



THRIVING On Campus

The Role of Disability in 2SLGBTQ+ Students' Campus Experience

Thriving On Campus is an Ontario-wide campus climate study for 2SLGBTQ+ university students. The project explored students' experiences, perceptions, wellbeing, and academic success. Nearly 3900 2SLGBTQ+ students participated in an online survey and 50 students participated in follow-up interviews. Surveys were administered in Winter 2019 and interviews took place from Fall 2019 to Summer 2020. For more information about the study and those who participated, please see "Study Overview and Participants' Demographics."

This Report Presents:

- Findings about 2SLGBTQ+ students who reported having a disability or a condition that significantly affects their experiences as a student.
- Findings on how students' experiences can affect their wellbeing, belonging on campus, and academic development and engagement.
- Recommendations for campuses to consider in order to improve campus experiences for students with disabilities.

Background: Report Development

Process of Development

This report was created by the Disability Community Report working group in collaboration with the study's principal investigator, research team members, and data analysts. Working group members identified as disabled and 2SLGBTQ+ representing undergraduate and graduate students, recent graduates, and faculty.

The group grounded their approach in the disability justice principle of *collective access*, emphasizing “ways of doing things that go beyond typical able-bodied and neurotypical norms”¹ to ensure that all working group members were able to meaningfully participate in developing the report. This meant they used whole-group work sessions and breakout groups. Their process involved shared decision-making and sought to honour the expertise ingrained in working group members' lived experiences. The group's collective expertise strengthened and contextualized their understanding of the study's survey and interview data and created a rich and valuable foundation for this report. The working group took great care to ensure the findings presented in this report reflect the complex experiences shared by disabled students in the survey and interviews.

Vignettes

The vignettes that are included in this report were created by one of the qualitative data analysts and work group members (Katie

Cook). The working group decided that sharing case examples would help to highlight some of the interesting issues faced by disabled 2SLGBTQ+ students, though we did not want to identify any individual participant. As such, Katie created vignettes, which are amalgamations of different participant identities/stories. All experiences in the vignettes are based on participant data, however the vignettes themselves do not describe any one specific participant.

Defining Disability

For the purposes of this report, “disabled student” refers to students who reported living with a disability or condition affecting their experience as a student and/or identified as disabled in the surveys. In the survey, students were asked a set of questions about particular disabilities and conditions affecting their experiences as students in terms of learning, access, and/or interactions with others on campus. These questions addressed having one or more physical, learning, neurodevelopmental condition or disability, emotional or mental health concerns, or other disabilities/conditions. Following this, students were asked the question, “do you identify as a person with a disability or a disabled person?”

Because important differences might exist between students with one or more disabilities and students who identified as disabled, at times in this report we present findings for both groups independently.

Looking to the Future: Intersecting Experiences

Thriving On Campus recognizes that 2SLGBTQ+ students have myriad intersecting identities, though to better understand 2SLGBTQ+ campus climate, the study focused on inclusion/exclusions concerning gender and sexuality. Given this focus, outside of demographic questions, the survey and interviews included limited questions related to experiences with disability or ableism. However, in the follow-up interviews, some disabled participants shared their experiences related to accessibility issues and ableism on campus. To further understand the experiences of diverse disabled 2SLGBTQ+ students, it is important that future research specifically address experiences of ableism on campuses, both interpersonally and within university systems, as they intersect with other systems of oppression like

cisgenderism, heterosexism, and racism (to name a few). Future research should explore better ways to holistically support disabled 2SLGBTQ+ students.

¹ Sins Invalid. (2019). *Skin, tooth, and bone - The basis of movement is our people. A disability justice primer* (2nd ed.). CA: Berkeley.

Methodological Notes. Because it is not possible to conduct a random sample of 2SLGBTQ+ university students in Ontario, we cannot know with certainty if our findings represent the population of 2SLGBTQ+ students at Ontario universities. However, given the size and diversity of our survey and interview samples, our findings offer important insights to support policies and programs that are responsive to the needs, strengths, and experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ students, including disabled students. Given the survey's cross-sectional design, reported statistical relationships between variables reflect correlation and do not meet the criteria of cause-and-effect.

