Webinar Speaking Notes - Nadia Kanani (Students for Barrier-free Access)

ABOUT SBA:

Students for Barrier-free Access (SBA) is a non-profit student led disability justice organization at the University of Toronto. We centre the leadership of disabled and mad folks, and all of our board members and staff have lived experience of disability and/or madness.

SBA works to build community for disabled and mad-identified students by offering services, events, and peer support programming created by disabled students for disabled students. We us an intersectional approach in all of our work, recognizing that many forms of systemic oppression shape the experiences of our community.

SBA runs a community drop-in centre, resource & zine library, and an accessible computer lab that can be used by all students. We offer free workshops and programs for all students and student groups including Accessible Event Planning, Accessible Graphic Design, Peer Support and Active Listening workshops, academic support workshops for students with disabilities, career workshops, and so much more.

We are primarily funded by University of Toronto students, funding that has come under threat in the past year due to the Ontario government’s introduction of the Student Choice Initiative. Unfortunately, due to the cuts in funding we experienced this year we have had to cut back on staff hours and some of our programming, such as the free 9 week ASL course we used to offer every Fall and Winter.

ABOUT THE DROP-IN CENTRE:

* Accessible Computer Lab
* Lounge
* Resource & Zine Library
* Study/meeting/nap room

CURRENT CAMPAIGNS AND ADVOCACY WORK:

Students with disabilities come up against many barriers when navigating post-secondary education from lengthy wait times to get registered with Accessibility Services and receive appropriate accommodations, complicated bureaucracies that we are expected to know how to navigate, misunderstanding and discrimination from faculty, staff and even colleagues, and exclusion from many aspects of student life.

SBA works to challenge these systemic barriers and empower students through a range of campaigns and advocacy work. For example, one of the workshops that we run every semester is a Know Your Rights workshop called “Surviving Together; A self-advocacy workshop for disabled students”. In this workshop we draw on human rights frameworks’ and the policies that the Ontario Human Rights Commission has drafted on accessible education for students with disabilities[[1]](#footnote-1) and keep students up to date about what the accommodations process involves, including how to register with accessibility services and what documentation is required. We also provide students with information about the University’s duty to accommodate up to the point of undue hardship - explaining what that actually means, what students’ rights and responsibilities are, and how they can access support if their access needs are not being met.

In addition to our workshop series, we also provide confidential and consent based one-on-one advocacy support to students how are facing barriers to access.

Another way that we advocate for increased accessibility is by participating in university led policy consultations. For example, when the University of Toronto was drafting it’s Policy on Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment, SBA held community forums in order to gather feedback from our members and submit a list of recommendations on the policy. We were invited to consult on the university’s policy and related online learning modules to ensure that they spoke to the experiences of students with disabilities.

Unfortunately, our advocacy efforts are not always successful. As some of you may have heard, the University of Toronto recently passed its University Mandated Leave of Absence Policy, despite the active resistance and outrage expressed by the student community. We continue to struggle against initiatives such as these, and to provide community space that can provide an outlet for student rage and grief. As a counter to the limited supports students receive on campus, and punitive policies such as this, SBA focuses on building capacity among our community through our Communities of Care Campaign. In addition to de-stressor events we offer free Peer Support, Active Listening, Crisis De-escalation and Suicide Intervention workshops.

1. OHRC policies and documents:

“Policy on Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities” web access: http://ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-accessible-education-students-disabilities

“With Learning In Mind: Inquiry Report on Systemic Barriers to Academic Accommodation for Post-Secondary Students with Mental Health Disabilities” web access: http://ohrc.on.ca/sites/default/files/With%20learning%20in%20mind\_inquiry%20report%20on%20systemic%20barriers%20to%20accademic%20accommodation\_accessible\_2017.pdf

“The Opportunity to Succeed; Achieving Barrier-free Education for Students with Disabilities” web access: http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/opportunity-succeed-achieving-barrier-free-education-students-disabilities [↑](#footnote-ref-1)