



DAVID C. ONLEY INITIATIVE  
FOR EMPLOYMENT  
& ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT



Accessibility Institute

**Ontario**   
Ministry of Colleges  
and Universities

# David C. Onley Initiative (DCOI 2.0)

Implementing a Collective/ Impact Strategy to Support  
the Employment of Postsecondary Students with  
Disabilities Across Ontario

November 1, 2021 to October 31, 2024



# Table of Contents

- Acknowledgements..... 5
- Executive Summary ..... 8**
- Objectives and Approach..... 9
- Key Outcomes and Impacts ..... 9
- Lessons Learned and Sustainability..... 9
- Next Steps..... 10
- Section 1: The Journey to DCOI 2.0..... 11**
- Section 2: Project Overview ..... 14**
- The Pilots ..... 15
- The Field Guide ..... 16
- The Practices ..... 17
- Collaboration..... 18
- Accessible Events ..... 18
- Accessible Employment Journeys ..... 18
- Employment Pathways Facilitator..... 19
- Awareness Plus + ..... 19
- Additional Supports for Success ..... 20
- The Team..... 20
- The Advisory Council..... 21
- Section 3: Key Project Outputs and Activities ..... 22**
- Conducting a Readiness Assessment ..... 22
- Facilitating Pilot Implementation Projects ..... 23
- Completing an Implementation Evaluation ..... 25
- Building an Implementation Platform (Field Guide) ..... 26

<b>Section 4: Evaluation and Impact</b> .....	<b>28</b>
Project Evaluation and Challenges .....	28
Impact of the Pilot Activities and Making Impact Beyond Pilot Sites.....	30
Making an Impact Beyond the Pilot Sites.....	31
<b>Section 5: Reflections on Emerging Themes</b> .....	<b>32</b>
Collaboration.....	32
Conversation .....	32
Flexibility and Individualization.....	33
Student Outreach and Engagement.....	35
Operational Systems and Processes .....	35
“So What?” Conclusions.....	36
A Dedicated Role.....	37
<b>Section 6: Sustainability – Keeping the Momentum Going</b> .....	<b>38</b>
Sustaining the Gains in the Pilots .....	38
Leveraging the Field Guide for Sustainability .....	40
<b>Section 7: Next Steps and Considerations for Ongoing / Future Work</b> .....	<b>41</b>
Did We Accomplish What We Intended? .....	41
A Way Forward with a Funding Model .....	43
Building on the Momentum.....	44
Conclusion .....	46
<b>Appendix 1: Overview of Pilot Implementations</b> .....	<b>48</b>
Algonquin College Pilot.....	48
Carleton University Pilot.....	48
Collège La Cité Pilot .....	48
George Brown College Pilot.....	49
University of Guelph Pilot.....	49
Lakehead University Pilot .....	50

University of Ottawa Pilot .....	50
Cross-Institution Ottawa Collaboration, November and April Career Fairs.....	51
<b>Appendix 2: Readiness Assessment Insights (Pre- and Post) .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Learnings from the Pilot Implementation Projects .....</b>	<b>55</b>
Algonquin College Pilot.....	55
Carleton University Pilot Project .....	56
Collège La Cité Pilot .....	57
George Brown College Pilot.....	57
Lakehead University Pilot .....	58
University of Guelph Pilot.....	59
University of Ottawa Pilot .....	61
Cross-Institution Ottawa Collaboration, November and April Career Fairs.....	63
What the Pilots Found.....	64
Further Actions and Activities .....	67

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# Executive Summary

The David C. Onley Initiative for Employment and Enterprise Development (DCOI), funded by the Government of Ontario, has entered its second phase (DCOI 2.0) to enhance employment outcomes for postsecondary students with disabilities across Ontario. Building upon DCOI 1.0, which established collaborative partnerships between key stakeholders, DCOI 2.0 focused on implementing a Collective Impact Strategy to drive accessibility and inclusivity in employment pathways. From November 2021 to October 2024, DCOI 2.0 engaged seven Ontario postsecondary institutions to pilot accessibility-confident practices and created a digital Field Guide to disseminate learnings and resources throughout the province.



“The David C Onley Initiative has what I believe to be the long game in a lot of senses,” DCOI co lead Tara Connolly says, “It’s about competencies, confidence building, and learning from each other and keeping these pieces going in our own settings.”





## Objectives and Approach

DCOI 2.0 aimed to foster structural changes within the postsecondary sector by supporting institutions to adopt practices that facilitate accessible employment journeys for students with disabilities. This phase introduced the following practices to pilot institutions:

- **Collaboration:** Encouraging cross-departmental teamwork to provide comprehensive student support.
- **Accessible Events:** Designing career events that are fully accessible.
- **Accessible Employment Journeys:** Preparing students and employers for inclusive employment experiences.
- **Employment Pathways Facilitator:** Supporting tailored career needs of students with disabilities.

The project also introduced an online platform, the DCOI Field Guide, enabling institutions to access tools, templates and training resources to strengthen accessibility practices across campuses.

## Key Outcomes and Impacts

DCOI 2.0 significantly impacted students, institutions and employers. Notable achievements include:

- Increased student confidence in navigating employment, disability disclosure and accommodation requests.
- Strengthened cross-departmental and community partnerships, embedding accessibility into institutional practices.
- Enhanced employer awareness of accessibility, resulting in more inclusive hiring practices and support for students with disabilities.
- Creation of a sustainable framework for postsecondary institutions to integrate accessible employment practices, supported by the Field Guide.

## Lessons Learned and Sustainability

The pilot institutions highlighted the importance of flexibility, collaboration and individualized support in implementing accessibility initiatives. Tailoring practices to institutional contexts, whether through dedicated roles or cross-functional partnerships, proved essential. Sustaining these gains will require continued support, resources and institutional commitment. The Field Guide, available online, provides a lasting resource for all Ontario institutions, enabling ongoing improvements in accessibility.

## Next Steps

To build on DCOI 2.0's success, future work should focus on securing dedicated resources for accessibility roles and embedding these practices within institutional frameworks. The recommended funding model includes base funding and performance-based incentives to ensure scalable and sustainable accessibility practices across Ontario's postsecondary institutions.



## Section 1: The Journey to DCOI 2.0

In 2018, Carleton University launched the David C. Onley Initiative for Employment and Enterprise Development (DCOI) with funding from the Government of Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities.

Under the direction of the Accessibility Institute at Carleton University, DCOI was a two-year partnership of the four postsecondary institutions in Ottawa (Algonquin College, Carleton University, Collège La Cité and University of Ottawa) to develop knowledge, resources and tools to support students with disabilities in their employment readiness and career aspirations. The goal was to close the employment gap that exists between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers by building pathways to meaningful employment.

As we summarized the work that was done in this first phase of the project, we asked ourselves a question:



“If we want to make a collective positive impact on the employability and employment outcomes of postsecondary students with disabilities through collaboration, what are the areas to focus on and what do we do in those areas?”

DCOI envisions collective action as a way to impact and improve employment outcomes for postsecondary students with disabilities. In DCOI 1.0, we saw the key players in a collective impact approach, each with their unique role, to be postsecondary institutions, employers, community service providers and government. Of course, students’ voices must inform the activities of each of these key players.

Postsecondary institutions can serve as foundational support, offering tailored career services, inclusive skill development programs, and coordinated accessibility services to ensure students are prepared for the workforce. Employers, on the other hand, play a critical role in creating inclusive hiring practices, offering mentorship, co-op placements and internships, as well as fostering workplace cultures that accommodate and value diversity. Community services, such as disability support organizations, can provide essential resources, training and advocacy that help bridge gaps between education and employment. Government agencies can bring essential backing by implementing supportive policies, funding initiatives that build up the accessibility of employment pathways, and reinforcing the use of accessible employment practices throughout workforce sectors.

Together, these players can establish a comprehensive ecosystem that addresses the multifaceted barriers that students with disabilities face, paving the way for meaningful employment opportunities.

The applied research conducted in DCOI 1.0 confirmed the need for increased innovation and collaboration between disability service offices, career service offices, future employers and community service providers to better prepare students for employment and career success. As our project wrapped up, it became clear to us that increased innovation and collaboration was only a start; there was far more to do.

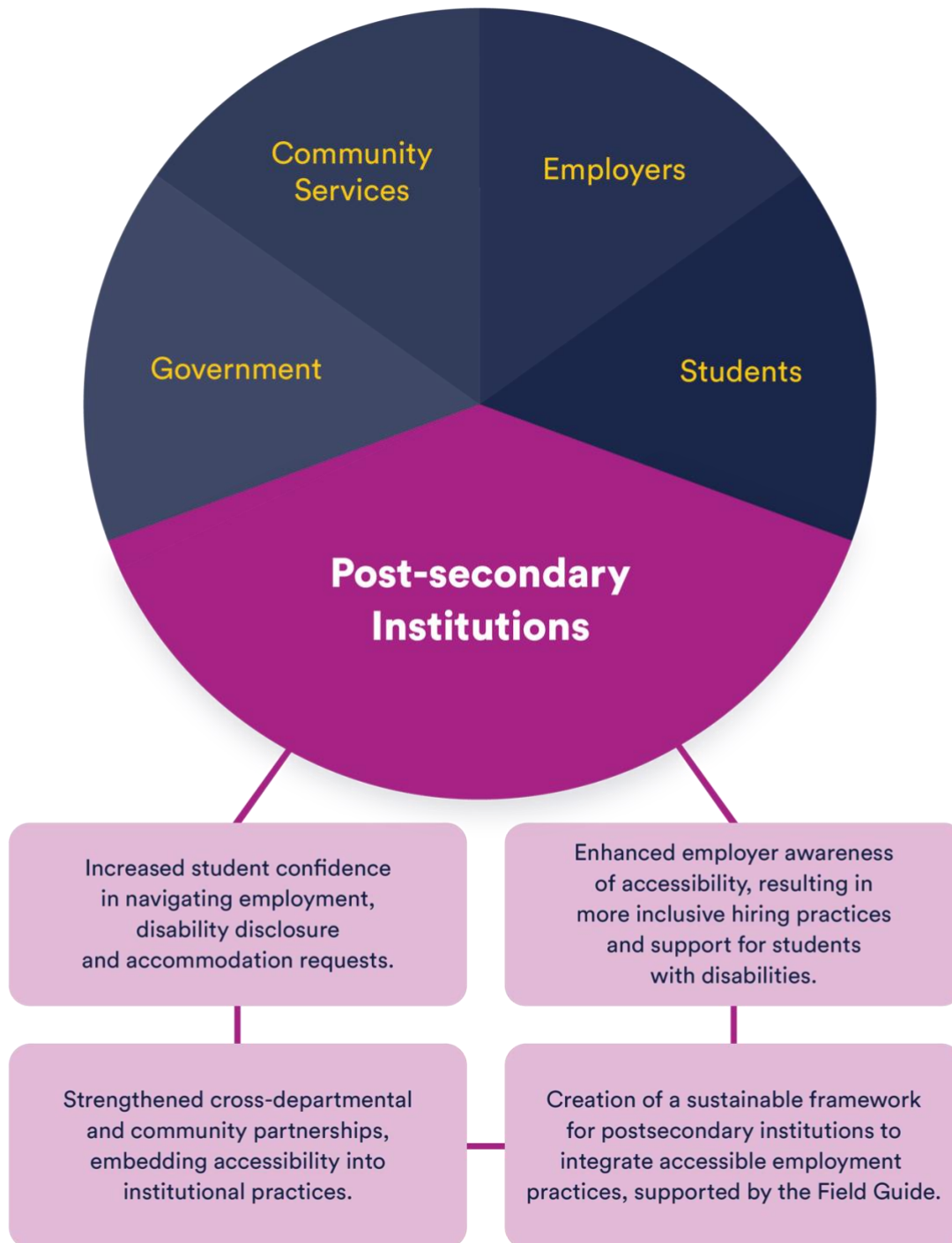
In 2021, the Accessibility Institute was granted new funding by the Government of Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities to launch the next stage of this important work. Building on the work of DCOI 1.0, this second phase, DCOI 2.0, focused on the creation of an online platform. The platform would facilitate the application of the knowledge from DCOI 1.0, for all postsecondary institutions across Ontario, through knowledge sharing, exchange and mobilization.

