Considering visible and invisible disabilities in the field: Adapting to improve experiential learning for everyone

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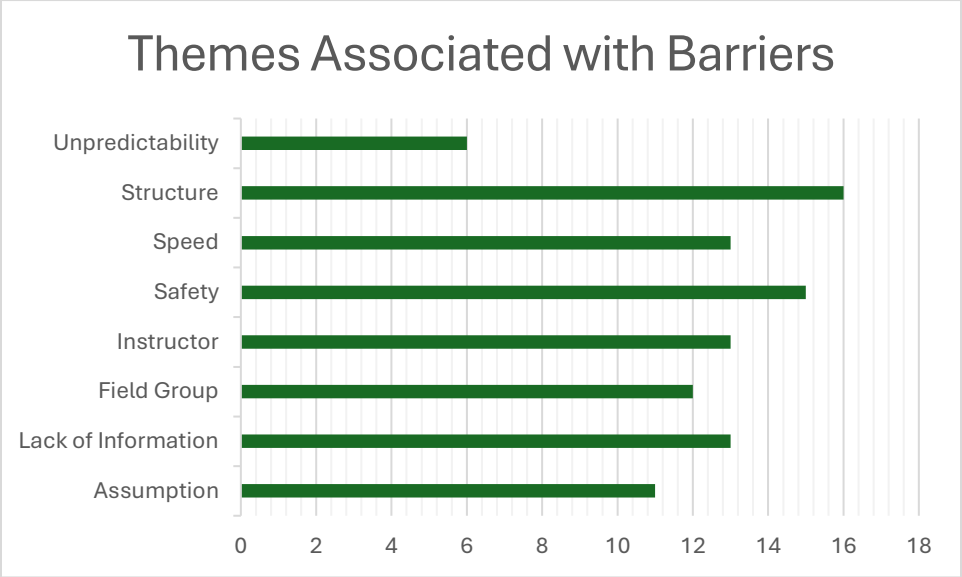
Field courses are offered in a variety of programs at Canadian Universities and are often required for program completions and professional accreditations. While field courses are excellent opportunities for experiential learning, students with visible and invisible disabilities face significant barriers that lead to either quitting their programs, or never registering to field-based education. Inclusion of all students in field-based learning allows for students with disabilities to feel belonging in their community, and any accommodations made for improved accessibility will benefit all students. Making sure students have a positive experience during field work is vital for their career and social development for several reasons. Field-based learning helps form student identity (Mogk and Goodwin 2012), improve engagement in other courses (Stokes and Boyle 2009), and increases feelings of belongings for students (Streule and Craig 2016).

The EDI Award project aimed at identifying barriers to accessibility for students with visible and invisible disabilities while conducting field work. Ten participants were recruited from Carleton University within the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Engineering and Design who had completed field work and self-identified as having a visible or invisible disability. Interviews were conducted using a structured question format focusing on participant history, field leads, barriers in the field and accommodations. Participants were chosen on a first-come, first-served basis and spoke to their field experiences in academia and industry. Participant data was de-identified using pseudonyms and epithets.

During interviews, participants identified several recuring themes. While formal accommodations were often provided to the participants when requested, others referred to having to create their own accommodations in their field group. Participants identified feeling supported by their field lead and colleagues through informal and formal accommodations. Participants who had positive experiences mentioned feeling a sense of belonging in their field group, as well as a feeling of openness. In contrast, many participants identified feeling discouraged in academia, and mentioned they felt they had to stay silent or hide their disability from their instructor.



Three main aspects were identified as barriers during participant interviews including : 1) course specifics, 2) relationships and 3) insufficient preparation. Course specifics such as the speed, structure or lack of safety in the field were referenced as barriers. Insufficient preparations such as assumptions made, a lack of information prior to leaving the field or unpredictability in the field. A subsect of participants references feeling as if their identity (age, race, gender) acted as barriers in the field. Most notably, no students who identified as having visible disabilities participated.

Using these findings, a series of recommendations can be made to reduce barriers and improve access to accommodations. One suggestion is implementing a living document in field-based courses where students can share advice or have questions answered to address the unpredictability in the field. The most suggested improvement was the implementation of more regular and more consistent breaks in the field. More ongoing cultural changes are suggested, such as frank discussions surrounding ableism, racism, sexism and ageism in the field-based sciences, as well as creating an environment that empowers everyone.

In the future, the study should be expanded to include more participants who identified as having visible disabilities or identify as a minority. While preliminary results were obtained, more data can clearly identify barriers and accommodations for these potential participants in the field.

Works Cited

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