40+ years enhancing disabled student learning experiences at McMaster University: Reflections from an intergenerational web of accessibility workers

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ABSTRACT

People at McMaster University have been engaging in access work—the labour of proactively enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities—for decades. In this chapter, we contribute to the recognition and preservation of these efforts by documenting forms of often invisible "behind-the-scenes" accessibility work that support disabled student learning experiences. We do so by sharing interconnected reflective snapshots from nine disabled and nondisabled students, alumni, staff, and educators. We argue that enhancing accessibility in teaching and learning is not just about physical accessibility, legislative compliance, or the domains of the classroom, course content, or the student-instructor relationship. Accessible education also requires the creation of a campus environment where everyone is embedded in relations that make access work possible and sustainable: community, paid employment, colleagueship, friendship, and mentorship. Several themes echo across our interconnected web of accessibility histories, including different change strategies adopted based on diverse positions, timing within the university, and individual needs,

skills, and motivations for involvement. Overall, this chapter sheds light on several dimensions and evolutions of access work over the last 40+ years at McMaster University.

KEYWORDS

accessibility, access work, disability, postsecondary education, accessible education

Students, staff, and faculty at McMaster University have been engaging in access work—the labour of proactively enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities—for decades. While traces of some of this work have been formally recorded and preserved, most have not.[1] This is not surprising as the broader academic literature contains few histories of accessibility work on postsecondary campuses. The recorded histories that do exist are largely initiative or event specific—for example, histories of specific disability accommodation offices, disability inclusion initiatives, equity office accessibility programs, student groups, or institutional policy change (e.g., Brown, 2008; Brown et al., 2007; Danforth, 2018; Green et al., 2017; Madaus, 2001, 2011). In this chapter, we contribute to the recognition and preservation of postsecondary accessibility work by focusing less on particular initiatives and corresponding events and instead on the relationships that make access work possible and sustainable. We do so by sharing interconnected snapshots from nine disabled and nondisabled co-authors—students, alumni, staff, and educators who have been engaged in accessibility work at McMaster for various overlapping periods throughout the past 40+ years.

Accessibility in teaching and learning is most commonly understood as pertaining to educators and course instruction: the work individual instructors do to proactively anticipate and mitigate barriers in their course design, teaching, and evaluation processes. Others might conflate accessible education with accommodation processes facilitated by institutional units like McMaster's Student Accessibility Services, where students and instructors follow the university accommodation policy to enact individualized adjustments in support of student learning. Although accessible education is different from academic accommodations (de Bie & Brown, 2017), both concepts tend to focus on formal teaching and learning in a classroom.

The snapshots in this paper instead seek to take a much broader perspective on accessible education by illustrating often invisible "behind-the-scenes" forms of accessibility work that support disabled student learning experiences. We argue that enhancing accessibility in teaching and learning is not just about physical accessibility, legislative compliance, or the domains of the classroom, course content, or the student-instructor relationship (Dolmage, 2017). Accessible education is also about accessible community, paid employment, colleagues, friendship, and mentorship. The future we desire for current and incoming disabled students, staff, and faculty is a campus environment where everyone can access these life-sustaining forms of interconnection.

WRITING APPROACH

The preparation of this chapter involved an iterative writing process. An initial direction was set during a dynamic conversation in January 2021 between several members of the team (Kate Brown, Alise de Bie, Anne Pottier, and Emunah Woolf). Next, team leads (Kate Brown, Alise de Bie, and Emunah Woolf) met to develop a list of prompts to guide the project and to identify diversely situated and interconnected colleagues who could speak to different aspects of invisible accessibility work at McMaster over the past 40 years and the relationships that have sustained it. The team leads decided on four reflective prompts for authors of this chapter:

1. What led you to accessibility work?
2. What kinds of relationships have been most important to your accessibility work on campus (e.g., relationships with collaborators/partners, colleagues, friends, peers, mentors, mentees, supervisors, disabled and/or nondisabled people)?
   a. How have these relationships been meaningful to you and vital to accessibility at McMaster (e.g., learning, support, inspiration, motivation, commiseration, validation)?
3. What has felt like the most meaningful accessibility work you have participated in?
   a. How did it impact the accessibility of teaching and learning at McMaster?
4. What kinds of accessibility development would you like to see on campus in the future?

At the time of writing over 2021, the nine co-authors included five alumni, one undergraduate student, and one postdoctoral trainee, as well as one sessional instructor, four full-time staff members, one former staff member, and three part-time contract consultants/employees, with most holding multiple connections to McMaster. Authors came from disciplinary backgrounds in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. In the group, six identify as disabled people with experiences of chronic illness/pain, neurodivergence, and/or mental health, physical, or sensory disabilities, and three have been identified by disabled community members as non-disabled allies. For brief biographies, please see the Note on Contributors at the end of the chapter, and for a list and description of key McMaster accessibility units discussed throughout, refer to Appendix A. To the extent possible, we have sought to explore multiple perspectives on a relationship (e.g., mentors' and mentees' experiences of their mentorship relationship with each other). While many more people exist in our web of accessibility workers than are represented here, we hope our particular constellation of connections made with each other over the last decade offers insights into the contributions that accessibility work at McMaster has made to student learning experiences.

All invited colleagues agreed to contribute, electing to meet with Emunah to verbally respond to the prompts and reflect on their experiences. Notes taken during these conversations were synthesized into brief snapshots by Emunah and revised multiple times by

Emunah, Alise, and in oral and/or written conversation with contributing co-authors as the team leads discerned and proposed unique and interwoven major themes illustrated by each author's account. Team leads also wrote their own narratives and revised these multiple times based on each other's feedback and emerging resonances.

