STEPS Forward

BC Initiative for Inclusive Post-Secondary Education

Making it unremarkable for students with developmental disabilities to learn, develop careers and pursue their passions alongside other students at universities and colleges in BC

WHAT IS INCLUSIVE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION?

STEPS Forward is a family-driven provincial initiative rooted in the belief that post-secondary education has the potential to be an important pathway to a fully inclusive life. With appropriate community inclusion support, young adults with developmental disabilities can have a coherent undergraduate student experience leading to lifelong learning, friendships, and employment. In inclusive post-secondary education, individuals study courses of their own choice for 4-5 years, create a network of relationships based on personal interests and campus involvement, find paid student jobs and develop a career path into adulthood. Students are 'participatory auditing' students and complete, with modifications to their level of ability, the same curriculum, assignments and exams as the other students. Inclusive post-secondary education is a collaboration between the local campus and STEPS Forward.

WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF STEPS FORWARD?

STEPS Forward was formed in 2001 when a group of parents gathered to consider the question, "What can I do to make sure that my son or daughter with a developmental disability will lead a full life in his or her community?" The conclusion they came to was that their son or daughter should experience the same pathway to adulthood as other individuals their age. Post-secondary studies and campus involvement were identified as formative experiences to learn, grow and make life-long relationships. They also concluded that participation in academics, extra-curricular activities, sports or social functions should not be determined by level of ability or academic achievement, but rather only by personal goals and an interest to continue learning after high school.

Ten years later, with the post-secondary experience as pivotal, we are seeing changes in expectations by families and members of the communities and by the adults with developmental disabilities about their own potential. We see that these young adults who have learned, laughed and worked alongside their non-disabled peers at college and university are well on their way to leading inclusive meaningful lives.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR INCLUSIVE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION?

Any individual is eligible if they have a developmental disability and a desire to be a fully participating university/college student for 4-5 years. Applicants must also be eligible to receive funding from Community Living BC (19+).

There is no minimum level of education or cognitive, physical, or academic ability required in order to be eligible. STEPS Forward has a policy of zero exclusion and successfully support students with significant intellectual disabilities who require direct support for physical and/or safety reasons.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF STEPS FORWARD INCLUSION FACILITATORS?

Inclusion facilitators provide support to the students, their peers, faculty members and staff of the post-secondary institutions. Their roles are multifaceted. They support students to select courses, identify a concentration of studies, find related work during the summer co-op employment terms, and identify career goals. Simultaneously, they support faculty and campus staff to accommodate diversity and build more caring dynamic communities. inclusion facilitators adapt the tasks and roles of the student to overcome obstacles to participation, modify course materials, assignments, exams, or the duties at a job or volunteer position, and identify natural peer supports. Inclusion facilitators liaise with faculty, campus staff, employers and other stakeholders on an ongoing basis in order to be proactive in ensuring the successful inclusion of individuals in courses, activities, and employment.

WHAT ARE STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES?

Students are participatory auditing students and take 1-3 courses per semester. They follow the same curriculum as crediting students, but have work modified or adapted by inclusion facilitators to suit individual learning styles. Students are responsible for completing adapted coursework, projects and exams.

Participatory auditing students do not receive grades or degrees, but are recognized by the university for their individual accomplishments. Students must also be willing to explore other campus opportunities such as clubs, fitness, course unions and/or student employment. Each student must agree to meet regularly with inclusion facilitators to discuss assignments, activities and ideas for campus participation.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

Students are responsible for the cost of tuition, books, supplies and student fees. The STEPS Forward Board raises funds for a student bursary for those who require assistance paying the costs for university. This fund is limited and therefore available only for students who are at risk of dropping out due to financial reasons.

In addition, it is essential that each applicant contact their local CLBC facilitator to let them know that they are applying. Students must be CLBC Eligible and 19 years old when they begin their studies. CLBC funding covers the the inclusion facilitator support.

WHAT DOES A DAY LOOK LIKE AT UNIVERSITY/COLLEGE?

The day looks very similar to the day of any other student on campus. Students take approximately 2 courses per semester which equals about 6 hours of class time per week with about 3 hours of prep time with inclusion facilitators. Between classes and meeting with inclusion facilitators, students spend time in the library, the student union building, the computer lab, studying or going for coffee with others from their class. Each semester will have a different schedule and each week can change slightly as opportunities for campus involvement varies. Where students hang out depends on their interests and study goals. Typically students are on campus 3-5 days/week for about 4 hours/day. Campus facilitators provide invisible supports wherever possible and do not attend class with students.