

# Accessibility and Accommodations on Campus

Results of the student survey on Student  
Accessibility and Achievement (SAA) and Mental  
Health

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to support student advocacy initiatives by evaluating the efficacy of services offered by McGill University's Student Accessibility and Achievement (SAA), formerly known as the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD)<sup>1</sup>. This research is in alignment with the Students' Society of McGill University (SSMU)'s mission to represent and advance the diverse needs of McGill undergraduate students. Furthermore, this report is centered around a disability justice framework and follows the SSMU *Accessibility Policy*,<sup>2</sup> the *Policy on Accessible Education and Academics*,<sup>3</sup> the *Mental Health Policy*<sup>4</sup> and the *McGill University Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities*.<sup>5</sup>

Following the pandemic, SSMU has received various complaints regarding student concerns with the SAA and their failure to fulfill their mandate.<sup>6</sup> This study follows a student report conducted in fall 2019, which identified several concerns such as SAA's annulation of paying note takers and disorganized assessment writing. This study was conducted during the 2022-2023 academic year to pursue these concerns and assess the steps taken by the SAA to ameliorate the quality and accessibility of education to students with disabilities. The purpose of this report is to investigate students' views of SAA and improve service provision for future students with disabilities coming to McGill.

This mixed methods study was facilitated through an anonymous survey and in-depth interviews to gather a snapshot of students' perceptions and experiences around SAA's name change, the ClockWork system, one-on-one appointments with Access Service Advisors, the testing centre, medical documentation, tutor matching program and more. This survey<sup>7</sup> ultimately elicited 66 responses from students and recent alumni. 4 individuals from this sample were selected for a 1-hour qualitative interview. The data presented in this report explores the lived experiences of the sample, who are both registered and not registered with the SAA and is not representative of all students living with a

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<sup>1</sup> "Student Accessibility and Achievement: New Students," McGill University, Accessed March 15, 2023, <https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/new-students>.

<sup>2</sup> Students' Society of McGill University, *Accessibility Policy*, Adopted motion LEG-PUB-MOT-2021-01-14-001, Montreal, QC: SSMU, 2021, <https://ssmu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Accessibility-Policy-2021-01-28-to-2026-01-01.pdf?x21981> (accessed March 16, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Students' Society of McGill University, *Policy on Accessible Education and Academics*, Adopted motion LEG-PUB-MOT-2020-03-26-007, Montreal, QC: SSMU, 2021, <https://ssmu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SSMU-Policy-on-Accessible-Education-and-Academics-2020-04-02.pdf?x21981> (accessed March 16, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Students' Society of McGill University, *Mental Health Policy*, Adopted motion LEG-PUB-MOT-2020-01-16-003, Montreal, QC: SSMU, 2020, <https://ssmu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/SSMU-Mental-Health-Policy.pdf?x21981> (accessed March 16, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> McGill University, *Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities*, Approved May 29, 1995, Montreal, QC: McGill, 2005, [https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/rights-of-students-with-disabilities-policy-concerning-the\\_1.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/secretariat/files/secretariat/rights-of-students-with-disabilities-policy-concerning-the_1.pdf) (accessed March 17, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> "SSMU Statement Regarding Student Concerns with the Office for Students with Disabilities," SSMU, Accessed May 19, 2023, <https://ssmu.ca/blog/2020/04/ssmu-statement-regarding-student-concerns-with-the-office-for-students-with-disabilities/>.

<sup>7</sup> Mina Pingol, *Survey on Mental Health and Accessing the Office for Student Accessibility and Achievement*, (March 14, 2023). Distributed by Block Survey, <https://blocksurvey.io/survey/p/fba9607f-6b11-470f-b737-60e72cb99330/r/o>.

disability on campus. The SAA did not release the total number of students registered with their office to the researcher and therefore this report is independent of the data and assessments produced and collected by the SAA.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Accessibility is a campus-wide concern. According to McGill's recent *Student Census: Reporting of Biennial Data to Senate*<sup>8</sup> 24,139 students (66.9%) responded, with 1,469 undergraduate students (8.8%) self-identifying as a person with a disability. Yet, students and scholars with disabilities in higher education remain underrepresented, especially at McGill. Students with disabilities are among the most marginalized and excluded groups on campus. With the university located by Mont-Royal, most of the downtown campus remains physically inaccessible to those with mobility challenges. With *McGill University Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) Strategic Plan 2020-2025*<sup>9</sup>, this study aims to hold the institution accountable to their commitment to addressing historic and ongoing injustices that challenge equal opportunities on campus as students with disabilities deserve an equitable education. In fact, it is their constitutional right to learn in an inclusive and accessible environment.

Student resources on campus are a crucial part of students' educational journey and greatly assist in maintaining students' health as they study and prepare for the workforce. According to the *McGill University Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities*, students with disabilities have the right to access available support services on campus to fulfill their academic requirements while also preserving "the right to a review of environmental barriers in the academic setting and the determination of a method of dealing with them."<sup>10</sup> This report aims to review and assess the efficiency of these services, particularly the Student Accessibility and Achievement (SAA).

The Student Accessibility and Achievement (SAA) was established at McGill in the 1980s in accordance with the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms.<sup>11</sup> The SAA main office is currently located at 1010 Sherbrooke Ouest, Suite 410 (4th floor) with its Exam Center located at 3459 McTavish Street, Room RS56. SAA is 1 of 8 units from Student Services, along with Campus Life & Engagement, Career Planning Services, First People's House, International Student Services, Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, Scholarships and Student Aid, and Student Wellness Hub.<sup>12</sup> Continually, Student Services is 1 of 5 units overseen by the Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning), a senior administrator who is responsible for applying policies, actions and choices aimed at promoting student life and learning at the university.<sup>13</sup> The Deputy Provost (Student Life and Learning), then is

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<sup>8</sup> Gillian Nycum, *Report on the Biennial Results of the Student Census*, D22-64, April 19, 2023, Montreal, QC: McGill University Senate,

[https://www.mcgill.ca/senate/files/senate/d22-64\\_report\\_on\\_the\\_biennial\\_results\\_of\\_the\\_student\\_census.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/senate/files/senate/d22-64_report_on_the_biennial_results_of_the_student_census.pdf) (accessed May 13, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> McGill University, Office of the Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic), *Budget 2022-2023*, May 31, 2022, p. 14, [https://www.mcgill.ca/apb/files/apb/budget\\_book\\_2022-2023\\_-\\_final.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/apb/files/apb/budget_book_2022-2023_-_final.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> McGill University, *Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities*. 1995, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Quebec, *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms, chapter C-12*, Quebec Official Publisher, 1975, <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/document/cs/c-12> (accessed May 15, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> "Student Services: Promoting Student Wellbeing and Success," McGill University, Accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.mcgill.ca/studentsservices/services>.

<sup>13</sup> "Administration and Governance: Organization Chart," McGill University, Accessed May 16, 2023, <https://www.mcgill.ca/orqchart/>.

responsible to the Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic) who responds to the Principal & Vice-Chancellor.

Understanding SAA's position within McGill's broader governance structure allows for further understanding of the *2022-2023 Budget* and the *2021-2022 Financial Report*.<sup>14</sup> Understanding these documents aids us in holding the university accountable of adequately funding the SAA and upholding their duty in creating an inclusive university environment. This report will first define important terms and provide an overview of the Universal Design for Learning. Then this report will present its methodology and the results of the survey and interviews. Finally, the report will offer its recommendations to ameliorate student experiences with the SAA.

## 2.1 Terminology

The terms outlined below are only for the purposes of this report and have been copied from *SSMU's Accessibility Policy*<sup>15</sup> adopted on January 28, 2021. The researcher acknowledges that each person thinks of disability and people with disabilities differently based on their own unique experiences. These definitions are just some of the many interpretations available.

- **Ableism:** Ableism, which can be conscious or unconscious, refers to practices and dominant attitudes in SSMU that privilege able-bodied individuals. Ableism is the belief system that underlies negative attitudes, stigma, and discrimination against people with disabilities.
- **Accessibility:** Accessibility refers to the ability for everyone, regardless of disability or a difference in needs, to access, use, and benefit from everything within their environment. As a practice, it aims to facilitate the full participation of individuals with disabilities in SSMU.
- **Barrier:** Barriers refer to circumstances or obstacles that prevent the full participation of an individual in a given activity or SSMU at large. Barriers may include but are not limited to, economic, systemic, environmental, attitudinal, psychological, physical, academic, linguistic, informational, or communication-based, or technological factors.
- **Disability:** Disability refers to an exclusion or limitation that may restrict the full participation of an individual in SSMU as a result of systemic barriers, including, but not limited to, physical, attitudinal, and social factors. (*This report will use the term 'disability' to refer to people who experience any accessibility challenges, "including physical, mental, sensory or learning disabilities, including those with chronic health conditions, whether permanent, temporary, or episodic in nature, or evident or not [...] This can also include persons identifying as neurodivergent"*).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> McGill University, *2021>2022 Financial Report To the Board of Governors*, by Yves Beauchamp and Cristiane Timmouth, NO. GD221006-14.4.1, Montreal: McGill, 2022, [https://www.mcgill.ca/vpadmin/files/vpadmin/bog\\_report\\_2022\\_oct12.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/vpadmin/files/vpadmin/bog_report_2022_oct12.pdf) (Accessed May 16, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> SSMU, *Accessibility Policy*, 2021, p.2.

<sup>16</sup> Nycum, *Report on the Biennial Results of the Student Census*, 2023, p. 15.

- **Disadvantage:** A circumstance or a situation that puts an individual or a group of people in an inferior or less favourable position compared to others, resulting in compromised access to resources or opportunities.
- **Reasonable Accommodation:** A necessary and appropriate modification or adjustment which can be requested by any person, at any time, to make fair an inaccessible system and ensure that all individuals can access, use, and benefit from everything within their environment on an equal basis with all others.
- **Universal Design:** Universal Design (UD) is a concept that promotes the production and creation of physical spaces, products, services, and built environments that allow for use by everyone to the greatest extent possible. This process involves continuous improvement toward the ultimate goal of full inclusion.
- **Universal Design for Learning:** Universal Design for Learning (UDL) refers to a teaching approach that encourages diverse methods of instruction, assessment, accommodation, and resource provision to meet the needs of the greatest number and most diverse group of learners possible. The goal of UDL is to create a learning culture in which diversity is respected and embraced, and where all students are encouraged to learn and demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of ways.

## 2.2 Universal Design for Learning

Equity in higher education for students with disabilities is an important yet challenging goal to achieve. Several Canadian universities have introduced the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in their pedagogy such as the University of Toronto, Concordia University, University of Calgary, Dalhousie University and more. McGill University has also introduced UDL to its faculty through the SAA. The UDL framework offers administration and teaching staff the opportunity to minimize barriers to education through representation, action and expression and engagement.<sup>17</sup> This set of 3 principles for curriculum development ensures that all students, including those with disabilities can learn in an inclusive environment filled with flexible learning materials and assessments.<sup>18</sup>

### Engagement

Each student is motivated to learn differently. The UDL explores Engagement as the ‘Why of learning and breaks it down into three parts: **Recruiting Interest, Sustaining Effort & Persistence and Self-Regulation.** UDL understands **Recruiting Interest** as the ability to empower learners to design their own learning through individual choice and autonomy. It looks to connect learning to

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<sup>17</sup> “The UDL Guidelines,” CAST, Accessed May 13, 2023.

[https://udlguidelines.cast.org/?utm\\_source=castsite&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_campaign=none&utm\\_content=aboutudl&gl=1\\*159wIx3\\* ga\\*MjAwMjY2Mjc1OC4xNjgyNTI3Mzkz\\* ga\\_C7LXP5M74W\\*MTY4MjUzNzlwMS4yLjAuMTY4MjUzNzlwMS4yLjAuMA](https://udlguidelines.cast.org/?utm_source=castsite&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=none&utm_content=aboutudl&gl=1*159wIx3* ga*MjAwMjY2Mjc1OC4xNjgyNTI3Mzkz* ga_C7LXP5M74W*MTY4MjUzNzlwMS4yLjAuMTY4MjUzNzlwMS4yLjAuMA).