As you read, you'll see several themes echoing across our interconnected web of accessibility histories: there have been shifts in who is doing access work—starting with predominantly nondisabled staff to the increasing involvement of disabled people, particularly students, in initially unpaid and increasingly paid roles. We have also adopted different change strategies based on our positions and timing within the university and our own needs, skills, and motivations for involvement. Together, the stories shed light on some of the dimensions and evolutions of access work at McMaster University over the last 40+ years.

REFLECTIONS FROM AN INTERGENERATIONAL WEB OF ACCESSIBILITY WORKERS

Building accessibility infrastructure and leveraging increasing authority to make institutional change (Anne Pottier, associate university librarian)
As a long-time McMaster employee, I have been able to see and participate in the development of infrastructure for accessibility work that now makes it possible for us to think about and enact accessibility in the context of teaching and learning in the classroom.

I started at McMaster in 1981 as the University Library's first online searcher/reference librarian. I initially became involved in micro accessibility work in the library, supporting individual wheelchair users and blind students in accessing the materials they needed. I helped arrange to get textbooks on tape and in Braille for those students who needed them, even personally recording textbooks for blind students. With so few visibly disabled students on campus at the time and low societal expectations that disabled students would pursue postsecondary education, we didn't have processes for systematically identifying and addressing the barriers they faced on campus. It took a while for the presence of students with disabilities to grow and for us to start thinking about structural change, such as the need for a systemic approach to alternative material formats. Over time and with the assistance of provincial accessibility legislation that required the provision of accessible course material, this student-by-student accessibility support was institutionalized as Library Accessibility Services (LAS) which has recently expanded to include the Campus Accessible Tech Space (CATS). In the context of this work with LAS, I became an advocate for physical accessibility in the built environment—for example, the need for curb cuts, hand railings, and accessible washrooms.[2]

I have also contributed to the development and creation of a number of essential accessibility units on campus. For example, I was involved in hiring the first coordinator for the disabled (Tim Nolan; see Teal et al., 2022, this volume, for more on Tim's contributions) at McMaster in 1988, which would later expand to become Student Accessibility Services. I was appointed to the McMaster President's Advisory Coordinating Committee on Disability (PACCD) in 1989[3] and the client services committee at the Canadian National Institute for the Blind

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(CNIB) where I eventually became the chair of their board and through which I was able to connect McMaster to a field of accessibility experts. PACCD would eventually disband, but a new committee, the McMaster University Committee for Disability Access (MUCDA), established in 2001 to comply with the newly enacted Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2001, created the university's first Accessibility Plan in 2003. In 2009, MUCDA became the McMaster Accessibility Council, the overseeing accessibility group on campus of which I have been the chair since 2014.

I began to work closely with Raihanna Hirji-Khalfan, the inaugural accessibility specialist brought into the Office of Human Rights and Equity Services in 2010, in taking a cross-campus approach to accessibility. This included joining, in 2015, the President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive Community (PACBIC, formed in 2002) and becoming chair of its Access and Accommodation Working Group (formed in 2009). In 2018, I began working with the provincial Postsecondary Education Standards Development Committee through the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility to develop an Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) standard specific to postsecondary education. We hope to see this standard enacted by the end of 2022.

My persistence and success in access work comes from my passion as a librarian combined with accrued accessibility knowledge, my optimism, learning who has power to create change, and being pushy until I get what students need. Over my past 40+ years at McMaster, I've also gained progressive leadership positions with authority to make change. I have found it exhausting at times to constantly engage in remedial efforts to make inaccessibly designed things accessible, driving me to focus on accessibility from the outset of any planning or design. Creating formalized committees and standardization has been vital to the furthering of accessibility work at McMaster.

Connecting and coordinating accessibility efforts on campus to encourage a culture shift towards collective responsibility for accessibility (Raihanna Hirji-Khalfan, former accessibility specialist, Office of Human Rights and Equity Services)

In 2010 the Office of Human Rights and Equity Services, as it was called then, invested in a 3-month contract for an accessibility specialist. I was hired into this role which was intended to identify the coordinating gaps between the accessibility initiatives on campus and to identify what resources were required to ensure that the university was in a position to advance accessibility in a meaningful way. There were pockets of accessibility advocacy being done by staff, faculty, and students, but what was missing was a central body coordinating all the accessibility work on campus to ensure effort and resources were not being duplicated. A holistic approach to accessibility on campus was needed by way of a centralized, coordinating office with resources and specialized supports attached. While my short-term contracts kept being renewed, my colleague Jewel Amoah and I made the case for a full-time, permanent accessibility specialist position. This proposal was eventually approved and in the 2011/2012 academic year, I was hired into the full-time, permanent position of accessibility specialist. Shortly after, the AccessMac program was born.

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One of the main challenges I faced in promoting accessibility across campus was resistance to the idea that accessibility was a shared responsibility. The most common response from faculty and staff to any suggestion on how to advance accessibility in a given area was that it was extra work that went above and beyond their job description. Not only was the concept of accessibility grossly misunderstood, typically confused with individualized accommodations, there was little to no guidance on how to do the work of accessibility in the different contexts across campus. For example, what did accessible teaching and learning look like? Where are the resources and supports? What does an accessible website look like? What are the standards? What do buildings need to be considered accessible? Who will pay for retrofits? The list of questions was endless, and while we had some of the answers, we were a long way from having the tools and the resources needed to advance accessibility on campus in a meaningful way.

Building strong working relationships, campus-wide education and training, and policy change became the focus of my work and that of the AccessMac program. Compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) was the entry point for many initiatives. The AODA obligated the university to set up initiatives, policies, and programs and actively report on how accessibility was being advanced as per the various regulations. These obligations provided many opportunities to ensure that a holistic approach to accessibility on campus was taken. My role as the university's central resource on accessibility allowed me to advocate for program resources and inform and support senior leaders, faculty, and student leaders using the AODA as leverage.

