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Creation of a Canadian Disability Studies Program: A Convergence of Multiple Pathways

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Abstract

This paper reports on the beginnings of the Disability Studies Program, University of Windsor (2011a), by describing the converging pathways of several events. Influential collaborative processes that occurred between major disability organizations and academics with the courage to promote change proceeded program development in disability studies. Choosing a philosophical approach, based on the social model of disability assured a critical approach to studying disability, enabling the program to address the desire to confront existing oppression and to produce graduates with expertise in many areas relevant to this goal. Most importantly, supportive individuals and organizations from the community made the Disability Studies Program, at the University of Windsor, a reality. The authors summarize the developments that preceded and followed the inauguration of the Disability Studies Program and make suggestions about further improvements.

Keywords: Disability studies, social model of disability, collaboration, community organizations

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Introduction

The Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada was initiated in September 2008. It offered professionals working in the field, students from human service college programs, as well as university students interested in learning more about disability, the opportunity to acquire an Honours Bachelor of Arts in Disability Studies. The Honourable David C. Onley, Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, attended the official launch, stating students could, through their studies, "shine a light on how to apply acceptance throughout the rest of our culture" (University of Windsor, 2009).

Since its inception, the Lieutenant Governor David C. Onley has visited the Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor on three occasions, stressing to his audiences how disability studies have important implications for our society as a whole. With an aging population, the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario indicated more than 53 percent of the current population is affected by disability issues, whether for themselves or an immediate family member, making the promotion of accessibility, "Something that goes to the heart of who we are as a people and a society" (University of Windsor, 2011b).

Essential to the genesis of the University of Windsor Disability Studies Program was the historical integration of three intersecting developments. These include the converging paths of Canadian disability organizations, the adoption of the social model of disability, and the support of a community focus on disability. This paper will discuss the Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor, exploring how Canadian disability organizations were essential to its

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creation, how an interdisciplinary approach based on the social model of disability was necessary, and how a supportive disability community made it possible.

Historical Developments

The creation of an interdisciplinary Honours Bachelors of Arts degree in Disability Studies at the University of Windsor emerged from convergent developments at the national, provincial, local and university levels. In this section of the paper, a brief synopsis of these converging streams that led to the creation of the Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor is presented (Leslie, 2011). The unique, contemporary development of the field of disability studies involved a movement by persons with disabilities and advocates, historically and internationally. Nationally, it was supported by Section 15. (1) of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) with the insertion that states:

15. (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Provincially, it is strongly linked to legislation embodied in the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (ODA) (2001) and the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) (2005). These acts initiated a response from the Council of Ontario Universities (2011), and quickly worked their way into Ontarian university structures. Simultaneously, Canadian disability organizations were working to increase academic responses and activities related to disability advocacy and research. At the University of Windsor, action towards the establishment of a disability studies program was also stimulated by internal leadership, innovation and commitment to disability issues, as well as community stakeholders' interest in the promise higher education could bring

knowledge and skill development in the area of disabilities. In response to the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (ODA) (2001), the Council of Ontario Universities (2011), who had been working closely with the Accessibility Directorate of Ontario, created a task force in anticipation of the need to comply with the ODA. As a part of the ODA, universities were required to develop an annual accessibility plan that identified any barriers to full accessibility to universities by people with disabilities.

The University of Windsor, represented by the Vice President of Administration and Finance, headed up a portion of the taskforce that became responsible for creating a check list of standards that should be met in each of the areas outlined in the Act, such as policies, architecture, mobility and attitudinal barriers that impacted the ability of persons with disabilities to access institutions of higher education. Out of that came the need for a planning process for implementation at the University of Windsor. So, in 2002 Dr. Donald Leslie, faculty of the School of Social Work, and Dr. Karen Roland, Employment Equity Manager, were assigned as co-chairs for the Accessibility Planning Committee at the University of Windsor. They were given the charge of heading up the University's efforts at pulling together a comprehensive accessibility plan for each year. This role included developing the plan that would filter down through the rest of the University and directing deans, school directors and department heads across campus in the process of getting everyone to work in concert towards the goal of a fully accessible campus.