<sup>18</sup> “About UDL,” UDL On Campus · Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education, Accessed May 13, 2023. [http://udloncampus.cast.org/page/udl\\_about](http://udloncampus.cast.org/page/udl_about).

experiences that are meaningful and authentic. **Recruiting Interest** also looks at minimizing threats and distractions, further creating a safe space to learn.

**Sustaining Effort & Persistence** provides options for determining intrinsic goals. It gives teachers the opportunity to foster collaboration and community in the classroom. When students are motivated, they can self-regulate and confront challenges with the help of appropriate and flexible resources. **Sustaining Effort & Persistence** further understands the values of assessment as a means for constructive and accessible feedback instead of a fixed understanding of performance and compliance.

Finally, Engagement observes **Self-Regulation** as students' abilities to regulate and manage their own emotions and motivations. This ensures that learners can cope and engage on campus with confidence. The facilitation of personal coping skills develops healthy emotional responses and interactions among students and creates a sense of increased awareness. Examples of this include managing frustration and seeking external emotional support when students are experiencing anxiety.<sup>19</sup>

## Representation

Students differ in the ways that they observe and understand information that is presented to them. For students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia and for those with sensory disabilities like blindness or deafness, content must be presented in equitable ways. Representation considers the 'What' of learning through 3 categories: **Perception, Language & Symbols and Comprehension**. In **Perception**, UDL aims to provide alternative options for auditory and visual information. In academic environments, the goal should be to provide the same information through different methods in a format that allows students to adjust as necessary. For example, enlarged texts and amplified sounds.

**Language & Symbols** looks at clarifying vocabulary, syntax, structure, and symbols in both linguistic and non-linguistic methods. Inequalities and barriers occur when information and content are presented to all students in one single format of representation. Not only do students with disabilities benefit from accessible language and symbols, but all students can gain from translations, descriptions, and images to support their learning. Multiple media such as videos and graphics are other examples of alternative and representative content.

Lastly, **Comprehension** considers the ability to transform accessible information into usable knowledge for future decision-making. Accessible curriculum and instructional methodology provides the necessary tools for students to build connections, highlight patterns and relationships and transfer learning to new contexts. Examples include supporting note taking, checklists, electronic reminders and more.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Engagement," CAST, Accessed May 18, 2023, [https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/?utm\\_source=castsite&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_campaign=none&utm\\_content=aboutudl&gl=1\\*jtafbu\\*ga\\*MjAwMjY2Mjc1OC4xNjgyNTI3Mzkz\\*ga\\_C7LXP5M74W\\*MTY4NDI4MTU1NC4xMS4wLjE2ODQyODE1NTQuMC4wLjA](https://udlguidelines.cast.org/engagement/?utm_source=castsite&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=none&utm_content=aboutudl&gl=1*jtafbu*ga*MjAwMjY2Mjc1OC4xNjgyNTI3Mzkz*ga_C7LXP5M74W*MTY4NDI4MTU1NC4xMS4wLjE2ODQyODE1NTQuMC4wLjA).

<sup>20</sup> "Representation," CAST, Accessed May 18, 2023, <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/representation>



## Action & Expression

Students vary in the ways that they can access and navigate a learning environment. Students with disabilities in particular express what they know differently than able-bodied students—some may express themselves through written text instead of speech whereas others communicate through signs. The UDL defines **Action & Expression** as the ‘How’ of learning and is composed of **Physical Action, Expression & Communication** and **Executive Functions**. **Physical Action** looks at the importance of offering materials that all students can interact with through assistive technologies. This includes interactive tools that make learning physically accessible to all students. To reduce barriers in physical environments, the UDL framework provides alternatives for learning through assistive technology that are operated by hand, voice, joystick, keyboard and more.

**Expression & Communication** highlights the importance of providing alternative modes for expression using multiple media for communication and construction and composition. It is crucial for teachers to use text, speech, drawing, illustration, comics, storyboards, film, music, video, discussion forums, annotation tools and more to give students various options for learning.

Finally, **Executive Functions** describes the highest level of the human capacity to act tactfully and skillfully. This includes actions controlled by the prefrontal cortex such as memory, cognition, and goal setting. It is important for educators to understand that each student has varying capacities due to their working memory. For autistic students, executive functions may differ from day to day due to social environments. Executive functions looks at appropriate goal setting, support planning and strategy development, management of information and resources and increased capacity for monitoring progress.<sup>21</sup>

For further exploration of the UDL guidelines, please visit the [CAST website](#).

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<sup>21</sup> “Action and Expression,” CAST, Accessed May 18, 2023, <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/action-expression>.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Survey

This survey was designed by Special Researcher Mina Pingol in collaboration with the SSMU VP-UA, to investigate the efficacy of services provided by the SAA. The survey was designed with the following questions in mind:

- *How accessible is the SAA?*
- *What do students think of SAA's services and supports?*
- *What issues have students with disabilities encountered related to their mental health?*
- *How is SAA implementing UDL through their services?*

The survey was conducted through Block Survey, a secure and encrypted online survey platform to preserve and maintain student confidentiality. The form was made available from March 14th until May 3rd in English. Students were given the option to respond in French, however, the questions provided were written in English. The survey was publicized via posters on campus, SSMU listserv, the McGill subreddit and social media outlets, and word of mouth. In total, the survey generated 66 responses (n=66).

The survey was comprised of 38 questions using a mix of short answer, multiple choice, checkboxes, and scaling questions. Participants were given the option to skip questions that they did not wish to answer, giving them the choice to disclose sensitive information surrounding their disabilities and experiences around mental illness. The full list of survey questions can be found in the Appendix of this document.

### 3.2 Interviews

Data was also collected through qualitative interviews. Out of 66 respondents, 4 were selected to partake in an individual interview with the researcher. These 4 students voluntarily contacted the researcher to share their personal experiences navigating SAA. Among of the 4 students, 1 student was from the Faculty of Engineering, 1 student was from the Faculty of Arts and 2 students were from the Faculty of Arts' School of Social Work.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured model and recorded on a secure device for eventual transcription. Field notes were taken during the interview. These interviews occurred in a hybrid model, both in person and over Zoom to ensure increased accessibility. Interviewees were given the option to abstain from answering any questions they were not comfortable sharing. All names and other identifying information from the interviewees remain solely available to the researcher to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the participants. However, this researcher has summarized their answers to inform the themes highlighted in this study.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Student Demographics

The first part of the survey collected student demographic data to ensure a heterogeneous sample of students. The goal of the survey was to reflect the diversity of the student population both academically and socially. The following sections will present the questions posed in the survey along with an analysis for each question posed.

#### Faculty and Year of Study

The table below presents the number of students per faculty and their designated year of study.

Faculty \ Year	U0	U1	U2	U3	Other	Grad	Alumni	Total	%
<b>Agricultural and Environmental sciences</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
<b>Arts</b>	3	8	7	10			6	34	51.5%
<b>Arts and Science</b>			2		1		0	3	4.5%
<b>School of Continuing studies</b>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
<b>Dental Medicine and Oral Health Sciences</b>	1					1	0	2	3%
<b>Education</b>	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	2	3%
<b>Engineering</b>	0	2	2	2	0	0	0	6	9.1%
<b>Law</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1.5%
<b>Science</b>	1	2	2	5			0	10	15.3%
<b>Business and Management</b>	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	3	4.5%
<b>Schulich School of Music</b>	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	1.5%
<b>Medicine and Health Sciences</b>	0	1	2	1	0	0	0	4	6.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1. Faculty and year of respondents

Of the 66 students surveyed, 5 were in U0 (7.6%), 15 were in U1 (22.7%), 17 were in U2 (25.8%), and 21 were in U3 (31.8%), 1 was in other year of study (1.5%), 1 was in graduate school (1.5%), and 6 were recent alumni (9.1%). “Other” can refer to students in their fourth year of study, however, the data provided did not specify.

Graduate students were invited to fill out this survey, however, only 1 responded. Though graduate students are represented by the Post Graduate Students' Society (PGSS) and not SSMU, it is known that students with disabilities have continued to study beyond their undergraduate degrees and enroll

in graduate studies. SSMU therefore works closely alongside PGSS to further the interests of graduate students as well as McGill’s undergraduate students.

The survey responses represent almost all faculties except for the Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and the School of Continuing Studies. This may be because no posters were distributed in the Macdonald Campus. As a preliminary report, further research can be done to ensure that future advertisement of the survey can be distributed adequately between both campuses. The data is heavily skewed towards students in 1 faculty more than others, with a total of 34 (51.5%) respondents belonging to the Faculty of Arts.

## Full Time vs. Part Time

A typical full-time course load is 12-15 credits (4-5 courses) per term of study in the Fall and Winter semester.<sup>22</sup> As students with disabilities engage in their studies, some may decide to reduce their course load to adequately manage their health conditions. Health professionals then provide documentation to support students’ decisions to reduce their course load below 12 credits. This medical documentation is then provided to the SAA. If students go below 12 credits, they are then considered part-time and this may affect scholarships, financial aid, international study permits and loans, health insurance and more. Changing one’s course load can be difficult, especially for out-of-province students on financial aid. For example, Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) considers 9 credits to be the minimum full-time requirement for students with disabilities. These interprovincial discrepancies prove challenging for out-of-province students with disabilities, who may feel pressured to take on more courses to keep their full-time status. According to the survey, 60 respondents (90.9%) indicated that they were full-time students and 6 respondents (9.1%) stated they were part-time students. This demonstrates that most students were taking a full course load of 12-15 credits.

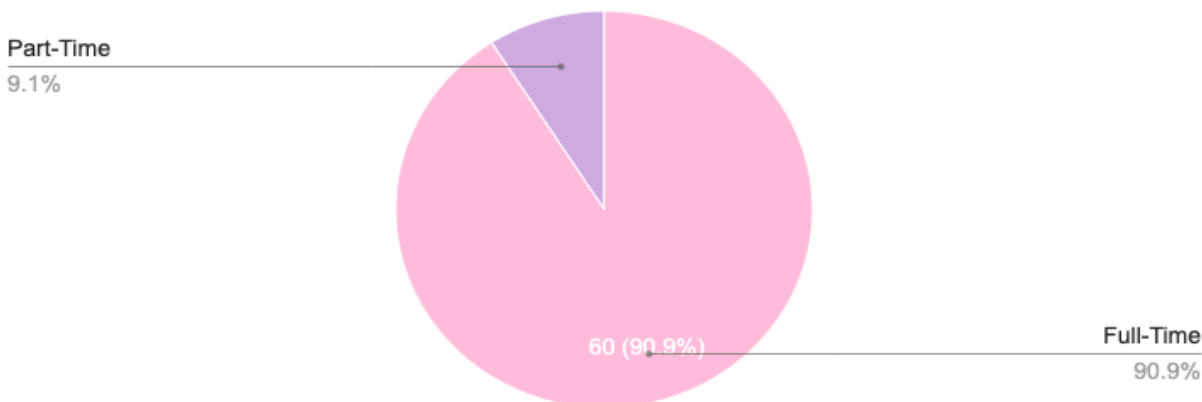


Figure 1. “Are you a full time or part time student?”

## Practicum/Internship

<sup>22</sup> “Arts OASIS: Course Load,” McGill University, Accessed May 18, 2023, [https://www.mcgill.ca/oasis/academic/courses#:~:text=A%20full%2Dtime%20course%20load,term\)%20is%20normally%2030%20credits.](https://www.mcgill.ca/oasis/academic/courses#:~:text=A%20full%2Dtime%20course%20load,term)%20is%20normally%2030%20credits.)

Practicum and internships are requirements for some programs at McGill like the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) and Bachelor of Nursing (B.Sc.). These field placements provide students the opportunity to apply theories and skills into practice outside the university and in local clinical and practical settings. Field placements can prove challenging for students with disabilities, as they may need to disclose the nature of their illness to their field supervisor for added support.