As the staff resource to the McMaster Accessibility Council (MAC), which was made up of decision-makers on campus, I was able to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Putting forward project proposals for initiatives that would make a material impact on campus for staff, students, and faculty with disabilities was a priority. Connecting the dots between the various committees and groups on accessibility such as MAC and the PACBIC working groups helped to push some agendas forward and open up some lines of communication between those with power to make accessibility happen and those who needed accessibility to successfully work, live, and learn on campus.

The role of accessibility specialist was an important piece of the accessibility puzzle on campus. I was always mindful that this position provided many opportunities to make real, meaningful change and that that opportunity should not be wasted. As someone without lived experience of disability, I tried to ensure the voices of disabled staff, students, and faculty were heard by providing opportunities for employment, presentations, and dialogue with senior management and for involvement in developing policies. The hiring of disabled student employees in particular helped to identify access barriers on campus, and collaborations with them led to the creation of accessibility resources, such as *Forward with FLEXibility: A Teaching and Learning Resource on Accessibility and Inclusion* (called *FLEX Forward* for short; de Bie & Brown, 2017).

Practicing what I've learned from people with disabilities to do the work of enhancing

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technological accessibility (Nick Marquis, technologies consultant, Faculty of Social Sciences)

I started working in the Faculty of Social Sciences in 2006 shortly after graduating from McMaster, focusing on upcoming educational technology and management of Faculty websites. My friend worked in the Centre for Student Development (CSD, now Student Accessibility Services) and brought me into the accessibility world. I became interested in disability community through talking, laughing, and relationship building with students in CSD and exposure to what a space could look like when disability is the norm. I began to notice accessibility barriers in the technologies I was supporting. In 2010, I was tasked with coordinating tech for a blind speaker to present over video conferencing. As soon as he began speaking, I realized that the audio was terrible, but did not know how to communicate with the speaker to convey and troubleshoot this information. Working in front of hundreds of people, this was an embarrassing experience and made me realize that I had to learn about digital accessibility.

I needed to understand how to troubleshoot assistive technology, learn to better communicate directly with disabled communities, and start seeing digital accessibility as more complex than a simple checklist. I also began to realize how much work needed to be done within information technology culture to prioritize accessibility. McMaster did not have resources available for web accessibility training so I found online courses, watched YouTube videos from assistive technology users, spent a lot of time reading articles on webaim.org, and completed the *FLEX Forward* training (de Bie & Brown, 2017). I started building an advocacy toolkit, trying to imbue the tech spaces at McMaster with accessibility, and pushing for accessibility work to get done.

I didn't have community in my accessibility work, so in 2010 my partner recommended I join the Accessibility Community of Practice (CoP) hosted by the Centre for Leadership in Learning (currently known as the MacPherson Institute). I enjoyed the community dynamic, openness to new ideas, critical thinking, and presence of folks with lived experience of disability. Watching leaders like Anne Pottier work to enhance accessibility has shaped how I approach my work; her fearlessness in identifying inaccessibility, success in infusing accessibility into policy meetings, and ability to hold everybody accountable has helped me feel more equipped to point out impacts of systemic inaccessibility. I do not want to talk about accessibility, I want to put in the work and do it. In the CoP I also met Raihanna Hirji-Khalfan in her accessibility specialist role. Through this group, I got involved in the Accessibility Hub webpage that Raihanna was working on to centralize accessibility information on campus. When Kate Brown got involved in the project a few years later, the Hub took life.

I'm often taken aback by how little I know about inaccessibility when I talk to those with lived experiences, leading me to learn more from disabled accessibility workers like Omar Hamdon, a co-author whose reflection appears later in this chapter. I first met Omar in 2018 to discuss how Omar could migrate the *Forward with FLEXibility* accessible education training into a more accessible format. Interacting with those impacted by inaccessibility, which I was only able to do by building trust and community with disabled people, is the drive behind my work.

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Over the last number of years, I've sought to act on what I've learned to do the work of accessibility—for example, by auditing the Faculty of Social Sciences websites for compliance with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (2.0AA) (see World Wide Web Consortium [W3C] Web Accessibility Initiative [WAI], 2022), developing and curating digital accessibility training for staff and faculty, and co-creating resources for instructors during COVID-19 with a focus on integrating accessibility in online teaching and learning tools and platforms. There's been a radical shift towards proactive consideration of accessibility during the pandemic, particularly around digital accessibility and online learning. In the years ahead, we need to keep up this awareness and response to ensure a fully accessible McMaster.

Sustaining accessibility work over time by creating community, having fun, changing my focus, and recognizing my needs (Alise de Bie, postdoctoral research fellow, MacPherson Institute)

I found my way to disability social movement work at McMaster when I arrived in 2012 because I was a lonely Mad-identifying student surrounded by healthcare professionals in the social work PhD program (de Bie, 2019).[4] Hanging out with fellow students with mental health disabilities who were reclaiming "madness" as a politicized social experience and community affiliation rather than an individual pathology brought some joy and relief. These relationships propelled me to transfer what I learned from participating in the Toronto-based Mad Students Society to begin organizing the Hamilton Mad Students' Collective (HMSC) from 2012–2016, which reached 200 members at its peak (see de Bie, Rothwell, et al., 2022).