What is Typically Involved in Accessing Accommodations for Disabled Students?

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) requires universities to meet the access needs of disabled students. The process for securing accommodations, typically through student disability services, involves:

- 1) Identifying as disabled
- 2) Providing proof of disability
- 3) Negotiating accommodations

“I had to do a lot of paperwork and a lot of going to my doctors and a lot of advocating with the doctors, and – which actually got to be so much work that by – when I returned for graduate school I decided to not go down the pathway of student accessibility, because it was just so much work that I didn’t feel it was worth it.”

“As someone with a disability, you’re always taught to advocate for yourself, and then it’s super frustrating when you do that...if I’m told that what I’m asking for is unreasonable because I’m ‘not disabled enough’”

Disabled students often face many challenges when trying to access accommodations:

- Their disability or condition is not recognized by disability services
- They do not identify as disabled
- They do not have a family doctor to provide the necessary assessment or they

cannot afford the cost of assessment/notes

- Documents use their deadname²
- They experience long waitlists to meet with disability services staff

Students who are able to register with disability services may struggle to find accommodations that work for them or the accommodation is provided at the discretion of faculty. Graduate students, in particular, may find the available options are not suitable for their needs or may experience disjointed support if they have to navigate petitions, supervisors, committee members, and graduate studies departments.

Accommodations - such as dropping classes, taking leaves, or declining teaching assistantships - can contribute to financial strain for disabled students. Where accommodations are inadequate or poorly implemented, or students encounter challenges with their instructors or university staff, there are often few options for filing complaints or accessing mediation.

² *Deadname* refers to a person’s first name that they no longer use, usually but not always their birth name.

Disability and 2SLGBTQ+ Students

Nearly 70% of 3865 2SLGBTQ+ survey participants reported having a disability or condition that affected their experiences as a student in terms of their learning, access on campus, and/or interactions with others. Not all students who report a disability or condition identified as disabled.

“Disability,” as an identity, is an umbrella term that includes a wide array of lived experiences, including physical disability, mental illness, chronic conditions, invisible illnesses, and so on. There are many reasons why a student who has a disability or condition may not identify as disabled, including stigma, access to diagnoses, and misunderstanding of what it means to be “disabled.”

“They know I’m a woman, but my disability is not visible, so that’s something else I have to out, and my sexuality I have to out. So, it’s just like all these identities where I don’t know how [people] are going to react.”

Who Identifies as Disabled?

- 62% with a physical disability/condition
- 52% with a learning disability/condition
- 48% with a neurocognitive disability/condition
- 23% with an emotional/mental health disability/condition
- 16% with another type of disability/condition

Disability and ableism intersect with other identities and oppressive systems. For example, BIPOC students in our study were less likely than white students to identify as disabled. We invite you to consider what barriers might exist that cause a BIPOC student with a disability to not identify as disabled? How might these barriers affect a BIPOC student’s access to accommodations and support?

Demographic Overview of Survey Participants by Disability Factors

	No reported disabilities or condition	Reported at least one disability or condition and did not identify as disabled	Reported disabilities or conditions and identified as disabled
Avg age	21.8 years	21.5 years	23.0 years
Identify as trans	18%	27%	47%
Median family income	\$75,000 - 99,999	\$75,000 - 99,999	\$50,000 - 74,999
Identify as BIPOC	31%	24%	21%
First generation students	19%	22%	26%
Undergraduate students	81%	26%	85%
Avg years in university	2.8 years	2.8 years	3.1 years

Campus Climate

Experiences of Victimization on Campus

The survey asked students about experiencing various types of victimization on campus since the start of the academic year. With few exceptions, our analysis found that disabled students were at greater risk for being victimized than students without a disability/condition.

