Graduate Studies Information Session

April 21, 2011

“Accommodating Graduate Students with Disabilities”

- David Rappaport's opening remarks:
  - Accommodating our students with disabilities is a legal requirement. Moreover, it provides the tools and self-esteem so that individuals can do their best, it is the right thing to do.
  - It is important to accommodate students so that they may achieve their full potential. This additional productivity is a service to the university and society at large.
  - It is important to note that accommodation is not about lowering standards, reducing requirements, or expecting less.
  - Health, Counselling and Disability Services (HCDS) is the unit at Queen's with responsibility for assessing disability issues.
  - Today's session is an exchange of your experience, as faculty and staff in our graduate programs, in working with students with disabilities. An open discussion regarding your experiences:
    - What types of requests for accommodation have been heard?
    - How are accommodations resolved and for how long?
    - Strategies or best practices that have been adopted for managing some of these issues.

- Observation - Some students need a quiet space to write an exam while others may need extra time to write their exams.

- Question - are graduate students entitled to services provided by the Registrar's Office in offering alternate arrangements for exams?
  - The School of Graduate Studies will inquire about this and respond.
  - Answer: Accommodations on exams are managed for graduate students just as they are for undergraduate students. The student meets with the Disability Services Advisor and provides the required documentation verifying a permanent disability. The Disability Services Advisor makes a recommendation to the Exams Office, which implements the accommodation. If the exam is not run by the Exam Office (e.g., private sitting proctored by a professor), the Disability Services Office supplies the student with a Recommendation for Accommodation form, detailing the accommodation. The student and professor then work out the appropriate arrangements.

- One attendee noted that the number of graduate students requiring accommodation on exams is growing. This led to a brief discussion about some graduate programs moving away from courses which might eliminate the need for exams and reduce the need for accommodation. However, it is important to recognize that there are many other types of situations when graduate students may need accommodation - e.g., accommodation in the lab, completing comprehensives, etc.

- Question - some students may require more time to complete their degree and this has funding implications. What can we do for students who go beyond their funding-eligibility
period for reasons of a disability? David Rappaport confirmed that this very issue came up at the Faculty of Arts & Science Arts Council in April. In response to this and other issues related to accommodating graduate students with disabilities, the School of Graduate Studies is striking a task force. Audrey Kohayashi (Department of Geography) and Sandra den Otter (Associate Dean, School of Graduate Studies) have agreed to Co-Chair

- It was further noted that this particular issue is multi-faceted. It is not a simply a matter of setting aside funds. Questions concerning how the funds should be allocated (e.g., who is eligible and for how much?) and how should these funds be managed also need to be answered.
- Up to now, the University has responded to these requests on a one-off, ad-hoc basis. The task force may provide some recommendations that will help answer these questions.
- Jeanette Parsons followed up by saying that in terms of responding to the specific accommodation needs of students, it is quite appropriate to do this on an individualized basis. She also pointed out that extra time may be more a function of accessibility (e.g., students with print disabilities having to wait for the conversion of academic/research materials into accessible formats) rather than a need directly related to one's disability (e.g., someone with a learning disability requiring extra time to complete tasks).

○ Question - what are the timelines of the taskforce? The taskforce is currently being established and its report is expected in the Fall, 2011

○ Question - how do we balance the student's right to privacy with our need for information in order to assist or supporting faculty to provide accommodation without disclosing the nature of the disability?
  - It is important to respect the student's right to privacy and to understand that information about a disability is theirs to disclose or not.
  - There is a difference between seeking information about one's disability versus information about how to make an accommodation work.
  - Disability Services often works with students to help them navigate the dilemmas associated with disclosure, including to whom they should disclose. Sometimes, a tactfully offered suggestion of seeking guidance from Disability Services may be useful for students.
  - The important thing to remember is to ask the student if there is anything that the department can do to assist, etc.