In DCOI 2.0, we decided to focus our attention on one of the players in the collective impact approach—the postsecondary setting—as we felt that supporting the role of postsecondary institutions could reveal valuable insights that enhance the overall approach. By examining how these institutions can integrate the strategies articulated in DCOI 1.0 and further identify strengths and gaps in skill-building and support systems, we could set postsecondary institutions up for success in how they support the employment journeys of students with disabilities and how they educate and resource employers associated with experiential learning programs, such as co-ops, internships and work-integrated learning. This targeted analysis of the postsecondary setting would amplify our collective impact by ensuring that students are fully equipped for the transition from education to employment. It would also build a strong foundation that would support the efforts of other players in the ecosystem.

More specifically, this second phase of the project would allow us to engage several Ontario postsecondary institutions to apply four key practices that we believe are essential in supporting a truly accessible and inclusive campus environment:

- Collaboration (also known as Work together across your campus in our Field Guide)
- Accessible Events (also known as Design accessible career and networking events in our Field Guide)
- Accessible Employment Journeys (also known as Get students with disabilities and employers preparing for employment early in our Field Guide)
- Employment Pathways Facilitator (also known as Support students with disabilities to explore and address their career needs in our Field Guide)

Through this work, we intend to lay the groundwork to support structural change throughout the entire Ontario postsecondary sector, as it relates to the employment of postsecondary students with disabilities.



## Section 2: Project Overview

Building on the work of the initial David C. Onley Initiative project, DCOI 2.0 focused on two primary activities over the duration of the last three years:

- taking a deeper dive into the implementation of the recommended DCOI strategies at postsecondary settings in the province through the implementation of several pilots; and
- creating an online platform (the Field Guide) that facilitates the application of the knowledge from DCOI 1.0 for all postsecondary institutions (and other key stakeholders) across Ontario, through knowledge sharing and mobilization.

In doing these two things, we have introduced new mechanisms throughout the postsecondary sector to help students with disabilities to get jobs along the various employment pathways while they are in school, and upon graduation; and we have helped establish a foundation to build accessibility confidence among postsecondary institutions across Ontario.



## The Pilots

We will go into more detail about the pilots and how we identified which postsecondary institutions were chosen throughout the report. But, for context, we identified seven Ontario institutions that met our needs for the project.

We felt it was important to continue the work we did with the four Ottawa partners from DCOI 1.0, so we invited back teams from the career/coop services and accessibility services units at Algonquin College, Carleton University, La Cité and University of Ottawa. They had established a strong foundation in DCOI 1.0, and we wanted to provide an opportunity for them to do two things in this project:

- Continue to enhance their levels of competence in one or more of the practices identified in DCOI 1.0; and
- collaborate and lead a multi-institution job fair in Ottawa for current students and recent graduates with disabilities.

We also identified three additional postsecondary institutions across Ontario—George Brown College, Guelph University and Lakehead University. (See [Appendix 2: Readiness Assessment Insights \(Pre- and Post\)](#) for more information on how we chose them.)

We asked each institution to form a team of members that represented both career/coop and accessibility services on their campus, and, where possible, to include members that represented frontline student services staff, managers and/or directors responsible for these offices, and senior management. This strategy aligned with the success of DCOI 1.0, where we had buy-in from senior leadership through to frontline staff to support the operational and cultural shifts that are needed to ensure the sustainability of efforts.

## The Field Guide

One of the things we heard consistently from our postsecondary service providers was a desire to have access to tools, resources and training to enhance their levels of accessibility confidence and competence in supporting students with disabilities on their employment journeys.

In today's virtual world, we determined that the best way to impart the knowledge we learned in DCOI 1.0 was to invest in building a platform to share our learnings. We set out to create a virtual Field Guide where postsecondary service providers from any level could access information quickly and efficiently, as well as download ready-made templates, emails and other resources that these providers could tailor to their institutional needs.

As part of DCOI 1.0, we launched a province-wide awareness campaign for employers called #AbleTo, which included a website that the Accessibility Institute maintains, that gives employers access to tools and training. (See <https://ableto.ca>.)

During DCOI 2.0, we revamped this website to make it more accessible for those in any role who are looking to hire (or support) students with disabilities. Under <https://ableto.ca/learn/> is a link for postsecondary service providers to access the Field Guide, so they can learn how to better support students with disabilities who are seeking employment and employers who are interested in hiring those students, as well as learn how to enhance collaboration across their institutions and with other stakeholders in the employment ecosystem.

The Field Guide is designed with adult learners and accessibility in mind. It includes easy-to-access modules that address the main practices from DCOI. Additionally, we have included a dedicated section for those interested in learning more about our pilot projects. This addition enables others to benefit from the experiences and innovations of each pilot project. Presented as case studies, this section provides insights into each pilot's specific goals, key learnings throughout the process and, in some cases, access to tools developed or refined as part of the pilot implementations. ([See Section 3 for more detailed information about the Field Guide.](#))





## The Practices

DCOI 1.0 produced a broad base of knowledge and experience that serves as the foundation for its Collective Impact Strategy. In particular, we identified four main practices that we believe are crucial for consideration when building a truly inclusive and accessible postsecondary environment:

- Collaboration
- Accessible Events
- Accessible Employment Journeys
- Employment Pathways Facilitator

In DCOI 2.0, we intended to help our pilot institutions implement as many of these practices as they were ready for. However, we learned early in the process that due to time and resource constraints (i.e., human, financial and system-level bureaucracy), it was not feasible to expect the pilots to implement elements from every practice. We adapted quickly with each pilot to help them ascertain which activities within the practices would best suit their needs as part of the implementation.

To address some of the financial concerns raised, we allocated \$100,000 to each of the three Ontario postsecondary institutions and \$50,000 to each of the four Ottawa postsecondary institutions (\$400,000 combined). These funds were used to implement the practices and toward things such as temporary staffing to support new activities, enhancing student services units to make them more accessible for students with both visible and non-visible disabilities, and hosting accessible career events tailored specifically to students with disabilities or making enhancements to existing campus career events.

The following is a summary of each practice:

## Collaboration

The Collaboration practice, or what we refer to in the Field Guide as “*Work together across your campus*,” is about creating more formal connection points and opportunities for knowledge sharing, so student-facing service providers at postsecondary institutions know how to satisfy student needs when such needs fall outside the role or expertise of a particular service provider. We observed that service providers are having informal conversations already, but this practice enables them to be more intentional about collaboration across campus.

The intention behind this practice is to increase knowledge sharing among different offices on campus, primarily between an institution’s career services and student accessibility services offices. Such sharing is not necessarily meant to make every person an expert in everything; it is to make sure they can identify the right resources for each student, direct them to these resources and, in doing so, create an enhanced student experience.

## Accessible Events

The Accessible Events practice, also known as “*Design accessible career and networking events*” in the Field Guide, is about gaining knowledge and access to resources necessary to design employment and career events—from the ground up—so that all students can attend. Such knowledge and resources extend to enabling a postsecondary institution to make its existing events accessible to all students. This practice also involves knowing how to design and host events meant for students with disabilities specifically.

Success in this practice is determined by two related measures: attracting a greater number of students with disabilities to employment and career events; and having more students with disabilities move further along their individual pathways to employment because more students take part in such events and engage with prospective employers.

## Accessible Employment Journeys

The Accessible Employment Journeys practice, or “*Get students with disabilities and employers preparing for employment early*” as featured in the Field Guide, is about gaining insight on the different employment experiences and pathways of students with disabilities, including helping student service providers to understand the steps students take as they seek meaningful employment; identifying the barriers students with disabilities typically face on their employment journeys; and removing these barriers to support more inclusive employment journeys for students. Service providers learn how to discuss with employers the actions necessary to make employment pathways easier to access for students, especially students with disabilities.

A key performance outcome of this practice is engaging more students with disabilities early in their postsecondary lives and, in doing so, enabling them to identify and choose the employment-development options that work best for them. For students with disabilities, this early engagement and ideal choice will increase their likelihood of finding the right employment and embarking on a successful career. For employers, this early engagement and ideal choice will give them access to a larger talent pool.

## Employment Pathways Facilitator

The Employment Pathways Facilitator (EPF) practice, or what we call “Support students with disabilities to explore and address their career needs” in our Field Guide, gives students with disabilities the opportunity to explore and address their specific needs in developing skills, accessing just-in-time services and resources, and gaining work-related experience.

The EPF was developed in recognition of the fact that a student’s lived experience of their disability is not only unique, but also goes hand in hand with how they choose to navigate their employment journey. This recognition differs from how postsecondary institutions often address the needs of students with disabilities—through separate services devoted to disability-related needs and employment-related needs.

The EPF is designed to be not only comprehensive, but also flexible. Any postsecondary institution can adopt the EPF model, regardless of the organization’s makeup. For instance, one person or unified team within a college or university could be assigned to carry out all its nine functions; or these functions could be assigned to several people throughout a postsecondary institution.

By implementing this practice, postsecondary providers can coordinate and deliver services and supports for students with disabilities across campus; and, in doing so, move more students further along their individual avenues to successful employment.

## Awareness Plus +

In the DCOI 1.0 project, we saw that building awareness is important but that it must be complemented with action. Awareness-building activities must be maintained, sustained and continually evolve with input from disability communities so that awareness can support culture shift over time. Therefore, in DCOI 2.0, we did not treat building awareness as a standalone practice. We sought to integrate awareness plus + into each of the four primary practices, because we felt a unique level of action and awareness was evident to each practice.

## Additional Supports for Success

In addition to imparting the wisdom and learnings from DCOI 1.0 to our pilots and through our Field Guide in DCOI 2.0, we invested in two other key areas that have led to the success of this initiative: our team and the introduction of the Advisory Council.

### The Team

To help us achieve our goals, we built a team with diverse expertise in program management, measurement and evaluation, consulting and knowledge mobilization. One of the unique positions on our team were Pilot Guides. These were members of our team who specialized in working with our seven pilot institutions across Ontario. They immersed themselves in understanding the intricacies of the work we did in DCOI 1.0, so they could take on consultant-like roles to support and guide each pilot team through the implementation of the practices they agreed to focus on. Our Pilot Guides did not do the work for the pilots; they simply guided them in identifying what they were ready to take on, measuring and evaluating what they did, and planning how they would implement it. Each pilot had different needs for support and guidance along the way, and the Pilot Guide team was skilled at adapting to meet them where they were at.



## The Advisory Council

As we embarked on the pilot implementations across Ontario, we felt strongly that it would be important to receive wisdom, guidance and insight from members across a number of key organizations. Participation of such members would ensure representation and input from all key stakeholders in the postsecondary and employment ecosystems. As such, we established an Advisory Council that included members representing the following organizations:

- Inter-University Disability Issues Association (IDIA)
- Colleges Committee on Accessibility Issues (CCAI)
- Canadian Association of Career Educators and Employers (CACEE)
- Ontario Chambers of Commerce (OCC)
- National Educational Associations of Disabled Students (NEADS)
- Employment Accessibility Resource Network (EARN)
- Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL Canada)
- Ontario Disabilities Employment Network (ODEN)

The Council met virtually on several occasions over the three years of this project. On a couple of occasions, we invited members of some of the pilots to join us to provide updates on their work and provide reflections from their respective campuses. Advisory Council meetings provided an ideal opportunity to highlight how postsecondary institutions' efforts to support students with disabilities in their employment journeys align closely with employers' needs—especially those offering co-op and work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities—to connect with and effectively support these students.



