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# **Neoliberal Methods of Disqualification: A Critical Examination of Disability-related Educational Supports in Canada**

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# **Neoliberal Methods of Disqualification: A Critical Examination of Disability-related Educational Funding in Canada**

Funding for post-secondary students with disabilities in Canada is an understudied yet pressing policy issue that affects up to 15% of students currently enrolled in post-secondary institutions across the country reflecting, at the same time, trends in educational accommodations occurring on a global scale. This article presents new data and combines these findings with a qualitative policy review to expose how funding levels in Canada have remained static over a 20-year period as a result of changes to key funding programs. We show how access to these insufficient funding programs is based on application processes that are shaped by the careful management of knowledge and information, underpinned by a desire to keep spending low. We then analyze the implications of these funding practices for disabled students and situate their effects within the neoliberal cultural project that eschews transparency while increasing individualization and self-responsibilization – encouraging disabled students to embody market rationalities as a way of maintaining their presence in academia.

Keywords: funding, disability, neoliberalism, transparency, Bursary for Students with Disabilities (BSWD), Canada

## **Introduction**

Funding for disability-related educational supports in Canada is a crucial part of how disabled students access higher education. The National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) (2012) explains that for students with disabilities, the cost of post-secondary education (PSE) is often high as a result of these support needs, which include accommodations (16). Earlier research by ARCH Disability Law (2004) demonstrates that these differentially-high costs present a long-standing trend in Canadian PSE. This article takes up earlier critiques around the uneven financial burden and other systemic barriers facing students with disabilities hoping to access PSE in Canada, focusing on the PSE funding landscape and culture of access shaped by policy and practice in the province of Ontario. We show that while disability funding in PSE in Canada comes with many strings, these strings appear to be tightening, forcing many disabled students to go without the equipment or support they need to be successful in higher education (see Chambers, Sukai and Bolton, 2011). We look at changes to key

funding programs over time and question the ways in which access to knowledge about disabled people and the funding programs intended for them have been structured. This analysis, which stems from a critical disability studies approach, leads us to argue that the quality of funding programs for disabled students have decreased over time, reflecting modes of exclusion that stem from ‘disqualifying practices’. As we will demonstrate, these practices rely upon inter-related conditions, including stringent eligibility requirements, adversarial encounters based on opaque information and a lack of transparency, as well as insufficient funding levels and an individualizing view of the problem of access. As a result, disabled students’ chances of succeeding and advancing in PSE can be thwarted by the very programs that are intended to support them. Our claims are not without precedence and a review of existing scholarly and grey literature, incorporated throughout this article, reveals longstanding problems with funding for disabled students.

Funding issues, whether disability specific or not, should come as no surprise to those who have a finger on the pulse of current trends in higher education (Ball 2012, Giroux 2002, 2013; Lorenz, 2012; Thornton, 2014). The global political and economic reforms, the market rationalities that structure decision-making, the calls for privatization and deregulation, the severe austerity on social programming, and the neoliberal cultural project that has increased individualization and self-responsibilization in all parts of life have not left higher education untouched (McBride and Whiteside 2011; Dolmage 2017). Neoliberalism is best defined by its characteristics – privatization and deregulation (and regulation) (Harvey, 2005), efficiency and accountability (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) and surveillance and competition (Peck, 2010). Within education, we see neoliberalism’s effects in the reduced funding and corporatization of universities and colleges, and in the influences of market rationalities

on planning, investment, and implementation. Neoliberalism's effects on funding programs, specifically the changes to eligibility criteria we explore below, may impact disabled students financially by requiring them to pay for equipment and services out-of-pocket – essentially individualizing the problem of access to PSE. Already responsible for balancing the other costs associated with higher education, many disabled students may be unable to take on this further financial burden and may, therefore, go without the services they require, as an Ontario-based survey by Chambers, Sukai and Bolton (2011) reveals. Research that examines issues at the intersection of disability (and/or equity groups), funding, and education, although limited (Fallon and Poole 2014; Whitburn, Moss and O'Mara 2017; Raasch, 2017), does point to the impacts of policy reform on access to education for marginalized populations. Education funding and policy reform is global in scope. In the UK, a disability-specific funding program, much like the grants that are the focus of this paper, was cut by 30 million pounds in 2015/16 (*The Guardian*, January 27, 2016). In Australia, massive changes in 2018 include a proposed 2-year funding freeze of 2.2 billion dollars, with plans to replace the current funding structure to a “performance-based funding model”; all of this would see opportunities for poor, Indigenous, and disabled students dwindle (*The Guardian*, December 19, 2017; February 27, 2018). Neoliberalism also structures (or restructures) what it means to be a student with a disability. Take for example a recent call by some university administrators in the UK to remove the term disability from higher education and to refer to disability services as “enablement” in an effort to further include students in the curriculum (*The Guardian*, April 7, 2017). Putting aside the contradiction in calling offices enabling when in fact they further bureaucratize disability and create disablement in the process, this example demonstrates how disability in a neoliberal context is being pushed out of higher

education. Speaking to these trends, Dolmage (2017) argues that the corporatization of the university has particular impacts on the construction of disability. He states:

So, whether unconsciously implanted in the minds of academic administrators, or overt in the words and deeds of the chief executive officer administrators imported into academia, this business model has specifically dangerous ways to respond to and to construct disability. As more colleges and universities are run like businesses, and as governments continue to defund schools so that they need to rely more and more on private funding, which increases this orientation to a business model, we can expect that disability will continue to be constructed as a drain, a threat, something to be eradicated or erased—not worth retaining. (Dolmage, 2017, 83).

Dolmage is not describing an abstract image but rather, is pointing to the material reality of being a disabled student in higher education that is linked to the discursive construction of disability. Disabled students are actively experiencing attempts at eradication in PSE, which is an increasing threat with the ever-growing scarcity of funding for disability-related educational supports.

### **The Funding Models/Bursaries**

The Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities (CSG-PDSE) and the Canada Student Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities (CGS-PD) (also referred to as the Bursary for Students with Disabilities, or BSWD in Ontario) is a provincial and federal bursary that is at the centre of our present analysis. The legislation that governs these grants is the *Canadian Student Financial Act*, 1994, which is accompanied by the *Canadian Student Financial Regulations*. The provincial/federal split is reflected financially in a 20/80% division, respectively. This means that out of the possible \$10,000 of funding disabled students can apply for

annually, \$2,000 is provincially funded (CGS-PD), while \$8,000 is federally funded (CSG-PDSE). The Ontario Legislature approves a yearly budget for the Ontario portion of the grant. This total budget is divided among provincial institutions depending upon the institution's previous distribution rate, minus their existing surplus (Frank Smith, August 8, 2019, pers. comm.). Applications for funding are often completed in consultation with disability service officers and must be approved by a financial aid officer, who signs off on the request and allocates the funding on an individual level.

