

The Letters/Opinions section of the Gazette is meant as a campus forum for all Dalhousie students. The opinions expressed within may not necessarily be those of the Gazette staff or editorial board. We welcome all submissions, but reserve the right to edit for style and content. It is the Gazette's mandate not to print racist, sexist or homophobic material.

Persons with disabilities patronized at Dal

I am a wheelchair-user who has attended Dal since 1993. During the past twelve years I have developed a keen interest in disability issues, primarily due to the fact that I have a personal stake in the positive resolution of these matters. It was therefore with much disappointment that I learned, while reading the Dalhousie News last semester, of the (re)appointment of Ms. Lynn Shokry as Advisor to Students with Disabilities. Prior to this announcement, Ms. Shokry had completed an extended stint as Dalhousie's "able-bodied" Advisor to Students with Disabilities.

This (re)appointment represents both good and bad news for the disabled community in my judgement. The good news is that the university seems prepared to present a superficial appearance of commitment to the integration of disabled students. The bad news is that it would appear that no consideration was even given to hiring a person with a disability for this position.

Imagine for a moment the laughter and indignation that would erupt if the university announced that a white person was elected as Black Student Advisor. The appointment of a male as Sexual Harrassment Advisor would likely generate similar outrage. The reasons for this seem fairly straightforward.

Although a hypothetical white or male candidate might possess qualifications to apply for the above-noted positions, the applicant would surely be disqualified on the basis of credibility. The credibility factor notwithstanding, an inequitable relationship vis-a-vis student/advisor would be the outcome of the proposed appointment.

When the equation shifts to students with disabilities, the aforementioned considerations are evidently dismissed. Persons with disabilities are presented with an advisor who is not representative of the visible minority group that s/he "advises". That situation in my view underscores the distance that must be covered for the disabled community to merely "catch up" with the historical progress attained by other visible minorities.

The Dalhousie calendar informs us that the advisor "provides support and advocacy for

students with disabilities" (p. 400). Just how an "able bodied" disability advisor provides effective advocacy for a visible minority group of which s/he is not a member is not explained.

Why would Dalhousie be hesitant to appoint a person with a disability as advisor to disabled students? Could it be that such a candidate might prove to be too effective? A quick cursory glance at the varied research pursuits undertaken at Dalhousie will provide a clue in this regard. Researchers here have pursued various solutions for disabilities, some of which appear to be grounded in eugenics theory. An advocate with a genetically related disability could very well speak out against scientific breakthroughs that in reality reflect an intrinsic devaluation of persons with disabilities. A low intensity advocate provides a handy substitute for a disability activist.

During recent years the disability business has expanded rapidly with a corresponding influx of non-disabled persons seeking a niche as advocates, advisors, coordinators etc. on various topics. Although some disability practitioners receive specialized (i.e. medical) training, the vast majority of those employed in this field are self-styled professionals. A small sample of disability practitioners demonstrate a genuine concern in improving the attitudinal and physical environments that impact the disabled. For others, these objectives are clearly subordinated to the pursuit of financial or career goals.

A stubborn misrepresentation that should be debunked is the claim that disability advisors, advocates, critics et al are "professionals". The claim is groundless on several levels. First, the only Disability Studies program offered in Canada is located in Winnipeg, and it is an undergrad program at that. A scattering of similar programs exist in the U.S. Secondly, no certification or licensing procedure is required to become a "disability practitioner" and no union represents this group on a collective level. Finally, no regulatory/governing body can be petitioned when these pseudo-professionals patronize or offend their disabled clientele (something that happens more often than people

may think).

It would be a positive development if the incumbent were eventually replaced with a person with a disability. In the improbable likelihood that Dalhousie

will implement progressive steps anytime soon, some compensatory effects can still be taken. To combat ignorance and arrogance, non-disabled staffers should be required to participate

in sensitivity seminars. The so-called disability advisor could try performing his/her job du-

Cont. on page 13

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