The survey listed 18 respondents (27.3%) who are completing a field placement versus 48 respondents (72.7%) who are not. Among those who partook in an internship, students indicated that SAA does not provide a clear pathway on how to support students with disabilities in field placements. SAA's capacity to support students completing practicums is limited as it goes beyond the compounds of the university. Students claimed that SAA directed them to speak with their field placement coordinator instead. Respondents stated that they did not know what kind of accommodations to ask from their supervisor and were confused about who to ask for help.

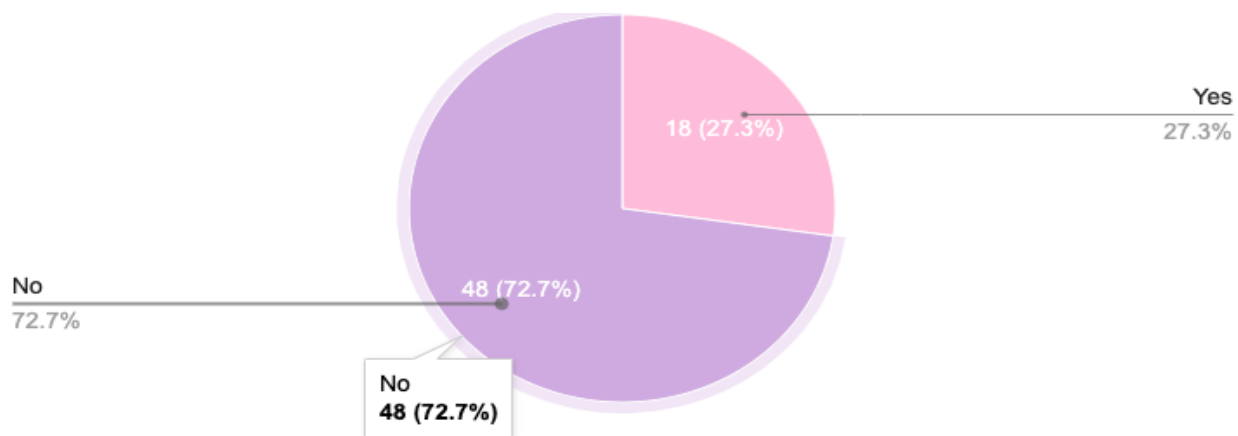


Figure 2. "Are you completing a practicum/internship as part of your degree?"

## Working Students

Working while pursuing undergraduate studies is not uncommon. There are a variety of reasons students work while they are in school. For example, some students work to sustain themselves and pay for their living expenses independently. For students with disabilities, gaining work experience can give them the opportunity to test their skills and develop a sense of confidence and self-advocacy.

Moreover, for students in financial need (including students with disabilities), the Scholarships and Student Aid office at McGill offers the Work Study Program, which gives students access to "clerical, research, technical, library or other jobs on campus or in some of the McGill-affiliated hospitals and organizations."<sup>23</sup> Some of these external organizations may have a mandate and quota to offer jobs to students with disabilities. According to the survey, 28 students (42.4%) responded that they are not working, 3 students (4.5%) responded that they work full-time, 20 students (30.3%) responded that

<sup>23</sup> "Scholarships and Student Aid: Work Study Program," McGill University, Accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.mcgill.ca/studentaid/work-study>

they work part-time, and 15 students (22.7%) responded that they work casually. Figure 3 illustrates that most respondents were not working while pursuing full-time studies.

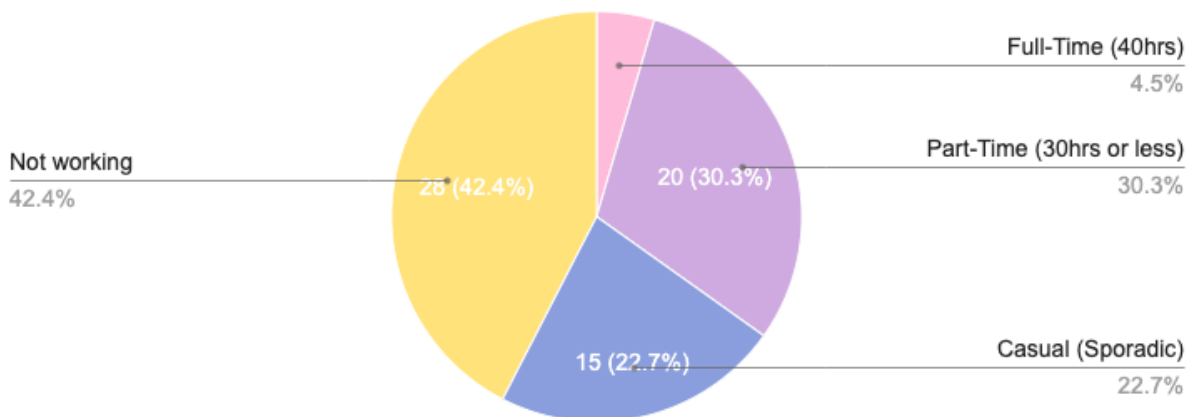


Figure 3. “Are you working full time or part time?”

## Marginalized Identities

SSMU is committed to addressing the specific needs of students with disabilities, especially those of marginalized identities. *SSMU’s Policy on Accessible Education and Academics* acknowledges that “barriers to education disproportionately and predominantly impact members of historically marginalized groups and identities, including, but not limited to: Indigenous students, racialized students, queer students, non-male-identifying students, religious students, students with disabilities, low-income students, first-generation students”<sup>24</sup> and more. It is through inclusion that the university can embrace the difference between members of communities and in turn, provide all students from diverse backgrounds with a sense of belonging. Inclusion prevents systemic oppression in academia and thus it is crucial to understanding the needs of marginalized students.

In conducting this survey, it was important to consider the intersectionality of differing identities and the ways marginalization impacts the learning experiences of students with disabilities. This question on the survey was left optional with the understanding that not all students may wish to disclose their specific marginalized identity. Furthermore, respondents were allowed to select more than 1 answer as students may have several intersecting identities. Among 66 respondents, 62 students replied to this section and 4 students skipped and preferred not to answer.

Figure 4 presents data collected regarding students’ marginalized identities. 39 respondents (62.9%) identified as queer, 42 respondents (67.7%) identified as living with a mental illness, 38 respondents (61.3%) identified as living with a disability or chronic illness, 22 respondents (35.5%) identified as a visible and racialized minority, 13 respondents (21%) identified as working class or low-income and 9 respondents (14.5%) identified as a religious minority. Another 9 respondents (14.5%) identified as a first-generation migrant, undocumented immigrant, or refugee and 9 others (14.5%) identified as trans, non-binary, two-spirit, and gender-nonconforming. Only 1 person (1.6%) identified as

<sup>24</sup> SSMU, *Policy on Accessible Education and Academics*, 2021, p. 1.

Indigenous. Many students identified with 1 or more of the identities listed. Most of this overlap exists between those living with a mental illness and gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, etc. individuals.

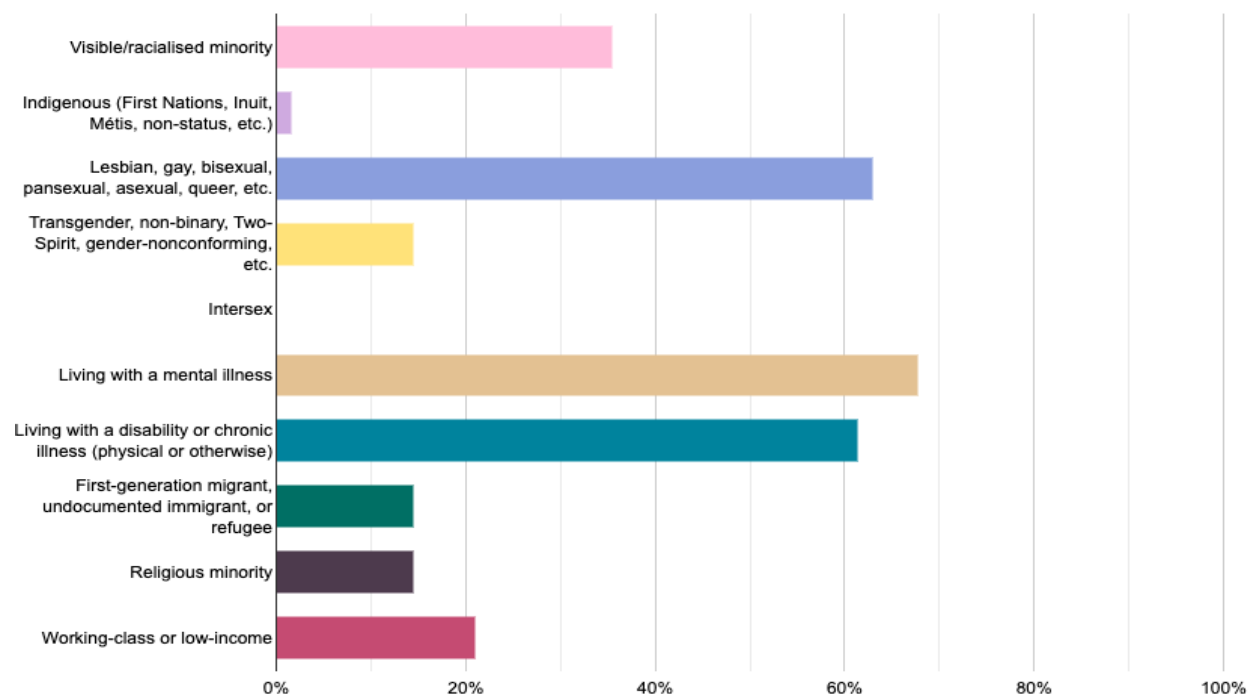


Figure 4. "I identify as..."

## 4.2. Student Experience Navigating SAA

Over the past decade, the number of students registered with the SAA has significantly increased. Despite the large number of affected students, the office currently has 6 Access Services Advisors (with 2 on leave) and 5 Learner Support Specialists, with a grand total of 24 staff at the SAA (outside of Advising and Accommodations and Learner Support, there is Leadership, Exam Team, Tutor Matching Program, General Operations and Frontline Team).<sup>25</sup>

### Registration and Documentation with the SAA

It is important to note that the SAA only works with students who have **documented** disabilities, mental health conditions, chronic health conditions or other impairments which may be temporary, permanent, or episodic.<sup>26</sup> This means that unless students have documentation describing their diagnosis from a health care professional, students cannot register with the SAA and access their services. If students wish to register with the SAA, they have to fill out the Student Accessibility &

<sup>25</sup> "Student Accessibility and Achievement: Contact Us," McGill University, Accessed May 19, 2023, <https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/contact-us>.

<sup>26</sup> "Student Accessibility and Achievement: New Students," McGill University, 2023.

Achievement Referral Form.<sup>27</sup> Once students have obtained their documentation, they can then book an appointment to speak with an Access Services Advisor to discuss their barriers and determine the appropriate resources and accommodations available.

This section of the survey asked survey participants to indicate if they were registered with SAA. Out of 66 respondents, 45 students (68.2%) who responded to the survey indicated that they were registered with SAA whereas 21 students (31.8%) stated that they were not registered. Figure 5 illustrates this ratio accordingly. Out of the 21 unregistered students, the majority found SAA's registration procedure to be a barrier and that the process of obtaining proper documentation was too tedious and not worth the effort while juggling other student responsibilities. In a province like Quebec, obtaining documentation from a medical professional is a privilege as 25% of Quebec residents are without a regular physician. One study further elaborates that the percentage of individuals with no family doctor in Montreal is 32.4%, which is much higher than the average for Quebec.<sup>28</sup> These statistics demonstrate the systemic barrier of accessing a health care professional and the lack of services available to Quebec students who may wish to seek out a medical diagnosis.

Some of the students not registered with SAA stated that they were denied registration due to a lack of sufficient medical documentation. For out-of-province students, they had to travel to their home province to obtain a doctor's note, which can be expensive. This is even more costly for international students. Among the 21 unregistered respondents, some shared how their medical documentation expired and they were unable to renew them and register with SAA again. Others stated that they were awaiting registration due to pending evaluations from medical professionals. Therefore, this study highlights how several students at McGill University cannot access medical documentation. Often, students' only place to access health care services is at the Rossy Student Wellness Hub, walk-in clinics or at hospitals' emergency departments.