To be eligible for many of the grants available to disabled students, applicants must meet the following criteria 1) meet the definition for students with permanent disabilities, 2) apply and qualify for full-time or part-time student financial assistance; 3) include proof of disability, and 4) be enrolled in full-time or part-time program at a designated Canadian institution. Another eligibility requirement that is not explicitly stated but that limits an individual's capacity to access the funding includes citizenship status. Only Canadian citizens, permanent residents, and protected persons qualify for education-related financial assistance (OSAP, for example). International students therefore are excluded from education-related disability funding because they are not eligible for student financial assistance. Finally, although not an explicit eligibility criteria, students almost exclusively have to be registered with the disability service office at their PSE to be successful in their application. Registering with a disability service office can take time, money, and energy and therefore can be another barrier to student's access to funding. As we argue below, this requirement expresses the neoliberal emphasis on self-responsibilization that decreases institutional accountability for equity in education.



## Critical Disability Studies

As disability studies scholars we approach [an analysis of key funding programs](#) through a critical disability studies lens that troubles the essentialized qualities of disability and mental health and frames these within larger discussions of social, cultural, political, environmental, and economic contexts. We understand the experience of disability to be relational and contingent on the interdependent connections between disabled people and “other humans, technologies, non-human entities, communication streams and people and non-peopled networks” (Goodley, Lawthom & Cole, 2014, n.p; Feely, 2014; Fritsch, 2015; Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006). Operating within these arrangements, or assemblages, are two belief systems or systems of power and oppression – ableism and sanism. We understand these systems as working in two ways: 1) they oppress disabled, mad, and neurodiverse individuals, and 2) actively promote the false reality of normalcy, propagating non-disabled and neurotypical ideals as attainable – desirable (Campbell, 2009; Diamond, 2013; Goodley, 2014; Ingram, 2011; Poole & Ward, 2013; Wolbring, 2008). Ableism and sanism, sedimented within our everyday practices and experiences are further entrenched in neoliberal policies and practices that make the experience of disability more difficult and conditions the solutions within individualized capacities (Goodley, 2014; Goodley & Lawthom, 2019), rather than within larger system-wide or structural reforms – reforms to areas such as disability-related educational funding. Our theoretical approach to this work orients our analysis to the contexts affecting disabled students across Ontario, and Canada. We see inadequacy of funding for disabled and mad students’ accommodations as a failure in acknowledging that interdependency that students create with other humans, non-humans, and technology as a means of making higher education more accessible.

Finally, while a discursive analysis of the major policy materials is significant –

as we will demonstrate – equally important is the methodological process we had to engage in to acquire rudimentary information about funding models in Ontario and across Canada. These hurdles – barriers – expose the system’s entrenched ableism and sanism. It strikes us as exceptionally problematic to make a system for disabled students almost totally and completely inaccessible to both them and their supporters.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

While researching the funding models we encountered a significant challenge in finding relevant academic sources on disability-related educational funding programs in Canada. The reason for this gap in the literature may be related to the limited publicly-available data around PSE funding. Recent advocacy by the student organization, Students for Barrier-free Access (SBA)<sup>i</sup> at the University of Toronto attempted to address some of these issues around transparency in funding. Reflecting on their personal difficulties in accessing funding, members of the organization realized that there were system-wide issues with how funding was allocated and processed under the current funding policies. They came to understand that their frustration with applying for funding, their experiences with idiosyncratic-decision makers (in the form of disability service officers and financial aid officers), and the persistent lack of information (sometimes disinformation) they received about funding, were systemic issues faced by many disabled students across the province, if not the country, and were a result of a system that was purposefully engineered to keep funding levels low and access to services limited (Kanani and Shanouda, 2016)<sup>ii</sup>.

We acknowledge the work of disabled student research and advocacy, led by SBA<sup>iii</sup> that initiated this article’s close analysis of PSE funding. Such a statement would often be couched in a footnote. However, it is essential for us that we take space in this

paper to adequately recognize the dedication and hard work of disabled students and their allies, especially those at SBA, for uncovering these funding issues and challenging the current model. Contributing to the work SBA started, our methodological approach centered on the collection and analysis of key manuals, reports, and websites. They include, 1) documents we refer to as the “Manuals”, 2) Canada Estimate reports between 1993-1996; 3) the Canada Student Loans Program Annual Reports between 1997-2016 (as of publication, the 2015/2016 report is the most recent report), and 4) the higher education ministry websites for each province.

Each of these documents were analysed using a disability-oriented critical discourse analysis. This type of methodological and analytic approach is a tool for explaining both the political and cultural implications of invoking disability in public discourse (El-Lahib, 2016; Grue, 2011, 2016). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) allows us to demonstrate the relationship between language and power, and their capacity to create, influence, and change social structures, policies, and practices (El-Lahib, 2016). Discourse creates meaning, while simultaneously expressing a particular power (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 2008; Wodak & Meyers, 2001). What is intended by the meaning of disability, Grue (2016) argues, is determined not only by its use, but also by the context within which the term is employed. As Titchkosky points out, “Texts never just get it right or get it wrong insofar as they are also a ‘doing’—right or wrong, texts are always *oriented social action*, producing meaning” (emphasis in original, Titchkosky 2007, 21). Our methodological approach, therefore centers not just on the term disability, but also the meaning and use of disability in relation to funding – we try to unpack what the texts are doing. Such an approach draws our attention to the long and complex history of disability and models of charity and pity that often render receivers of funding as burdens. Categories like deserving and undeserving poor

(Harrison and Wolforth, 2012), contemporary policy practices that disincentivize disabled people from working (Longmore, 2003), the long-standing conditioning of disability support as charity/patronage (Oliver, 2009), and the austere measures of neoliberalism in our current context, marks disabled students not as recipients of funding – meant to directly counteract the inaccessibility of higher education – but as drains on the system. Our discourse analysis, informed by this history, reads the texts within this broader and age-old characterization of disability as unwanted. To complete the process, in addition to mapping the changes in funding levels across time, we also tracked the discursive changes within the policy documents to demonstrate a shift in thinking and reasoning – one that we have characterized as part of the neoliberal project. This project may be characterized by a heightened emphasis on self-responsibilization that further shifts responsibility for educative access and equity onto disabled students. The implications of this analysis are consistent with those of a previous study we conducted around online voting and disability, which found that “inaccessibility comes to signify an individual’s inability to participate, rather than the effects of faulty social arrangements” (Spagnuolo & Shanouda, 2017, 705).

### **Data Sources: Manuals, Reports, and Websites**

#### 1) The “Manuals”

Part of the research SBA took on was to file Freedom of Information (FOI) Requests with the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and at every publicly-funded university in Ontario to request material on the two grants that fund services and equipment for disabled students (BSWD/CSG-PDSE). In response, they received 15 “Manuals” from the Ministry that outlined the details around these two grant

programs.<sup>iv</sup> These Manuals - which we describe below - are *not* accessible to the public, but only distributed to disability service offices (DSOs) and financial aid offices (FAO) at post-secondary institutions. Students can only access these Manuals by filing FOI requests.

