

Humber meets provincial standards, not students' needs

Andrew Jeffrey

NEWS REPORTER

For Kathleen Lynch, the issue of accessibility on campus is a matter of independence.

Lynch, 51, a first-year journalism student living with Multiple Sclerosis, has used a wheelchair since 2012.

At Humber, this shouldn't be a problem.

The college touts itself as providing an accessible learning and working environment that meets the province's standards of accessibility. Yet, Lynch consistently struggles to even pass through the doorway of some of her classrooms without assistance.

Without automatic doors for all her classrooms, Lynch often faces difficulty opening heavy doors while maneuvering her chair. She raised this complaint with campus officials and was disappointed by the response. Signs were posted asking to keep doors open, garbage cans propped open doors, or maybe Lynch thought, the expectation was simply on her to ask for help from other students opening doors for her.

But even this solution, to Lynch, misses the point. A fully accessible campus provides independence to each student.

"Truly, I do feel insulted that they're trying to placate me," Lynch said. "If you ask any person who has a physical handicap what you want, it's independence.

"I want my independence, I want to be just like you," she said.

"I want to go to school, I want to learn stuff, but my efforts are being stymied," Lynch said. "It's enough work for me to get up and get dressed, for crying out loud. I don't want to go to college and have more barriers put in front of me."

She has been a vocal advocate for providing better wheelchair accessibility in her home community of Bolton for years. She said it never even occurred to her to worry about the same types of services being unavailable at Humber.

So it came as a disappointment when she began classes last fall and said she found classrooms without

automatic doors, barrier-free washrooms with common access used by students who don't need it and broken wheelchair-accessible desks.

What disappointed Lynch even more was the nonplussed response she said she received across campus from Humber's facilities department.

"I never expected to find that. I thought in 2018 that Humber would be accessible to the max," Lynch said.

"I just assumed I would have no barriers or doors," she said. "I just assumed that accessibility would be provided 100 per cent."



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Kathleen Lynch

FIRST-YEAR HUMBER COLLEGE STUDENT

Natalie Robinson, a 19-year-old sport management student who's used a wheelchair her whole life, faces her own difficulties accessing classes on campus, despite the college's efforts. A number of classrooms are crammed with so many desks and tables that she has difficulty moving through these rooms. Long, steep ramps and difficulty getting to school from the campus residence during the winter are everyday nuisances to Robinson's academics.

"Realistically, I just think they need to put less desks in the classroom and make the classrooms bigger," Robinson said. "I have to budget more time to get here in case there's crowds of people on the ramps.

"You've just got to make it inclusive," she said. "It's hard to feel

like you belong in a place where you can't do much...I shouldn't have to work a lot harder just because I'm in a wheelchair."

According to Humber's records and regulations, it seems the school should have stronger accessibility. The college's Director of Communications, Andrew Leopold, said in an email response to Et Cetera that Humber is compliant with the current Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA). The college's Multi-Year Accessibility Plan tracks the school's progress in meeting AODA standards and reports positive results, he said.

On top of these reports, an AODA Committee affiliated with Humber's Centre for Human Rights, Equity and Diversity meets on a near monthly basis throughout the school year to promote barrier prevention and removal around campus.

"Humber complies with the five AODA standards, which include the Accessible Customer Service Standard and the Accessible Built Environment Standard, as well as the Ontario Building Code and the Ontario Human Rights Code," Leopold said.

"The installation of push button operators on doors in older buildings that are not undergoing renovations is currently not a requirement under AODA," he said.