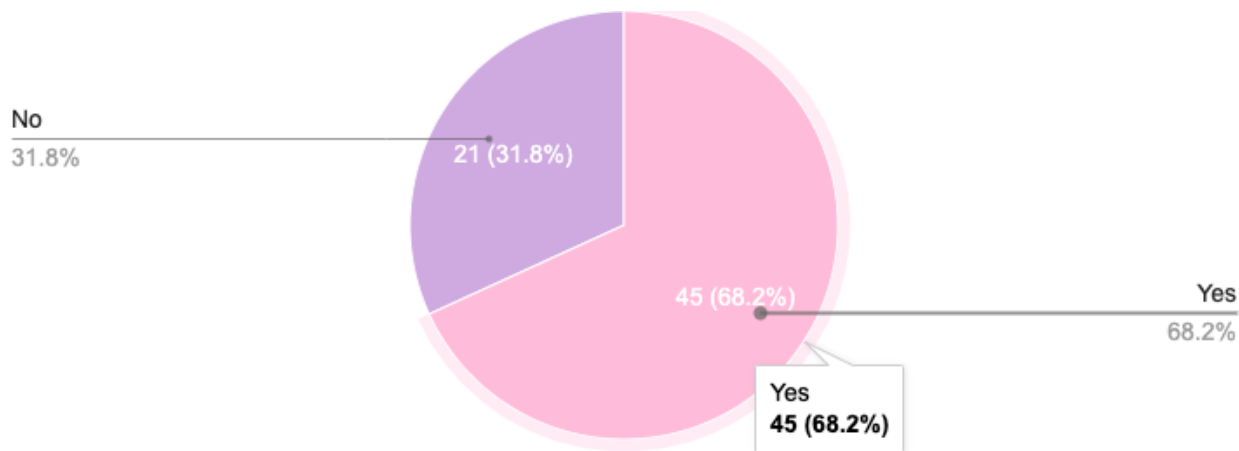


Figure 5. "Are you registered with Student Accessibility and Achievement (SAA)?"

<sup>27</sup> "Documentation & Student Accessibility and Achievement Referral Form," McGill University, Accessed May 19, 2023, [https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/files/access-achieve/saa\\_referral\\_form\\_2022.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/files/access-achieve/saa_referral_form_2022.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> François-Pierre Gladu, "Perceived Shortage of Family Doctors in Quebec: Can We Do Something About It?" *Canadian Family Physician Medecin De Famille Canadien* 53, no. 11 (2007): 1858–60.



*“I was registered only temporarily while I had a concussion. When I was hospitalized for a suicide attempt, my documentation ran out and there were too many hoops to jump through that I just couldn't (and still can't) manage, and I still don't have proper documentation apparently.” - Student*

*“I wanted to become registered, but I don't have enough documentation to get the resources necessary.”  
- Student*

## Accessing Accommodations with the SAA

Once students are registered with the SAA, they are encouraged to review their accommodations every semester. It is during the initial registration appointment that students discuss their accessibility needs with an Access Service Advisor and determine what accommodations are available. Examples include accommodations related to testing and exam writing (i.e., additional time or separate space), note-taking, assistive technology (i.e., speech-to-text and text-to-speech software) and tutoring.<sup>29</sup> These services are only available once medical documentation has been submitted and approved as Services Advisors review these documents and establish an individualized accommodation plan for the student.

### Exam Testing with the SAA

Students registered with SAA can write their assessments in the office. The next set of questions asked students about their accommodations with the SAA. 45 respondents (68.2%) stated that they had to ask for accommodations related to testing and exam writing whereas 21 respondents (31.8%) stated that they did not. Figure 5 and Figure 6 are identical and demonstrate that all students registered with SAA requested accommodations related to assessment writing.

Though some students were satisfied with their testing accommodations, most students indicated being dissatisfied for several reasons. For example, students testing with SAA have frequently received incorrect instructions regarding the location, scheduling, and duration of their examinations. One interviewee described their experience testing with SAA and stated that the office scheduled their exams during their other class time. Another student described being sent to one exam location, only to be relocated to another building due to the classroom being double-booked. Students expressed receiving the wrong midterm and not having adequate access to professors during exams. Another concern raised by students was receiving the exam location notice only one day in advance. This made testing with SAA extremely stressful, and many wished to be given this confirmation detail further in advance.

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<sup>29</sup> “School of Continuing Studies: Student Accessibility and Achievement,” McGill University, Accessed May 15, 2023. <https://www.mcgill.ca/continuingstudies/scs-current-students/scs-student-services/scs-student-accessibility-achievement>.

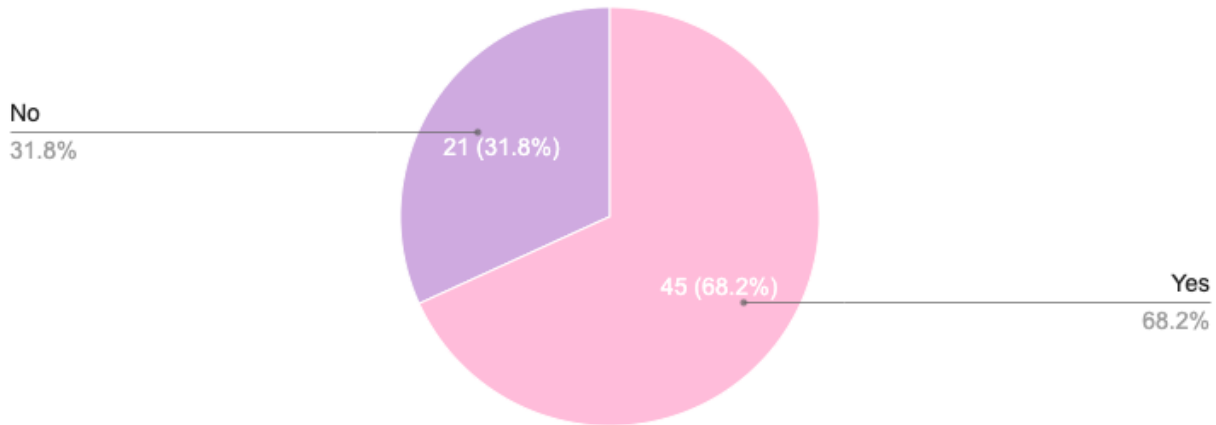


Figure 6. “Have you had to ask for accommodations related to testing/exam writing?”

*“Some of my exam related accommodations were not always provided. For example, for some exams, there were no dividers, or no ear plugs provided.” - Student*

*“I felt like it wasn’t particularly helpful. I went in primarily because of chronic tics with the intention of seeking accommodations related to a separate testing room for my wellness and for the sake of a distraction free testing environment for others - what I was told is ‘They don’t do that for anyone but blind students and gave me cookie cutter accommodations which didn’t really address any of my needs and left me feeling like I wasn’t heard.” – Student*

## Note-Taking with the SAA

Note-taking is a service provided by the SAA where students with disabilities can attain notes from other classmates registered in the same course. Though in the past, students who shared their notes were compensated for their labour, today, note-takers volunteer to share their notes. Instead of financial compensation, student note takers are entered into a raffle to win a \$50 gift card to a McGill service like the McGill Gym or the Le James Bookstore. Since the change in remuneration 4 years ago, various students have reported a decrease in notes available from the SAA.<sup>30</sup> Since 2019, the McGill Tribune has written 2 articles about SAA’s note-taking services and how it falls short to users and volunteers. Though staff at SAA have claimed that the accessibility of the note-sharing program has not been affected by the switch to a volunteer-based service, this research has reported differently.

According to the survey, 28 respondents (42.4%) requested accommodations related to note taking whereas 38 respondents (57.6) claimed they did not. In this section, students were encouraged to share any qualitative feedback related to their experience requesting and receiving these note-taking services. Among the 28 respondents, students shared that since the defunding of note takers, they have not been able to access adequate notes. Without a financial incentive, the number of student note takers has decreased as well as the quality of notes provided. One student claimed that they received notes from a note sharer that left out 80% of the 3hour/week lecture content. Many students

<sup>30</sup> Allie Harrison, “McGill’s volunteer-based note-sharing service falls short according to users and volunteers,” *The McGill Tribune* (Montreal, QC), November 15, 2022, <https://www.thetribune.ca/news/mcgills-volunteer-based-note-sharing-service-fall-short-according-to-users-and-volunteers-15112022/>

reported that they generally never receive notes even after requesting them. This proves problematic as many students with disabilities deserve to be given the same opportunities for academic success without additional financial barriers.

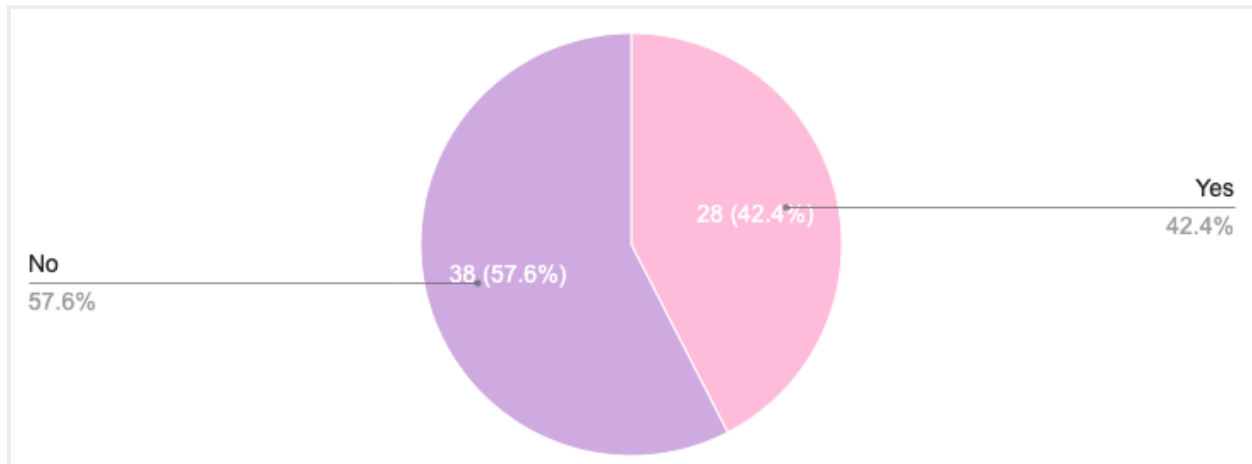


Figure 7. “Have you had to ask for accommodations related to note-taking?”

*“Ultimately, I think the university must pay note takers to ensure quality services and to incentivize students to take it on.” – Student*

*“Never managed to receive note taking services, as no one volunteers to be a note taker without financial compensation.” – Student*

*“Rarely a note-taker available as there is no incentive for them to do so.” – Student*

## Assistive Technology

SAA offers various assistive software and equipment for registered students to use such as Microsoft Office 2010 Professional, Zoomtext and MAGIC & Bigshot Screen magnifiers, JAWS Screen Reader, Open Book Scanning & Reading, WYNN Scanning and Reading, Kurzweil Scanning and Reading, Inspiration, IBM Home Page Reader, Co:Writer, TextHelp Scanning and Reading, Duxbury Braille Translator and PDF Converter. Other assistive equipment available includes CCTV-print enlargers, scanners, 19 and 21-inch computer monitors, tactile image enhancers, adapted keyboards, 4-track tape recorders and FM wireless voice amplification systems.<sup>31</sup>

This section of the survey asked students if they have had to ask for accommodations related to specialized equipment. Figure 8 shows that only 7 respondents (10.6%) indicated that they requested assistive technology, whereas 59 respondents (89.4%) stated that they did not. According to student interviews, students who required assistive technology were students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia and utilized speech-to-text software (i.e., Word to Speech).

<sup>31</sup> “Student Accessibility and Achievement: Access Technology & Computing Resources,” McGill, Accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/student-resources/accesstech>.