By 2003-2004 the School of Social Work, at the University of Windsor had established an Accessibility Planning Committee. In early 2004 the Accessibility Planning Committee, University of Windsor, began to consider the creation of a Disability Studies Program as a part of its accessibility plan. It was decided that one way the academy could serve the university and

the disability community was through research and investigation, since little was known about what accessibility meant on this scale. The establishment of a disability studies program was also identified as a way for the University of Windsor to give back to the community, given that it was clear that the goal of accessibility stemming from the ODA (2001) was to reach out broadly into the community to have Ontario become a fully accessible province that allowed for full participation of all its citizens by 2025. This was further reinforced when the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (2005) was passed. While the ODA had clear requirements around accessibility planning, the AODA articulated clearer expectations around actually doing the work towards full accessibility, explicitly articulating action steps towards accessibility implementation and accountability.

Around the same time that the Accessibility Planning Committee began conceiving of a disability studies program at the University of Windsor, Dr. Donald Leslie was on sabbatical and used that time to explore the role social work could play in the area of disabilities, including the possible development of a disability studies program. He conducted extensive research on disability studies programs across Canada and the United States, and began to articulate a vision for the construction of a Bachelor of Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor.

In addition to developments provincially and at the University of Windsor, Canadian disability organizations and groups were simultaneously working towards increased activity in the area of disabilities. The Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS, 2011) was one such organization that stimulated attention to disabilities in the academy through multiple meetings and discussions. In 2003, academics shared their work on disabilities in Halifax at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, and established a steering committee for disability studies. At the 2004 meeting of the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Winnipeg,

Manitoba, CCDS sponsored a conference with some support from the federal Department of Disability Issues. In 2005 the steering committee expanded, allowing for the creation of the constitution and board of directors to form the Canadian Disability Studies Association (CDSA, 2011). Dr. Donald Leslie presided as the first president of the board. With support from the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Windsor, and a small donation of money towards the organization, CDSA was originally housed at, and operated through, the University of Windsor.

In addition to the work of the CCDS and CDSA, the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW), since renamed the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), maintained a caucus on persons with disabilities; this caucus had a meeting in Toronto, Ontario and research from the caucus was presented at the 2004 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Winnipeg, Manitoba. A best practices workshop was presented prior to the 2004 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences. Following this meeting, approximately 10-12 core faculty remained interested and involved the group. In 2005-2006 the group developed a best practices workshop video/DVD and manual (Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW), 2007). In 2006, the CDSA sponsored a conference at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, York University, Toronto, Ontario.

The rise in the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder experienced internationally (Chakrabarti & Fombonne, 2005) prompted requests for increased funding and intervention. The primary mode of intervention was Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) (Lovaas, 1987; Rapin, 1997). However, at that time, funding for the recommended primary mode of intervention, ABA, available from the Ontario government, ended at age 6. Community organizations

approached the Department of Psychology, University of Windsor, about the possibility of creating an Honours Bachelor of Arts in autism.

A committee was organized consisting of representation from faculties and departments that included psychology, social work, English, education, law, and music, and included representation from the community by a parent with a child with autism. Thus, the beginning of a disability studies program committee at the University of Windsor emerged in 2005. Later, an interdisciplinary disability studies executive committee was established with members who had participated in the original committee since its inception in 2005. They included Dr. Donald Leslie, School of Social Work, Dr. Shelagh Towson, Head, Department of Psychology, Dr. Irene Carter, School of Social Work, who focused on support for persons with developmental disabilities and their families, particularly, in the area of autism, and Dr. Brent Angell, Director, School of Social Work, who continually provided the Disability Studies Program with needed resources. Throughout the period of 2004 and 2005, Dr. Shelagh Towson, Head of the Department of Psychology, and Dr. Brent Angell, Director of the School of Social Work called meetings of key university stakeholders in the area of disabilities. During these meetings, the convened group decided that an honours degree should not be limited to autism. In particular, the School of Social Work committee members suggested that the scope of the committee be broadened to be more inclusive and this perspective was championed.