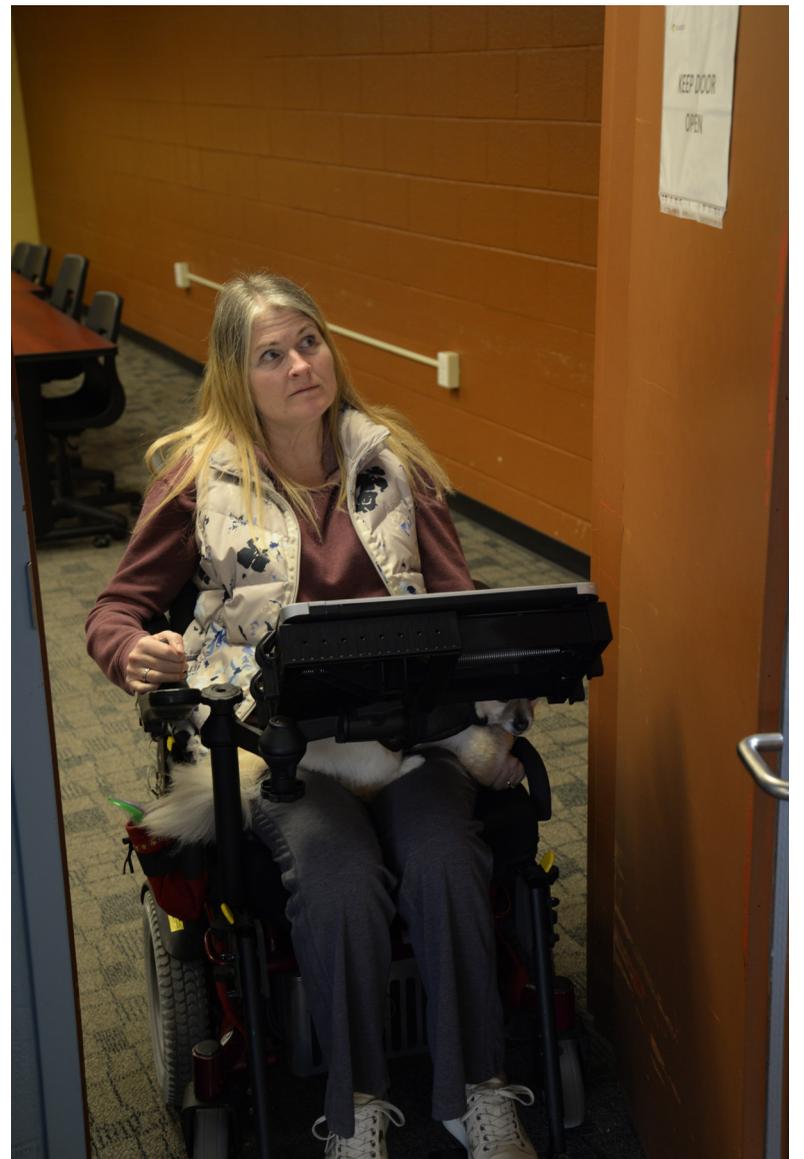
David Lepofsky is the chairperson of the AODA Alliance, the organization that led the campaign to implement the legislation, said the act requires Ontario to be fully accessible by 2025.

But Lepofsky would be the first to admit the current legislation as it stands doesn't go far enough.

"You can comply with all those standards all the time and still have horrible accessibility problems," he said.

"Even the term 'AODA compliant' is a term that doesn't really mean anything, but people use the term anyways," Lepofsky said. "The law that actually applies is the Human Rights Code and the Charter of Rights.

"Both of those laws require equality without discrimination based on



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Kathleen Lynch raised concerns about accessibility resulting in these signs.

disability," he said.

But Leopold maintained the measures Humber has in place go beyond the AODA's minimum standards, and that the school is always looking to become more accessible.

"We are working with accessibility consultants to ensure that our new Barrett Centre for Technology Innovation is built with the latest accessibility requirements," Leopold said.

Lynch hopes to see change at Humber that includes more buttons to open automatic doors, more height-adjustable desks around campus to accommodate wheel-

chair accessibility and access cards to ensure barrier-free washrooms are used by those with physical disabilities.

"If I am still needing to ask you to open that door for me, there's a problem," she said. "I need my independence and that's robbing my independence from me.

"If I stop doing it myself, I may as well lay down and die," Lynch said. "And I'm just not that type of person."

Accessibility is an election issue. See Et Cetera election coverage starting on page 5.

Student group calls for more federal funding for mental health services

Olivia Levesque

NEWS REPORTER

The federal government should invest more in post-secondary student mental health care, says a study by an alliance of college and university students.

The Canadian Alliance of Student Associations is calling on Ottawa to increase investments in accordance with suggestions based in part on studies by the Mental Health Commission of Canada, and to help with the growing demand for health assistance on campuses.

"We've done a lot of work with reducing stigma and bringing the conversation of mental health for-

ward," said Shifrah Gadamssetti, the chair of CASA. "But what that's resulted in is an increase in the amount of people that are trying to access these services on campus."

CASA, which represents 255,000 post-secondary students across Canada, released a policy paper last month citing results from the 2016 National College Health Association survey. It reported that 44 per cent of students felt too depressed to function at some points in their studies, while only 18 per cent of students reported being diagnosed or treated by a professional.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada explains the highest rate of mental health problems and ill-

nesses fall among young adults ages 20 to 29.

The sharp rise in students seeking accommodations has left many campus services across the country struggling with how to best support students, the paper stated.

Gadamssetti said some campus mental health services have waitlists of between six to nine months.

"While we recognize there are tonnes of opportunities in our communities that address mental health to a certain degree, students feel most comfortable accessing mental health services on campus because those service providers have a very in-depth knowledge of challenges that students face," Gadamssetti said.

Kara Seguin, a second-year social work student at Humber, recognizes the need for expansion in the health and wellness services on campus. She said the wait time could be the difference between someone getting better or someone getting worse.

"I have met students who have said that they had to wait to access the services that available on campus because they are so booked up," Seguin said.

"There seems to be a need for more counselors on campus so more students can receive proper care, especially students who need long term mental health services while their still students," she said.

The Humber Wellness and Development Centre was contacted for a comment on the findings of CASA, but due to their high volume of activity they were unable to comment.

Recommendations in the study, Breaking Down Barriers: Mental Health and Canadian Post-Secondary Students, include the creation of a national working group to promote mental health and accommodations, increase federal funding for existing and new mental health programs on campuses, and working with stakeholders to improve accommodation for students with mental health problems and illnesses.