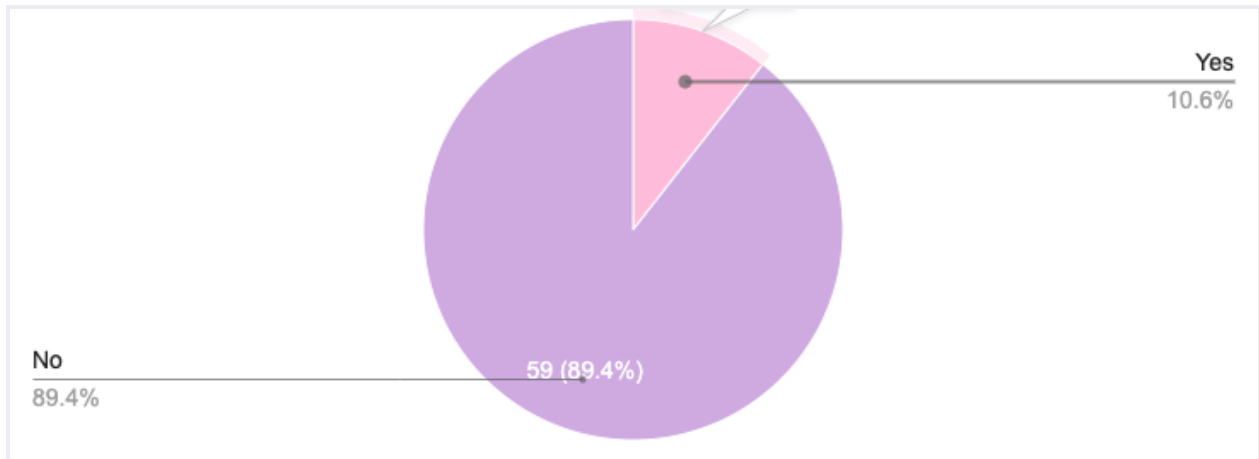


Figure 8. “Have you had to ask for accommodations related to specialized equipment?”

## Tutoring Services

Two years ago, SAA introduced its Tutor Matching Program, a peer tutoring service that pairs requests for academic assistance for any course offered at McGill to SAA’s bank of private tutors. For a fee, students with disabilities can have access to SAA’s tutors, who are also students enrolled in McGill courses. To become a tutor, students must have an A- or higher in the desired tutored course, have a CGPA of 3.2 or higher and complete the Tutor Application form.<sup>32</sup> According to SSA staff member, there have been additional Ministry grants that have now added funding for support that addresses a broader audience of neurodivergent learners who may not meet the government-defined threshold for a documented disability.

The survey asked students if they have asked accommodations related to a tutor and 65 participants answered and 1 participant skipped. Out of 65 participants only 6 respondents (9.2%) stated that they have requested tutoring support and 59 (90.8%) replied they have not.

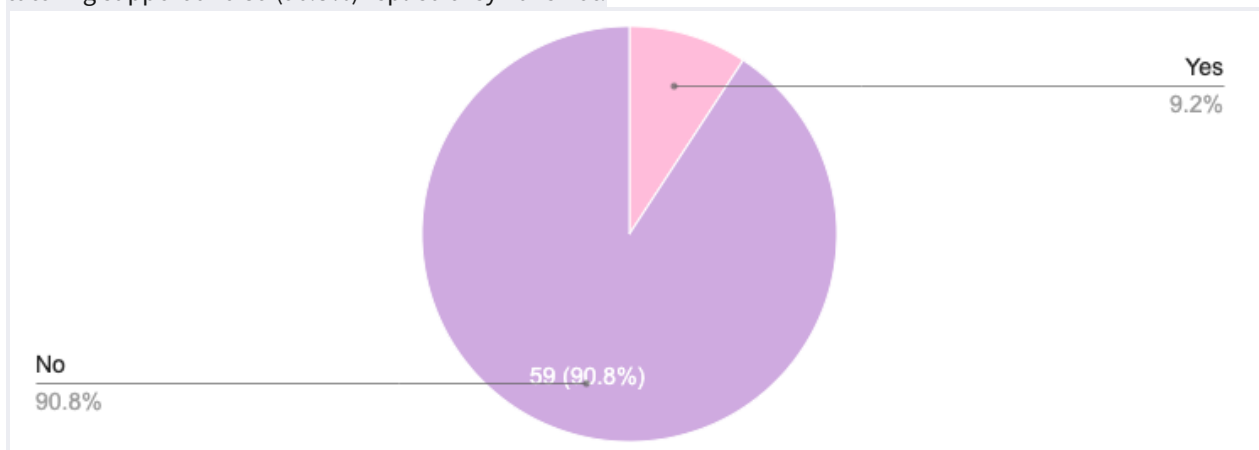


Figure 9. “Have you had to ask for accommodations related to a tutor?”

In summary, the survey asked respondents to indicate what their experience was like in requesting, receiving, and/or not obtaining SAA’s accommodations. 44 students (66.7%) provided qualitative feedback whereas 22 (33.3%) students skipped the section. Out of the students who responded, 22

<sup>32</sup> “Student Accessibility and Achievement: Tutor Application Form,” McGill, Accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/tutor-matching/become-tutor/apply>

students (33.3%) were not satisfied with services provided by SAA and found engaging with the office to be very difficult due to several factors. The common points of dissatisfaction were around the defunding of student note takers, lack of empathy and understanding from Access Service Advisors, long wait times for documentation validation, lack of organization around exam taking, and lack of transparency and clarity on the SAA website. Conversely, 12 students (27.3%) responded that they were satisfied with SAA's services and that the office successfully met their needs. Levels of satisfaction were from friendly and supportive staff. 8 students (12.1%) responded that they found SAA's services to be limited in accommodating their accessibility needs such as lack of assignment accommodations, documentation discrepancy (medical notes provided by a physician versus a psychologist) and professors' discretion.

## Student Opinion on SAA's Name Change

One way to address stigma toward disability is to intentionally use more inclusive language that dignifies people's images and expectations. Formerly known as the Office for Students with Disabilities, Student Accessibility and Achievement adopted its current name after receiving a great deal of feedback over the years from both students and parents. Though there are different points of view regarding the terminology used, the office has been considering seeking a new name for several years. According to the Associate Director of Advising & Learning Supports, the name 'OSD' no longer reflected the breadth of services offered by the office. SAA solicited open-ended feedback from 99 students and adopted its new name after much consideration, aiming to reflect many of the comments they received in their data collection. While the fact that the word 'disabilities' was no longer mentioned in the name, SAA stated most feedback around their name change was positive.

However, this student-led survey garnered very different feedback. 55 students (83.3%) responded to the question on SAA's name change, whereas 11 students (16.7%) abstained from commenting. Out of the 55 students, only 13 (23.6%) students had a positive impression of the name change, claiming that it was more inclusive and empowering. On the contrary 33 students (60%) of students disapproved of the name change. Most students preferred the old name and felt that the term 'OSD' was clear and representative of its target student population. Many students shared that the new name was confusing and that the term 'achievement' connotes academic pressures of success. Others believed that removing 'disability' from the office's title furthers the narrative of shame and that the term 'disability' is not a negative word. Finally, 9 students (16.4%) felt indifferent about the name change and stated it did not make a difference.

*"I don't like how the word "disability" was removed. Disabled people are not ashamed of the term nor their status and the name of the office that exists to support them should reflect and promote the visibility of disabled students (not mask it)." - Student*

*"I understand the reason for the change, although it completely beats the purpose of a more inclusive name when the school always states, "previously known as Office of Students with Disabilities." This only reminds the public of this presumptive and offensive name which should no longer be used. Is this not the point of changing the name to a more optimistic, encouraging outlook for students needing the centre's support?" - Student*

## ClockWork

ClockWork is a new online portal and application SAA uses for student accommodation requests since the fall 2022 semester.<sup>33</sup> In the past, students would have to email the SAA office with their request and await a response from a staff member. Now, students can use ClockWork to directly book an appointment with an advisor, review and confirm their accommodations, schedule a test or exam, access a calendar, request and access alternate formal files, and request and access notes (see Image 1). SAA's website provides a breakdown on how to complete each of these tasks and includes detailed instructions.<sup>34</sup> ClockWork also provides an option for instructors to upload test information and a copy of the exam.

This section of the survey asked participants to state if they have used the new ClockWork system. 35 respondents (53%) stated they had used ClockWork whereas 31 respondents (47%) stated they had not. 33 students provided qualitative feedback on ClockWork, with the majority stating it is better than the previous system. Since its implementation, several students have reported ClockWork to have an outdated interface, calling it “clunky.” Some have reported on glitches in the new system and stated that ClockWork was hard to use at first. During the qualitative interviews, one student suggested making a video tutorial on how to use ClockWork as the SAA website predominantly caters to written learners as opposed to kinesthetic and auditory learners. Overall, feedback has been positive, and students prefer using ClockWork as it is faster and more streamlined.

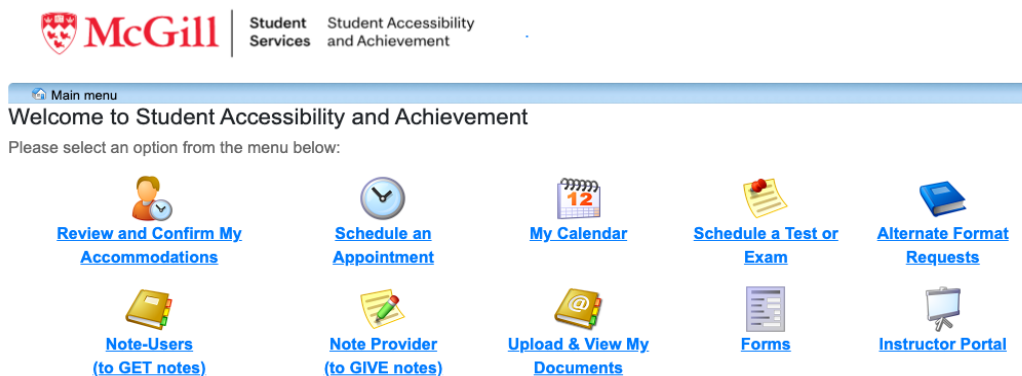


Image 1. ClockWork Interface

<sup>33</sup> “Information Technology Services: About: ClockWork Portal,” McGill University, Accessed May 18, 2023, [https://mcgill.service-now.com/itportal?id=kb\\_article\\_view&sysparm\\_article=KB0012344&sys\\_kb\\_id=3f42f0ed87706550e925fcc7dabb3555&spa=1](https://mcgill.service-now.com/itportal?id=kb_article_view&sysparm_article=KB0012344&sys_kb_id=3f42f0ed87706550e925fcc7dabb3555&spa=1)

<sup>34</sup> “Student Accessibility and Achievement: ClockWork,” McGill, Accessed May 18, 2023, <https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve/clockwork>

### 4.3. Student Experience with Mental Illness

In Canada, mental illnesses are the most prevalent type of disability (8%) among youth ages 15 to 24 years old.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, since the emergence of the (COVID-19) pandemic, more Canadian undergraduate students are reporting symptoms of mental illness and are being prescribed psychotropic medication.<sup>36</sup> The McGill Census reported that 1,072 students (59.3%) self-identified as a person with a mental health disorder (e.g., depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia).<sup>37</sup> More and more students on campus are struggling with their mental health and it is imperative that they receive the adequate services to manage their mental wellbeing. Over the past several years, SSMU has advocated for increased mental health supports on campus as students continue to navigate social and academic pressures within post-secondary institutions. These statistics highlight the importance of policies such as the *Mental Health Policy and Plan* and *Guiding Principles for Campus Mental Health*. Thus, it is SSMU's long-term goal to address the challenges students face within academia and to move towards a shift in university culture to ensure campus-wide wellness.

#### Diagnosis

This researcher wanted to investigate the number of students engaged with SAA who self-identified as having a mental illness and observe if SAA staff were trained and equipped to treat students with other invisible disabilities such as autism and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In this section, the researcher asked if students have been formally diagnosed with a mental illness. Out of 66 respondents, 65 replied and 1 skipped. 43 respondents (66.2%) stated that they have been formally diagnosed with a mental illness, whereas 22 respondents (33.8%) stated they have not been formally diagnosed. Among the 43 respondents, 26 (60.5%) identified having a mood disorder (Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, etc.), 35 (81.4%) identified as having an anxiety disorder (Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Agoraphobia, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, etc.), 6 (14%) identified having a personality disorder (Borderline Personality Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, etc.), 1 (2.3%) identified as having a psychotic disorder (Schizophrenia, Schizoaffective disorder, etc.), and 7 (16.3%) identified having another mental illness. Of the 22 respondents who were not diagnosed, half of them stated that they were awaiting further evaluation from a psychiatrist or psychologist.