I had so much fun with those folks—from building a blanket fort in my teaching assistant office, to organizing Mad Pride Hamilton events and creating wicked zines (Mad Pride Hamilton, 2014). Having fun together was part of accessibility, fostering belonging and encouraging us to imagine alternative approaches to care and education that would meet our needs and goals. Alongside fun, I would regularly ghostwrite students' emails to their profs or disability advisors, walk them to Raihanna Hirji-Khalfan's office in Human Rights and Equity Services for consultation, accompany them or sit in the hallway while they attended appointments, visit them when detained in hospital, etc. We crowdsourced a list of academic accommodations to support us in identifying and requesting what we'd find helpful and created our own Mad studies independent study course for university credit with support from a willing faculty member. We just made stuff up ourselves—creating accessibility and relevant, disabled student-friendly learning experiences in ways the institution itself was unable to. Much of this organizing stood in direct resistance to the institutional student mental health strategy that was being developed at the time, which we worried would further entrench biomedical ideas of mental illness on campus that would contribute to the pathologization of our experiences rather than structural change.[5]

With several colleagues, the existence of the Hamilton Mad Students' Collective was used to argue for and imagine a university-supported cross-disability group for all disabled students. Sarah Jama (who went on to co-found the Disability Justice Network of Ontario) and I

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created the Maccess Student Network listserv in October 2014, which transformed into the formal McMaster Students Union (MSU) service, MSU Maccess, in 2016. Although there's a long history of intermittent disabled student organizing and advocacy at McMaster,[6] my sense is that the last decade has marked a shift in the relative continuity of these efforts. Students have become sufficiently organized (i.e., politicized, collectivized, empowered) in our advocacy to sustain spaces of our own, without nondisabled allies. For example, in 2015, members of the School of Social Work's Disability Action Group (DAG), which was initially established in 2008 as a group for disabled and nondisabled students, staff, and faculty to collaborate on advocacy initiatives, created a separate DAG peer support space exclusively for disabled social work students (de Bie, Kumbhare, et al., 2021).

While I found my work organizing the Hamilton Mad Students' Collective outside the administrative structure of the university faced fewer restrictions and felt more meaningful and useful than my more official work on various equity committees, it was also lonely, and the extensive care labour involved became financially unsustainable, emotionally exhausting, and strangely boring (over the course of 4000+ hours of unpaid work). I sought out further paid employment and was luckily able to contribute to several accessibility-related positions at McMaster, such as establishing the Employee Accessibility Network for disabled employees through a role in the Equity and Inclusion Office, teaching disability studies courses where I had the pleasure of learning with students like Emunah Woolf, and conducting research on Mad/disability pedagogies as a postdoctoral fellow in the MacPherson Institute. In these roles I've been able to facilitate support and opportunities for disabled students that I didn't have access to as a student and to witness disabled students gain confidence, claim entitlements, and have higher expectations than I'll likely ever experience myself as a disabled scholar.

My loneliness persists, albeit differently. But I have also found true colleagueship that achieves two important qualities: in my friendship and coworking with Kate Brown, I don't suppress my own access needs (which was often felt required or inevitable when organizing the Hamilton Mad Students' Collective) and can instead have these needs met through reciprocal exchange of our personal strengths. Kate also understands the confusing loneliness of working to create changes that will benefit others but are too late to have a meaningful impact on our own lives and pasts; there's a sad kind of estrangement that can happen, I think, between generations of disabled people who may never fully appreciate each other's experiences of living in a different era of access. As long as I keep changing my strategy for contributing to accessibility when I get tired, bored, or sad; find new ways to have fun with disabled people (most recently, creating zines with disabled student partners! See de Bie, Tanisha, et al., 2021 and Alise et al., 2022); and move with my evolving loneliness into different forms of relieving company (de Bie, 2019), perhaps I'll persist for another decade :)

Finding and creating ways into accessibility work through gaining and giving mentorship (Kate Brown, accessibility program manager, Equity and Inclusion Office)
As a student experiencing severe chronic pain, studying full-time was impossible for me,

leading to a prolonged 8-year undergraduate study experience. It was difficult for me to feel a sense of belonging within academia, as the university is arguably structured to privilege full-time studies, young able bodies, and rigorous intellectual and physical endurance.[7] Affording such a long degree proved challenging as well, and so in efforts to seek out meaningful work opportunities, I applied to a MacPherson Institute student partner position to develop an accessible education training resource, *Forward with FLEXibility* (de Bie & Brown, 2017). Lived experience of disability was acknowledged in the job posting an asset to the role, which was the first time in my life I'd ever seen or conceived of being disabled as advantageous.

By participating in this particular project, I ended up developing incredibly deep relationships with mentors and colleagues who brought me into accessibility work in safe, creative, and supportive ways that have enabled me to feel competent and grounded in work in which I was never formally academically trained. This was a critical juncture for me: I simply couldn't imagine spending more years in the low-paying, academic-oriented work I would need to gain access to the fields I was training in at the time; my intersecting health and financial needs were too great. Accessibility work was offering paid opportunities with practical and enticing professional development components to solve problems that would in fact support mine and many others' access needs. And so, I jumped—full on—in.

Mentorship from Anne Pottier and Raihanna Hirji-Khalfan, who were editors of the *FLEX Forward* training, helped me to develop key critical analysis around legislative and practical ways of engaging with accessibility work that has directly led to my current position as accessibility program manager in the Equity and Inclusion Office (EIO). Alise de Bie, who was the lead author on *FLEX Forward*, mentored and "friended" me into worlds of critical disability and Mad studies, scholarly approaches to understanding accessible education, and the ethics of engaging with Disabled community members in respectful ways. This learning informs how I approach my role and has supported me in shaping an accessibility practice that seeks to infuse integrity, community engagement, and the amplification of Disabled voices into accessible design and institutional decision-making processes at McMaster.

Colleagueship and friendship with Nick Marquis through the refinement of McMaster's Accessibility Hub website for sharing accessibility resources ignited my passion for digital accessibility. (I think I went to his accessible media training eight times in one semester in 2018.) Having such a funny and irreverent friend introducing me to this type of work helped me to take it seriously, but in a non-stressful way. This was important because the weight of equity and accessibility work can fall heavily on staff with accessibility in our job description and who are disabled or otherwise experiencing workplace barriers. The significant amount of work ahead of us often feels endless and overwhelming. Laughter has really helped me mitigate burnout and continue in the accessibility field.