## Section 3: Key Project Outputs and Activities

This section outlines the key outputs and activities implemented to achieve the objectives of DCOI 2.0. The four key outputs of this project are:

- Conducting a Readiness Assessment
- Facilitating seven pilot implementations
- Completing an implementation evaluation
- Building an implementation platform (Field Guide)

### Conducting a Readiness Assessment

To assess and make decisions about which of the 46 postsecondary institutions across Ontario would be the ‘most ready’ to participate in the pilot implementations, the team set out to create a Readiness Assessment (RA).

In addition to project-specific criteria that had been identified, the RA was used to identify and select the pilot sites for the DCOI 2.0 project. Nineteen postsecondary institutions in Ontario were invited to complete the assessment and 11 (58 percent) ultimately submitted completed assessments. The Readiness Assessment tool was designed to evaluate each institution’s readiness to implement DCOI practices. It focused on three thematic areas:

- Willingness to implement
- Capacity to implement
- Quality of relationships

The assessment captured both subjective and objective factors such as awareness of existing gaps, institutional openness to change, leadership engagement, and existing resources that would support implementation. Each institution formed a Completion Team comprised of senior leadership, accessibility services and career/employment services to provide an institutional response that was comprehensive and informed by multiple perspectives.

The tool was not intended to measure an institution’s level of accessibility, inclusivity or compliance with legislated practices. The results provided a snapshot of readiness that was used alongside other factors, such as institutional type and regional location, to ensure a diverse selection of pilot sites. The assessment was a key tool that helped the DCOI team choose three new Ontario project collaborators—George Brown College, Lakehead University and the University of Guelph—while ensuring that other institutions received tailored feedback to support ongoing improvements.

The readiness assessment tool was developed to capture a snapshot of each institution’s preparedness to engage in activities aligned with DCOI practices. Five institutions completed both a

pre- and post-pilot RAI, providing an opportunity to observe any shifts in their capacity to implement further initiatives and reflect on their progress in applying DCOI learnings. By comparing these assessments, the team aimed to identify changes in each pilot site's perception of its ability to implement and sustain DCOI practices over time.

It is worth noting that the Readiness Assessment tool could be adapted for use more widely by postsecondary institutions to establish their own baseline and measure their progress in implementing DCOI practices and initiatives. This adaptation would offer insight into how effectively they are supporting and improving the accessibility of employment pathways for students with disabilities. The ability to evaluate progress on an ongoing basis would help schools align more closely with accessibility and inclusion best practices.

## Facilitating Pilot Implementation Projects

The institutions selected to host pilot programs were organized into two groups. The Ontario Pilots group comprised George Brown College, University of Guelph and Lakehead University. The Ottawa Pilots group comprised the original partners from DCOI 1.0: Algonquin College, Carleton University, Collège La Cité, and the University of Ottawa.

As noted previously, we established a team of Pilot Guides to facilitate communication with the pilot sites and support the implementation of their initiatives. These Pilot Guides first held discovery meetings with each partner site to discuss their needs, the practices they felt ready to implement, the types of events they wished to enhance, any supports they anticipated needing, and how their initiatives could be tracked and measured.

The following is a high-level summary of the initial activities that each pilot intended to undertake:

- **Algonquin College:** Develop a structured and collaborative approach to developing and delivering training that is theoretically grounded and relevant to staff work.
- **Carleton University:** Develop easy-to-use checklists to support staff in designing and hosting accessible in-person and virtual events.
- **George Brown College:** Establish and formalize structures to support students with disabilities seeking accommodations from employers during work-integrated learning (WIL).
- **University of Guelph:** Recruit students with disabilities into a program that provides pre-employment training, individualized career exploration and job search support, connections to inclusive employers for summer employment, and advice and support with navigating disability throughout work periods.
- **Collège La Cité :** Develop and deliver training for their career and co-op services staff to enhance their capacity to support students with disabilities on their employment journeys.

- **Lakehead University:** Build internal capacity to provide services to students with disabilities, including building connections between accessibility and career services offices, providing individualized support through an employment pathways facilitator (EPF), identifying and connecting inclusive employers with students, and hosting exclusive events for students with disabilities.
- **University of Ottawa:** Host two events to support employment journeys for students with disabilities—a career-development bootcamp for students and a work-study accessibility challenge for on-campus employers.

It is important to note that it became clear early on that the practices we had designed in DCOI 1.0 could not be implemented in a consistent, wholesale manner across different institutions. Rather, we needed to adapt and respond to each institution's needs and unique internal circumstances.

For example, each institution's internal systems followed different process paths to approve the creation of new staff roles, the use of funding, signing agreements and sub-agreements, and revising existing agreements. These differences in review periods and approval requirements directly impacted the time needed to implement pilot practices, particularly when hiring and training new staff. In several cases, a one-year pilot period simply would not be long enough to implement certain DCOI practices.

Therefore, we worked closely with each institution to tailor what a DCOI practice, or activity within a practice, could look like in their local context to meet their needs within their limitations. Since the primary purpose of the pilot programs was to test the practices developed in DCOI 1.0 in real-world settings, the lessons we learned about the need to adapt practices to local circumstances represent valuable knowledge outputs of this project. By increasing our operational knowledge of how to implement DCOI practices in Ontario postsecondary institutions, the pilots can be considered a success. (Please see [Appendix 1: Overview of Pilot Implementations](#) for an overview of the implementation and results for each pilot.)

An important outcome of the pilot projects was the creation of numerous tools and resources that supported implementation and that can be shared. The pilots participated in knowledge exchange sessions, providing valuable feedback, lessons learned, tips and resources—all of which contributed to the DCOI Field Guide. As the Field Guide is available through a virtual platform, it will be available to postsecondary institutions across Ontario and beyond, offering a wealth of materials to support future activities.



## Completing an Implementation Evaluation

We recognized that measuring pilot activities and evaluating the project's overall rollout were crucial to understanding its impact and guiding future initiatives. A dedicated team member was assigned to focus on measurement, ensuring that we had a structured approach to capture the outcomes of each pilot site's efforts. This role allowed us to support pilot sites in tracking the results of activities aligned with the DCOI practices, offering them guidance on effective data collection and analysis.

By embedding a strong focus on measurement, we aimed not only to assess the immediate outcomes of pilot activities, but also evaluate the project's broader implementation across sites. This approach allowed us to identify what worked well, what challenges emerged and where adjustments might enhance future efforts. Ultimately, this emphasis on measurement has provided valuable insights that will inform the refinement of practices and ensure ongoing improvement and scalability of the DCOI model.



## Building an Implementation Platform (Field Guide)

Getting information to the people who need it



As noted previously, we designed the Field Guide to be an accessible, online mechanism for mobilizing the knowledge, learnings and experiences of DCOI 1.0. We also designed it with adult learners in mind. It is our hope that the Field Guide will become a go-to resource for postsecondary student service providers who engage with students with disabilities during their employment journeys. The Field Guide allows campus service providers to access tools, information and resources based on each of the four key practices identified from the DCOI 1.0 Collective Impact Strategy.

Establishing the right platform to use for the Field Guide took us some time. Our vision was to mimic the experience of holding a tangible book, glancing through the table of contents and flipping to the appropriate section. The platform also had to allow for ease of engagement for both accessibility purposes and adult learners. This proved to be a challenge initially. In fact, after we conducted our second beta test three-quarters of the way through the project, we changed our approach and the platform that hosts the Field Guide, as the hosting platform was not meeting users' needs.

We eventually settled on using a platform that mirrors an existing tool created as an offshoot of DCOI 1.0. Both are now hosted on the <https://ableto.ca/> website. While the transition to the new platform delayed our initial launch, set for early 2024, the wait was well worth having a powerful tool that is user friendly and accessible, and that aligned with overall branding and enhanced the work completed in DCOI 1.0. The site is seamless and now designed for various stakeholders in the employment ecosystem who may be hiring students with disabilities.

**Career Opportunities for Students with Disability**

Background - David C. Orlay Initiative

What does disability look like?


Student Experiences

What does the solution look like?

Structure of the Field Guide

Lesson 4 of 5

### What does the solution look like?



This Field Guide will provide education, insight and tools to help you address student needs more effectively, while respecting the resources and workload that exist within your campus. The goal is to find common ground where the specialised skills and knowledge from both accessibility services and career services can overlap and create better outcomes for students with disability as they seek employment.

On October 31, 2024, we held a soft launch of the Field Guide. All our pilot partners were invited to engage with the site. Then we did a formal launch in mid-November across Ontario to all post-secondary institutions. We also worked with our external agency to create branded information kits that we sent to all Ontario institutions to be shared with their extended teams. In addition, we hosted two live webinars to showcase the Field Guide to those who desired to have an in-person introduction to the tool.

Our vision for creating the experience of accessing an online Field Guide has come to life. It offers users a powerful tool that allows them to pick and choose what they want to learn. In addition, we have created a comprehensive set of enhanced and new resources in the form of checklists, guides, PPTs and email templates. Most of these can be downloaded and tailored to meet institutional needs.

We also created a section in the Field Guide to showcase each of the seven pilot implementations. These case studies enable other postsecondary institutions to learn from the pilots, as well as access some of their new or enhanced tools and resources.

It is our hope that the Field Guide will become the primary source of information and guidance that colleges and universities can use to improve the capacity of their respective career, accessibility and student services offices to serve and support students with disabilities. Equipped with knowledge that builds their capacity, these institutions will be able to positively impact the employability of students with disabilities.

The site is fully bilingual in both official languages and is free for all users. It will be maintained by the Accessibility Institute at Carleton University.

## Section 4: Evaluation and Impact

### Project Evaluation and Challenges

To assess the success of our project team in supporting pilot sites to implement the DCOI practices, we used several metrics and indicators. These metrics focused on both the effectiveness of the support provided and the progress made by the pilot sites in adopting and sustaining accessibility practices. The key metrics we used to evaluate our overall project are:

- Engagement and Participation of Pilots with the DCOI Project Team
- Implementation of Activities On-site by Pilots
- Pilot Satisfaction of Support from DCOI Project Team
- Level of Capacity and Confidence Building of Pilot Sites
- Outcomes and Impacts from the Pilot Activities
- Sustainability of Pilot Activities

Key engagement and participation metrics included tracking level of engagement of the pilots. This measure included attendance at ongoing meetings, trainings or implementation planning sessions, completion of Implementation Readiness Assessments, frequency of support interactions, one-on-one consultations and check-ins with DCOI project staff. High engagement levels were viewed as indicators of the project's success in fostering motivation and commitment among pilot sites.

The DCOI project team closely monitored the timelines for pilot sites to implement core practices and assessed each site's planned progression of activities. This process included identifying any barriers encountered by pilot sites, whether due to internal institutional factors or challenges within the DCOI project team's own processes. By analyzing these factors, the team gained valuable insights into both the drivers of success and the obstacles that hindered progress. This understanding proved essential for adjusting support strategies and enhancing the overall success of the Pilot Site component of DCOI 2.0

The project team also measured perceived support and satisfaction through regular feedback, assessing how well pilot sites felt their unique needs were met and rating the relevance of project resources that were provided for them. This level of support and satisfaction was captured through qualitative feedback from the pilots about their experiences and progress during ongoing consultation and update meetings with the DCOI project team members, primarily the Pilot Guides.