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<sup>35</sup> "Canadian Survey on Disability – Reports A demographic, employment and income profile of Canadians with disabilities aged 15 years and over, 2017," IDAC, Accessed May 20, 2023, <https://www.idac-acta.ca/canadian-survey-on-disability-reports-a-demographic-employment-and-income-profile-of-canadians-with-disabilities-aged-15-years-and-over-2017/>

<sup>36</sup> Kathryn Matsushita and Nicholas Grubic. "Bridging the Gap: Considerations for the Design of Effective and Tailored Student Mental Health Supports," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 68, no. 2 (2023): 130–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07067437221125303>.

<sup>37</sup> Nycum, *Report on the Biennial Results of the Student Census*, 2023, p. 16.

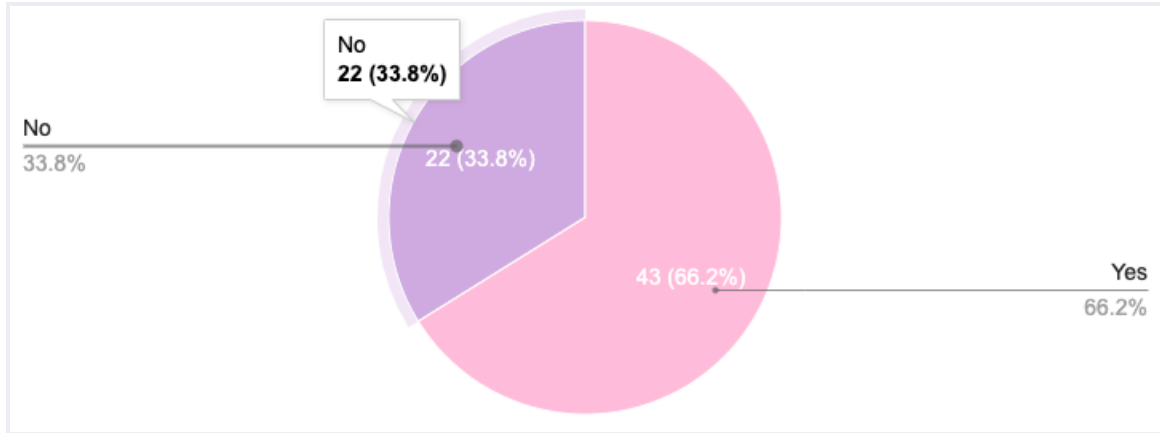


Figure 10. "Have you been formally diagnosed with a mental illness?"

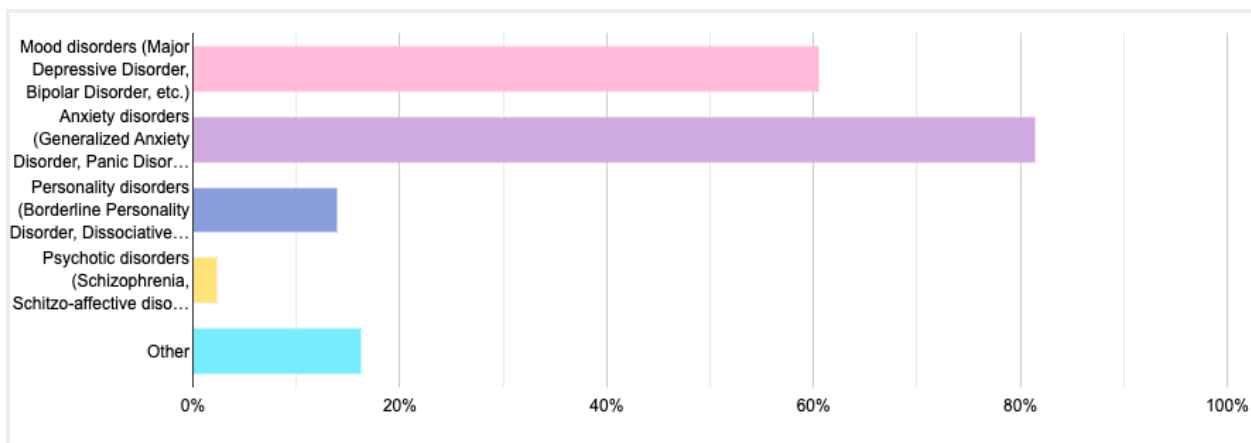


Figure 11. "If you have been formally diagnosed with a mental illness, please select all that apply."

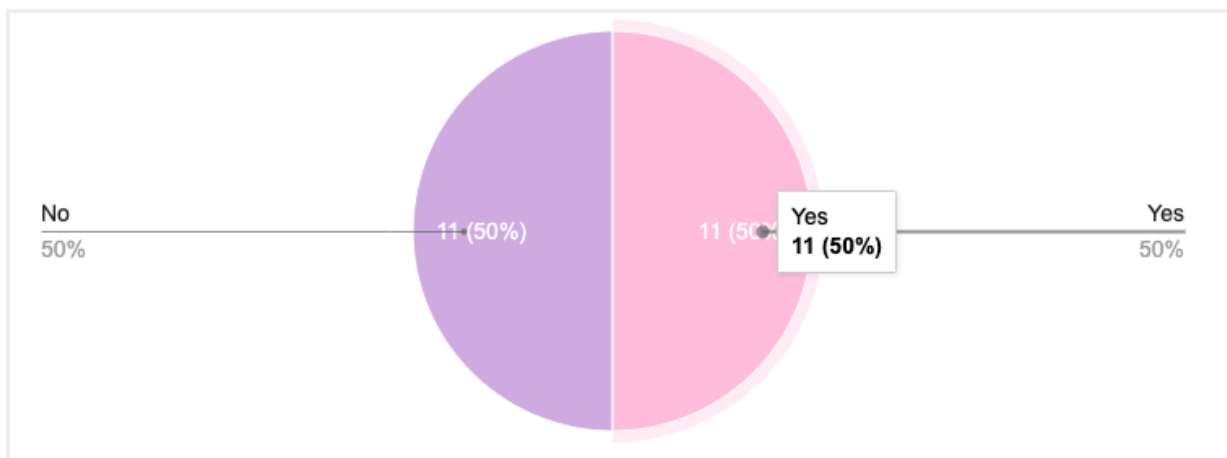


Figure 12. "If you are not diagnosed, are you waiting to see a mental health professional for a formal diagnosis? (Psychiatrist or Psychologist)"



## Mental Wellness

Following the *Preliminary Report and Summary of Survey on Remote Learning and Mental Health*<sup>38</sup>, many students have continued to manage their mental health through various coping mechanisms. This researcher thought it was relevant to include this question in the survey to garner a strength-based approach on students' ability to self-regulate. As highlighted in the UDL, self-regulation is a key component of engagement that considers the reason students retain interest in their studies and other aspects of their life. Especially for students with disabilities, it is important to promote one's resourcefulness in managing their health, emotions, and motivations. As aforementioned, self-regulation ensures that learners can develop the skills necessary to engage on campus with increased confidence.<sup>39</sup>

Survey participants were allowed to select more than one answer. 58 respondents indicated that they cope with their mental health by spending time with loved ones (87.9%). 40 respondents indicated that they spend time outdoors (60.6%). 37 respondents indicated that they talk to a mental health professional (56.1%). 32 respondents highlighted that they exercise and engage in creative and artistic activities (48.5%). 30 respondents stated that they bake or cook to self-regulate (45.5%). 26 respondents indicated that they take psychotropic medication to manage their mental health (39.4%). 23 respondents stated that they consume substances (34.8%) and 4 respondents selected "Other" (6.1%).

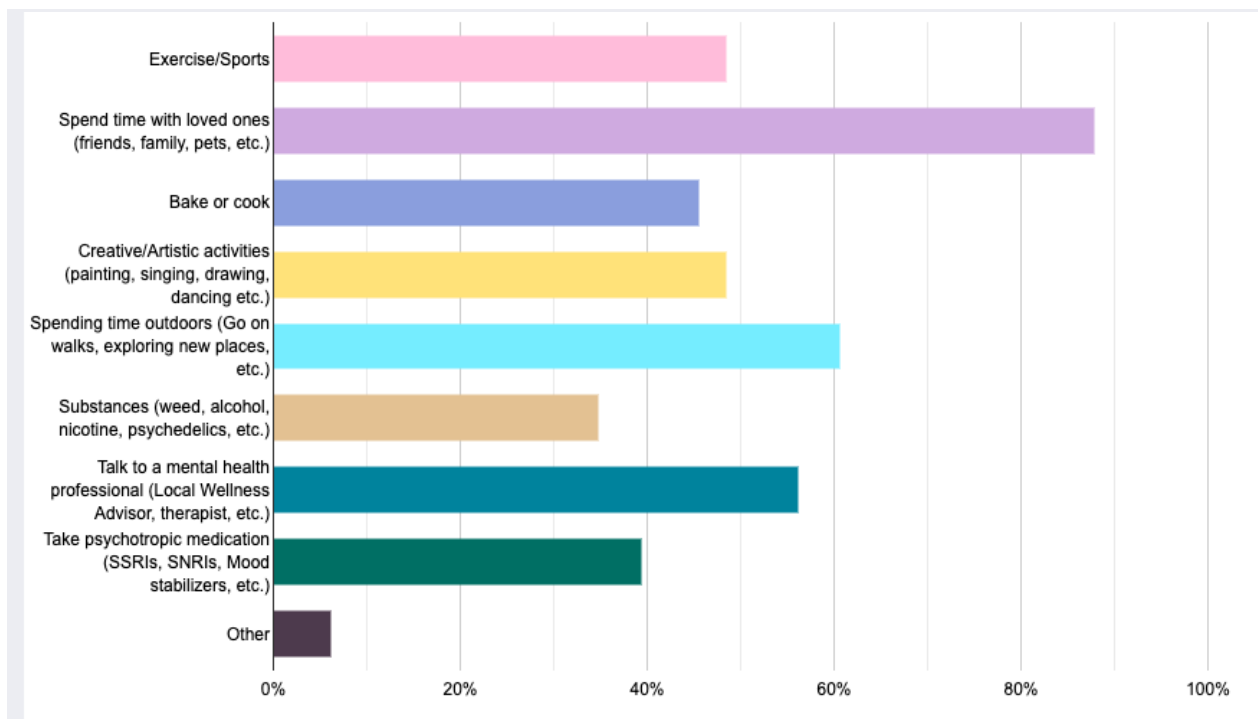


Figure 13. "What are some things you do to improve your mental wellness this semester?"

<sup>38</sup> Mo Rajji Courtney, "Preliminary Report and Summary of Survey on Remote Learning and Mental Health" *Mental Health Advocacy Coordinator, SSMU* (2020): 10-11.

<sup>39</sup> "Engagement," CAST, 2023,

## Campus Resources

This section of the survey wanted to investigate if students with disabilities utilized services on campus to manage their mental health. Students were then invited to provide further qualitative feedback on their experience navigating these services on campus, including the SAA and the Rossy Wellness Hub. Regarding the SAA, some students indicated their need to reduce their course load due to them struggling with their mental health. For students who wished to reduce their course load, they discussed the process of having to go to their health care professional and obtain medical documentation supporting their decision to reduce their course load and come up with a plan to deal with the potential consequences (i.e., losing their scholarship status, taking summer classes and more). Other students shared their experiences with SAA staff who invalidated their concerns and the lack of clarity within their services.