SBA also received thousands of pages from universities, but this also varied. The University of Toronto for example sent along nearly a thousand pages of documents, many containing personal email exchanges between students and the primary financial aid officer at the University. Most other universities sent along only a few pages – and many times the documents SBA received included application forms that are easily accessible online. Our analysis stems less from these materials and is more concerned with the Manuals SBA acquired and from subsequent data the authors collected in the process of researching and writing this article.

#### 2) Canada Estimate and 3) the Canada Student Loans Program Annual Reports

We also collected data pertaining to state fiscal allocations around the Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP). Data pertaining to this program includes Canada Estimates from 1993-1996 and Annual Reports between 1997-2016 which are described below (in Table 1) and published for the first time in this article. This marks a unique contribution to the scholarship on disability funding and education. The Annual Reports also informed a cross-country comparison of funding programs that included a review of websites and manuals.

#### 4) Websites

Finally, we surveyed the websites of each province's ministry of higher education in Canada, searching for 1) the amount of funding and types of bursaries

available, if any, 2) the eligibility requirements for each bursary in each province, and 3) whether “Manuals” such as ones distributed to disability service offices in Ontario, are available online. Our findings indicate that while there are some differences in funding amounts across Canada, both eligibility requirements as well as the level of transparency, or lack thereof, remain consistent.

A critical discourse analysis of this material allowed us to examine trends across funding portfolios and contextualize our findings within broader issues of neoliberalism. As a primary source material for this study, examining the Manuals that SBA acquired allowed us to map transparency and clarify how students with disabilities engage with funding administrators and the power dynamics involved in these interactions. The use of this methodological approach, which draws upon the advocacy of students with disabilities, lead to unique analytical findings and insight around current policy practices and the modes of exclusion that they uphold.

## **A Brief History and Examination of Disability-Related Educational Funding in Canada**

Our examination of the larger funding context reveals that disabled students are struggling to maintain their place in higher education due to barriers to accessing funding and the added cost of making inaccessible spaces accessible. [We discuss this](#) context in detail below in order to directly contrast this with how disability-related funding is presented and discussed in the Annual Reports for the Canada Student Loans Program. Across the 18 reports we reviewed, disability-related funding is presented as consistent, growing, and in-line with student needs. These conclusions are factual; but only when we compare the total number of recipients and allocation of funds, year after year. We claim that the reports ignore both the larger social, cultural, and economic

changes to higher education across time, including the costs of resources, tuition, housing, transportation, etc. but also the average grant value per recipient. As we will demonstrate, this measure has remained static for over 20 years. As such, these reports provide an uncritical, non-contextual reading of funding issues in Canada.

To begin, funding for PSE in Ontario, as in most other provinces, is structurally informed by the dynamic relationship between provincial and federal governments. Prince (2001) summarizes the importance of both levels of decision-making for disabled people when he argues that “disability policy making in Canada is characterized by a history of collaborative federalism” (817). Collaborative federalism simply means that federal influence does not necessarily supersede provincial as there is, “little or no hierarchy in working relations between the two orders of government” (794). The Canada Social Transfer (CST) is part of this collaborative architecture and is a key mechanism by which federal funding for PSE is transferred to provinces and territories – contributing to the overall budget of grant programs such as OSAP. In a recent report, Prince (2016) also highlights the role of the provincial government in PSE when he explains that “an important role for provincial governments is to provide accommodation grants to post-secondary institutions, and to fund direct services and on-site supports for post-secondary students with disabilities” (16). He summarizes the joint role of provincial and federal governments by stating that both “play a role in offering financial aid and support for equipment for students with permanent disabilities” (16). In the following analysis, we take a historical look at grant programs informed by both levels of government.

Student financial aid in Canada started in 1918 in an effort to support disabled veterans who wanted to resume their studies after serving in the war effort. Loans at the time were a maximum of \$500 and were repayable after five years (Human Resources

and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) 1997/98). The program was designed to assist, ‘universities in providing the necessary additional accommodation, equipment, and instruction for ex-service men and women’ (Maxwell as quoted in Stager 1972, 27). Additional funding was created in 1939, when the Dominion-Provincial Student Aid Program (DPSAP) was established. It provided matching grants to provinces that created programs to assist students who qualified under particular criteria (HRSDC 1998/99).

Individual funding for disabled students was not again a focus until the academic year of 1994/95, when a program called the “Special Opportunities Grant” was established (Canada Estimates). Details around this grant are difficult to come by, but we know that it ran for a short period of time - only 3 years - and distributed 15.8 million dollars to approximately 6,573 disabled students nationally (HRSDC 1999/00). Over the next 20 years, a number of grants were created to provide funding for disability-related educational expenses. The maximum funding, across two different grants, would rise from \$3,000 to \$10,000. The table below traces this history and provides some insight into how disability-related educational supports have changed since their inception in 1994/95.

Table 1. Canada and Ontario Comparison of Disability-related Educational Grants for Full-time Students, 1995-2015.

There is a clear and steady increase in the number of grant recipients and the amount of money distributed year after year. Although the total amounts distributed appears to reflect a steady incline, dividing those totals in any given year by the number of recipients reveals how static funding has been over the 20-year history of these grants. Our descriptive analysis, applied to determine the average grant value per recipient, is consistent with how the authors of the Annual Reports for the CSLP



describe annual funding targets.<sup>v</sup> For example, in the 2000/01 Annual Report, the following is outlined: “Students with Permanent Disabilities were provided to 4,636 students amounting to \$11.2 million, with an average grant amount of \$2,400 per student” (HRSDC, 18). We therefore followed the Annual Report’s methodology for presenting data to determine past and current average grant amounts and discovered that on average, students have been receiving the same funding levels since the implementation of the grants. In addition to revealing the stagnant nature of the grants – we surmise that this actually demonstrates a fall in funding when we take into account inflation and the burgeoning costs of new technology, equipment, and supports that students are required to use in higher education in order to be successful (King and South, 2017).

Furthermore, in Table 1, in the 2006/07 academic year, we see the highest number of grant recipients at 11,956, and the lowest average grant value per recipient of just under \$1700. Between 2006/07 and 2007/08 there is a \$1098 decrease in the average grant value per recipient for CSG. This is the largest single drop in funding. The highest single increase for the same grant occurred between 1996/97 and 1997/98 with a rise of \$608 in the average grant value per recipient.<sup>vi</sup> These figures, especially the 2006/07 data suggest that there are budget limitations per year, for each grant, and that disabled students are in fact having to compete against one another for funding that is already difficult to access – a veritable race to the bottom.