○ Question - Do any graduate programs publish information for students with disabilities on their website? None of the attendees knew of such information on their websites.
  - Suggested information could include not just links to services such as HCDS but also tips, strategies, resources and other information specifically for students with disabilities.
  - The information should be located front and centre on the website so that students don't have to go looking for it.
  - This would also be a way of sending a welcoming message to students with disabilities.

○ Question - has there been any discussion about the separation of Disability Services from Health, Counselling and is this something the SGS task force will comment on?
Jeanette Parsons confirmed that Disability Services was reviewed by two external experts several years ago and one of the recommendations considered at that time was the separation of Disability Services from HCDS. The final report from this review was not released. She acknowledged this as being a concern for some students with disabilities who argue that housing disability and health services together does lend to the medicalization of disability.

Jeanette said that this is an issue beyond the scope of the SGS task force.

- **Question** - What is the role of graduate programs in managing the needs of graduate students with mobility disabilities who are assigned teaching assistantships for classes taught in buildings that are inaccessible?
  - There may be some role for the Timetabling Committee to move rooms based on these needs and this could take place at the request of the professor.
  - The University has an obligation to accommodate the needs of TAs just as it does for students, faculty and staff with disabilities and this includes moving activities to accessible locations when requested.
  - Part of the problem is that room assignments take place well in advance of students receiving confirmation of their teaching assistantship.
  - TAs, in many cases, are not assigned until the first or second week of classes and this tight timing would make it difficult to respond to accommodation needs.
  - The other problem is that in most cases students with disabilities do not receive detailed information about the specific tasks associated with a teaching assistantship (i.e., job description) until they start and that is often too late.
  - There is also no formal mechanism in place for students to signal that they have particular accommodation needs in relation to their teaching assistant’s role.
  - One attendee suggested programs could include a message in their letter of offer inviting students to let the program know of any particular needs they may have.

- **Suggestion** – the School of Graduate Studies should include a message in its Offer of Admission inviting students to let the University know of any particular needs. As well, programs could include a similar message in their letter of offer. The School of Graduate Studies is currently looking at adding this to the template offer letter.

- **Question** - how do we appropriately accommodate mental health issues that may or may not be temporary in nature?
  - It is important that faculty and staff become more aware of mental health issues. We have a moral/legal responsibility to understand how to do this appropriately.
  - A little awareness can go a long way.
  - It is important to understand that the Disability Services Advisor decides if a particular condition warrants an accommodation, not a graduate supervisor.
  - The graduate supervisor is responsible for providing information about the work/tasks required of the students.
  - Disability Services assess these tasks, along with the disability in question, and designs an accommodation plan accordingly.
  - Disability Services also distinguishes conditions that require accommodation from those better managed through other supports such as short-term counselling, stress-management strategies, learning strategies development, etc.
  - It is important to work towards balancing some of these issues. Not all students with disabilities - permanent or temporary - register with HCDS. Many students can get
their needs met by simply speaking with faculty. Faculty members are encouraged to exercise judgment when dealing with students who request extensions, delaying exams or who appear to have more complex needs.

- HCDS is not only a resource for students but also for faculty who have questions about how to meet the needs of students.

  - Suggestion - perhaps HCDS could offer some sessions in stress management for students who are struggling to cope.

    - Jeanette Parsons referred to such workshops available through the *Expanding Horizons* program. She indicated more information about the program will be presented at the Graduate Studies Forum on April 27 and will be posted to the School of Graduate Studies website over the summer.

  - Colette Steer, Recruitment Coordinator, reminded attendees of the importance of ensuring that their websites are accessible. She is available to work with programs on this.

  - Jeanette Parsons referred attendees to the online training in Accessible Customer Service available on the Equity Office website ([http://www.queensu.ca/equity/content.php?page=CSOnlineTraining](http://www.queensu.ca/equity/content.php?page=CSOnlineTraining)). This training provides a comprehensive introduction to disability and accessibility issues and answers many common questions that people have. It was noted that Senate recently passed a motion making this training mandatory for all graduate students as a condition of graduation.