Capacity-building was evaluated through increases in accessibility confidence and self-reported competency growth, both of which demonstrated a project's success in equipping sites with the skills and knowledge needed for sustainable change. Pilot site participants were also asked to reflect upon intent to implement the new learning in future interactions. Additionally, both the project team and

the pilot sites collected data on formats that participants thought best suited their learning needs and connected them with skills information.

Outcomes and impacts from pilot activities were also measured. These metrics included the achievement of site-specific goals that had been identified and recorded in initial meetings with each site and the extent to which the activities aligned with the practices articulated in DCOI 1.0. Feedback that the pilots were required to gather from end users of their implemented activities provided further insights into the concrete changes noted at each site. This feedback demonstrated the practical value of the DCOI project team's guidance. Pilot sites were provided the opportunity to present the outcome and impacts of their activities and share their many lessons learned at a final knowledge exchange event, which was facilitated by the DCOI team.

Finally, sustainability indicators—such as pilot sites' plans to continue the practices post-project and the development of new partnerships—strengthened collaborations and opportunities for future collaborative activities were recorded. These indicators were essential in evaluating the project's long-term impact and success.

These metrics offered a comprehensive view of the project's impact from initial engagement to lasting institutional commitment. They also underscored the DCOI project team's role in supporting the pilots to anchor in some practices, fostering a culture of accessibility and awareness related to employment of postsecondary students with disabilities that would extend beyond the life of the pilot. Surveys and interviews were conducted at key points throughout the life of the project rollout to gauge the progress and identify needs or gaps from the pilot perspectives.

The internal DCOI team was also tasked with capturing and documenting their own insights on how their activities and support efforts were received by the pilot sites, as well as the effectiveness of those supports in fostering growth and tangible progress within the pilot implementations. Surveys and full-team discussions were used to capture this data. This self-reflective evaluation provided a valuable perspective on the impact of their guidance in driving meaningful action at each site.

Additionally, challenges were captured through pilot feedback and staff observation. All this data was discussed at project staff meetings, so the project team could be responsive to the needs of the pilots and make adjustments that would facilitate successful implementation of the DCOI practices within the pilots. Through these evaluation mechanisms, the project team ensured accountability to its funder and provided a robust framework for continuous improvement.

## Impact of the Pilot Activities and Making Impact Beyond Pilot Sites

The pilot programs generated several concrete and measurable impacts that underscore the value of these initiatives and their potential for long-term sustainability. One of the significant impacts was the improvement in student confidence and comfort in navigating employment, particularly around topics such as disability disclosure and accommodations. Students with disabilities often face barriers to employment, both in terms of self-perception and the attitudes of employers. By focusing on disability-specific content, the pilot programs empowered students to better understand and articulate their strengths, which is a critical factor in their job search and career success. Appendix 1 notes that one of the pilot sites demonstrated that providing targeted, strengths-based support to students with disabilities not only enhanced their readiness for employment, but also set foundations for continued career development.

Another important impact of the pilots was increased collaboration between various university departments, external partners and student organizations. The engagement of multiple stakeholders, including career services, accessibility services and community organizations such as OPEN Collaboration for Cognitive Disability, created a collaborative environment that strengthened pilot implementation. The work in one of the pilots to engage staff and faculty to build awareness of the work-integrated learning accommodation process resulted in increased preparedness among faculty and staff to refer students to critical and meaningful supports. These examples of cross-departmental collaboration highlighted the importance of embedding accessibility into standard institutional processes, which contribute to the sustainability of the new initiatives implemented through the pilots. By fostering these relationships early and integrating best practices into ongoing operations, the pilots laid the groundwork for continued improvements in accessibility and student outcomes, even beyond the life of the initial project.

Additionally, some of the pilot projects directly influenced employer engagement by educating employers about the unique needs and communication styles of students with disabilities. Content informed by students' lived experience served to provide some "aha" moments for employers to reflect upon. Feedback from employers indicated a greater awareness of how to accommodate and support students in professional settings, as well as an increased confidence to ask solution-focused questions when engaging with student employees who have self-identified. An overall approach to accessibility in the workplace, regardless of self-identification, was also considered by employers who engaged with pilots. The willingness of employers to adapt their processes, such as offering flexible work hours or considering alternative communication methods, was a key outcome that will benefit future cohorts of students with disabilities. This is particularly important for sustainability, as building a network of employers who understand and value accessibility will ensure that more students have access to meaningful, inclusive work experiences in the long term.

The pilots highlighted the importance of involving individuals with lived experiences of disability, both in the design of the program and as speakers or facilitators. This inclusion not only enhanced the relevance and effectiveness of the training for students, faculty, service providers and employers, but also ensured that the pilot offerings remained grounded in the realities faced by students with disabilities. Incorporating lived experiences into design is a sustainable practice that can be replicated in future iterations, ensuring that student feedback and real-world challenges remain at the forefront of program development and accessibility practices.

These impacts—including improved student confidence, strengthened cross-departmental collaboration, enhanced employer awareness, and the integration of lived experiences—demonstrate the effectiveness of the pilot site initiatives and their potential for lasting change. Students also benefited from being involved in the pilots. They created systems and partnerships that will support future cohorts of students with disabilities. Investing in the continuation and expansion of these activities, professional development and events will ensure that postsecondary settings create accessible, inclusive pathways to employment for all students.

### Making an Impact Beyond the Pilot Sites

In addition to the individual impacts each pilot project made within its own setting, the DCOI project created opportunities for collaborative learning and shared insights to further inform broader efforts in employment accessibility. A notable example of these broader efforts was a discussion with Stephanie Cadieux, Chief Accessibility Officer (CAO). As an independent advisor to the Federal Minister of Diversity, Inclusion, and Persons with Disabilities, the CAO provides annual progress reports on the Accessible Canada Act (ACA). Ms. Cadieux's upcoming report will focus on employment, a key priority under the ACA.

To support this effort, representatives from the DCOI pilot projects were invited by the Accessibility Institute to meet with Ms. Cadieux. They offered their unique perspectives, observations and insights on the challenges and opportunities faced by postsecondary students with disabilities in accessing employment. This dialogue not only highlighted the collective achievements and gaps identified by the DCOI applied research, but also contributed valuable firsthand knowledge to inform future employment policies and practices under the ACA.

## Section 5: Reflections on Emerging Themes

The combined learnings from the pilots emphasize the critical role played by collaboration, conversation, flexibility and individualized approaches in creating successful and inclusive service offerings, events and environments for students with disabilities. Below are some key themes that we identified throughout the project. See [Appendix 3](#) for a detailed overview of the learnings from each pilot.

### Collaboration

A key takeaway from the pilots was the essential role collaboration played in the success of the pilot implementation. Collaboration was demonstrated in a variety of ways throughout the pilot activities. A notable observation relevant to any multi-departmental and multi-institutional collaborations is that while campus departments may be open to the idea of collaboration, achieving high levels of success in collaboration requires formalizing activities, assigning responsibilities and deadlines, clarifying roles and specifying leads. These actions also ensure that collaborative efforts are purposeful and productive, leading to enriched services and better outcomes. The pilots also underscored the value of starting collaboration early in the process. Early discussions allow for the generation of new ideas, which can enhance both the content and delivery of services. As seen in the DCOI 2.0 pilots, collaboration enriches the development of programs and supports inclusivity.

### Conversation

One of the standout themes of this project is the importance of conversation. Conversations are essential for knowledge sharing, self-reflection, goal setting, and creating customized experiences tailored to individual needs. This point may seem obvious and minor, but the pilot initiatives demonstrate that conversations were in fact foundational to the success of applying DCOI strategies in this project. Examples include important conversations between campus service providers and students, campus service providers and employers, campus services and faculty, students and employers, and conversations between multiple stakeholders collaborating to implement the DCOI strategies. These conversations, which require the presence of a person who can facilitate and guide the discussion, not only help identify biases, but also facilitate “aha” moments in which individuals gain new insights into their practices. These insights make it possible for them to make necessary adjustments.





“I noticed an increase in the level of knowledge and disability awareness in students as well. Of course, they have their own perceptions of their disabilities and a lot of them have experienced it over their entire lives. But being able to really look at what their disability means in employment was a huge learning curve for a lot of them, because a lot of the time they just haven’t had the opportunity to think about it. So being able to have open conversations about what accommodations might look like, when they’re in employment, was really important for a lot of them.” (*Guelph Pilot reflection on students with disabilities who participated in the pilot, Q2*).

## Flexibility and Individualization

Flexibility and individualization are essential for successful initiatives to improve employment outcomes for postsecondary students with disabilities. The pilots demonstrated that when flexibility is built into program structures, it promotes engagement from key stakeholders, including students with disabilities, by respecting the diverse barriers they face. Flexibility was a critical factor in the pilot programs, both in terms of accommodating individual student needs and offering varied participation formats. For example, providing hybrid or online workshops allowed more students and faculty to participate and created more accessible learning environments. Programs should avoid rigid structures and instead offer multiple avenues for engagement. For students with disabilities who may face fluctuating needs, having the ability to choose when and how they participate can make the difference between success and disengagement.

It is also important to incorporate real-world perspectives, particularly from those with lived experiences of disability. The pilot implementations benefitted significantly from involving students with disabilities in development and delivery of content. Including panels, speakers or facilitators with direct experience of navigating the workplace as a person with a disability can offer participants relatable insights and help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. This approach enhances the relevance of the content and builds trust among participants, as they can see that the advice is grounded in real-world challenges and successes.

Individualized supports, actioned through mechanisms like pre-participation surveys to better understand student needs, ensures that services and activities are tailored to specific audiences and learning styles. Again, collaboration is of central importance. Collaborating with students in the design process and obtaining continuous feedback further strengthens the alignment of services with actual needs and lived experiences.

Scaffolded referrals were an important tool in supporting students, particularly those with more complex needs. Referrals made within the context of a trusted relationship led to higher levels of

engagement and participation. This trust allows service providers to make referrals that are better suited to the individual, improving the student’s overall experience. As earlier discussed, students at the University of Guelph pilot appreciated that the EDI Employment Engagement Specialist who referred them to the WorkAbility program continued to work in partnership with the WorkAbility Employment Pathways Facilitator after they joined the program. The smooth transition prevented the common feeling for students with disabilities of being “shipped off” or “pawned off” between departments. Cross-departmental collaboration in this case maintained the students’ engagement and increased the chances of their completing an employment program.



## Student Outreach and Engagement

One of the notable challenges is student outreach and engagement, particularly for students with disabilities who may face additional barriers such as time constraints, transportation issues or discomfort in new environments. While online delivery of programs has helped increase accessibility, it has also limited the opportunities for students to engage with others in more interactive or in-person settings, which can be important for building networks and employment connections. Engaging students earlier in the planning process is essential for tailoring programs to their needs. But doing so requires dedicated time and effort, especially when balancing academic and personal demands.

Engaging both students and faculty in student service initiatives can be challenging for several reasons. The pilots highlighted the importance of understanding the experiences and concerns of these groups to effectively address any barriers or resistance to participation. This approach fosters trust and rapport between students, faculty and student services, which is crucial for the success and sustainability of new initiatives, particularly those focused on employment and students with disabilities.

Any organizations looking to replicate these efforts should plan for the long term by considering sustainability from the outset. One of the key lessons from the pilots were the importance of embedding accessibility-focused practices into institutional processes, such as staff onboarding and event planning. Making these practices a standard part of operations, rather than add-ons, can create a sustained impact. This approach ensures that the progress made in pilot phases can be carried forward and built upon in future iterations. Sustainability also means securing buy-in from a broad range of stakeholders, including students, faculty, employers and funders. This buy-in helps ensure continued interest and investment in these initiatives.