In summary, the major barrier to the development and sustainability of the Honours

Degree in Disability Studies has been and remains economic and resource related. Regardless,

passage of the ODA (2001) and the AODA (2005) created an environment at the Ontario

Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (2011) that was open to the creation of a

disability studies program. CCDS provided support and a vision for disability studies by

assisting in the development of an academic forum for exploration, and giving credibility to the notion that disability studies is a viable area for academic study. In addition, academics, many who themselves had disabilities, worked formally and informally with others to stimulate the creation of the Canadian Disability Studies Association (2011).

An Interdisciplinary Approach

In a short period of time the field of disability studies has come to be viewed as an academic discipline in itself that requires an interdisciplinary approach. In part, this interdisciplinary approach is needed due to the complexity of life experience faced by persons with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities find themselves adapting to many aspects of life spanning physical, technological, emotional, intellectual, economic and social areas, to mention just a few. No one discipline, either academic or professional, can legitimately claim to know and adequately understand the range of areas of information and knowledge needed to understand disabilities. Interdisciplinary approaches to disability are able to transcend the limits of single disciplines to increase our capacity, intuitively and analytically, for understanding and addressing problems that are too complex for one discipline (Klein, 1998).

Goodley (2011) discusses how it is a common misunderstanding that disability studies originated from a single orthodoxy rather than a multiplicity of approaches that complement as well as deepen each other. Goodley regards disability studies as a global trans-disciplinary synthesis of critical disability theories and perspectives. He views the field of disability studies as analyzing the politics of human variation from a variety of standpoints, social goals, and disciplinary emphases.

An interdisciplinary disability perspective challenges us to overcome "deeply ensconced professional and cultural responses to significant disability" (Kliewer, Biklen, & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006, p. 169). Describing disability studies as a scholarly convergence of the humanities and social sciences, Kliewer, Biklen and Kasa-Hendrickson suggests it displaces "traditional, reductionistic, psychological and medical orientations with their emphases on defect, impairment, and abnormality" (p. 188). An interdisciplinary program of disability studies that employs the arts and humanities helps students develop understanding, acceptance and meaning. To ensure that the Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor offered an interdisciplinary perspective, the program drew upon a wide range of disciplines including social work, psychology, languages, drama, music, women's studies, English, political science, education, nursing, and labor studies.

Based on the Social Model of Disability

The University of Windsor interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program adopted a critical approach to the study of disability based on the social model of disability. This model counters the outdated vision of disability that fostered a medical model perception of deficiency and dependency that must somehow be 'fixed.' At many universities, the standard paradigm is to study disability from a medical model approach in programs such as medicine, nursing, and rehabilitative fields. Although disability is presently already studied in many different university departments, the social model, as taught in the Disability Studies Program, actually re-situates and challenges the ways disability has traditionally been studied. The notion of disability as characteristic of a sick, minority group, associated with the medical model, has been replaced by the position that social, cultural, political, and environmental barriers are more disabling than

physical or cognitive disabilities (Hiranandani, 2005). Since most adaptation to permanent disabilities happens outside of medical intervention, it is no longer adequate or desirable to focus on medical rehabilitation processes to help people with disabilities adapt to life in a society. The social construct model emphasizes, "It is the environment that creates and perpetuates the disabling condition, not the individual" (Rothman, 2003, p. 12) and explores what could be done about the negative impact of environmental barriers and social attitudes on people with disabilities (Oliver, 1990).