In addition to the financial changes, or lack thereof, other reforms to the grants that occurred in 2008/09 and 2009/10 saw significant differences around how disability funding was described; essentially, the rhetoric around funding has shifted to focus on individualization and restraint. In 2009, the grant was renamed “Canada Student Grant” - a clear distinction from its previous names, “Canada *Study* Grant” or “Canada *Access*

Grant” (HRSDC 2008/09). The renaming of services or grants specifically highlights that these grants are now intended for individual students, and not as a means of addressing the inequity in studying or of covering the costs associated with PSE inaccessibility (as did the previous grants). This discursive change symbolizes a clear shift in thinking around who is responsible for disability-related educational supports. Funding, by all means, would continue to be provided by the provincial and federal government. However, in renaming the grants to centre students as the grant holders – rather than study or access – responsibility shifted off the institution and the government, and onto the grant recipient. Access to funding is now more explicitly reflective of a neoliberalization of PSE, as something that individual students are now responsible for ensuring themselves. A critical discourse analysis allows us to read this change in language as directly impacting upon the relationship between disabled students and university and government authorities, discouraging students from calling upon these sites of power in a way that would hold them accountable for disability-related inequities.

Moreover, other rhetoric in the grant has changed following this shift. In the 2005/06 report, the grant is described as follows:

The Canada Study Grant for the Accommodation of Students with Permanent Disabilities was created in 1995 to *help* offset exceptional education-related costs associated with permanent disability, and to help students with permanent disabilities *participate* in post-secondary education. Full-time and part-time students with a permanent disability may qualify for a CSG for as long as they are eligible for loans, and up to \$8,000 per loan year (emphasis not in original, HRSDC, 27).

Take in contrast a description of a similar grant in the 2012/13 Annual Report:

Canada Student Grants are also available for students with permanent disabilities. These students are *entitled* to a grant of \$2,000 per academic year. Additional funding up to \$8,000 is available for those who require special services or equipment. Students receive *consideration* for these grants upon providing documentation relating to their disabilities when applying for a Canada Student Loan (emphasis not in original, HRSDC, 6).

In the 2005/06 description, the grant's purpose is described as "to help" students both offset the costs associated with disability related expenses, but also for the purposes of ensuring participation. In 2012/13, disabled students are now "entitled" to grants and "considered" for grants. The initial purpose of the grant "to help" disabled students offset the costs of their education and to ensure participation has shifted to rights-based rhetoric that, perhaps ironically, further individualizes the conditions of access, hiding its structural dimensions.

The undermining of the grant's initial purpose is paralleled by changes made to the provincial portion of the grant in 2009/10. Before 2009/10, disabled students could use the smaller of the two grants (the \$2000 BSWD or CSG-PD) to cover the costs associated with tuition, books, and other education-related expenses (HRSDC 2008/09, 10). This has since disappeared in all the provinces we surveyed, except for in Saskatchewan and Alberta<sup>vii</sup>. In these two provinces, the smaller grant can still be used to cover education and living costs. The funding in other provinces, including in Ontario is now restricted to covering costs associated with services and equipment as they relate to the student's needs. These changes, which limit how students can use the funding, demonstrate the impact of the discursive shifts in disability-related educational funding since 2008/09, which reflect disqualifying practices that effectively lead to exclusionary outcomes. In this case, these outcomes further marginalize and individualize a

community who already faces economic injustices and struggles to meet the costs of education (NEADS, 2015).

We can tie these developments to larger policy changes in Canada after the federal elections in 2006 and again in 2008, as well as the global financial crisis after the fall of the housing market in the United States, also in 2008. These two events align with the significant shift in how funding - or any entitlement program - in Canada needed to be restrained (Healy & Trew, 2015). McBride and Whiteside (2011), in describing the breadth of neoliberalism, argue: ‘Virtually every substantive policy area – from industrial relations and employment standards, social welfare policy, employment insurance, education, through to monetary policy and foreign policy reveals some impact’ (45). Disability-related educational funding is small in comparison to other programs that have been impacted by neoliberal policies (see Healy & Trew, 2015). Disabled students account for only 10-15% of college students and 5-7% of university students in Canada (McCloy and DeClou 2013, 7). With just over 2 million students in college and universities across the country, 10% of that population would amount to 200,000 disabled students (Statistics Canada 2016). However, in taking just 2015/16 data in the table, which reveals that just under 44,000 students received funding, this would suggest that somewhere in the region of 156,000 disabled students either did not apply or qualify for funding under the current model. This finding aligns with The National Educational Association of Disabled Student’s (NEADS) claim that a majority of students are unsuccessful in securing funding (NEADS 2015, 3).

Although the disability population is small, they are disproportionately impacted by neoliberal reforms that narrow who can access funding (Clarke, 2014). The policy changes we describe provide just one example of these impacts, demonstrating that a disability lens is necessary in analyzing efforts at policy restructuring in the current

global economic climate. Given this context then, and with a grant that only affects a small population - a population that is already considered entitled given their access to higher education and funding to see them through that education - it is no surprise that restraining the funding or changing the eligibility criteria and shifting the philosophy of the grants from one of help in addressing structural barriers to one of individual entitlement and responsibility, results in significant financial stagnation and personal harm to disabled students that goes largely unnoticed.

### **The State of Disability in Higher Education: The Funding Context**

From a critical disability studies perspective, research into funding for disability-related educational supports in PSE in Canada has been rather limited, but there is nonetheless a strong body of evidence demonstrating far-reaching equity issues in this area. Concerns around the post-secondary experiences of disabled students come from many corners. Canadian human rights bodies (OHRC 2001; CHRC, 2017) organizations of disabled students (NEADS, 2012; 2015; Kanai and Shanouda, 2016; Pal and Kanani, 2016; L'association québécoise, 2018; SBA 2017), and evaluation and policy agencies (Chambers, Sukai and Bolton, 2011; Mackay, 2010; McCloy and Declou, 2013; Woods, et. al., 2013; Wilson, McColl and Parsons, 2015; Towle, 2015) have contributed to a body of grey literature, while Canadian critical disability studies scholars of education (e.g. Dolmage, 2017; Titchkosky, 2011; Hibbs and Pothier, 2005; Marquis, et. al., 2016) add to a growing resource of academic publications. Across the research spectrum, there is widespread agreement that financial barriers represent a severe and underlying problem for students with disabilities. Within the research cited in this section, there is indeed recognition that current funding models are in particular need of reform.