## Operational Systems and Processes

Lastly, the reflections from the pilot schools pointed to some challenges and risks to implementing the DCOI strategies, such as timelines and human resource limitations. But these reflections also offered solutions, including phased project implementation and modifying existing templates to avoid duplicating efforts. Timelines are often impacted by external factors, such as hiring processes and financial systems, but the positive outcomes achieved in the pilots highlight the importance of persevering despite these obstacles. Overall, the pilots reinforced the importance of having time, money and dedicated personnel to ensure the success and sustainability of employment accessibility programs.



## “So What?” Conclusions

Integrating the findings and strategies from the DCOI 2.0 pilots can remove barriers and support the journeys of students with disabilities transitioning from education to employment. By designing services that consider the unique challenges for students with disabilities, such as disclosure and accommodations, we empower them to navigate work environments with greater confidence. Inclusive, flexible programs that consider diverse learning styles and real-world workplace scenarios will help students with disabilities succeed. Furthermore, preparing employers to understand, value and more confidently accommodate individuals can lead to more inclusive hiring practices and improved employment outcomes.

## A Dedicated Role

The data from the DCOI 2.0 pilots clearly supports the need for a dedicated job role to effectively implement and sustain the work supporting students with disabilities in their journeys toward employment. This need was demonstrated through several of the pilots, described in previous sections, and noted by those pilot teams as an essential factor in the success of the implementation. These roles provided students with consistent support, facilitated collaboration between departments, and ensured that the programs were tailored to the unique needs of each student. Feedback from students highlighted that having a single, consistent point of contact who could understand their individual needs and provide tailored guidance significantly improved their confidence and comfort in navigating the employment process. Additionally, collaboration in the Guelph case between the WorkAbility Employment Pathways Facilitator and the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Specialist helped fill gaps in support for students with higher needs, demonstrating that dedicated specialized staff are crucial to the effectiveness of these initiatives.

While the project results underscore the value of dedicated positions, it is conceivable that certain aspects of this work could be spread among several roles to match the needs of postsecondary settings that are smaller or in more remote locations. For example, existing staff within career services, accessibility centers and faculty could share responsibility for different elements of distributing support across departments. This sharing of responsibility would require building a robust system of communication, co-training and shared ownership over program goals and outcomes.

However, without a dedicated position to provide oversight, inconsistency, gaps in support and decreased effectiveness in tailoring service could arise. Ensuring the continuity and growth of these initiatives, particularly as they relate to the specific needs of students with disabilities and employer engagement, requires ongoing attention and coordination. A dedicated position ensures someone is consistently monitoring program development, making necessary adjustments based on student and employer feedback, and keeping the focus on inclusion and accessibility in pre-employment training and other related activities. This position can also serve a valuable function by observing the overall picture of student supports for accessible employment journeys and identifying emergency competency needs among staff, students and employers.

## Section 6: Sustainability – Keeping the Momentum Going

With DCOI 1.0 (a two-year project) and DCOI 2.0 (a three-year project), we have begun to lay a foundation for positive culture change within postsecondary institutions. We have also fueled a sense of momentum that is bringing positive impact to campuses for students with disabilities who are seeking meaningful employment opportunities.

### Sustaining the Gains in the Pilots

Jeff Agate, Associate Director, Student Support Services at Algonquin College, and a member of senior leadership that has been involved in the DCOI project since 2018, reported that participation as a pilot site has helped his institution link the priorities of student employment readiness, accessibility supports and access to employment opportunities. In addition, he notes that meaningful connections have been forged between the employment career services, co op office and accessibility services team, which will be a tremendous ongoing benefit to the college.

Overall, the DCOI project demonstrated success in testing and implementing sustainable practices, particularly in knowledge building, resource integration and capacity strengthening. Jessica Lovett with the Lakehead University pilot felt that the importance cross institution collaboration that DCOI facilitated should not be understated and constituted “a core part of what worked well for us.”

The practices that were identified across the various pilot sites as sustainable focus primarily on embedding resources, knowledge and processes into institutional frameworks to support long-term accessibility and employment initiatives for students with disabilities. Examples of sustainable practices captured from the pilot activities are:

- creating ongoing resources such as training modules and accessibility guides
- integrating learning materials into existing career and cooperative education courses
- developing strategic partnerships
- making checklists and toolkits available to both students and employers

Additionally, commitment to scheduled initiatives such as annual events, dedicated webpages and continued collaborations with accessibility-focused partners has enhanced institutional capacity to maintain these efforts beyond the pilot phase.

Most of the pilots have taken steps to integrate resources and learnings into their broader institutional frameworks, thus reducing dependence on pilot-specific funding to design them. However, it was also noted that to ensure the continued success of operationalizing, coordinating and implementing the more impactful activities, it is essential to have dedicated personnel with secure funding. This support is necessary to effectively manage the collaboration, organization and relationship-building that underpin meaningful engagement with students, faculty, staff and employers. Having a stable, funded role would allow these initiatives to be carried out in a responsive, consistent manner, which is critical to sustaining their positive impact.

**The message from the combined pilot sites was clear: the design is sustainable; the execution requires consistent resourcing.** Maintaining the sustainability of these initiatives would require ongoing funding for essential staff positions, creating formal partnerships that prioritize accessibility and implementing a centralized lead or coordinator for collaborative projects. It is also critical for institutions to commit to making regular updates to training content and resources to maintain their relevance and use. Institutions would also ideally embed these resources into their existing professional development frameworks.

## Leveraging the Field Guide for Sustainability

The creation of the Field Guide as an online platform ensures that the learnings and insights, as well as tools and resources that have been discovered, curated and enhanced, will remain accessible to those who wish to use them. The Accessibility Institute has committed to maintaining the ableto.ca website, and each of the platforms that are available for both employers and postsecondary institutions, so that the conversation and the learning can continue. While the Field Guide has been shared with all the Ontario institutions, by virtue of it being available online, it will be accessible to any postsecondary campus service provider regionally, nationally and internationally.

Christian Tremblay with the University of Ottawa pilot believes that the field guide will be the key to sustaining DCOI activities at each institution, providing tangible tools that each institution can use to regroup after the conclusion of their pilot schemes and form the basis of next steps.



“We found that learning is an interest of everyone”, says Jessica Lovett with the Lakehead University pilot, “we really reached outside the university into our local employers in the regions we serve as well as into different post secondary institutions where we found peers who were also very interested in attending the professional development sessions that we brought into as a result of this funding.”



## Section 7: Next Steps and Considerations for Ongoing / Future Work

### Did We Accomplish What We Intended?



Based on the progress reports and the activities of the pilots, the current project achieved many of the objectives set out in DCOI 1.0, with some key adaptations. Phase 1 of the David C. Onley Initiative focused on outlining the strategies and best practices for improving the employment outcomes of postsecondary students with disabilities. Phase 2, which focused on applying these strategies in postsecondary settings and articulating them in a Field Guide resource made available to postsecondary service providers, demonstrated the feasibility and effectiveness of the practices and underscored the importance of flexibility when implementing these practices in different institutional contexts.

One of the key takeaways from the transition between phases is the importance of customization. The original vision in Phase 1 was that all pilot institutions would implement the DCOI 1.0 practices in a uniform way. However, during the discovery meetings in Phase 2, it became clear that institutions

faced various constraints in terms of staff, space and institutional readiness. This understanding led to a major shift, allowing each institution to implement one or several DCOI practices based on their specific needs and existing capacities. This change in approach not only allowed for greater buy-in from the institutions, but also resulted in more tailored and impactful activities suited to the unique profiles of each postsecondary environment.

The concrete activities implemented by the pilot institutions, such as accessible career fairs, the development of easy-to-use accessibility checklists, and initiatives to support students with disabilities in work-integrated learning (WIL), illustrate this customization. While some institutions were able to establish structures that provided direct services to students, such as individualized career exploration, others, like Lakehead University, had to adapt the employment pathways model to suit their small, rural setting. Lakehead's challenge of recruiting for a dedicated role is a notable example of the flexibility needed. Instead of creating a new role, Lakehead leveraged existing staff across different departments to implement smaller components of the DCOI practices. This decentralized approach was practical and showed that even in smaller institutions, a collaborative, horizontal model can yield positive outcomes.

A significant lesson from the pilots is that successful implementation often requires staffing and institutional support, but these factors must be aligned with the local institution's context. For smaller institutions, the creation of new staff roles may not always be feasible or necessary. Instead, training existing staff, encouraging interdepartmental collaboration, and building on the resources already available are more sustainable approaches. For larger institutions, dedicated roles like the Employment Pathways Facilitator might be essential to scale and maintain the impact of DCOI practices, especially when focusing on building systemic bridges between accessibility services and career services.

The work done in Phase 2 directly reflects the goals of Phase 1 but with an important emphasis on adaptability. The need to tailor approaches to fit institutional profiles became one of the key learning outcomes of this phase. The successful implementation of DCOI practices in various formats highlights the importance of contextual flexibility in achieving broad goals like improving employment outcomes for students with disabilities. Moreover, it illustrates the potential for future scalability and sustainability, particularly if the local context and resources are considered during the planning and implementation stages.

## A Way Forward with a Funding Model

The first two phases of DCOI have demonstrated a need for dedicated resources at postsecondary institutions to implement intentional, flexible and collaborative approaches for supporting students with disabilities in their employment journeys and transitions from education into work. The following is a proposed funding model for consideration to facilitate the uptake and implementation of the DCOI strategies for postsecondary settings.

A recommended funding model for supporting employment initiatives for students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions is one that is tiered, flexible and performance-based in its approach. It aims to provide institutions with the resources needed to implement inclusive programs that align with provincial goals, while allowing for customization based on their unique characteristics, such as size, student demographics and local employment landscapes. The model would begin with base block funding for all institutions, providing a guaranteed minimum to support core activities, such as hiring accessibility staff or developing student-informed programming. This funding ensures institutions of all sizes have a foundational level of support to begin or expand their work.

In addition to the base funding, institutions would have access to a project-specific grant pool, allowing them to apply for additional funding to carry out initiatives tailored to their specific needs. These projects could focus on enhancing employment outcomes for students with disabilities, building stronger partnerships with local employers, or integrating more inclusive practices in student services. The flexibility of this component allows institutions to innovate and create programs that are responsive to their individual circumstances, while still advancing broader provincial objectives related to accessibility and employment.

To ensure accountability, this model includes a performance-based incentive system where institutions demonstrating measurable progress in areas such as employment outcomes, student satisfaction and institutional capacity-building would receive additional funding. This system encourages continuous improvement and fosters a results-oriented approach. Regular reporting and student feedback mechanisms would be required, along with institution-specific performance indicators, ensuring that the funding is used effectively and aligns with each institution's strategic goals. Sustainability plans would be an annual requirement.

Finally, a portion of the funding could support collaboration and knowledge sharing among institutions, encouraging joint initiatives and the sharing of best practices across the province. To promote cross-institutional collaboration, a portion of the funding could be set aside for institutions that partner with other colleges or universities, employers or community organizations. This set-aside would support the sharing of lessons learned and ensure that smaller institutions, which may lack certain resources, benefit from the innovations of larger institutions or external organizations.

By promoting both flexibility and accountability, this funding model allows institutions to engage in innovative and impactful work, while ensuring that public funds are used responsibly and that the initiatives are sustainable in the long term.

## Building on the Momentum

The DCOI 2.0 project has catalyzed significant progress in fostering accessible employment pathways for students with disabilities across Ontario's postsecondary institutions. Building on this success will require sustained commitment to embedding, evaluating and evolving DCOI practices to ensure lasting and scalable impact.