*I originally signed up with OSD in first year as I was struggling with my mental health and had to take a reduced course load which threatened the renewal of my scholarship. The scholarship desk told me I had to go to OSD, and they would know how to help me so I went to OSD, and they said that the scholarship people should know. It eventually got figured out, but I sincerely hope that SAA now has protocol for that situation as this was a very frustrating situation especially given that I was in crisis. – Student*

*“An administrative worker in the exam office suggested I was lying about my exam or accommodations when I approached the office with questions about my upcoming exam. Learning the details of your exam two days prior is not enough time to find solutions if there is a problem with them. It would be good to get this confirmation notice with details further in advance.” – Student*

*“I am unsure if SAA accommodates for mental illness. If so, I wish this was clearer” – Student*

Another respondent explained that they attempted suicide twice during the holidays due to mental health struggles and not getting the proper accommodations. This demonstrates the dire need to ameliorate mental health resources on campus. Further qualitative data supports the idea that prevention is key to addressing the mental health crisis on campus and ensuring that all students are safe and have access to equitable education. This report aims to highlight the barriers identified within these services and improve access and the quality of its services.

Most feedback was given about the Rossy Wellness Hub (Hub), which began its operation in July 2019.<sup>40</sup> Though this report is focused on services provided by the SAA, it is important to understand the barriers addressed within the Hub as it also falls within the jurisdiction of Student Services. Especially considering the lack of access to health care professionals at the Hub, some students articulated their frustration with being unable to obtain an appointment. This may look like getting an assessment to obtain medical documentation to register with the SAA, refilling medication and more. Most of the concerns were also around access to psychiatry and the long wait list. This report aims to continue to push student-driven feedback and advocacy to the forefront of institutional conversations.

*“Very hard to get wellness hub appointment and I do not feel very heard by my psychiatrist” – Student*

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<sup>40</sup> Students' Society of McGill University, *Mental Health Policy and Plan 2020-2023*, Montreal, QC: SSMU, 2020, (accessed March 17, 2023).

*“I tried using the My SSP app to see a counsellor because I heard from friends how difficult it is to get an appointment through the Wellness Hub. I used their chat line to get a referral to a counsellor but still haven't been able to secure an appointment.” – Student*

*“They were largely unhelpful and just told me I was fine and should join one of their groups. I have a psychiatrist that has followed me for several years at the Hub and he's decent, but our conversations are usually under 5 minutes, and he just refills my meds.” - Student*

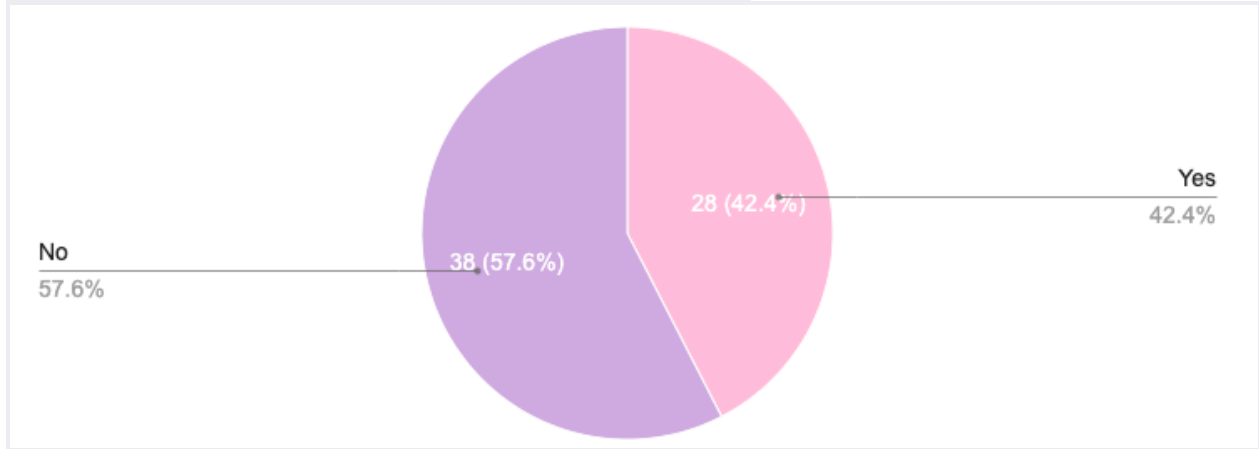


Figure 14. “Have you used any of the mental health resources at McGill this academic year?”

Though there are various concerns regarding the SAA and the Hub, there is some student feedback that is positive. 11 respondents responded that they would recommend these resources to other students. One student further shared their positive experience with the Hub’s sexologist. Students also provided positive feedback regarding the Peer Support and Local Wellness Advisors.

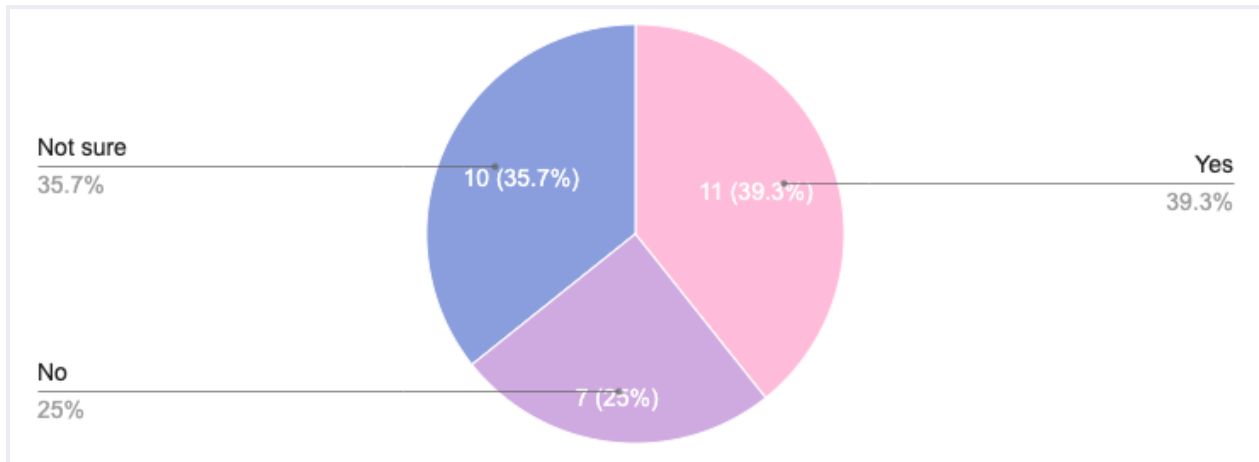


Figure 15. “Would you recommend any of these resources to other students?”

## 4.4. Scaling Questions

### Stress

The survey then asked students to respond to scaling questions around their stress level, mood, energy levels and concentration level from a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest). This is most relevant for students attending McGill University, of Canada's most prestigious post-secondary schools where it is common to experience increased levels of stress. Stress serves as the number one factor in North America in influencing students' mental health outcomes as it negatively impacts their academic performance, attention span, postgraduate prospects and more. Among 66 survey participants, 21 respondents (31.8%) reported a 5 (very high stress level), 28 respondents (42.4%) reported a 4 (high stress level), 12 respondents (18.2%) reported a 3 (medium stress level), 4 respondents (6.1%) reported a 2 (low stress level) and 1 respondent (1.5%) reported a 1 (very low stress level). The total average stress level experienced by students surveyed was 3.97. It is important to note that this data was collected during the winter exam season and results may be influenced by the number of assessments, time management and more.

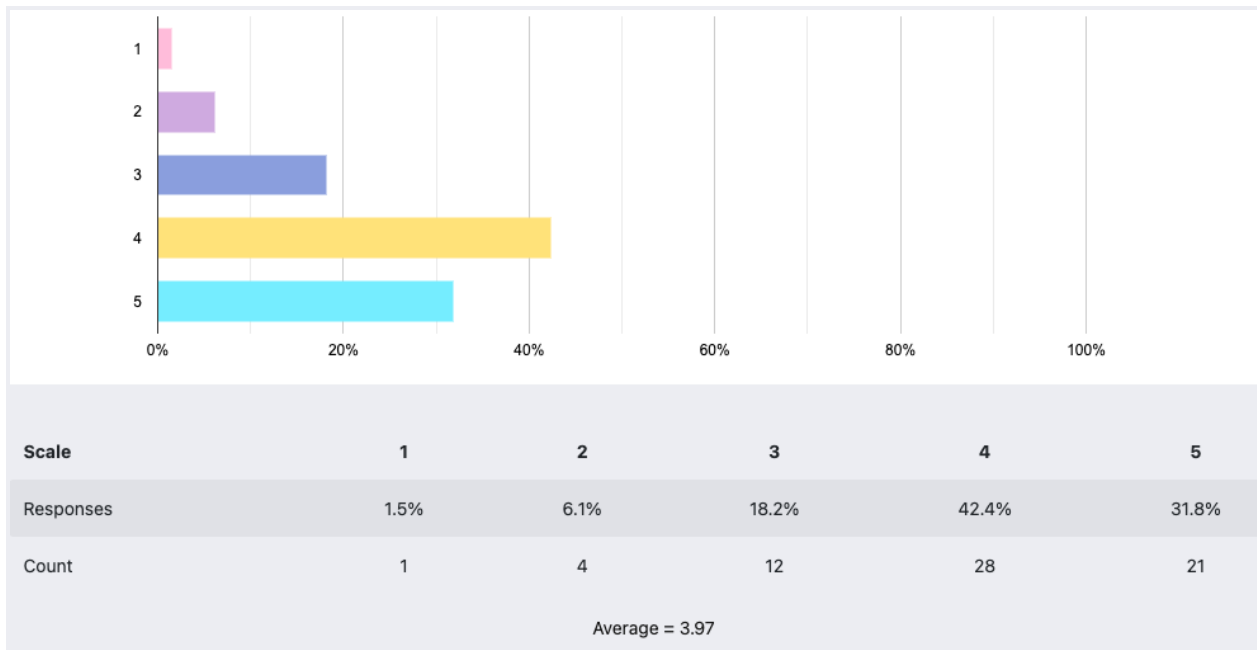


Figure 16. "What is your current stress level on a scale of 1-5?"

### Mood

Regarding overall mood, 2 respondents (3%) reported a 5 (very high mood), 7 respondents (10.6%) reported a 4 (high mood), 25 respondents (37.9%) reported a 3 (mediocre mood), 24 respondents (36.4%) reported a 2 (low mood), and 8 respondents (12.1%) reported a 1 (very low mood). The average mood experienced by survey participants was 2.56. These statistics can be connected to the average of 26 respondents (60.5%) out of 43 who identified as being diagnosed with a mood disorder. 32 respondents provided further feedback of the length of time they have felt that way. Many stated that they have had a low mood for years whereas some indicated for several months. Another student

explained that since coming to university in fall 2021 and moving from another country they have felt isolated and lonely. Feelings of isolation and loneliness are not uncommon for many international and out-of-province students, who leave their families behind to pursue their studies.

