

Organizing Accessible and Inclusive Events

Canadian universities have a duty to be inclusive – not only to reflect the diversity of their respective student bodies, but our communities and our country as a whole. A crucial aspect of making our universities inclusive is ensuring that they are accessible. The term accessible does not exclusively refer to the traditional definition of wheelchair friendly buildings, although this is a key component. Rather the concept seeks to, in broad terms include attitudinal and cognitive inclusivity in order to accommodate groups such as the hearing and visually impaired. We must focus on broadening our dedication to accessibility in order to allow all students to participate fully and equally in campus events.

It can be challenging to plan and organize events with a focus on inclusion and accessibility because organizers may overlook certain underrepresented groups, or be under the impression that the extra work might be too much to undertake. Regardless, the extra effort by organizers has a drastic impact on the student experience for a large number of people who may not be able to participate equally in the absence of the added accessibility options. The topic of accessibility is not limited to just physical abilities, rather it encompasses the inclusion of people from various cultural, socio-economic, religious, and racial backgrounds, as well as a diverse set of identities based on gender and sexual orientation.

Individuals belonging to the aforementioned social markers can be included in university events if their unique needs are taken into consideration. In order to enhance the student experience, organizers should:

1. First, on top of ensuring wheelchair accessible locations for those that are differently abled, sensory abilities such as visual and hearing impairments can be accommodated with minimal extra work. For example, visually impaired individuals can be accommodated through the availability of pamphlets and print materials in braille. Similarly, hearing impaired individuals can have equal access to events through the presence of a sign language translator.
2. Second, providing a broader dietary selection for event refreshments can also accommodate individuals with different religious and ideological restrictions such as Kosher/Halal, vegetarian and vegan choices. This can be done through offering a wider selection of options along with the traditional selection.
3. Third, ensuring that event locations are accessible through public transportation allows for not only increased inclusion, but also higher attendance for events. A majority of university students do not own vehicles, and as such rely on public transportation as their primary means of getting

around. Selecting venues which are easily accessible and along bus routes will allow more students to attend events.

4. Last, student groups would greatly benefit from researching the venues beforehand in order to ensure that the values of that business are in line with those of the group, and the university itself. For Example, our university aspires to be an inclusive space meant to be equally accessible to all. The events organized through university groups should be conducted at venues which are also respectful of all genders, races and religions, and do not discriminate against any specific groups. This research would allow student groups to choose not to associate with businesses that operate in sexist, racist, homophobic or other non-inclusive ways. Moreover, these events should be seen as an opportunity to help the growth of local businesses aimed at positive community initiatives. This mutually beneficial relationship between universities and their respective communities is crucial in upholding the reputation of post-secondary institutions as centres of growth and progress, which benefit not only those in attendance, but also the community at large.

Increased accessibility can be promoted and achieved through organizations striving to make their events more welcoming to as broad an audience as possible. Being cognisant of different groups and their unique needs can allow for better accommodation through additional planning and brainstorming. This positive step can be achieved with minimal organizational and financial burden. For instance, instead of only meat/chicken options, having the same amount of food, but with a wider variety addresses dietary restrictions within the same budget. Similarly, asking a student fluent in American Sign Language to volunteer at the event provides a sign language translator for free, while giving the student an opportunity to add to their resume.

The reason accessibility is of such high importance is because it promotes the principles of independence, dignity, integration and equality of opportunity. The failure to account for different requirements can inadvertently exclude a group because of lack of planning. We must keep in mind that universities are meant to be learning spaces for all, and our events should be organized to reflect how highly we prioritize the principle of inclusion.

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