

## Disabled have uphill battle at UNB

If you were a disabled student with a specific physical, motor or sensory impairment who was considering coming to UNB to study, there is a good chance that on closer scrutiny you would decide against applying and try somewhere else. Why? Undoubtedly the reason would be that on visiting the campus you would be totally discouraged to find an environment which physically, architecturally and in terms of services is totally unsuited to students who have special needs. You would probably try York, U of T, Concordia or one of the several other universities that have committed themselves to creating a barrier-free campus for students, and they would in all likelihood be able to accommodate you and your needs. But supposing the course you particularly wanted was offered only at UNB; or suppose you were a Fredericton resident and wanted to go to UNB for convenience, or because it was the only feasible institution; or perhaps you just liked UNB. What then?

If you persisted with your application, you would almost certainly be accommodated to the best possible extent by the university and helped as much as possible by willing university personnel. On the whole it would seem that UNB has a friendly, helpful and empathetic administrative staff who will do all they can to assist the handful of students with special needs that come to UNB. There is at least one university official on the administrative staff who has done much to help these students and I know of faculty members in education, psychology and physical education who are also empathetic to their needs. There may well be others I've not heard about who have shown concern.

In the past cases where students with special needs have been admitted, these officials and faculty members have been in a position to pay close attention to the individual needs and problems of the students, and thus on a short-term spontaneous basis the service to these students has been quite good and certainly adequate. Several small but significant changes have been effected. These in the main part have been architectural renovations and minor alterations and additions designed to overcome specific physical barriers which students have encountered. Ramps have been built, curb cuts have been put in sidewalks, and the ground floor of LBR has been made accessible and functional for wheelchair users. Certain other parts of campus, such as the IUC, newer parts of Head Hall, and Tilley Hall are also accessible. The Harriet Irving Library has arranged total access to all of its floors and even produced a pamphlet of library information for wheelchair users. The initiative of the

employee in the library responsible for this service is commendable. There are also parking places for disabled drivers on several sites around the campus and I understand that the new social club displays some thoughtful architectural planning features.

UNB has clearly been doing what it can within its present organisation, but is this enough compared with what it could and should be doing? Despite the few areas of improved accessibility, the flexible timetable arrangements, and the adapted admission procedures, the total picture of provision is clearly inadequate compared with other post-secondary educational institutions. Assuming that the student wasn't initially discouraged, his time at UNB is still destined to be full of hindrances and frustrations simply because the services he or she receives remain at best unco-ordinated and fragmented. The SUB, Old Arts Building, Carlton Hall, Gym, Health Centre and many other buildings remain almost impossible to negotiate for wheelchair users, whilst there is no systematic provision for students who are visually or hearing impaired. Blind students receive free tuition but what about special equipment, braille signs, etc.

Of course UNB was never really designed for such students in the first place - the campus is on a steep hill and the buildings are old and were built when people didn't stop to think about designing buildings for wheelchair or other special users. UNB has a genuine problem here but we must be careful not to use it as an excuse. Times and attitudes have changed - it is now widely recognized that disabled people have a right to education and employment along with us "normal" folk. This means that responsibilities change too and institutions must make suitable provision in a responsible manner to reflect the new attitudes; unfortunately this often means costly alterations to existing facilities and services, an added and unwanted expenditure in lean economic times. The changes have to be made though and there is almost certainly a limit to which an uncoordinated effort can provide for special students.

UNB has it seems got off to a slow start in comparison with other universities. A special Senate Student Services Sub-Committee on Disabled Students Needs was formed in April 1981 meeting initially in September and presenting a two-part building access recommendation package totalling \$150,000 to the University Development Committee in November. This Sub-Committee also produced a report in February of this year containing eleven general recommendations and drafted an excellent position paper containing fifteen recommendations. Under the

leadership of Carol Green (Chairman) the Sub-Committee also established a resource file of literature on the subject and made several useful contacts with organisations and other universities. Since these developments however, things have come to an apparent halt. The Sub-Committee has disbanded following the presentation of its proposals and these recommendations are now with Physical Plant being assessed for feasibility. Although there is still a good chance that some of the minor architectural changes will be made, it is unlikely that others such as the appointment of a special Students Advisor will be, thus wasting the good groundwork of the committee.

By comparison York, U of T, Carleton, Concordia, Manitoba, Alberta and Waterloo are already well advanced in their planning and provision. Both U of T and the University of Lethbridge have Special Students Advisors and several universities have barrier-free campuses, technical aids centres, information centres, volunteer networks, special transport systems and formal policies and budgets. Carleton has a special tunnel system for wheelchair users in winter, and the capacity for severely motor impaired students, whilst U of T has a brand new totally accessible Athletic Centre. Back in 1968, UBC established a library and resource centre for visually impaired and physically disabled students investing \$45,000 in technical aids, and the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology initiated a major access, equipment and service program back in early 1981. In Winnipeg there is a very active support group called Physically Handicapped Concerns on Campus which has produced a definitive access report on Canadian universities and colleges. In the USA, where building and accessibility legislation is tougher than here, there is the Association on Handicapped Student Service Programs in Post-Secondary Education (AHSSPPE). At Birmingham University in England, there are special residential facilities, braille signs, ramps, washrooms that are accessible, special elevators, a Disabled Sports Club, a braille computer terminal, and a resources/aids room.

There has certainly been no shortage of hints at the national and federal level aimed at encouraging educational institutions to take the initiative. The "Obstacles" Report, published last year by the Special Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped in the House of Commons calls for sign language to be established at universities, and the Canadian Organising Committee for 1981 (International Year of Disabled Persons) in its document "Directions" specifically recommends that "the Boards of Governors of universities, colleges and other post-secondary

educational institutions in Canada take immediate steps to provide equal educational opportunities for disabled students". The report also calls for institutions to produce formal written policies and to allocate sufficient funds for the implementation of necessary changes. Both reports stress that education is a basic human right to which everyone is entitled irrespective of personal condition.

It would be especially fitting if UNB caught up on its slow start and committed itself to actively helping and providing for students with special needs. It would be fitting because Fredericton itself is already an active city with respect to disabled members of society. In the Bio-Engineering Institute, we have on campus one of the world's leading centres on myoelectric prostheses, and this facility complements nicely the modern and well equipped Forest Hill Rehabilitation Centre. We have in addition an active city Recreation Department, a successful local Special Olympics Program, the beginning of mainstreamed education in the city's schools for mentally retarded children, and we have many well organised and competent advocate associations in the city such as CAMR, CPA, CRCD, CMHA, CNIB and AHI. On campus we have programs in special education and adapted physical education, and yet UNB still has no formal written policy, budget, or adviser.

The time has come for a more thorough, coordinated approach which will give direction, impact and commitment to the cause. Of course disabled students will always be in a minority, of course special provision is expensive, and obviously things can't be changed overnight. Neither can the hill be removed. However these problems can be overcome with proper planning and it would be appropriate for UNB to take on real responsibility on this issue. New Brunswick has a very high concentration of paraplegics, quadriplegics and sensory impaired students of university eligible age - why can't the challenge of long-term educational provision for them be met? Rather than just accommodating special students, why can't UNB attract them? There is no reason at all, but we need a Special Students Advisor, a formal policy, a technical aids centre, a shuttle service, a campus directory of services for disabled students, a campus access group and a few of the other things which have put many of our neighbours ahead of us in special services provision. Let's have a greater commitment to students with special needs at UNB - we'll be doing the community a service by training people for purposeful employment who in the past have been rendered unemployable. It makes sense and it's our responsibility.