For example, compared to students without a disability, students with one or more disabilities and who identified as disabled were:

- 2.5X more likely to have been verbally threatened, bullied, or intimidated
- 5.7X more likely to have been followed on campus in a threatening manner
- 4.0X more likely to have been sexually harassed or assaulted

Intersecting Identities: Disability, Race & Gender

In understanding disabled students' experiences, it is important to consider their other identities, including race and gender. Below we report on experiencing at least one type of victimization, comparing students without a disability to students with one or more disabilities and who identified as disabled.

In terms of race, we found

- Disabled BIPOC students were 3.7X more

likely to have been victimized than BIPOC students without a disability

- Disabled white students were 3.2X more likely to have been victimized than white students without a disability

In terms of gender, we found

- Disabled trans students were 4.0X more likely to have been victimized than trans students without a disability
- Disabled cisgender students were 2.9X more likely to have been victimized than cisgender students without a disability

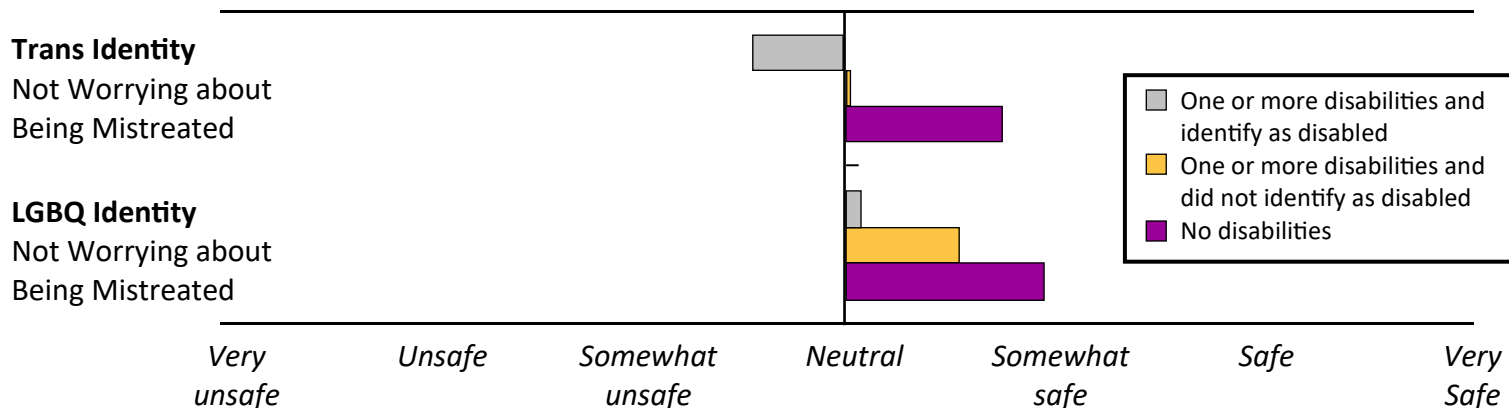
When we examined non-binary, trans, cisgender women, and cisgender men as separate groups, we found that except for cisgender men, disabled students were between 3.2X and 4.0X more likely to have been victimized.

Perceptions of Safety on Campus

Research suggests that feeling safe on campus is a critical factor influencing students' belonging, academics, and wellbeing. Using survey data, we explored 2SLGBTQ+ students' perceptions of safety on campus, specifically among students with one or more disabilities who identified as disabled, students with one or more disabilities who *did not* identify as disabled, and students who reported no disabilities.

We examined two aspects of 2SLGBTQ+ safety on campus: (1) not worrying about being mistreated because of their trans

Feeling Safe: Not Worrying about Mistreatment



identity and/or sexual identity, and (2) feeling safe being open about their trans identity and/or sexual identity (see textbox—the Safety Scales—for more information about the scales). Questions concerning trans identity were asked only to students who identified as part of the trans community.

