago. With students from all over the world, and the children of immigrants a constituent part of the classroom, diversity is no longer a new phenomenon. This is even more so in many graduate schools. There are many kinds of diversity within a university, including gender, ethnic backgrounds, religions (or lack of religion), and immigration status. In this article, I will focus on diversity as it relates to international and immigrant students.

When I first came to Canada eight years ago for graduate studies in law, I was in a class of ten females and no males, and almost half of us came from different countries: Nigeria, the Philippines, Guyana, and India. For the majority of us, this was our first experience living in a foreign country. Similarly, my roommates were mostly students from Asian countries: China, the Philippines and Bangladesh.

Diversity makes for an appealing pot of soup, much like a spicy pot of Nigerian okra soup. It comes with different interesting ingredients, including challenges and opportunities that have the potential to provide a richer experience in education than might otherwise be the case. In terms of challenges, most international students come from different teaching/learning backgrounds, different cultures, different financial circumstances, and may face diverse immigration challenges.

> *"It is important to understand that international students come from a variety of educational backgrounds that are different from the Canadian educational system and that they may encounter a number of challenges."*

Many of these challenges are resolved in time, with some reliance on resources provided by schools. But in my experience, I benefitted most from the informal help provided by other students, both Canadian and international.

For instructors specifically, respecting diversity in the classroom can prove to be a challenge, but it can also provide very rewarding opportunities. There may be little that instructors can do about issues such as providing information regarding extension of student permits, but there is much that they can do to enhance the learning experience of international students in the classroom. A willingness to see things from the perspective of a student is an important attribute that would contribute to effective teaching in a diverse class. An instructor's careful explanation of concepts such as plagiarism, which may be different for some international students, is vital. International students can run into trouble sometimes for paraphrasing sentences without attribution, not understanding what they have done wrong.

It is important to understand that international students come from a variety of educational backgrounds that are different from the Canadian educational system and that they may encounter a number of challenges. For instance, when a student comes from a background of rote learning, transitioning to a system that requires greater analysis and original thinking might be challenging. These challenges affect not only students but also their instructors. For instance, trying to decipher words spoken in foreign accents might be difficult for an instructor who has several international students in the class. Yet making the effort to listen patiently and engage students is likely to yield great rewards for students in terms of their engagement in the class and their confidence in navigating the world outside the school.

Providing support systems within departments is also important. I often tell new international students about a friend of mine who faced lots of challenges

early on as an international student in Canada. Her writing was poor and she despaired about graduating. Fortunately, the professors at the school who had had experience helping foreign students with similar challenges, provided her with a writing tutor. She graduated, having written a really strong thesis. She now works at a top law firm in Canada. The professor's assistance, and the student's willingness to succeed, combined to ensure her success.

But at the same time, it is important to tread carefully and to avoid condescension. Foreign students are not only a "bag of challenges"; they are also a possible treasure trove of possibilities. Many international students are, by nature, adventurous and willing to work hard to succeed both in and outside the classroom. Many come from excellent educational pedigrees, having excelled back home or in other countries; it is important to recognise and nurture their talents. They also bring different perspectives to classes that can help broaden the horizons of their classmates, and through their contributions, they provide opportunities for others to develop a more global view, not to mention making the class more interesting.

Given the continuing trend of globalisation, diversity in Canadian classrooms is here to stay. Deliberate recognition and engagement with what 'diversity' means for students is important both for institutions which have to consider what support services to provide for students and also for instructors who have to engage with a diverse class. Fortunately for me, I had a really positive experience in my first year at the Law School which in part encouraged me to pursue my doctorate at Dalhousie. Many of my professors had previous experiences working with international students and were able to encourage my engagement as a student. My hope is that other international students have such experiences and that those of us who aspire to become teachers will in turn make positive contributions to respecting diversity.

International Student Centre (ISES)

Our office strives to promote positive experiences by responding to the diverse interests and needs of international students, staff, faculty, and the wider community. We provide services and programs to approximately 1700 international students at Dalhousie.

Our services include:

- Welcoming and assisting international students upon arrival and throughout their studies.
- Advising students in the areas of immigration, medical insurance, work permits, financial matters, travel, language enhancement and personal issues.
- Offering a variety of social, cultural and information programs throughout the academic year.
- Advising students on international study/work/volunteer opportunities.
- Promoting cross-cultural understanding within Dalhousie University and the Halifax Community.

Find us on the *Web* at: http://isd.dal.ca/ Contact us at: *Tel* (902) 494-1566 , *Email* ises@dal.ca (for general inquiries) *Visit* us at: International Centre, Killam Library, Room G-25, 8:30am-4:30pm Mon-Fri

Being Learning Disabled in a Higher Education Setting

Gaia Aish,
Chemistry

I didn't realize that the tears I shed trying to understand my homework and the level of anxiety I felt during tests wasn't normal. It had always been that way and I had survived. Spelling tests were the worst; other students would get marks back of 18 or 19 out of 20, but mine were 2,1 or even 0, and I simply didn't understand how my class mates did so well. In grade six I wasn't as capable of thoughtful personal reflection as I am now, so it didn't occur to me that I had a problem.

