

Dedicated to abling

Service helps you get your skills out

MANY OF US CAN THINK OF A DREAM job... that perfect position matching our aptitudes and our inclinations. Some of us, of course, would be happy just to have a job. But what if the primary thing standing between you and blissful or merely gainful employment were a physical or mental disability?

Since 1980, NorQuest College's Learning Support Services has been providing services to students with special needs. What began as a government-funded pilot project has blossomed into a multifaceted support web, going through several transformations and a not a few name changes in the 23 years that it has been in operation.

"We have grown from one student who was blind and one staff person to a staff of 27, serving 600-800 students annually," coordinator Suzanne Panteluk says.

The services include specific supports for sensory, speech and language, neurological and chronic health impairments, and mental, physical and learning disabilities. LSS provides academic

by NorQuest College. "No student is personally required to pay for supports—students who do not have external funding are covered by College resources."

And the service, by necessity, trains its own staff. "Everybody in LSS learns on the job. There is no degree program that covers the spectrum of skills needed to work in our unit," Panteluk says.

For students, she says, the service sets the bar high. "We expect that they will have developed strategies for learning, effective methods of [inputting] and outputting information, and technology skills that will enhance their employability. Most importantly, they will leave here knowing they have the tools to be successful either in a post-secondary program or in employment," says Panteluk. "We have a high student success rate in all of our programs here at NorQuest. For students with disabilities we have the same expectation—they will succeed."

Panteluk sounds justifiably proud when speaking about specific successes. "One student who was

'One of our students with a physical disability graduated with a BA in Psychology—this is significant in that she would never finish high school.' L.S. COORDINATOR SUZANNE PANTELUK

counselling and classroom support (learning strategies, exam accommodations, peer note takers). Specialized courses can be designed to meet the specific needs of students. Alternate format materials such as digitalized text and Braille are offered to students who need them, as is SARAW (Speech Assisted Reading and Writing), a talking computer designed for the development of basic reading and writing skills, which was donated to the College.

"We also provide supports to students who have temporary disabilities or support needs," Panteluk says. These needs can include anything from illness and pregnancy to traumatic family events. Staff members can get support from LSS as well, be it through interpreters, special equipment or assistive technology.

Panteluk stresses that LSS is not a program, but rather a much-needed service, "meaning all of our students are integrated into upgrading and skills programs." Funding comes from sources other than the individual, such as the WCB and through the Disability Related Employment Supports. What isn't covered by external funding is paid for

blind completed her Rehabilitation Practitioner Diploma and returned to work at NorQuest with an ESL student who was blind. Several deaf students have gone directly to employment. One of our original students with a physical disability graduated [from] Concordia University with a BA in Psychology—this is significant in that she had been told she would never finish high school.

"Several of our LSS students have been college ambassadors; one was the student association president and one was the student association secretary."

She could go on, she says, since student success is her favourite topic. "Essentially, when you look at this range, you can see that we have been successful in helping students develop their personal strengths so they can go on to achieve their individual dreams—they are not limited by preconceived notions about what a person with a disability can accomplish."

NorQuest's Learning Support Services can be reached at 427-5467

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