The National Education Association of Disabled Students (NEADS), the largest

national organization representing disabled students in Canada, argues that there is an adverse financial impact of PSE on students with disabilities:

[S]tudents with disabilities can incur higher costs than students without disabilities owing to the costs associated with their disability (such as accommodations) and the fact that many students with disabilities take an extended period to complete their education. It is therefore imperative that students with disabilities have access to additional funding opportunities to help reach their educational goals. (National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2012)

Advocacy work by disabled students and disability organizations, outside of the work by SBA, paints a grim picture of how these higher costs translate into economic injustices (e.g. L'association québécoise, 2018; NEADS, 2012; 2015). Jasmin Simpson's very public legal struggle against the Canada Student Loan Program (Goar, 29 July 2014), according to Barkerlaw, represents 'a challenge against discriminatory debt accumulation' (Bakerlaw, 16 July 2014). In a 2011 interview with Chris Kenopic, Simpson claimed that, 'A disabled person graduates with 60% more student debt than a non-disabled student graduating with comparable credentials (same BA and MA degree). This is true for many students with disabilities' (Canadian Hearing Society, News Releases, 19 September 2011). Similarly, research by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) shows that post-secondary students with disabilities in Ontario "may encounter greater difficulties in repayment" as a result of their unique experiences in these environments (Chambers, Sukai and Bolton, 2011, 41). Not unexpectedly, 46% of these students face unexpected costs related to accommodating their disability (34).

Research by NEADS (2015) certainly supports Chambers, Sukai and Bolton's (2011) finding that many students with disabilities experience financial and funding

barriers. NEADS found that over a third of students with disabilities experience barriers in accessing accommodation-related funding and quite tellingly, their report reveals that only a small percentage are even able to secure this support: ‘Indeed, only 14-16% of [graduate] students indicated that they successfully obtained such funding’ (NEADS Taskforce 2015, 3). Sadly, these recent findings demonstrate a long-standing problem, as they echo issues identified over a decade earlier by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC 2001, 48).

Although research into these issues has quantified the problem in helpful ways and produced compelling statistical data, there is often less attention to how disability is conceptualized in the policies that are pushing disabled students out of PSE. Disabled students, their associations (NEADS, 2012; 2015; SBA 2017), and critical disability scholars, both within and outside of Canada, tend to lead the way in drawing out the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications connected to these problematic funding contexts (see for example Bolt and Penketh, 2015; Dolmage; 2017; Fallon and Poole, 2014; Hernández-Saca, 2017; Hibbs and Pothier, 2005; Kerschbaum, Eisenman and Jones, 2018; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015; Price, 2011; Titchkosky, 2011). In contrast to these critical approaches, we discuss how much of the grey literature focused on disability and PSE in Canada remains steeped in medicalized views of disability that (perhaps) inadvertently reinforce the collection of ableist and sanist assumptions that contribute to the very problems whose effects are being acknowledged (Disability Policy Alliance, 2015; Harrison and Wolforth, 2012; McCloy and DeClou, 2013; Woods et al., 2013).

Take for example a 2013 study led by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HECQO) (McCloy and DeClou, 2013). Their conclusions share the tendency reflected in other government-funded reports to look at disability through a diagnostic

lens, linking PSE experiences to categories such as impairment type and ‘severity’, and thus establishing a baseline for equity evaluations that relies on normative and highly ableist views of post-secondary students. The authors of the report understand disability ‘as a general term that encompasses many conditions with a wide range of severity’ (7). The report relies on diagnostic categories or ‘specific student populations’, such as ‘autism spectrum disorder’, and uses Mackay’s (2010) highly medicalized definition of autism as ‘a complex developmental disorder that typically affects a person’s ability to communicate, form relationships and respond appropriately to his or her environment’ (4, as quoted in McCloy and DeClou, 2013, 16). A critical analysis of these medicalized discourses that centres how social interactions shape, and are shaped by language, suggests that they risk upholding uneven power relations between disabled and non-disabled people. Applying a critical disability lens to these discursive decisions further reveals that this power imbalance is dependent on the juxtaposition between disability-as-pathology and unchallenged assumptions of non-disability-as-normalcy. In framing disability as a manifestation of individual pathology rather than as a social-relational experience, this discursive move is well-aligned with the neoliberal push towards privatization and self-responsibilization that currently characterizes PSE funding for disabled students.

The Disability Policy Alliance (2015) – a group that can be distinguished from a disabled person’s organization, or an organization run by disabled people as a result of its mandate to ‘seek to ensure appropriate representation of consumers and different disability groups (physical, sensory and cognitive disabilities)’ – uses a similar methodology as HECQO to measure success among disabled post-secondary students in terms of ‘integration’. Integration is described in comparative terms that draws a sharp division between disabled and non-disabled students, with clear moral sanctioning of



the latter's behaviours: 'The extent to which activities and their social contexts resemble those of non-disabled persons measures the similarity of the experience of daily life of disabled and non-disabled persons'. The study asks, 'do disabled persons with post-secondary education behave more like the general population than those without?' Such questions ought to be contrasted with growing recognition by those outside of critical disability studies that ableist policies are rooted in stigmatizing views of disability as abnormal (e.g. Dowrick et al 2005; Garrison-Wade, 2012). Published the same year as the Disability Policy Alliance study, and in sharp contrast to the methodologies used in that report, The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) is critical of normative standards that continue to shape inclusive education, arguing in a recent report: 'Furthermore, inclusive education policies are still largely dictated by expectations of "normal" human development' (Towle 2015, 35). Once again, we can interpret this emphasis on an individual's normative development through the popular critical disability critique of neoliberalism that calls attention to the privatization of disability.

Another study by HEQCO (Woods et. al., 2013, "Succeeding with Disabilities") allows us to view the tendency among researchers to focus on disabled students' behaviour as a natural extension of deficit-thinking and the tendency to pathologize disabled people in terms of their failure to approximate normalcy (see especially Davis, 1995). In their 2013 report, HEQCO implicitly shifts the blame to disabled students in the analysis they offer around accommodation-use. Having initially intended to look at possible links between time-to-completion and accommodation-use, the authors note that not many students make use of accommodations (18). For this reason, they recommend that future research ask why disabled students do not access accommodations. While this question could lead to helpful information around barriers, it appears to take for granted the quality of existing accommodations. This is further

suggested by the author's tendency to issue direct advice to disability service officers around what students should and should not be doing. Speaking to the managers of accommodation services, the authors write: 'Disability offices should consider the importance of testing centres and encourage struggling students with disabilities to utilize this service.' Similarly, they advise disability officers, 'to suggest reduced course loads or considerable adaptive technology training' (18).

The idea that students require a degree of encouragement or convincing to access services places the onus on them to adapt to their environments, accept the available supports, and make good use of them through proper training and compliance. Such advice reflects the individualizing approach to disability that is promulgated through the neoliberal funding models for disability-related educational support programs, which we will address further on this article, and similar policies that require self-responsibilization and, as a result, demand that disabled students take up the work of fitting themselves into ableist and sanist post-secondary environments. One of the combined consequences of self-responsibilization and the medicalization of disability can be seen in a study by Harrison and Wolfarth (2012), which asks about malingering among students who may 'feign' disability in order to accrue certain perceived advantages. The study argues for improved screening that 'disability diagnoses are genuine', while also recognizing funding concerns.