## Embedding Accessible Practices Institution-Wide

- **Institutional integration:** Embedding DCOI practices, such as accessible career services, event accessibility checklists and cross-departmental collaboration, into formal policies and operational frameworks will ensure that accessibility remains a core enterprise across campuses. Institutionalizing these practices will preserve the progress achieved through DCOI 2.0 and lay a strong foundation for long-term impact.
- **Permanent roles:** Dedicated positions, such as Employment Pathways Facilitators, have been pivotal in providing consistent, individualized support for students with disabilities. Ensuring permanent funding for these roles will be crucial for maintaining the program’s momentum and further advancing accessibility in employment pathways.

## Sustaining the Field Guide as a Resource Hub

- **Field Guide as a dynamic and evolving resource:** The DCOI Field Guide is intended to be a central tool for knowledge-sharing and capacity-building across Ontario’s postsecondary institutions. To keep it relevant and impactful, it should be maintained as a “living resource” that evolves based on continuous evaluation and the growing body of knowledge on accessible employment practices. Regular updates—driven by feedback, assessment outcomes and new insights—will ensure that the Field Guide remains aligned with best practices and meets the changing needs of institutions and students alike.

## Fostering Collaboration and a Culture of Continuous Improvement

- **Leveraging existing networks and communities of practice:** The success of DCOI 2.0 highlighted the value of inter-institutional collaboration in advancing accessible employment pathways. To sustain this momentum, we recommend leveraging and strengthening existing networks of postsecondary student service providers across Ontario. By aligning with these established communities, institutions can continue to exchange insights, address shared challenges and disseminate effective practices. This collaborative approach will reinforce a province-wide commitment to accessibility and ensure that learnings from DCOI 2.0 continue to benefit a broad range of stakeholders.
- **Ongoing evaluation and adaptation:** To ensure that practices and funding models remain effective, continuous evaluation of outcomes is essential. Regular measurement of impact—such as student engagement, employment outcomes and institutional capacity—will enable ongoing adjustments to approaches based on evidence. Adapting practices and funding structures based on data-driven insights will ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively, maintaining a high standard of accessibility across Ontario’s postsecondary institutions.

## Conclusion

DCOI 2.0 has laid a robust foundation for accessible employment student services within Ontario's postsecondary sector. By embedding effective practices, securing dedicated roles, fostering inter-institutional collaboration and committing to continuous evaluation, Ontario can ensure that its postsecondary institutions lead in creating inclusive and accessible pathways to employment for students with disabilities.



# Appendices

# Appendix 1: Overview of Pilot Implementations

## Algonquin College Pilot

Algonquin College developed and implemented Coaching for Empowerment: Making Employment Journeys Accessible. The coaching program consisted of two two-hour training workshops for school staff who support the career journeys of students and recent graduates. Workshop topics ranged from understanding disability rights legislation to discussing disclosure to advocating for the needs of individuals in professional and community settings.

Algonquin College found the coaching program to be feasible and sustainable. All participants agreed that the content of the workshops was relevant to their work. In fact, staff who took part in the pilot program encouraged the school to expand the pool of trainers, include delivery of the workshop in the formal workload of trainers, and incorporate two more subjects into the workshops.

## Carleton University Pilot

Carleton University developed and tested checklists to help staff plan and host accessible in-person and virtual student events. The goal was to create accessible and inclusive events by establishing the consistent use of best practices and guidelines. To create the checklists, staff and event organizers relied on the principles and best practices that emerged from the David C. Onley Initiative 1.0 Project.

Organizers then used the checklists in the process of developing student events during the 2024 winter semester. All event organizers reported that the checklists were easy to use. Eighty-seven percent of 141 students who attended events indicated they experienced no barriers to accessibility. Some students who self-disclosed a disability, however, highlighted noise, overcrowding and lack of seating as barriers to accessibility. Carleton University event organizers will continue to use the checklists created during the project.

## Collège La Cité Pilot

La Cité developed and implemented a training program for staff. The program was meant to improve their capacity and ability to support students with disabilities on their employment journeys.

The three-hour workshop covered seven topics chosen based on information from staff about their current knowledge and learning priorities. The topics ranged from understanding statistics and models of disability to discussing disclosure to applying accessibility best practices. All participants agreed that the content of the workshop was relevant to their work.



## George Brown College Pilot

George Brown College developed three initiatives to improve the work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences of students with disabilities. The initiatives are a multi-step registration process for students to access internal supports when seeking WIL accommodations; a self-reflection tool to support students through the process of identifying their accommodation needs; and a tool for support staff to check in with students with disabilities at three different points in their WIL terms.

The initiatives were successful in simplifying and standardizing the WIL onboarding experience, empowering students to shape their WIL experiences, and providing staff and students with practical tools and approaches to navigate WIL settings. As a result, George Brown College found the overall project to be feasible.

The school also indicated that it would make the initiatives sustainable by dedicating a full-time staff member to support students with disabilities in WIL. This staff member will begin work on five target areas, which include releasing a WIL Student Toolkit to support students with disabilities, working with academic departments to streamline and refine WIL processes, and creating video resources for students on WIL resources and supports.

## University of Guelph Pilot

The Experiential Learning Hub at the University of Guelph developed the WorkAbility Employment Pathways Program. Starting in December 2023, the program prepared students with disabilities for employment in the summer of 2024. Students used the program to develop individual learning goals, complete self-paced pre-employment learning modules, and receive advice and support to navigate recruitment. Once hired, students accessed further assistance to succeed in their jobs and achieve their individual learning goals.

Sixteen students took part in the program. Nine of them secured employment. Ten indicated they met their personal learning goals. Twelve of the 16 completed the pre-employment training component. Eighty percent of them indicated they would recommend this component to others. In terms of recruitment, the 16 students participated in 66 advisory sessions. These students benefitted from 180 job leads and held conversations with 35 employers about employment opportunities and disability matters. Overall, the Experiential Learning Hub deemed the program successful. It equipped students with disabilities with the knowledge and support necessary to achieve their employment goals.

## Lakehead University Pilot

Lakehead University carried out five main projects. One, the university brought together all service providers for a meeting to build stronger connections and relationships. Two, the university hired a student to perform an audit of its employer database to remove duplicate records and identify inclusive employers. Three, a lead member of the university's DCOI team delivered a presentation to 200 employers on the latest knowledge on inclusive hiring practices. Four, the university hosted an employment event exclusively for students with disabilities. And five, it hired a coordinator to plan and help execute these projects and others designed to support students with disabilities as they move along their employment pathways.

The university found these projects to be feasible and sustainable. Three examples stood out as sustainable. The university will continue to hold accessible employment and career events for students with disabilities. It will keep looking for ways to share information and resources within the university and with employers about accessibility and inclusion. And its service providers have continued to hold bi-weekly collaboration meetings—some of which have been information sessions on pressing topics delivered by subject-matter experts.

## University of Ottawa Pilot

The University of Ottawa hosted two events: the Career Bootcamp for Students Living with Disabilities, and the Employer Accessibility Challenge.

The three-day Career Bootcamp for Students Living with Disabilities was a hybrid event that consisted of one three-hour workshop each day. Participants learned about networking, preparing resumes, using LinkedIn, honing their interview skills, finding accessible employers, disclosing their disabilities and asking for accommodations. After each workshop, students had one-on-one consultations with members of the university's Career Development Team.

The Employer Accessibility Challenge divided hiring staff from on-campus employers into five groups. The groups were asked to serve as representatives for persons with mental health disorders, developmental disabilities, chronic illnesses, physical disabilities and hearing impairments. Participants engaged in mock interviews, navigated complex forms and tackled the dilemmas associated with disclosing disabilities. Expert facilitators and students with disabilities guided these activities.

The University of Ottawa found both events to be feasible and sustainable. The Career Bootcamp for Students Living with Disabilities will become an annual event starting in Spring 2025. The Employer Accessibility Challenge led to a series of best practices for on-campus managers of departments who

hire students. The university will build on these practices with further initiatives to uncover insights and develop resources.

## Cross-Institution Ottawa Collaboration, November and April Career Fairs

The four Ottawa schools—Algonquin College, Carleton University, Collège La Cité, and the University of Ottawa—partnered to plan and host two in-person career fairs exclusively for their students and recent graduates with disabilities. Both events were held at the Shaw Centre in downtown Ottawa—the Government Career Fair in November 2023 and the Spring Career Fair in April 2024. The November career fair was focused on careers in government. A Public Service Commission working group helped with event promotion and recruitment across the federal public service and federal department recruitment teams. The April career fair showcased private- and public-sector career opportunities. The Employment Accessibility Resource Network (EARN) promoted the event to its network of employers and contributed financially to hosting costs.

An organizing committee was established in May 2023, with representatives from each Ottawa school and administrative support from two DCOI 2.0 project team members. The project then rolled out over several phases. The pre-planning phase focused on establishing budgets, financial management, team roles and responsibilities, and goals and objectives for the events. The planning phase involved selecting the event dates, venue and target number of students and employers. The event agenda was created and planning milestones solidified, including registration processes, staff and volunteer requirements, space and equipment requirements, and refreshment provision.

During the marketing and recruitment phase, the team created flyers and posters for the events, which each school distributed to their own students. The organizing committee collaborated with each institution's disability services and career services offices to send targeted emails to registered students with disabilities and post-event promotion on their social media accounts. Student registration and post-registration communication was managed separately by each school. As the November Government Career Fair career fair was dedicated to careers in government, a small team within the Public Service Commission managed all aspects of marketing and recruitment. These activities included promotion, registration, post-registration communication and liaising with the organizing committee about employer needs before the event. For the April Spring Career Fair, the organizing committee established a sub-committee to identify employers to recruit. Employer registration and post-registration communication were centralized in the DCOI 2.0 team. EARN also supported employer recruitment for this event by promoting the event to its network of employers.

In the student preparation and support phase, the team created pre-event FAQs and tip sheets to help registered students know what to expect. Each school offered resume development support to their

students. Staff and student volunteers were recruited to provide support at the event through registration, wayfinding, room monitoring and accompanying assistants to students.

A variety of design elements were incorporated into both events at the Shaw Centre, which is a wheelchair accessible venue and accessible by public transit. Booths in the registration area and main event space were spaced out to allow room for assistive devices and service animals. Chairs were also placed throughout the space. Refreshments tables were situated at an accessible height. High-contrast, large-print navigation signs were produced and posted throughout. Screen-reader compatible and large-print copies of event material were made available. A sensory-friendly quiet space with low lighting was also available to attendees who needed a break.

Both career fairs can be considered successes and achieved improved employment outcomes for students with disabilities. The November Government Career Fair had 180 student registrants, 90% of the target 200; 51% of registered students attended. Fifty-four employers attended the event, far exceeding the target of 35 employers and requiring the opening of a second large room at the Shaw Centre. In post-event surveys, 79% of students and 85% of employers were satisfied or very satisfied with the accessibility of the event space; 9% of student and 96% of employer respondents would recommend the event to others; 22% of students and 20% of employers surveyed reported that the career fair led to an employment onboarding. The April Spring Career Fair had 250 registered students, 83% of the target 300, with a 38% attendance rate. Twenty-five employers participated; 92% of surveyed students expressed that the pre-event FAQs and tip sheets were helpful or somewhat helpful. Among post-event survey respondents, 83% of students and 95% of employers were satisfied or very satisfied with the accessibility of the event space; 85% of student and 94% of employer respondents would recommend the event to others; 20% of responding employers reported the event led to an employment onboarding.

## Appendix 2: Readiness Assessment Insights (Pre- and Post)

### Qualitative Findings

Five institutions completed both the pre- and post-pilot RAI, with respondents invited to provide narrative responses to several open-ended questions. The following summarizes the key findings synthesized from these participating institutions, along with an analysis of the resulting change.