This intensive focus on digital accessibility, supported by empowering relationships with Nick and later on, Alise, and motivated by provincial web accessibility imperatives as well as the sudden shift to remote work and study due to COVID-19, helped me develop the confidence to take a risk in trying something never attempted before at McMaster—a User Testing Project for

web accessibility. Funded initially by the MacPherson Institute's Student Partners Program, I was able to hire and work with Ryan Joslin (another co-author of this chapter) and several other students (see Brown et al., 2020). I also hired Omar Hamdan to work on web accessibility support for accessible education content through the Equity and Inclusion Office. In building relationships with Ryan and Omar—as their supervisor, but also as their disabled colleague and friend—I have been able to resist risk-aversion in my current role. Sometimes equity/ accessibility workers can be positioned as "rocking the boat" and are subtly or not-subtly advised to make our voices quieter; however, these relationships with disabled students encourage me to move forward in engaging in digital accessibility work because it is impossible to ignore how essential this work is when you witness how severely impacted some are by digital inaccessibility. As I connect with and become a mentor to more disabled students through the User Testing Project, I have the opportunity to share with them what I've learned from the extensive mentoring I've received.

Building networks to holistically support disabled students from classroom to workplace (Katherine Hesson-Bolton, diversity employment coordinator, Student Success Centre)

I became involved with accessibility work at McMaster in July 2018 after my neighbour, a McMaster staff member, informed me of the diversity employment coordinator posting at the Student Success Centre (SSC), which aligned with my role of employer and client coordinator at March of Dimes Canada and previous roles I had held with national non-profit organizations with a disability service mandate. I joined the Student Success Centre as they were working closely with Student Accessibility Services to develop the new Career Access Professional Services (CAPS) program. CAPS was designed to provide individualized support to assist equity-deserving students and alumni who experience barriers to employment with all aspects of career development, including exploration, preparation, skill development, and confidence-building. To date, these services have led to countless employment and experiential opportunities for program participants.

The relational aspect of my work is immensely important because career opportunities and supports for students are often created through these partnerships. When I started in my role, the Student Success Centre gave me a list of relevant departments and contacts; Kate Brown, one name on that list, helped me begin to navigate the institution and develop a network. I have since collaborated with Kate and the User Testing Project, Alise de Bie at the MacPherson Institute, and numerous other groups on campus to create summer jobs and experiential learning opportunities for disabled students to develop transferable skills.[8] Navigating the vast number of McMaster departments to identify and connect with people doing equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility work has been a challenge. However, meeting one person can lead to an important connection and subsequent introductions to other employers, so the relational work pays off.

In addition to networking with colleagues on campus, I also connect with off-campus

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employers to help students access careers and experiential learning opportunities. I regularly engage in accessibility conversations with these employers, teaching them to value the talent in students who have had difficulty accessing work opportunities. This can lead to a job for the student, a talented employee for the company, and a more accessible workplace. It also builds a relationship where I can then refer additional students to the employer with confidence.

The most meaningful aspect of my work is supporting students in removing barriers so that they successfully obtain new work opportunities. As students access these experiences, we discuss what they are learning and how they might transfer this learning to future jobs, all while building confidence that their developing knowledge, skills, and hobbies are valuable and applicable to their career.

The more we educate faculty and staff on having conversations about accessibility, the easier it will be for students experiencing employment barriers related to identities and intersections of disability, gender, language, and racialization to access opportunities. Accessible education doesn't end in the classroom—it must inform our hiring practices and the creation of extracurricular and employment opportunities. Bringing conversations about accessibility into the classroom and discussing how access translates to the workplace is vital for student success—for both individuals with a disability and their future co-workers.

Accessibility and equity work can be exhausting, but meeting other accessibility workers, such as those affiliated with the Employee Accessibility Network for disabled staff and faculty, is uplifting. These relationships facilitate creation of a community that offers hope, continuous learning, and a safe space where I can be authentic and do not have to explain myself; with community, I feel less alone and am infused with energy to keep going. One day, I want to read that McMaster University is not only world-ranked for our research, but for our accessibility, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Easing workplace worries through developing an interest and community in paid accessibility work (Ryan Joslin, web accessibility user tester/developer, Equity and Inclusion Office)

Before I got involved in accessibility work, I was a mentor for disabled students through Student Accessibility Services (SAS). I found this opportunity to pass on my knowledge and learn from first-year students very fulfilling; it transformed my initial university experiences of feeling alone and having to learn so much on my own (as none of my friends experienced disability) into knowledge that could help others.

I began developing an interest in accessibility work when I started working with Kate Brown on the User Testing Project in 2017. I heard about the position via an email from Student Accessibility Services. This project, testing websites for accessibility, caught my eye and I applied. Although I was familiar with my own accessibility needs, I didn't yet have a good understanding of others' needs or what user testing was. I didn't know what to expect, but with Kate and Nick Marquis' guidance I learned so much. These mentors taught me about assistive technologies beyond the ones I personally use and helped me feel less overwhelmed in the

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workplace by speaking in plain language and making themselves available for support.

As one of the members who has been involved with the User Testing Project since the very beginning, I have now taken on a role training new team members, all students with disabilities. Whenever I do a training session, I pass on knowledge I gained from Kate and Nick at the same time as I learn new information about assistive technology (AT) from the team members' experiences as AT users. This process of two-way learning has helped us build mutual relationships. The core team of four has been working together for four years now, but new members are quickly seen as friends in addition to colleagues. Before this experience, I had some community through the Student Accessibility Services mentorship program and MacWheelers,[10] but nothing mutual or long-lasting. The User Testing Team has changed this for me: while we don't all share the same disabilities, we all understand when it takes somebody longer to complete a task or the feeling of being stuck in an inaccessible online environment. This bond and the desire to improve online spaces create a feeling of community.