Quite interestingly, and despite the shortcomings in HEQCO's reporting that are mentioned above, the 'Disability in Ontario' report (McCloy and DeClou, 2013) argues for less restrictive approaches, invoking earlier research on this point: 'Chambers, Sukai and Bolton (2011) recommend several financial aid policies, including shifting loan-based funding to a grant-based model, taking into consideration the typically longer time to completion, adjusting eligibility for students with disabilities who do not qualify

for student aid, and adjusting loan repayment mechanisms in general for students with disabilities' (21). Referencing recommendations around shifting funding models, the authors conclude that existing funding models are indeed problematic and result in the tendency to impose loans on students. Yet as long as issues around funding and finance exist within a culture that continues to reflect many of the disabling values seen in other parts of HEQCO's reporting, it will be difficult if not impossible to dislodge their authority. By encouraging self-responsibilization and normative measures, commentators ignore the broader realities of disability injustice and the diverse situations of individuals with disabilities. The CCPA report quoted earlier (Towle 2015) takes up these issues by challenging one-size-fits-all solutions for disabled students on the grounds that they erase the reality of diversity. Suggesting that categorical thinking around disabled students stems from segregative practices, CCPA encourages recognition of a diversity of needs, rather than categorical thinking that will 'divide students with disabilities from their [non-disabled] peers' (21).

In an article by Marquis et. al. (2016), we see how discrimination against students with disabilities can result from a bureaucrat and non-individualized approach to accommodations. Marquis et. al.'s work further shows how, in the critical disability literature, we often see an emphasis on how perceptions of disability shape policy and policy delivery. To this point, the article addresses the need for cultural changes within PSE by showing the limitations of rights-based and anti-discriminatory legislation. In describing the failed impact of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) legislation in Ontario, Marquis et. al. argue that existing approaches to accommodations are too reactive to foster a supportive and inclusive environment for students with disabilities. These reactive measures frame disability as a problem to be solved, and this leads to serious tension between students with disabilities and those

who provide accommodations and funding for those accommodations.

### **Neoliberal Methods of Disqualification**

Examining the Annual Reports, [policy documents, and grey literature in this area](#) reveals a shift in discourse around funding for students in higher education. It also reveals that the state of funding has not changed, and may in fact be worse-off than we expected. These revelations are surprising, but make sense when taken together with the other issues impacting students' ability to access funding. These include issues around funding transparency, eligibility, and performativity. In this section, we unpack some of the neoliberal methods of disqualification that are applied towards students with disabilities and that impact their ability to apply and secure funding for disability-related educational supports.

#### ***Funding Transparency***

Our primary source material for this paper is derived from documents that are completely inaccessible to students. Transparency, therefore, is practically non-existent in relation to the funding program. George (1999) argues that veiled and discrete movements are at the core of neoliberalism. She contends that in order for neoliberalism to continue to encroach on services and supports, in addition to everyday spaces and places, it must co-opt democratic processes – such as transparency and accountability. Co-option of these processes provides a foundation for, and thus helps advance the market economy. Evidence of this process is found in the state-conducted reporting on disability-related educational supports. The Annual Reports for the Canada Student Loans Program produced by the federal government, in addition to provincial reports such as the annual disability report produced in Ontario titled, “Accessibility Plan”, describe only some information about the programs. These reports often focus on

outlining the financial activities of the grants and are generally devoid of critical information that would help disabled students to successfully apply for the funding. Rodan (2006), provides some insight here when he argues that reporting on finances - without providing any critical information (such as standard deviations, as one example) - is a neoliberal method that allows the state to: 1) keep spending low and in line with market rationalities; and, 2) limit the discretionary powers of policymakers. In essence, the disclosure of financial information is a way to ensure state spending remains in line with the market economy and prevent policymakers from making changes that would see the program move away from market interests, such as changes that would maximize student use of funding. The stagnation of the grant over its life-course, as we have previously described, demonstrates how funding continues to follow market rationalities and trends towards austerity.

The lack of information around the standard cost of support and the frequency of student entitlement is a precise attempt at curbing students from using all or the maximum amounts of the funding available to them. Much of the information that students would need to have an informed approach to the grants is restricted. In Ontario, the information that students need is part of a larger report on the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) - and is what we have referred to as the Manual. Ontario's Ministry distributes this document to disability services offices at the start of the year and if changes arise mid-way through each academic year. SBA and individual members of the organization all requested copies of the Manual from their disability service officer<sup>viii</sup>. In one way or another, we were told that the Ministry had advised DSO's not to copy or reproduce the Manual to give to students. University administrators told SBA that the Manual was off limits to students for various reasons - including the particularly troubling notion that it would confuse students, and that

students would not understand all of the details.

Of the nine provinces and one territory we surveyed in our search for the Manual<sup>ix</sup>, only Newfoundland and Saskatchewan (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 2017; Government of Saskatchewan 2017/18) publish a section of the Manual that outlines the standard cost of equipment and services and a recipient's frequency of entitlements. Even these publications, however, are incomplete. In fact, no province or territory publishes the complete Manual to the BSWD (or equivalent) and the CSG-PDSE. Moreover, in the 2014/15 Ontario Manual SBA received from the Ministry, the partial-list of the standard cost and frequency of entitlement, which is available in Newfoundland and Saskatchewan, had the following statement preceding it:

This list of Equipment and Services Funding Caps has been established by the Canada Student Loans Program and provincial student aid programs and is **not to be shared publicly**. Any inquiries regarding the funding caps indicated in this manual should be directed to the ministry for response (emphasis in original, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2015/16).

Without this information, disabled students cannot claim the maximum amount for supports and equipment. Without these “funding caps”, or the maximum amount of funding a student can claim for each item, students merely guess how much funding they may need per item, per year. And although the application is often completed with an administrator, without the complete Manual, there is no way for the student to verify that the standard costs or the frequency of entitlement has been reached. This lack of informational transparency reflects an attempt by the state to keep students' requests for available funding as low as possible. Through our discourse analysis, we read the characteristics of the text above – bolded and underlined – to mean that there are

significant consequences for any action taken to make this information transparent. The information is purposefully secretive, and we can only assume this because of who might benefit from learning of this information.

We have heard from students that the material consequences of this opacity are that they have gone without therapy in the summer semester, without tutoring or academic advising when they need it, and without access to new, more advanced and relevant software when they could have benefitted from this (Shanouda, 2019). The persistent lack of transparency in Ontario and in most of the country is outrageous; yet, entirely conceivable once framed through the prism of neoliberalism.

Ultimately, the lack of transparency constructs disabled students as ‘deficient’ through the assumption that they cannot understand or comprehend the complex nature of funding, and also in the piece meal way in which funding information is distributed. Disabled students are disqualified from acquiring supports and services – those human and non-human elements that make up so much of disabled people’s lives and that would ensure access – through a system that repurposes problematic conceptions of disabled people as intellectually inferior and masquerading (deceitful in their claims for financial support).