Category	Pre-Pilot Findings	Post-Pilot Findings	Change
<b>Employment and Skill Development Needs of Students with Disabilities</b>	Students concerned about discussing disabilities and accommodations with employers; concerns about discrimination and stigma.	Expanded to include specific strategies for discussing accommodations, finding inclusive employers, and managing bias and stigma.	Shift from general concerns to actionable strategies for managing and addressing barriers (systemic and attitudinal) highlighting a more practical focus post-pilot.
<b>Institutional Support for Skills Development and Employment Needs</b>	Support often provided through specific programs or one-on-one support; institutions with high readiness more likely to have coordinated support between career/employment and disability services.	Emphasis on independent and collaborative programs; support through existing and new programs in development.	Move towards a structured, programmatic approach rather than reliance on individual support, suggesting an institutionalization of support mechanisms.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Pre-Pilot Findings</b>	<b>Post-Pilot Findings</b>	<b>Change</b>
<b>Relationships between Career/Employment and Disability/Accessibility Services</b>	Shared resources and programming common, with high-readiness institutions reporting a history of collaboration.	Half report strong or new relationships, either under same portfolio or shared priorities; others see opportunities for collaboration.	Slight increase in collaboration and recognition of shared priorities, although still some limitations. Clear potential for ongoing relationship building.
<b>Challenges to Implementation</b>	Concerns over ability to provide necessary financial and human resources; emphasis on importance of internal partnerships.	Identified challenges include competing priorities, staff capacity limits, and a need for more collaboration.	More specific challenges identified, highlighting time constraints and staff limitations. Shift from general resource concerns to operational challenges in execution.
<b>Senior Leader Contributions to Implementation</b>	Senior leaders support by prioritizing projects and committing resources.	Senior leaders now actively champion initiatives, participate in planning, facilitate connections, and advise on working group formation.	Enhanced leadership involvement, with leaders not only supporting but actively engaging in strategic and operational roles for project advancement.

## Appendix 3: Learnings from the Pilot Implementation Projects

### Algonquin College Pilot

Pilot activities led to practical improvements to College-wide policies that benefit students with disabilities. The project also helped to maintain accessibility as an institutional priority. At a department level, the project initiated better collaboration between units, streamlined processes, improved staff training, and increased the accessibility of events.

Feedback from participating staff indicated that collaboration between schools for career fairs would benefit from a source of centralized coordination. Comments highlighted a need for someone who would drive the main activities, perhaps involving self-selection by partner institutions to assume leads for different project activities based on expertise and capacity.

The team co-leads reported that developing training material collaboratively produced practical content that was well-received and believed better than what could have been produced independently. The training topics that the co-leads developed collaboratively were those that showed the highest gain in staff knowledge and confidence. Online delivery is considered the best method for training workshops, supporting strong participation rates among staff and faculty, who have become accustomed to flexible training options post-pandemic.

Pilot timing and the need to deliver the Making Employment Journeys Accessible workshops before the start of the summer vacation period required the team to develop most workshop content over a tight four-week period, finalizing only two weeks before delivery. While this delivery was achievable, a longer preparation period for future workshops would allow more pre-workshop communication with intended audiences and content customization. The team also suggests that involving target audiences early in the planning process through surveys and focus groups would allow for better tailoring of training session content. Session length was set early, before the workshop content had been finalized, to allow promotion and booking. Feedback from the co-leads and some participants suggest that longer sessions would enhance the experience by allowing more group discussion.

This pilot represents a feasible model for internal staff to develop and deliver effective training focused on accessibility knowledge and disability confidence. With some support and resources from DCOI for planning the training, two internal content experts collaboratively led the development of all key aspects of training, including content and sequencing. Post-training survey data demonstrates that participants made substantial gains in knowledge across all training topics.

The Algonquin planning committee determined that all key aspects of the pilot were sustainable and have sufficient resources to sustain the training program beyond the pilot. Future career fairs will open one hour early for students with disabilities. This dedicated time will allow them to engage employer booths in a less crowded environment, exposed to less noise stimulation, and with more room for mobility devices and service animals. A quiet space will also be provided in future fairs for neurodiverse attendees.

There is an ongoing need and demand for the Making Employment Journeys Accessible training program, and the team intends to continue offering it annually or semi-annually as part of the College's professional development offerings. There are plans to expand the pool of trainers to increase flexibility to schedule training at optimal times and manage workloads, formally incorporate preparation and training time into trainer's staff schedules, and add employer perspectives to workshop content, potentially with an employer co-trainer.

## Carleton University Pilot Project

The Carleton pilot team prioritized accessibility in all aspects of event creation, including communication, promotion and physical space. This consistency was effective in maintaining a culture of inclusivity among staff, partners and collaborators. The team benefited greatly from the involvement of a student member of staff with lived experience of disability. Their perspective and work on all aspects of the project was essential to its successful completion. Employing students with lived experiences is highly recommended.

Feedback from event creators and facilitators strongly indicated that implementing the pilot accessibility checklists was not challenging. They were able to easily update their normal processes to include checklist items. The checklists developed in this project will be used by event planners from the Career Services office going forward. However, it will not be possible to add to or update these checklists in keeping with changing best practices in the future without additional resources.

This pilot demonstrated that training staff in accessible practices is easier and more effective when they possess a foundational knowledge of accessibility. The Carleton team was fortunate to have such knowledge. Some external organizations with which we interacted did not arrive with comparable levels of accessibility knowledge, which presented challenges to introducing new processes. Considerable time, effort and resources were required to train staff on the purposes, locations and uses of checklists. This training should be embedded into onboarding for new staff.

The initiative undertaken in this pilot project was feasible in that desired outcomes were achieved with the available resources. The financial support provided by the project budget was essential to pay for a student member of staff, whose contributions enabled the team to complete the key components of the project in a timely and efficient manner. Completing the project goals at the



expected level of quality within the established timeframe would not have been possible without this human resource and associated funding.

## Collège La Cité Pilot

The La Cité pilot highlighted the importance of leveraging external expertise to support staff accessibility training. Staffing resources remain limited at La Cité, so staff upskilling would be best pursued through ongoing partnership and collaboration with projects like DCOI and organizations like the Accessibility Institute at Carleton University.

La Cité is continuing efforts to develop collaboration between student service providers. They are adapting their training workshops to be more accessible and inclusive. There are plans to periodically update training workshops to ensure staff accessibility knowledge remains current with changing best practices.

Without continued resources, La Cité will be unable to maintain the levels of staff accessibility training undertaken as part of this pilot. Given the rate of staff turnover, there is a need for training to maintain a certain standard of accessibility confidence at this institution.

## George Brown College Pilot

The primary takeaway from the George Brown College pilot is that resources for WIL accommodations must be tailored to each student-employer relationship. “Everyone kind of has their own vices, everyone has their own challenges and opinions about WIL and their particular WIL model,” says George Brown WIL Consultant Deandra Christopher. She stresses the importance of a tailoring process, “going strategically program to program to engage with those key stakeholders at the top, then having a conversation with faculty who then support.” An important realization was the need for WIL resources that cater specifically to different learning and communication styles, incorporating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. Developing tools with visual, written and multimedia formats will help ensure that WIL students from all academic areas can access and benefit from the accommodations process, regardless of their preferred learning style. The pilot team identified a need for a pre-assessment consultation mechanism to assess student needs at the beginning of the WIL process, before placements are made. While this tool was not fully developed, the team believes it could lead to more proactive and personalized accommodation planning. Developing a pre-assessment mechanism will be a priority for future WIL projects.

The George Brown College team also highlighted the need for clarity and clear communication about the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders involved in WIL. A key challenge was the variation in how academic programs handle check-ins and accommodations for WIL students. While some

programs, like Early Childhood Education (ECE), already had robust feedback mechanisms in place, others required more structured tools. This difference demonstrated that a standardized, one-size-fits-all approach may not work across diverse academic areas. Throughout the project, they successfully engaged faculty to improve their understanding of the distinction between academic and WIL accommodations. This engagement was critical to fostering collaboration between faculty and WIL practitioners, ensuring students received the accommodations they needed in both settings. For future project implementation, the team suggest establishing a “champion” from each target program to participate in strategic planning and maintain communication channels.

The team also identified the potential benefits of leveraging a new integrated database system to track WIL accommodations and student progress more effectively. This tool could provide ongoing data collection and support the development of more comprehensive student reflection and self-assessment processes, which were not fully realized in this pilot phase. An initial version of this tool is planned for trial in winter 2025.

The pilot project is considered feasible as implemented. The desired outcomes of project activities were successfully achieved using the resources provided. However, these initiatives required a dedicated full-time member of staff whose role proved necessary to identify gaps, collaborate with stakeholders and execute the project activities effectively. George Brown College has made its WIL Consultant role ongoing. This role was created for the DCOI project and will continue to support students indefinitely. Key project initiatives will therefore be sustained beyond the pilot. Target areas for ongoing work include:

- Increased database integration for tracking WIL accommodations
- Launching a dedicated WIL webpage within Accessible Learning Services (ALS)
- Releasing a WIL Student Toolkit to support students with disabilities
- Collaborating with the Careers, WIL and ALS offices to create an Employer Toolkit to better support students with disabilities in WIL environments
- Continued collaboration with academic areas to streamline and refine WIL processes
- Creating a series of student-focused videos that outline available WIL resources and supports; when complete, the videos will be integrated across academic program platforms

## Lakehead University Pilot

The Lakehead team originally conceived the EPF role as someone who could champion and mobilize expertise in accessible career services. Their presence would overcome staff resourcing challenges that limited time available for accessibility initiatives. The team had hoped the role would develop resources that would be retained after the research project was over, which could then be used assist with onboarding new staff to a more accessible way of working.

However, it proved a challenge to find candidates for a full-time short-term position. Since the EPF would be a new type of role, any candidate hired would likely be stronger and more experienced in some required areas than others. Lakehead also experienced delays in pilot funding, which necessarily delayed HR approval processes and resulted in posting an EPF position less than 12 months in length. This short contract may have deterred qualified applicants from expressing interest. The team was therefore unable to hire an EPF for their pilot project. In response, Lakehead reconsidered resourcing needs and introduced dedicated work hours for an existing member of career services staff to take up some administrative elements of the project. The team also hired students with lived experience of disabilities to work on pilot initiatives by reallocating unspent staffing funds to direct wage subsidies. Pivoting to alternate approaches to achieve the pilot goals without the EPF role required a significant amount of flexibility and adaptability.

The Lakehead experience provides insights for post-secondary institutions that are considering adopting an EPF role. It is not the norm in small, rural or northern settings to hire dedicated fulltime members of staff for most portfolios, including to support students with disabilities. Smaller institutions feature more horizontal employment structures where staff have responsibilities across multiple services that in larger institutions might be staffed by entire teams. As the Lakehead team explained in their pilot feedback, the system navigation support provided by the EPF role as originally conceived may not be as needed in such institutions where accessibility and career services are already connected. In these settings, training existing staff to provide more nuanced accessible career services could be more effective than introducing dedicated roles. Lakehead's experience further supports the DCOI 2.0 assertion that accessibility practices must be adjusted to local needs, norms and options.

Another notable finding from Lakehead is that some students choose to rest during summer periods rather than engage employment programs, even when those programs are available. There is reason to believe this is more likely among students with disabilities, who may experience lower energy and increased burden from everyday activities. The team predicts that longer-term programs would benefit such students by giving them a wider choice of placement periods.

## University of Guelph Pilot

At the beginning of the program, students were often unaware of their rights as employees with disabilities and had low confidence in their ability to get jobs with suitable accommodations. The Guelph team developed a strengths-based pre-employment training program to empower students to recognize their abilities and know their employee rights before they begin their employment experience.