As with the issues of gender and race, a paradigm shift enabled disability to be viewed as a natural occurrence which should not in any way diminish a human being's right to a normal life (Silverstein, 2001). Describing people with disabilities as an oppressed, marginalized, nonethnic minority, promoted a major shift in the intellectual, experiential and academic understanding of persons with disabilities. A disability studies perspective, built on the social model, is consistent with the commitment to diversity and the elimination of oppression (Gilson & DePoy, 2002). The social model of disability revealed that progressive social policy could reduce and address oppression (Goodley, 2000) caused by disabling social, environmental, and attitudinal barriers (Morris, 2001). The social model of disability has resulted in legislation and laws which have outlawed discrimination based on a person's characteristics, and has required public agencies to manage programs in the most integrated fashion possible so as to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. The social model of disability continues to evolve as it strives to address the challenges faced by persons with cognitive disabilities and chronic illnesses, areas less focused upon while identifying structural barriers to persons with physical disabilities. To date, the accomplishments made possible by the social model of disability include policies to relieve oppression (Prince, 2004), promotion of accessibility for persons with disabilities through necessary support (Roeher Institute, 2003), and the philosophical foundation for a disability studies program.

The social model of disability, as adopted by the Disability Studies Program, University of Windsor, ensured a collective commitment to social justice and accessibility, and reflected the right of individuals with disabilities to be free of oppression, and included as full participants in society. The concept of promoting social justice for the disability community fits well with the overall goals and objectives defined in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Five Year Plan: *FASS 2012: The Windsor Advantage* (University of Windsor Senate, 2011), which are consistent with the University of Windsor's social justice principles, particularly in reference to *Principle 2:* Social Justice is an ideal that infuses our creative, research, and learning endeavours and links our Faculty's mission to the university's founding purpose to teach goodness, discipline, and knowledge in pursuit of a better life for humanity.

With regard to specific goals and objectives included in the FASS Five Year Plan, the Honours BA in Disability Studies fits the Graduate Outcomes identified in *The Windsor Advantage* by requiring students to:

- engage in research about issues related to the history, construction and meaning of disability;
- undertake relevant field placements outside the university;
- master foundational research skills and discipline-specific research tools and employ these foundational skills for research on disability issues;
- discuss disability issues from several critical perspectives, articulate the assumptions of these perspectives and evaluate their comparative merits;
- work closely and productively with peers in support of a *culture of enquiry*

leading to a greater understanding of the complexity of disability;

- exercise the responsibilities of active citizenship through advocacy for and with individuals and groups labeled as disabled;
- develop a strong identity with disability studies as an emerging discipline;
- exercise critical thinking and apply it to diverse issues and problems associated with disability.

Overall, the social justice principles of the University of Windsor were very compatible with the respectful approach required in adopting a social model of disability and advancing equity and accessibility (Leslie, Leslie, & Murphy, 2003). The University of Windsor faculty, who developed the Disability Studies Program, addressed the desire to confront existing oppression by making students aware of disability from the social model of disability perspective and by presenting them with learning tools to commit to social justice and accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Consistent with the a social model approach, the Disability Studies Program offers core courses in the social model of disability, the history of disability, community approaches to disability involving advocacy and empowerment, service delivery systems and independent living, and community field exerience. As well as eight core disability courses, students in the Disability Studies Program take several additional required and disability-emphasis courses in other disciplines. Further, educational options, such as combined degrees and a certificate in disability studies is providing additional, useful, and attractive options for students and practitioners, resulting in graduates who are better equipped to help challenge ableism.

Blending Disability Studies with Other Disciplines

Disability studies strengthens and adds value to academic disciplines in the social sciences in its capacity to meet the increasing societal demand for the inclusion of those with disabilities into the larger culture. Gilson and DePoy (2002) recommend integrating a broad perspective of disability - one which is constructed by social, cultural, political, and economic factors - into other curriculum. They see the increasing emphasis on constructionist approaches as essential in integrating disability into the dialogue on diversity and oppression.

Greater interdisciplinary activity within disability studies allows students from various disciplines to become fully aware of injustices and continuing barriers for persons with disabilities. For example, an interdisciplinary approach that combines disability studies with social work encourages social work to include disability in its critical analysis of gender, race and class, moving beyond its relationship with rehabilitative dominated paradigms (Meekosha & Dowse, 2007). It projects particular disciplines to the forefront of the philosophical discussion that is developing regarding the intersectionality of gender, race, and disability. It generates a transformative process that is cutting edge, aligning the social sciences with the rising development in disability studies. Goodley (2011) embraces the global interdisciplinary framework of disability studies and how it intersects with feminist, class, queer and postcolonial analyses in exploring the realities of oppression and how we address it. He makes a case for versions of disability studies, including hybrid combinations that are critical and transformative, stressing the possibility for new forms of disability activism and new possibilities for research.