### ***Funding Eligibility***

The opacity of the funding structures are also tied to claims to limited funding. Such claims, which cannot be verified because of issues with transparency means that more and more students with disabilities are at risk of being deemed ineligible. Scarcity provides a motivating basis for gatekeepers to guard what limited resources are available and exercise scepticism when faced with a request for disbursement. We can only expect that these administrative pressures will impact the eligibility criteria in both

formal and informal ways. Officially, students must demonstrate disability status as well as their need for funding. And as we will demonstrate below, this has set the stage for degrading encounters between administrators and students with disabilities and translates into informal moral judgments that assign gatekeepers broad discretionary power. This implicates administrators in what can be characterized as neoliberal forms of disqualification that are articulated through changing program criteria.

Formal changes to eligibility criteria have closed access to funding for many disabled students. The OSAP eligibility requirement for many of the grants continues to be one of the most onerous barriers to students receiving funding, as outlined by OHRC (2001). This regulation denies many disabled students access to the grants and as a result, their support needs. Many students are not eligible for needs-based funding (like OSAP) because, among other things, they live with their parents, work either part-time or full-time, receive funding awards, or hold teaching assistantships and/or other assistantships. Mature students have the added “disadvantage” of potentially having savings or other financial resources. Testimonials from students directly quoted in the NEADS report (2015) further expose the near-impossibility of qualifying for funding. Summarizing their experience, one student explained: “Deemed ineligible for bursaries because I did not qualify for FULL student loan (criterion for grant application). Did not receive a full student loan because I work part-time; couldn't afford to quit my position because of the medical benefits and having already advocated for accommodation in that position” (NEADS, 5).

Students who have defaulted or overdrawn on OSAP are also ineligible for funding. All of these realities potentially disqualify people from OSAP. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (2001), citing the Learning Opportunities Task Force, argues, “eligibility for the BSWD [should] be separated from OSAP so that all students



with disabilities can access bursary funds” (52). The repercussions of linking OSAP to the funding program can have devastating consequences for students who, for no fault of their own, are unable to meet repayment deadlines outlined by OSAP and who therefore are deemed ineligible for disability-related educational funding and forced to disrupt their studies and forgo their academic goals.

The idea that disability-related funding ought to be proportionate to or contingent upon a student’s demonstrated financial need stems from the view that the disability-related supports and services are an individual matter and that these costs ought to be borne by the individual. Such a view can be directly contrasted with approaches to justice based on an interactional view of disability that fully socializes the provision of supports and services. This approach to justice is oriented towards equality in outcome, rather than treatment. As Rioux and Riddle (2011) explain, under this model “differences have to be accommodated to neutralize them as barriers to personal achievement and to entitlement as fully participating members of society” (51-52). In light of this approach to justice, there are very few reasons as to why eligibility for funding is contingent on a student’s eligibility for OSAP. It is however apparent that the OSAP eligibility requirements consequently decrease the total number of potential students deemed eligible for the grants. The results, as mentioned earlier, can be catastrophic for disabled students. But the OSAP requirement follows what McBride and Whiteside (2011) argue is part of the neoliberal paradigm, a means of social program reform geared towards reducing spending and restrict state sponsorship.

Interestingly, students who apply for funding can become eligible for OSAP through a part of the program called “Adding Verified Disability-Related Expenses to the Need Assessment”. A “need assessment” is when “disability-related education support costs are included in the calculation of eligible education costs” (Ontario

Human Rights Commission, 49). Simply stated, if your support needs are high, they can be calculated in relationship to your income to demonstrate financial need. However, disabled students rarely apply to be reassessed through this process. The process itself requires that the disability officer be aware of this option (which is not always the case) and that they be willing to engage in a conversation with the student to assess their income in relation to their disability-related educational expenses. According to the 2015/16 Manual, this process does not have to be entered into the OSAP system, but rather is approved in-house by the disability officer/financial aid officer. However, the details of the assessment - the forms or guidelines - are not publicly available and are only accessible through the Manual. The shrouded nature of this process and the information around the need assessment altogether follow the trends described in this section, and more importantly, the paradigmatic qualities of neoliberalism.

### ***Funding Performativity***

In discussing funding among disabled students, stories began to surface of students working to convince disability service officers and administrative staff of their need for funding to access supports. Through such interactions, both the legitimacy of students' requests and, even more fundamentally, of their disability status are called into question. The application process positions students as objects of a moral judgment informed by the age-old categories of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, wherein the power to judge the 'reality' of their disability and their support needs is vested in the non-disabled observer, as Harrison and Wolfarth's (2012) argue. One of the degrading aspects of these interactions is linked to the expectation that students perform their disability in a manner that convinces gatekeepers of the veracity of their claims (Siebers, 2008). Yet, the pressure that compels this performance is a condition of the application process itself – it appears that funding gatekeepers actually encourage these

rituals in their efforts to advise students on the surest way of securing funding. In a 2013/14 meeting between a representative from Accessibility Services at the University of Toronto and members of SBA, the Accessibility Services representative described the student's role in regards to applying for funding. Upon discussing the funding with them, one of SBA's members was told the following:

[...] students need to make reasonable arguments with their counsellors. Sometimes counsellors are tired and so students need to be innovative in their arguments. Focusing on the "impacts of disability" on learning and daily life is a key way of phrasing convincing arguments. Getting funding depends on three things: available funds, documentation, and *reasonable* and *convincing* arguments about impacts on daily life (March 12, 2018, pers. comm.).

The representative concluded their remarks by suggesting that SBA should be concentrating its efforts on teaching disabled students how to make clear statements relaying the impacts of disabilities on their everyday lives. This aligns with other advice presented in pamphlets, websites, policy documents and reports, such as the following statement, taken from the disability services office website: "Advisors encourage students to advocate for themselves and to speak with their lecturers about their disability related accommodations, thereby promoting a three-way partnership with students, *AccessAbility* staff and faculty" (*AccessAbility* Services). These suggestions demonstrate how disabled students are now responsible for convincing gatekeepers that they would benefit from applying to the funding program – a demand that is inherently problematic, if not redundant, given that the fund was created as a resource for students with disabilities in recognition of this need. Thus, in addition to navigating the system, we read through a critical discourse analysis the representative's suggestion as a request for students to perform their disability in a way that is fantastic, persuasive,

entertaining, and practical. According to these standards, students are expected to be knowledgeable, understanding, and all the while contrite and patient.