As paid contributors to the team we have gained some power to change our environments and are no longer outsiders in the university or the workplace. Through the User Testing Project, I took part in a talk to the Brightspace/Desire to Learn Accessibility Interest Group[9] about the user testing teamwork and testing methodology. That experience made me feel like we were trailblazers, forging our own path in the tech world with confidence in ourselves and one another. I used to worry about getting a job in a place where accessibility is not considered and where I would be unable to find community, but working with a team of disabled accessibility workers gave me access to employment experience and a community where I could let go of some of these fears. The team has shown me that accessible workplaces and workplace communities are possible. With Kate at the helm and all team members experiencing disability, access is at the forefront and work still gets done. We have made a huge impact at McMaster.

My experience with the User Testing Team encouraged me to continue my education through the Accessible Media Production Program at Mohawk College. I have gained technical skills, knowledge, appreciation for the impact of digital accessibility, and a deeper understanding that McMaster has a lot of room to grow. While I was interested in computers before my involvement in the User Testing Team, this project inspired a specific interest in digital accessibility. I would like to see the User Testing Team expand to help make accessible web content across campus. I also hope to see more workplaces rooted in commitments to accessibility and community.

Revitalizing student activism for institutional change (Emunah Woolf, McMaster Students Union Maccess director, 2021/2022)

My first year at McMaster was difficult for me as a disabled student—navigating postsecondary education, living away from home, building and sustaining community, and dealing with health fluctuations. I continually encountered barriers to accommodations and support. Luckily, I had connected to Maccess, a service by/for disabled students at McMaster,

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before starting university. Here I saw many others experience similar barriers, a reassuring but also frustrating experience.

I have since given advice and support to disabled students as a peer support volunteer, executive team member, and director of Maccess. Through Maccess, and in interactions with other disabled students, I have helped build disability community and foster relationships that help me survive university. Finding a home within Maccess was vital but also resulted in many unacknowledged and tiring hours of community work. My involvement in disabled student community was necessary, but I knew that broader change was needed.

Supported by disabled staff members such as Dr. Alise de Bie and Kate Brown, I've been able to do institutional accessibility work beyond student organizing. From 2019–2021 I conducted paid disability research as a student partner with the MacPherson Institute and felt valued as a disabled student researcher. I focused on the context and politics of disabled student self-advocacy and students' associated emotional experiences by reviewing the literature, creating and facilitating self-advocacy workshops, interviewing students, and co-authoring a paper on my findings (Woolf & de Bie, 2022). This helped me further identify flaws in the accommodation model utilized on campus and possible alternatives generated by disabled student knowledge.

In 2021, I completed a social work placement with Alise at the MacPherson Institute and Kate at the Equity and Inclusion Office (EIO) that offered me an even closer look into the institutional side of accessibility work. Their lived experiences have been translated into invaluable knowledge that has been passed on to me about policy, change-making processes, and the reality that McMaster leadership is mostly non-disabled people at the top. This has been crucial in understanding and navigating the institution. Both Alise and Kate have been incredible mentors to me. They have been able to secure me funding to do paid equity work (that usually would be unpaid) and modeled the possibility of building careers as a disabled person in the university. I would not have been able to focus on creative, relational, and (somewhat) institutionally supported disability work without their earlier work and that which came before them, such as the creation of an accessibility program within the EIO, the Student Accessibility Services office, through which students negotiate academic accommodations, and prior disabled student community building.

Disabled student community has existed at McMaster for a long time but has only recently been legitimized with a name, space, and funding through the McMaster Students Union (MSU). This legitimization has facilitated community development but inhibited possibilities for advocacy as our reliance on the MSU impacts our ability to speak out. My role as Maccess director is complicated, involving creating community, opportunities for peer support, and events while working towards broader change and ensuring Maccess operations remain palatable enough to the MSU to ensure its continued funding. I have seen this balancing of pushing for change while focusing on palatability for self-protection in different forms throughout my disability-related work, within both community and institutional work. Access to disabled mentors helps me understand this need for both relational and policy work and do this

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balancing.

My access to opportunities that have allowed me to integrate community and institutional work shapes my hopes for the future of accessibility at McMaster. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I sought out disability studies courses and put a disability lens on assignments for unrelated courses. Integrating disability studies coursework, research, placement practice, and community involvement made my contributions in all areas more valuable and grounded in lived and community experience as well as disability theory. This holistic education can be a model going forward.

As Maccess director, I hoped to refocus the service's work on building disability community to involve further advocacy/activism. Disability community is vital for student success, but there also need to be structural shifts toward accessibility and valuing disability on campus. I hope to see the development of a disability studies minor at McMaster so that this field is legitimized on campus, students can engage with critical ideas of disability and related research, and disabled students can have a place to engage with professors in the field. My experience connecting to so much disability work was mainly facilitated by my connection with disabled staff members. I hope that with continued community and institutional change work these opportunities become more easily accessible to disabled students across McMaster.

Creating accessibility where I can while waiting for the accessibility I need (Omar Hamdan, web accessibility user tester/developer, Equity and Inclusion Office)

I became involved in accessibility work because I knew that things needed changing and wanted to play a part in the change. One of my high school teachers suggested I go into computer sciences because if there were more blind computer developers like me, there would be more accessible software. But I found it difficult to be a computer science student at McMaster: when courses used diagrams, it was impossible for me to understand the visual content; the physical layout of campus was hard to navigate; and I felt frustrated for myself and other students navigating accessibility barriers here. All of this pushed me toward accessibility work and specifically towards easy and accessible user experiences of technology.