Other disciplines add perspectives to the field of disability studies to create a greater understanding of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities (Ware, 2001). When exposed to faculty who have expertise as anti-oppressive practitioners, historians, and writers from disciplines such as, social work, psychology, dramatic arts, music, English, and history, it helps

to ensure that disability studies accurately records and portrays the narratives and experiences of persons with disabilities. The promotion and evolution of disability studies will depend on access to, and alliance with, courses, faculty and research in other disciplines, and consultation with persons with disabilities and community disability organizations.

Support from Persons with Disabilities and Community Organizations

One of the most important factors contributing to the development of the disability studies area has been the vision and courage of persons with disabilities. The development of disability studies has been encouraged by families, particularly mothers, "who identified the impact of discriminatory practices on the exclusion of their child" (Panitch, 2003, p. 273). They made a significant contribution to the development of the field by identifying deficiencies in environments rather than individuals. Family members, as well as persons with disabilities have been, and continue to be, situated as caregivers to engage in both structural analysis and social and political change. Learning the value of community and leadership, they are not only able to be helpful to parents unaware of their children's rights, but can continue to collaborate with faculty from disability studies to create strategies and research to bring about greater reform.

In the context of the University of Windsor Disability Studies Program, the importance of including representatives with direct experience of disability was recognized by the decision to designate one position on the Disability Studies Program Advisory Board to a representative from the University of Windsor Disability Services staff and one position to a member of the larger Windsor, Ontario community. The community position was filled by a mother experienced in advocating for her own disabled child and for others who face similar challenges.

The impetus for the development of the Disability Studies Program was a meeting in 2005 between the Director of the Thames Valley Children Centre (2011), and the University of Windsor Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Director of the School of Social Work, and Head of the Psychology Department. This meeting resulted in the University of Windsor's commitment to develop a Disability Studies Program consistent with the university's accessibility plan that would meet the needs of a diverse student body, ranging from students straight out of high school to social services professionals looking to complete a university degree in order to qualify for graduate training.

In 2006, consultation with the Executive Director and President of the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies resulted in their expression of support and encouragement for the University of Windsor to develop a Bachelor of Arts in Disability Studies. Also in 2006, the Manager of Workforce Diversity for a major Canadian bank indicated that she believed the Bachelor of Arts in Disability Studies, with the curriculum being proposed at the University of Windsor, would be an excellent beginning degree for students wishing to pursue a career in the employment equity field.

In 2007, the Director of the Disability Studies Graduate Program at the University of Manitoba (2011) and President of the Canadian Disability Studies Association also indicated strong support for the development of a Bachelor of Arts in Disability Studies at the University of Windsor. She indicated that graduates from such a program would be welcome to pursue graduate studies with their program at the University of Manitoba. The employment potential of graduates of the Honours Bachelor of Arts in Disability Studies was also addressed in letters of support from the executive directors of three community agencies working with children and families.

The potential student base was assessed as positive through an information evening held at St. Clair College of Applied Arts and Technology, Windsor, Ontario 2006. It was attended by approximately 100 University of Windsor School of Social Work and Department of Psychology faculty, college faculty, and representatives and staff from community organizations. In addition, surveys conducted in 2007 of students enrolled in relevant college and University of Windsor programs indicated a high degree of interest in the proposed Disability Studies Program.