While this article is primarily concerned with direct access to educational funding, the performative nature of disability that conditions student success in these contexts is bound up with an even broader politics of access, understood as both a social-interactive and epistemic process. Titchkosky's (2011) insights are instrumental here, particularly her argument that access "also needs to be understood – as a complex form of perception that organizes socio-political relations" (4). From a critical disability perspective, the importance of disability performativity in funding contexts means that direct access to PSE is indeed connected to this broader understanding of access as perception, which closely interacts with the ways in which we conceptualize disability. Along these lines, Titchkosky argues, "disability is a concept that gives access" (4). Systemic ableism in PSE can thus be linked to this access-disability nexus. The requirement for students to perform disability recalls Titchkosky's claim that "[w]hen used to relate to people, disability is a form of perception that typically devalues an embodied difference" (5), while the "dominant knowledge regimes" that are shaped by this devalued form of difference in turn support attempts to exert "devastating control" over disabled lives (18).

The importance of performance within the funding process further emphasizes how, rather than setting up a fair and respectful application process, these funding rituals are premised on what Titchkosky refers to as a "tyranny of containment" (18) - further fuelled by fears of malingering and a quality of masquerading, as described by Siebers (2008). This in turn leads to a competition for finite resources among members of a marginalized community. And, as many students with disabilities are aware, it is a race for limited funds where the winners are those who are best able to demonstrate a

level of need that is sufficiently grounded in what the non-disabled observer counts as legitimate evidence. Such concerns are once again exemplified by Harrison and Wolforth's (2012) research around disability documentation and authenticity. Under this framework, if students do not receive funding it can be attributed to their own failure, on an individual level, to be convincing and reasonable. This shift - the privatizing of responsibility - is not merely compliance with rules. Shamir (2008) argues that it stems from the construction of a moral agency that centers individuals as responsible for their successes and failures. Individuals are now viewed and are expected to act like entrepreneurs responsible for their personal and financial needs. As a result, we witness disabled students embodying market rationalities as a way of maintaining their presence in academia.

## **Conclusion**

Neoliberal efforts at restructuring disability-related educational funding in Canada have created severe barriers for disabled students accessing higher education. These students are being asked to convincingly perform their disability in order to access funding and to navigate new and changing eligibility criteria year after year, all the while having limited access to the information they need to be successful in this process. What we discovered in our analysis of funding programs is that they are part of a post-secondary system that continues to operate with broad discretionary powers and with limited public transparency. Demands for change that include the abolishment of the OSAP eligibility criteria, requests to release and make public the Manuals, and overall transparency in the allocation of funds, have been consistent for decades – not just from disabled students, but from human rights and other organizations (OHRC 2001; Nichols, Harrison, McCloskey, & Weintraub, 2002; McCloy and DeClou 2013;

NEADS 2015; Kanani and Shanouda, 2016). Unfortunately, we have not found evidence of significant improvement following these recommendations.

It must again be emphasized that our examination of this system is made possible by work carried out by members of SBA, who filled initial FOI requests. By examining materials obtained by SBA and reading these against data collected from 18 Annual Reports of the Canada Student Loans Program (represented in Table 1), we were able to identify funding trends over the grant's life course. Changes to both the program and to how disabled students participate in higher education have been substantial, with many taking on more responsibility for their educational access; access that is required because PSE institutions remain inaccessible.

In presenting these arguments, we hope to direct the attention of scholars from different fields towards disabled students' experiences in higher education, especially in relation to funding and policy changes. We know this work to be important and timely, given some significant changes to the funding structures in higher education in Ontario. The most significant include plans to cut \$600 million in student grants and introduce a mandatory 10% cut to tuition that will amount to a \$440 million shortfall in institutional funding (James, 2019). These announcements mirror the global trends we discussed earlier. What is equally perplexing, however, are plans by the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario to reinstate the Post-Secondary Education Standards Development Committee – a committee with a mandate to develop a new accessibility standard in post-secondary education by 2025. The two decisions by the government are inherently contradictory, given our analysis that funding is paramount to increasing disabled students' access to higher education. Thus, alongside any new policy changes that appear on the horizon, the funding situation will require ongoing monitoring and critical evaluation. Scholarship and research in disability and PSE funding remain important

and should be an area of focus for any scholar concerned with education policy and reform.

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<sup>i</sup> To learn more about Students for Barrier-free Access, visit, [www.uoftsba.com](http://www.uoftsba.com)

<sup>ii</sup> Part of the activist work that SBA engaged in during this time included calling and speaking with representatives of disability organizations at universities across the province of Ontario. We spoke with many disabled students who experienced similar frustrations with the funding programs.

<sup>iii</sup> Author 1 is included in this group, and served a leadership role at SBA at the time.

<sup>iv</sup> To learn more about the initial analysis developed by members of SBA, see Kanani and Shanouda (2016), “Barriers Related to Disability Related Education Supports: Mapping Funding Discrepancies Across the Province” - Toronto OPRIG’s “Action Speaks Louder” [https://issuu.com/opirgtoronto/docs/asl\\_winter\\_2016\\_issuu\\_17cd159747ea96](https://issuu.com/opirgtoronto/docs/asl_winter_2016_issuu_17cd159747ea96)

<sup>v</sup> Our decision to provide the average value per recipient in the table stemmed from how data was presented in the Annual Reports. We are cognizant that funding is allocated on a case-by-case basis—as it should—and so each recipient receives a different amount based on their individual needs. However, with little to no change in the overall average value per recipient for over 20 years, and with stories from disabled students having more and more difficulty in accessing funding, the static nature of these trends underscores a growing concern among students that funding is limited and is often withheld to ensure budget ceilings are not maxed. We believe the rate should have at least increased with inflation. However, as we describe, the average is nearly static over 20 years. Further analysis was also limited because of reporting. For example, a one-way ANOVA test was planned, but ultimately abandoned, because standard deviations were not reported in any of the Annual Reports. Our descriptive analysis of the data, however, does reveal that more testing is necessary and that greater transparency in terms of funding levels and individual funding allocation would be beneficial in determining the overall distribution of funding.

<sup>vi</sup> The highest and lowest changes for the smaller of the two grants occurred between the years 2004/05 and 2005/06 with an increase in \$259 and a decrease in \$46.

<sup>vii</sup> We found that four provinces provide additional funding outside of the total \$10,000 maximum that is stipulated in the CSLP Annual Reports. This information was ascertained during our survey of ministry websites. Provinces that provide additional funding are British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Newfoundland. British Columbia offers a grant called “B.C. Access Grant for Students With Permanent Disabilities”. This is a \$1000 grant that helps disabled students with the costs of education (British Columbia Student Aid BC, n.d.). In Saskatchewan, student funding is capped at \$12,000, instead of \$10,000 (Saskatchewan, n.d.). In Alberta, there is an additional grant called the Alberta Grant for Students with Disabilities. This grant, “may be issued to a full-time student with a documented permanent disability who is not eligible to receive the Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities or has costs that are not covered by that grant” (Disabilityawards.ca). A grant with purpose, but a different name (Grant for High Need Students with Permanent Disabilities) is available to disabled students in Newfoundland.

<sup>ix</sup> Quebec, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories were excluded from our survey because they do not participate in the CSLP.

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