In the following graphs, we present the average scores for the three groups of students for each scale related to 2SLGBTQ+ students’ perceptions of safety on campus. Across the four measures, the same pattern emerged: students with disabilities who identified as disabled felt the least safe (or the most unsafe), followed by their peers with disabilities who *did not* identify as disabled and then students without any disabilities.

Feeling Safe: Not Worrying about Mistreatment

Trans Identity: Scores across the groups fell to either side of “neutral,” with those who identified as disabled feeling the least safe (in fact their score fell between “somewhat unsafe” and “neutral”), followed by those with disabilities who *did not* identify as disabled and then those without any disabilities.

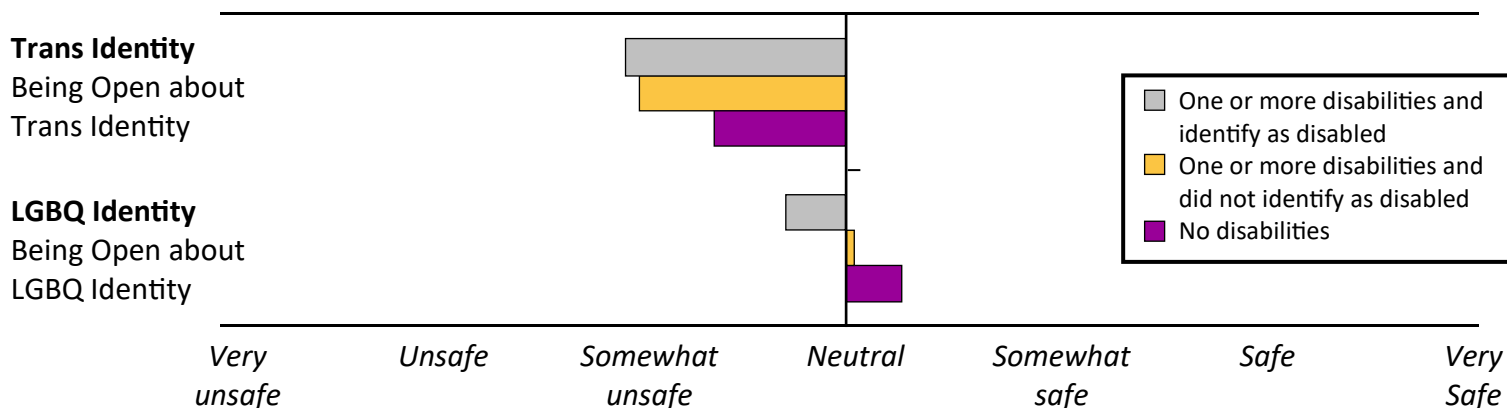
LGBQ Identity: The scores for all three groups fell between “neutral” and “somewhat safe.” Students with disabilities who identified as disabled felt the least safe, followed by students with disabilities who *did not* identify as disabled and then students without any disabilities.

The Safety Scales

Not worrying about being mistreated – feeling personally safe in terms of not worrying about being discriminated against (e.g., stared at/whispered about, verbally assaulted/threatened) on campus because of their trans/LGBQ identity.

Feeling safe being open about 2SLGBTQ identity – feeling personally safe to be open and not hide their trans/LGBQ identity on campus.

Feeling Safe: Open about 2SLGBTQ+ Identity



Feeling Safe: Open about 2SLGBTQ+ Identity

Trans Identity: The scores for the three groups indicated that each group generally felt “somewhat unsafe” on campus.

Students who identified as disabled felt the most unsafe, followed by students with disabilities who did not identify as disabled and then students without any disabilities.

LGBQ Identity: Scores across the groups fell to either side of “neutral,” with students who identified as disabled feeling the least safe (their score fell actually below “neutral”), followed by those with disabilities who did not identify as disabled and then those without any disabilities.

“Well, [when I hear anti-2SLGBTQ+ comments on campus they are] very brief and I’m not around them very long ... I feel panicked for a few moments until I’m away from them. I always feel like maybe I should say something, but when it’s a group I just I don’t...I feel scared.”