Flexibility was essential to the program's success, as each student's experience with disability is unique. This flexibility allowed for a greater level of student engagement than would have been possible if the program set rigid expectations for participation, including in employment experiences. It is necessary to consider the barriers that students with disabilities regularly experience in post-secondary education, particularly those limiting their time, energy and mobility, as these can impact their ability to engage employment programs.

The Guelph team experienced program delays, which required the WorkAbility pilot to run on a compressed timeline. This shortened schedule afforded less time and flexibility for students to balance program demands with their academic demands. It also reduced the team's ability to collaborate effectively with employers to develop job opportunities available exclusively to pilot participants. The shortened timeline therefore likely reduced the number of student participants and summer employment positions secured. A longer schedule for the WorkAbility program would increase student and employer engagement.

An EDI Employment Engagement Specialist who served as a planning committee member to the pilot referred a significant number of students to the program and then went on to support those students through their employment experiences in various ways as needed. Collaboration with this EDI Specialist was not explicitly planned but developed organically. By working in partnership, the EDI Specialist and the WEPF were able to provide smooth transitions between stages and student support that was free of gaps. Student feedback indicated that their ability to receive support from the WEPF position, specifically as consistent central source of support, helped them to secure employment and achieve their career goals.

Post-placement interviews with employers indicated that some lack an understanding of the ways neurodivergent students may communicate in professional settings. These perceptions represent a source of potential bias in hiring decisions and suggest further efforts to educate employers participating in employment programs.

The WorkAbility Program as implemented in this pilot is feasible. The desired outcomes of the project were able to be achieved through the resources allocated. Despite the compressed timeline and resulting adjustments to the project plan, the program was successful in securing employment for students with disabilities and providing them with knowledge and information to be successful in their future employment endeavours.

The WorkAbility Program could only be sustained, however, if funding were made available for a full-time WorkAbility Employment Pathways Facilitator position. The planning, coordination and delivery of key program activities necessary for this program to operate successfully was shown to require at least one dedicated member of staff. The Guelph team will nonetheless continue to work to incorporate the material developed for this pilot into relevant areas of operation. All four training

modules created for the program will be shared with the Experiential Learning Hub team to increase staff knowledge and capacity to work with students with disabilities. The Accommodation and Disclosure module will be updated and included in the co-operative education prep course, which all co-op students are required to complete.

## University of Ottawa Pilot

The collaborative cross-departmental working group was key to the success of this project's initiatives. The working group intends to continue building collaborations in the future, particularly with student government, academic departments and representatives of the disability community. They also hope to build upon the bridge this project established with OPEN Collaboration for Cognitive Accessibility. While collaboration between different university departments and external organizations like OPEN was key to the success of the pilot initiatives, relying on such partnerships also poses a barrier to sustaining such activities. Partners may not have the capacity to participate in future events, and predictability is an important part of formalizing accessibility training in internal budgets and work plans.

A challenge to the sustainability of this project's initiatives is the lack of clear administrative responsibility to implement them after the end of project funding. This uncertainty includes the recommendations from the Accessibility Challenge, which are wide ranging and thus cannot be implemented by any single administrative unit. The team also found it difficult to secure buy-in and consistent participation from the student government and student representatives from the Centre for Students with Disabilities. It is important to develop trusting ongoing relationships with these student organizations.

The Career Development Bootcamp demonstrated the importance of including students living with disabilities in the planning and development of training programs to identify needs and ensure accessible learning environments. Event spaces should be chosen based on their hybrid learning capabilities to provide students the flexibility to participate in the way best suited to their needs, which may change from day to day. Holding the bootcamp during the week after the end of final exams worked well for most students. However, limitations on staff capacity and institutional bans on sending promotional emails during exam periods suggest that promotion for future bootcamps should begin earlier and utilize a larger variety of methods.

Student feedback from the bootcamp suggests that workshop content should focus less on resume and interview skills and more the topics of networking, disclosure and accommodations. The team will consider adding a speaker or panel of persons with disabilities who have successfully transitioned to the workforce to provide their insights and answer questions at future bootcamps. Students

appreciated being provided with lunch during training. Offering a choice of gift cards worked well for encouraging participation in surveys.

The Employer Accessibility Challenge demonstrated the effectiveness of including students living with disabilities in creating the employer challenges and then co-creating solutions with employers. The team intends to continue collaboration with community organizations to maintain the credibility of this exercise. The team highlights that employer participants may also be persons living with disabilities who may find the exercise difficult or even triggering and suggest these drawbacks be taken into consideration when planning future challenges. Tools and resources should be developed based in the lessons learned from the Employer Accessibility Challenge and distributed to all campus employers to mobilize accessibility knowledge beyond those who are able to participate.

Both initiatives undertaken in this pilot project were deemed feasible by the cross-functional working group. Each achieved the desired outcomes with available resources. The Career Development Bootcamp for Students with Disabilities will become an annual event from the University of Ottawa's Career Development Team. In Fall 2024, the resources created through this pilot will be added to those available to career counsellors, specialists, mentors and students on the Career Development website. These resources will include a one-page guide of best practices for accessible job postings and hiring processes for managers and departments who hire students on campus. In Summer 2025, the team will record a training module on disclosure and accommodations for the online Horizon's Career Development Program.



## Cross-Institution Ottawa Collaboration, November and April Career Fairs

The joint Ottawa pilot events demonstrated the importance of having centralized coordination with decision making authority to provide structure and continuity to collaborative activity. Each institution tends to have conflicting priorities, which impede effective work if not managed by a central team. Central financial management is also key to hosting collaborative events. There is a need to navigate varying institutional finance policies and spending limits. In this pilot, Carleton assumed the lead financial responsibility for event hosting, specifically for expenditures and partner cost recovery. This pilot also showed that a long scheduling lead time is essential. Most institutions establish the dates for career fair approximately one year in advance. Planning for any joint events should align with these planning cycles if possible.

The number of students attending career fairs for students with disabilities can be significantly lower than the number of students who register. This disparity should be taken into consideration when setting attendance targets and suggests that event promotion should continue even after registration has reached the target number. A follow-up survey targeting registered students who did not attend the events may help to identify the causes and potentially flag barriers to access. The pilot teams found that providing pre-event support to students, such as resume development, required a considerable amount of staff time. These duties should be carefully factored into staff resource planning well in advance of career fairs.

The pilot partner institutions are bringing the accessibility practices they learned at the shared Career Fair to their own internal career fairs. For example, future career fairs at the University of Ottawa will be held in the main gymnasium, the largest space on campus. However, some attendees at the Government and Spring Career Fairs still reported experiencing challenges linked to mobility and sensory load during busy periods. Further approaches should be explored to manage the flow of attendees.

Despite positive outcomes and feedback reported from students and employers involved in these pilot events, primary contacts from each collaborating school suggested that there remain challenges to the sustainability of hosting similar events in the future. Competing internal priorities in each partnering institution, resource limitations, and the capacity of participating staff will continue pose issues even with longer planning periods and improved central coordination. That said, the collaborative initiative explored in this pilot are theoretically feasible, repeatable and saleable.

## What the Pilots Found

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### The Power of Collaboration

- Collaboration enhances the quality of outputs, leads to better content and helps meet the needs of students with disabilities.
  - Bringing together expertise from multiple departments (e.g., Career Centre, Accessible Learning Centre, EDIA, student associations, Co-op, etc.) enriched the training programs and enhanced the effectiveness of the workshops.
  - Early collaboration fosters innovation, new ideas and tailored solutions.
  - Assigning clear roles and leads for collaboration is essential for success.
  - Collaboration with external organizations was helpful to provide needed expertise to further staff development in accessibility practices. Planning to sustain those competencies is a critical strategic activity for student services.
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### Incorporating Lived Experience

- Involving students with disabilities in planning and design ensured more tailored and accessible learning programs, creating environments that met their specific needs.
  - Colleagues with lived experience were able to provide additional perspectives to the design of training sessions for campus staff and faculty.
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### Role of Conversations and Relationships

- Conversations with employers, students and stakeholders are key in reducing bias and creating 'aha' moments that lead to meaningful change.
- One-on-one conversations build trust, facilitate self-reflection and allow for tailored goal setting.
- Building student confidence through strengths-based approaches was essential, especially for those with past negative experiences related to disability disclosure.
- Meaningful conversations about students' perceptions of their strengths and abilities, as well as exploration of individual challenges, opened opportunities to build skills.
- Scaffolded referrals, facilitated through relationship-building, improve engagement and the effectiveness of support systems.



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## Flexibility and Individualization

- Flexibility in programming and engagement is crucial to accommodate diverse needs and overcome barriers faced by different stakeholders.
  - Individualized approaches, supported by student pre-surveys, help ensure programming is responsive to specific needs and improves overall participation.
  - Providing individualized and flexible support helped students engage more fully in the employment programs, addressing their unique needs and learning styles.
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## The Power of Knowledge and Reflection to Build Confidence and Address Bias

- Training opportunities allow colleagues to build knowledge, gain confidence and identify peers they can reach out to with questions.
- Training that includes scenarios, discussions and space for asking questions creates an environment for learning, growth and confidence-building for students, postsecondary staff and employers.
- Always account for accessibility, including non-visible disabilities, in the delivery of training to either students, staff, employers or other stakeholders.
- Offer training in a variety of formats to increase accessibility. Check in with intended audiences for preferred formats of delivery. In some pilot activities, virtual delivery of training was preferred by staff and students, while in others in-person format was key to supporting the experiential learning components of the training.



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## Challenges and Lessons Learned

- Timelines, systems and processes can be barriers to success, but phasing project activities helps address these challenges.
  - Templates and established frameworks can reduce workloads and speed up implementation while still allowing for customization.
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## Resources Needed for Success

- Time, money and people are consistently identified as the essential resources required to successfully implement and sustain accessibility and employment programs.
- Funding a dedicated role at schools is critical to managing these collaborative activities and ensuring the sustainability of positive outcomes.
- Staff feedback confirmed the importance of having a dedicated position to consistently coordinate activities, which was crucial to the success of collaborative efforts. Similarly, student feedback emphasized the value of having a role providing consistent support, with many noting that the guidance and encouragement they received helped them feel more comfortable and confident as they navigated different aspects of their unique employment journeys.



## Further Actions and Activities

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### At the Service Provider Level

- Regularly train staff on accessibility, inclusion and disability-related topics to ensure they can effectively support students with disabilities.
  - Build partnerships with both internal and external organizations that specialize in accessibility to continuously develop staff capacity.
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### At the Student Services Level

Integrate disability-specific pre-employment training modules into career development programs across campus.

Offer flexible timelines for students to engage with services, recognizing that balancing academic and career development work may take more time for students with disabilities.

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### Across Campus

- Promote campus-wide education and awareness campaigns on disability inclusion, with one focus being on accessibility in the workplace.
  - Improve accessibility of career fairs and work-study programs by addressing barriers like mobility, noise and flexible work arrangements.
  - Increase collaboration with employers, ensuring they are trained on accommodating and understanding a diversity of students, and facilitate continuous communication to develop more inclusive workplace cultures.
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### Potential Activities

**Create a Mentorship Program:** Pair students with disabilities with alumni or professionals who have successfully transitioned to the workforce, offering guidance and support.

**Launch Employer Education Initiatives:** Develop educational resources and workshops for employers on campus and beyond to raise awareness of accessible recruitment and workplace practices, tapping into talent in postsecondary settings and accommodations in the workplace.

**Incorporate Accessibility into Event Planning:** Utilize checklists and surveys to gather feedback from students and ensure that career development events are accessible and inclusive, considering factors such as location, format and ti