I began engaging in accessibility work in 2018 as an accessibility assistant in the Equity and Inclusion Office with Kate Brown and then through the User Testing Project since 2020. I am extremely passionate about this work—both the public-facing and backend testing. I have had two key mentors: Kate and Nick Marquis have helped me develop practical skills in communication and the basics of user accessibility, enhancing my ability to empathize with different disability experiences and report my findings to people of varying technical or non-technical backgrounds.

The User Testing Team also keeps me connected to disability community. I wouldn't have finished my undergraduate degree without the friends I met through the McMaster Association for Part-Time Students (MAPS) and Maccess. Talking to, empathizing with, and being motivated by these friends helped me realize I was not alone. However, I lost a lot of this student-centred community once I graduated. The User Testing Team fills this gap, offering

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valuable relationships with colleagues, such as a collaboration with Ryan Joslin to mentor and orient new members to the team. Ryan has helped me understand how others use assistive technologies to navigate through websites.

Due to access barriers, postsecondary education was often not enjoyable for me. For this reason, I am delaying enrollment in graduate studies. I hope that every course at McMaster will become accessible so that I can pursue a master's degree without having to guess what accessibility needs will arise. This would require a focus on accessibility rather than individualized accommodation, course content designed with accessibility in mind, creativity for courses taught in a visual manner, and lots of education and support (from Student Accessibility Services or another service) for professors in adapting content. While I wait, I am still learning about new technologies and working to create accessible software to replace the flawed program that I use to write out math equations.

CONCLUSION

Institutions do not change themselves. People, bolstered by our relationships with each other, change them. Through snapshots into the work and experiences of nine access workers, this chapter has explored how accessibility and disability inclusion initiatives have happened and continue to happen at McMaster University in large part through the various connections we create with like-minded colleagues. Each of us in our own way has been compelled into finding, creating, and sustaining relationships, whether through loneliness, frustration, worry, curiosity, necessity, strategy, or happenstance. We hope our stories support further recognition of the importance of these relationships, the labour involved in them, and how all disabled students, staff, and faculty and our allies should have access to the friendship, mentorship, colleagueship, and other community relations that enable our survival, success, and leadership in the university (Carter et al., 2011; Foster-Fishman et al., 2007). Work to support accessibility in teaching, learning, and education must attend to these relational needs. We encourage readers to validate the importance of these relationships and to invest time in developing and sustaining them.

40+ years is a long time. Written as a contribution to the 50th anniversary commemoration of McMaster's teaching and learning centre, this chapter might be partly interpreted as a celebration of the wins for accessibility that have been achieved over the past 4 decades. This recognition is important: numerous students, staff, and faculty over the years have chipped away at structural and attitudinal barriers to create changes that in at least some ways make some lives less difficult. We are grateful for this work and wish it was not necessary. We are also angry that barriers continue to exist 40+ years later. One learning from our interconnected reflection is the importance of documenting, preserving, sharing, and building on this history as a crucial form of accessibility work. Most incoming students, staff, and faculty never have access to the histories of accessibility work at McMaster, and many likely come to feel like the barriers they face or the changes they seek are somehow individual to them. This can lead to significant isolation, localized change initiatives that get forgotten as soon as those

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leading them leave, and in some cases so-called "new" initiatives that inadvertently erase the work of prior generations.

Learning and connecting to local histories can instead help us build intergenerational community that sustains us in the work of creating change. Perhaps most significantly, this sort of community can help us dream: when we're individually struggling to have basic accommodations met, access essential information, or navigate a physical space, having aspirations higher than a bare minimum can be challenging. Bolstered by a history of how slowly things have changed and how exhausting and underrecognized access work is, we can get angry, we can hold people responsible, we can demand more. We can learn that 15–20 years ago, fighting for the enactment of and compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act was an important step in getting the accessibility conversation going, and we can reflect that this is not enough for us now; we want and deserve better. We want an institution designed for disabled people, where accessibility is accepted as everyone's responsibility and effectively threaded throughout everything we do, so that specific accessibility roles (like those occupied by Raihanna Hirji-Khalfan, Kate Brown, and Katherine Hesson-Bolton) are no longer necessary. Informed by the different change strategies (e.g., being pushy, being hopeful, leaning into desperation/survival needs, building infrastructure, doing policy, doing grassroots, moving with loneliness, creating community) adopted by each of the chapter co-authors and other access workers, we can try them on and experiment to create approaches that work and are sustainable for us. History is not optional; it is crucial to our collective survival and liberation.

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NOTES

1. For example, material has been recorded in personal stories and creative pieces (Alise et al., 2022; de Bie, Tanisha, et al., 2021; Mad Pride Hamilton, 2014; Sayles with de Bie, 2018; Supeene, 1990), student newspaper articles (e.g., Denbok, 1974; Freeman, 1969; Freeman, 2000), institutional reports (e.g., Lisk & Tremblay, 1981), case studies (Brown et al., 2020; de Bie, Kumbhare, et al., 2021), theses and dissertations (e.g., Castrodale, 2015; Ditkofsky, 2011; La Monica, 2016; Tullio, 1999), and research articles (Chouinard, 2010, 2020; de Bie, 2019; de Bie, Marquis, et al., 2022; de Bie, Rothwell, et al., 2022; Low, 1996; Marquis, Jung, et al., 2016, Marquis, Schormans, et al., 2016; Watt et al., 2014; Woolf & de Bie, 2022). There are also materials preserved in the McMaster University Library William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections: Cyril Greenland fonds, Box 12, F.13, Presidential Advisory and

Coordinating Committee on the Disabled, 1981; Alvin Lee fonds, Box 8, F.276, Dr. A. A. Lee's Welcome for the Disabled Awareness Day on September 25, 1986. The annual Accessibility and Disability Inclusion Update, published since 2018, has begun to play a vital role in preserving and sharing accessibility initiatives, though it is focused on outputs/ activities as opposed to the stories of those involved. Read past issues on the McMaster Accessibility Hub website.