Campus Belonging & Instructor Relations

Students were asked in the survey about the extent to which they felt that they belonged in their campus community and about the support they received from instructors.

Compared to students without a disability, those with at least one disability/condition reported a lower sense of belonging and support from instructors. These outcomes were even lower among students who identified as disabled.

“My mental health definitely took a bit of a hit just because I didn’t feel welcomed.”

“The instant I handed them my accommodation papers, which means, you know, “Hey, this person needs extra time on tests, and such and such,’ the rest of the year I was treated like a 5-year-old.”

Among students who reported at least one disability/condition and identified as disabled, BIPOC students’ sense of belonging was more than 2x lower than white students who reported at least one disability/condition.

Academic Satisfaction & Mental Health

Students were asked about their academic satisfaction through questions about their performance in classes and overall academic achievements, as well as their overall academic experience.

Students who reported at least one disability had lower academic satisfaction than students with no reported disabilities.

“I was really glad to have those working relationships with my professors, to be able to say, hey, I’m going through a thing – either I need an extension on this, or can we talk about this.”

Concerning mental health, students were asked how often they had experienced symptoms of psychological distress in the last two weeks.

Students who reported at least one disability/condition experienced psychological distress more often than students with no reported disabilities/conditions.

Please note, academic satisfaction and mental health outcomes are also part of a complex series of interconnected relationships between feelings of safety on campus, campus belonging, and instructor relations. For more detail please refer to the model on page 12.

A Closer Look at Student Persistence among Disabled Students: An Intersectional Analysis

Students were asked about whether they had ever considered leaving their university because of their experiences on campus:

- BIPOC students who identified as disabled were 2.3x more likely to have seriously considered leaving their university than their white peers.
- Students who identified as disabled were 4.3x more likely than students who reported no disabilities/conditions to have considered leaving.
- Students who were OSAP eligible and identified as disabled were 51% less likely to have seriously considered leaving their university than their peers who were OSAP ineligible.
- Students who reported at least one disability/condition but did not identify as disabled were 2.6x more likely than students who did not report any disabilities/conditions to have considered leaving.
- BIPOC students who reported at least one disability/condition but did not identify as disabled were 1.5x more likely to have seriously considered leaving their university than their white peers.

While the findings suggest that having one or more disabilities increases students’ risk of considering leaving university, the risk is even greater for those who identified as disabled.

Vignettes

Sam's Experience with Campus Climate

Sam is an asexual nonbinary graduate student who recently experienced a chronic illness flare-up that impacted their ability to participate in class and stay engaged in their studies. Without sufficient support, their grades slipped and they struggled to complete their graduate degree work.

Sam's advisor was the only person who got them through the remainder of their degree, with weekly meetings and assistance in navigating course requirements during their flare-up. Sam has had some supportive professors; however, the majority of their professors have not taken their accommodations seriously—as one professor said to Sam, “I just don't see you as disabled.” Sam has had to drop more than one class due to lack of accommodations provided by professors, despite having a registered accommodation plan.

Sam is not able to work while going to school due to their chronic illness, so they rely on the money they saved before they started their graduate degree, as well as OSAP and other financial aid. This makes it difficult to access supports such as medication and mental health services due to the financial strain they experience. This also impacts Sam's ability to go out with friends after class or attend events that cost money, leading Sam to feel socially isolated at times.

Petra's Experience with Instructor Support

Petra is a bisexual trans woman who is in her second year of undergrad. She has a learning disability that impacts her ability to navigate classroom lectures and assignments. Petra developed a positive working relationship with a professor last year; however, once she informed the professor of her formal accommodation plan, the professor disengaged and treated her differently for the rest of the term. The professor talked to Petra like she was a small child and no longer called on her in class. Without engagement from her professors, Petra finds it more difficult to focus in class.