A central component of the Disability Studies Program is student participation, in their last semester of study, in a community experience placement (CEP) course that gives students the opportunity to use the skills they have learned within the context of a social model of disability. In order to identify appropriate placements, the coordinator of the CEP approached more than 20 organizations in the community, whose mandate included or focused exclusively on children and adults with disabilities, to discuss the possible role that Disability Studies students could play in facilitating organizational goals and objectives. The response was very positive. Staff in community organizations recognized that Disability Studies students possessed expertise relevant to address existing oppression of and discrimination against persons with disabilities by effective removal of barriers to full participation.

Over the first two years of the Disability Studies Program's existence, Disability Studies students in their final year of study have had the opportunity to work in a large number of community organizations with persons with disabilities and on a diverse range of projects.

Students have completed their community experience placements in elementary schools, centres for children with disabilities, a local hospital, a therapeutic riding association, a group assisting immigrants with disabilities, a local chapter of the Canadian Mental Health Association (2011), a

local chapter of the Community Living Association, Community Living Essex County (2011), an organization working with adults with physical disabilities, and other community organizations. In some cases, students worked on the preparation of outreach materials for clients, funders and the larger community, designed to clarify the organization's mission and increase its profile in the community. Some of the placements involved the examination and revision of existing organizational policies to comply with the requirements of the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (2005), and some students helped organizations in their efforts to move service delivery from a segregated to a more integrated and participatory model.

A primary goal of the Disability Studies Program was to model the principles of diversity and inclusion in its own admission policies, and so far, it has succeeded in meeting this goal. Students in the first group to complete the community experience placement were from diverse academic, professional and cultural backgrounds, and this diversity proved to be an asset to the community organizations with which they were placed. Some of the students had prior personal and/or professional experience with the disabilities of the clients served by the community organizations to which they were assigned, for example, autism and learning disabilities, and this experience, coupled with the knowledge gained in the Disability Studies Program, increased the value of their contributions. Two placements involved work with new Canadians with disabilities; the Disabilities Studies students in these placements were also new Canadians and, in one case, shared a common ethnocultural, religious and language background with the organization's clients.

Feedback from the community organizations, that accepted Disability Studies students for placement in the first year of the program, was very positive, and all the organizations were enthusiastic about providing placement opportunities in subsequent years. In the second year of

the program, the coordinator approached additional community organizations. Once more, the response was very positive. In 2003, the University of Windsor president said: "There are huge opportunities ... for the University of Windsor to play a significant role with its community partners in finding solutions to daunting problems of health education and care," (Paul, 2003), and the Disability Studies Program has embodied that vision. The relationship between community organizations and the Honours Bachelor of Arts in Disability Studies Program is proving to be mutually beneficial, filling a community need and, as one of the first programs of its kind in Canada, heightening the University of Windsor's profile in the community.

Conclusion

Rates of Canadians with disabilities have risen from 12.4% (Statistics Canada, 2001) to 14.3% (Statistics Canada, 2008) increasing the necessity for educational institutions to address the needs of persons with disabilities. Activists, community organizations, and academics who raised awareness for three decades led to important legislation such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982); *American Disabilities Act* (2000); *Ontario Disabilities Act* (2001); and *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (2005). The faculty, at the University of Windsor, took action in developing the Disability Studies Program to help address the needs of persons with disabilities. Their experiences, as expressed in this paper, help to inform other faculty in Canadian post-secondary schools how to initiate a similar program in disability studies.

The Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor was built on a rich and vibrant history with the Canadian Disability Studies Association and the Canadian Centre for Disability Studies from its inception, fostered by the first course on the social model of disability (Leslie, 2008) and community support. These influences continue as the interdisciplinary

program draws support from other disciplines such as social work, psychology, English, labour studies, etc., while sharing the critical perspective of disability studies with other disciplines. Significantly, disability studies is forging ahead supported by persons with disabilities and the disability community, evident by the support of grassroots organizations (Lord & Hutchison, 2011; Park, Monteiro, & Kappel, 2003). The Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor will be enhanced by the further development of a community advisory board. The future of disability studies will continue to evolve as it receives support and feedback in the process of sharing, exchanging, and integrating information and resources between community organizations and academic institutions, and will lead the way to collaborative community initiatives through practice, education and research.

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