I was in grade eleven when I was officially diagnosed with learning disabilities and given personalized accommodations in all classes. I relied on book-on-tape readings and for my grade twelve provincials, I was one of only a few students in the province to have exams-on-tape. It wasn't until a few years later that I truly began to understand how I survived thirteen years of public school. I was outgoing and friendly, avoided science, and overcompensated with creativity. I was told by my high school's part-time psychologist that I "wasn't cut out for university", and the comment really haunted me. Thankfully, I didn't listen to her and I completed a bachelor of science and am currently completing a master's degree in chemistry. It was a long road with a mixture of accomplishments and failures that have given me time to reflect on the challenges that are unique to students with learning disabilities in a higher education setting.

I encountered my first barrier during my transition from high school to university when I tried to implement my high school accommodations at university. In high school, students may have been given accommodation without a formal diagnosis of a learning disability, whereas in university students with learning disabilities are required to submit a current psycho-educational report from a registered psychologist. This encompasses 6-12 hours of testing to reach a diagnosis at a cost of $1700-$2400 to the student. The student can apply to get a partial reimbursement (up to 70%) if they qualify, but this is still a huge financial burden to most families, especially in addition to tuition. This may prevent some students from seeking and receiving accommodation.

Another barrier that students may encounter is the realization that the support system they had in high school is gone. In high school, students with learning disabilities can have individualized education plans and their teachers are typically aware of their disability and learning needs. In university, their professors are not automatically informed of the diagnosis and as a result are not aware of the specific needs of a given student. The school no longer initiates accommodation for the student and parents are no longer automatically included. Learning disabled students must quickly become self-advocates. However, once a student has had accommodations approved by the Student Accommodation Office (formerly OSAA) instructors are informed of the accommodations and must participate in the facilitation of the stipulated accommodation.

All students coming to university find that the teaching and learning process is different from high school. In a university setting students are expected to develop their learning skills to allow them to learn on their own; this creates new challenges for all students. Academic accommodations are granted to students with learning disabilities to provide equal education opportunities, but with the varying lecture and testing structures between courses it can be difficult to determine what accommodations are appropriate. Students need to be able to assess how their learning disabilities may affect them from course to course and ensure they have the appropriate accommodations. For some students, the level of self-awareness and initiative required to ensure an equal opportunity to education will be an ongoing and challenging barrier to their success at university.

SAO provides a range of services for the implementation of an individual's approved accommodations. For exam

accommodations, these could include arrangements for extended time, writing in a room of their own, timed breaks, or using a word-processor. For classroom activities, these may include facilitation of note-takers, assistive technologies or minimized penalties for spelling and grammar.

Another barrier many students with learning disabilities may face in university is a social one. All students may struggle as they try to make new friends, develop new interests and mature. Learning disabilities may also present themselves as personality traits, which range from overly outgoing and hyper to especially removed and distant. Often students will be seen as 'different', a consequence that could be made worse by other students' lack of understanding. With that said, the ability to maintain confidentiality regarding a student's learning disability is important.

Although a high level of confidentiality is maintained to protect students' privacy, in some instances the procedure may also create a barrier for students. For some students, their accommodations and diagnoses are their secrets. They make the student feel different. Who they tell, and what they tell, is up to the individual student. Nevertheless, other students are still going to notice if they never write a test with the class or require a note-taker, and they will ask why. What do these students tell others? Unfortunately students will find that many of their peers and even some of their professors don't fully understand what being learning disabled means. They draw misconceptions about the student's intelligence and ability, which creates negative connotations about learning disabilities. This in turn may cause students to think of their learning disability and accommodations as a negative personal secret.

Learning disabilities do not mean that you lack intelligence. During secondary school I was in the enriched program for gifted students when I was diagnosed with learning disabilities. Some of my teachers and family found this inconsistent due to their misconceptions. How could someone be 'gifted' and learning disabled? Now, my overall academic ability would likely be comparable to other students in graduate programs, but still I am sometimes met with uninformed surprise from peers and professionals when I tell them about my learning disabilities. I have unique aptitudes and deficits in my abilities. For example, my working memory and processing speed is quite slow and I cannot successfully finish a test in the standard time; however, given extra time I can finish successfully.

Equality for students with learning disabilities starts in the classroom but should also include challenging the general misconception about learning disabilities. It is important for students with learning disabilities to understand the resources available at SAO and around campus, to be self-aware, and to self-advocate. For professors and instructors it is important to consider if course material is being delivered and tested in a manner that is inclusive to everyone. As peers, it is important to avoid prejudice. Although these considerations may seem obvious, people with learning disabilities belong to an invisible minority that at times are still misunderstood and misjudged at university.

Student Accommodation Office (formerly OSAA)

Dalhousie University recognizes the diversity of its students and is committed to providing a learning environment and community in which students are able to participate without discrimination on grounds prohibited by the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act. In particular, the University is committed to facilitating students' access to the University's academic programs, activities, facilities and services. The SAO administers the Accommodation Policy for Students. All requests made for academic accommodation and non-academic accommodation made by registered students must be directed to SAO.

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Certificate in University Teaching and Learning
2011 Graduates

Back row L-R: Meftah Abuswer, Pratip Mitra, Anwar Alhenshiri

Front row L-R: Verona Singer, Fozi Alsagheer, Robert Ronconi, Caroline Cochran, Sarah Crawford, Angela Siegel

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Centre for Learning and Teaching
Dalhousie University
Halifax, N.S. B3H 4R2