Petra has a great group of friends who support her academically—helping her to navigate course information and complete assignments on time. Without this informal support, Petra fears that she would fall behind in her studies. This worry is quite stressful for her.

The accommodations office has repeatedly reduced Petra's accommodations and she has had to appeal these decisions. The appeal process requires consulting with her doctor each time, getting additional documentation, and then appealing the decision with the accessibility office and her academic counsellor—a process that takes weeks to months every time it happens.

Petra's gender marker is different between her doctor's office and the accessibility office

records due to systemic and bureaucratic policies, creating additional barriers in the accommodation process. These additional barriers related to trans exclusion impact Petra's stress levels and academic performance.

Shane's Experience with Academic Satisfaction and Mental Health

Shane is a trans, queer, third-year undergraduate student. He has been diagnosed with depression and anxiety and both of these conditions impact his ability to thrive academically and socially on campus. For example, Shane's depression sometimes causes him to feel disengaged from his studies and impacts his cognitive abilities and decision-making.

In his second year of university, Shane failed two courses because he was not able to maintain a full course load but did not know that there were other options. He tried to get an appointment with the academic counselling office on his campus, however the waitlist was more than 8 weeks and so he could not get timely support in managing his academics.

For the first two years of his undergraduate studies, Shane wasn't aware of accommodation plans and so did not seek any academic accommodations. The process of applying for accommodations was very confusing and overwhelming for him, but he was able to access family support to complete the necessary paperwork in time for Fall semester of his third-year. Shane applied for accommodations and since then, he has found school to be much more manageable. His professors have been very helpful with implementing his classroom accommodations.

Shane finds that the pressure of academic settings—for example, comparison to peers, high-stakes exams, writing many papers at one time—is detrimental to his mental health. He has tried to use counselling services on campus to help manage his mental illnesses; however, he has found that the counsellors are not well-equipped to help him with his chronic depression and anxiety. Shane has not managed to find a campus counsellor who has been able to help him.

Campus Climate Matters for Disabled Students

Relationships between reported disabilities/conditions, safety, belonging, instructor relations, and student outcomes:

- Students who reported at least one disability/condition felt less safe on campus than their peers who reported no disabilities/ conditions.
- For these students, feeling unsafe on campus was associated with a decreased sense of belonging on campus and less supportive relationships with their instructors.
- In turn, less supportive relationships with instructors was associated with more negative academic and mental health outcomes.

In short, students with disabilities/ conditions felt less safe and this finding was related to a lower sense of belonging on campus, less supportive relationships with instructors, and more negative academic and mental health outcomes.



Recommendations

“There is a shared responsibility for accessibility across all members of an institution”

- Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)

Culturally Responsive Support Services

- Inclusive campus climate initiatives are needed to facilitate the safety and belonging of 2SLGBTQ+ students with disabilities. Campus policies and awareness programs need to centre intersections of disability, gender, and sexuality by highlighting the unique experiences and strengths of disabled 2SLGBTQ+ students.
- Academic and student wellness services need to adopt an equity mandate when working with 2SLGBTQ+ students with disabilities, including understanding students’ intersectional experiences and providing culturally responsive services. For instance, accessible learning centres need to implement practices and systems that quickly and easily respond when a student changes their gender and/or no longer uses their legal name.
- Service providers should partner with students to implement equity audits to identify priorities for making services culturally responsive to 2SLGBTQ+ students with disabilities.

Fostering Equity and Inclusion in the Classroom

- Information about accommodations for students with permanent and temporary disabilities should be made easily accessible to faculty and students.
- In order to address barriers in the classroom, universities need to offer training and ongoing development in [Universal Instructional Design](#) so faculty can increase course accessibility for all students, including students with disabilities.
- Faculty must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to support 2SLGBTQ+ students with disabilities, including understanding and how to address barriers they face in the classroom related to their gender, sexuality, and disability.
- Documentation policies should offer flexibility in instances where there is a difference between chosen names and deadnames.



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