2. This eventually led to creation of the central Barrier Free Standard Committee (2019–Present) at McMaster, composed of employees focused on health and safety, facilities work, and accessibility. Anne Pottier is very happy to be the chair of the committee. This group provides proactive integration of accessibility considerations into the university and is working to create a built environment standard specific to McMaster's use of space as a postsecondary institution. As one outcome of this work, Facilities Services at McMaster has developed an accessibility plan and is committed to ensuring compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).

3. McMaster University Library William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections: Alvin Lee fonds, Box 14, F.9 1989, Letter from Graham Hill to Dr. Lee regarding his recommendation for Anne Pottier to serve on the Operating Committee for the Disabled, September 7, 1989.

4. For an accessible introduction to the reclaimed language of madness, Mad identity, and the developing discipline of Mad studies, see Costa (2014) and Gillis (2015).

5. See McMaster's mental health strategy website.

6. We know of disabled student organizing at McMaster as far back as at least the 1970s with the short-lived Handicapped Students Union (Denbok, 1974), the 1990s–2000s McMaster Special Needs Association, later renamed the McMaster Disability Advocacy Group (Freeman, 2000), the 1990s WINGS (Wisdom, Integrity, Networking, Grappling, and Support) mental health-related support group, the later 2000s peer support group for students with mental illness co-facilitated by a student with lived experience and an accommodation coordinator (Wyse, 2007), and many other individual and coordinated efforts by disabled students.

7. We thank Alek Montes for drawing our attention to how this privileging of young able bodies has been embedded in McMaster University for decades—reinforced, for example, through mandatory physical education courses in the early years and the university's focus as a sports-centred school and later a health science hub (e.g., see Prince, 1975).

8. Other collaborations between the Student Success Centre's Career Access Professional Services program and campus partners include the Faculty of Science, Spark (a McMaster Students Union service supporting the high school to university transition), Student Affairs, and University Technology Services.

9. For more information on this adapted exercise and wellness program for people living with spinal cord injuries, visit the MacWheelers' webpage.

10. For more information, visit the Desire2Learn accessibility webpage.

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APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF MCMASTER ACCESSIBILITY UNITS DISCUSSED IN THE CHAPTER

NAME	DESCRIPTION
Accessibility Community of Practice (CoP), MacPherson Institute	The Centre for Leadership in Learning, currently known as the Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation, and Excellence in Teaching, began coordinating an Accessibility Community of Practice in 2010 for several years. This group was reactivated as the Accessibility & Equity Teaching Network from 2017–2020 until the pandemic hit. There have been some initial efforts in 2022 to reactivate the group.
AccessMac Program, Equity and Inclusion Office (EIO)	Formerly named the Office of Human Rights and Equity Services, the EIO promotes and supports institutional commitments to equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. The EIO's AccessMAC Program is responsible for translating, communicating, and incorporating regulatory requirements

	under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 into university structures, processes, and policies through strategic and deliberate cross-campus partnerships. Integral to the work is the creation of on- and off- campus networks and communities of Disabled students, staff, and faculty, as well as accessibility practitioners and allies, to create and maintain a culture of disability inclusion informed by Disabled perspectives at McMaster.
[Career Access Professional Services](#) (CAPS), Student Success Centre (SSC)	The CAPS program offers career support for McMaster students and alumni who identify as members of an equity-deserving group(s) and/or who are experiencing barriers to employment. This includes women; racialized persons; First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people; persons with disabilities; and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.
[Employee Accessibility Network](#) (EAN)	The EAN is a consultative and peer network of and for McMaster employees identifying with disability-related issues who wish to share information and offer suggestions for enhancing accessibility at McMaster.
[Library Accessibility Services](#) (LAS), McMaster University Library	Since the 1980s, LAS has been supporting students with disabilities (currently, those referred by Student Accessibility Services) in accessing assistive technology hardware and software, alternative formats of course material and other learning resources, and public and private study spaces with adjustable furniture. Since 2018, LAS has offered an assistive technology lab called the Campus Accessible Tech Spaces (CATS).
[McMaster Accessibility Council](#) (MAC)	The MAC was preceded by the McMaster President's Advisory Coordinating Committee on Disability (PACCD) and the McMaster University Committee for Disability Access (MUCDA). The MAC is responsible for ensuring McMaster University's adherence to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).
[MSU Maccess](#)	MSU Maccess is a peer support service by and for disabled students supported by the McMaster Students Union (MSU). MSU Maccess was preceded by the informal Maccess Student Network and the [Hamilton Mad Students' Collective](#), among other disabled student-run groups.
[President's Advisory Committee on Building an Inclusive](#)	PACBIC has facilitated a number of accessibility-related working groups since 2009, including the Accessibility and Accommodation Working Group (2009–2018); the Mental Health, Equity, and Inclusion Working Group that was renamed the Madness, Eugenics, Discrimination, and Sanism (MEDS) Working Group (2014-2018); and the current, amalgamated working group

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Community (PACBIC)	focused on Disability, Inclusion, Madness, Accessibility, and NeuroDiversity (DIMAND).
Student Accessibility Services (SAS)	SAS has existed for over 30 years to provide academic accommodation assistance and related support to students with disabilities. The service was previously known as a responsibility of the coordinator for the disabled in the Office of the Registrar, the Office for Disabled Students, the Office of Ability and Access, and a program of the Centre for Student Development (CSD).
User Testing Project for Web Accessibility	The User Testing Project Team is comprised of students, alumni, and staff with disabilities who work collaboratively to develop end-user testing methodologies and applications for testing McMaster websites for assistive technology compatibility and accessible end-user experience. The team has existed in various iterations since 2018 and is currently coordinated by the AccessMac Program in the Equity and Inclusion Office and the Faculty of Science.

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