*I've had a poor mood for most of my life, and I haven't been able to seek help for personal and family reasons. It's definitely become worse with the pressures of student life at university, and feeling isolated and distanced from living in a different province hasn't helped. – Student*

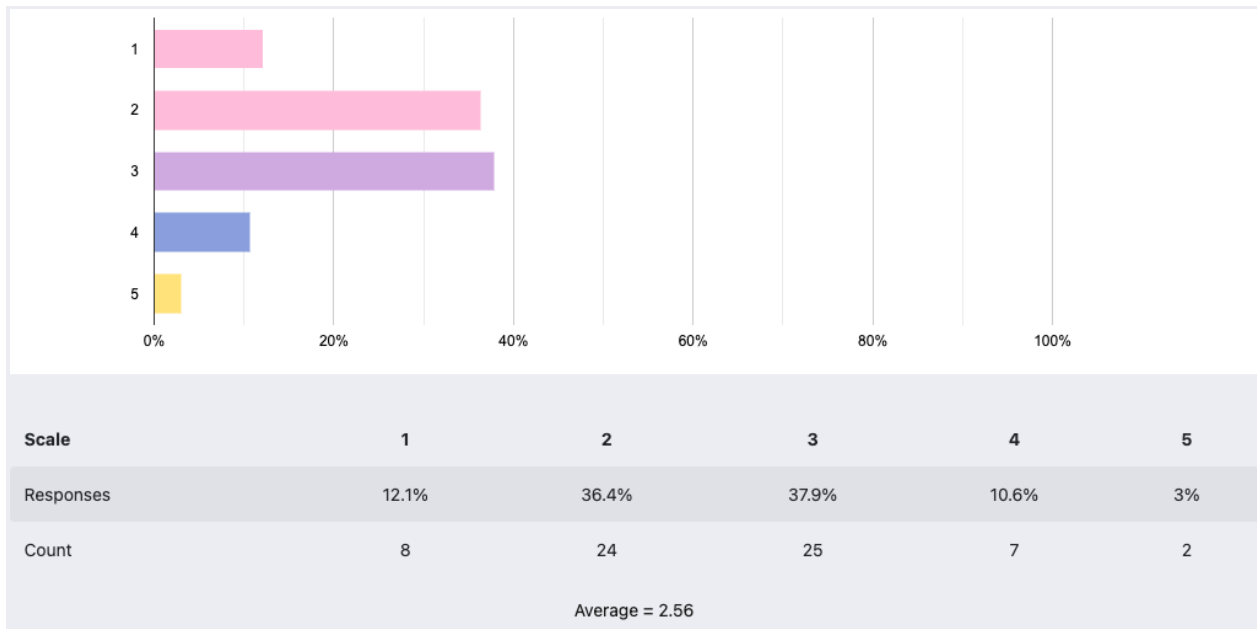


Figure 17. “What is your mood level on a scale of 1-5?”

## Workload and Concentration

Just recently, McGill University has implemented a Fall Reading Week after several student advocacy efforts and cross-campus consultation. This has given students the opportunity to manage their workload and lower student stress levels.<sup>41</sup> Since its implementation in 2021, this researcher wanted to investigate the impact the McGill workload has on students’ mental health and levels of concentration. This survey asked respondents to indicate on a progressive scale (never to always) if they had had trouble concentrating on things such as completing assignments and studying in the past week. It is important to note that the results in this section of the survey were gathered during the month of March and the beginning of April 2023, the period for final assessments. 26 respondents (39.4%) indicated that they always had trouble concentrating, 33 respondents (50%) indicated that they often had trouble concentrating, 5 respondents (7.6%) indicated that they sometimes had trouble concentrating and 2 respondents (3%) indicated that they rarely had trouble concentrating. Nobody indicated that they never had any issues concentrating on schoolwork. During qualitative interviews, 2 interviewees diagnosed with ADHD explained their struggles paying attention in class. One discussed their difficulties maintaining their concentration during class lectures and when writing exams. Though both students were registered with SAA, they mentioned how SAA only provided

<sup>41</sup> Ashley Thorup, “Fall Reading Break Research, Towards a Mental Health Perspective,” SSMU, (2019):1-2.

accommodation for exam testing and not assignments. Furthermore, other students indicated that increased workload and lecture times have contributed to a need for accommodations. 33 respondents (50%) indicated that their McGill workload always impacted their mental health, 22 respondents (33.3%) indicated that their workload often impacted their mental health, 10 respondents (15.2%) indicated that their workload sometimes impacted their mental health and that 1 respondent (1.5%) indicated that their workload rarely impacted their mental health. Many stated that they felt overworked and tired by assignments and exams.

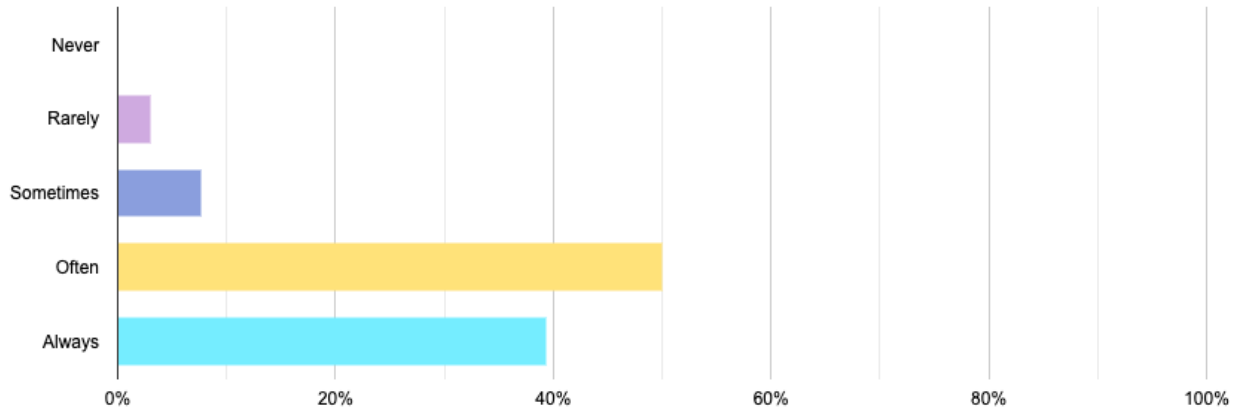


Figure 18. “How often have you had trouble concentrating on things such as completing assignments or studying in the past week?”

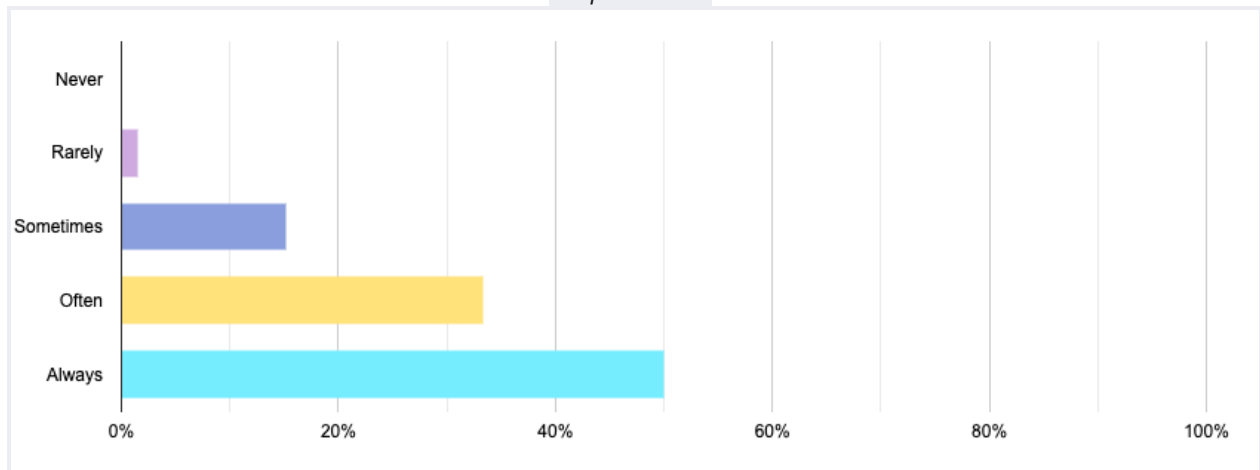


Figure 19. “Does your McGill workload impact your mental health?”

## Professor Engagement

SAA gives students the ability to notify their professor of their accommodation plan at the start of every semester. This process is optional and allows for professors to identify which student in their class is registered with SAA. The survey asked students how accommodating their professors are in supporting their accessibility needs and Figure 20 illustrates the results. Out of 66 survey participants, 4 responded always (6.1%), 19 responded often (28.8%), 29 responded sometimes (43.9%), 11 responded rarely (16.7%) and 3 responded never (4.5%). Though some professors try to be accommodating to their students, there is no standardization for accommodations across departments and professors in different faculties. It has been voiced by students that some professors

ignore the accommodations highlighted by SAA and that they do not design courses with accessibility in mind. For professors who are willing to be accommodating and knowledgeable about SAA's services, students have reported positive experiences.

*“Depending on the professor, it could be easy or be made an obstacle.” – Student*

*“I received exam accommodations but the main thing I needed was assignment accommodations, but the SAA does not offer that, and professors are reluctant to” – Student*

*“I had to specifically make these requests to teachers, and they would assess on an individual basis.”- Student*

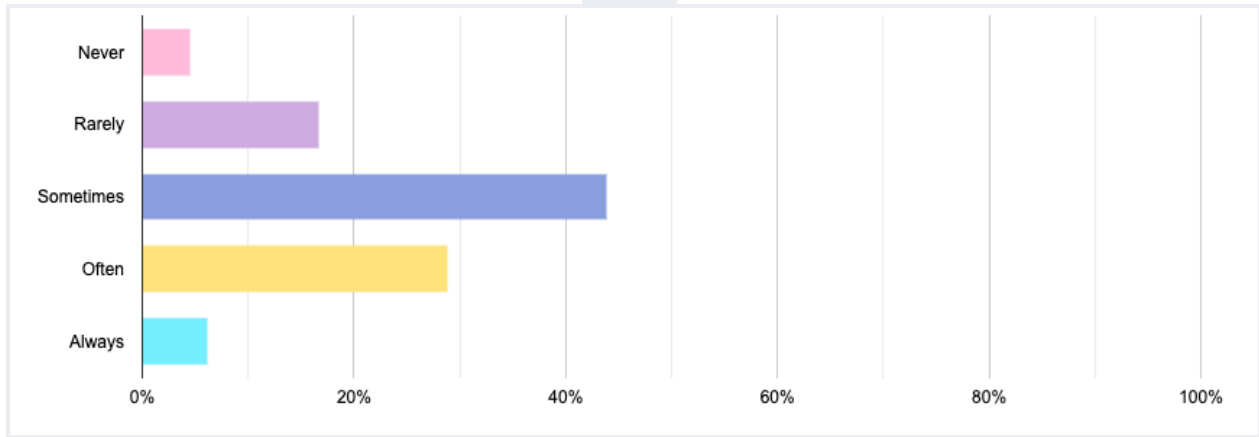


Figure 20. “How accommodating are your professors in supporting your accessibility needs?”

## 5. KEY THEMES AND TRENDS

This report highlighted key findings in student accessibility and accommodations on campus. These themes should be used to inform positive changes to ameliorate the overall wellbeing of students with disabilities and their academic success while navigating student services on campus, including the SAA.

- **Obtaining medical documentation is very challenging** in Quebec with the limited number of physicians available, including at the Rossy Wellness Hub. Students have articulated that they don't have access to a health care practitioner (specifically a physician and psychiatrist) to obtain the documentation to register with the SAA. As a result, many students who self-identify having a disability are left without the necessary resources to complete their studies and manage their health effectively.
- **There is a lack of incentive of providing high quality notes** as note sharers are no longer financially compensated for their time and labour in spending additional time formatting and organizing their notes. The volunteer framework and being entered into \$50 raffle is not effective in ensuring that all students with disabilities obtain the notes necessary to engage in an equitable learning environment.
- **Not all professors respect and listen to their students' accommodation requests.** There is a lack in standardization across faculties regarding accommodation requests. There are some professors who honour SAA's accommodations whereas other professors are reluctant to offer accommodations to their students. This is assessed on an individual basis and students are given the option to self-disclose their registration with the SAA to their professors, which leads to increased feelings of vulnerability and stigmatization.
- **Disorganized assessment writing with the SAA.** Students have resoundingly reported that writing their assessments with the SAA has caused additional stress due to varying factors related to testing organization and access to professors. For example, students have reported receiving incorrect instructions on the location of their exam, having scheduling conflicts, experiencing noise disturbance and more. Students have also explained how they are unable to ask their professors questions during examinations due to the lack of established contact between the invigilator and the teacher.
- **Students' do not feel heard.** Though there are some students who have reported positive experiences navigating the SAA, a large majority of survey respondents feel that their concerns are being ignored. This is especially regarding the inability to access SAA's services without medical documentation and the inability to access physicians at the Wellness Hub.
- **Clockwork is a significant improvement** from the previous booking system. Students have reported positive experiences using the new platform. Though there are some glitches in the system, students have shared their appreciation for a standardized online tool to manage their accommodation requests.



## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This report is a crucial part of student participation in policy and highlights the importance of adhering to *McGill University Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities*. Clause 19 notes that students with disabilities play an active role in formulating policies related to their needs.<sup>42</sup> This report was written based upon preliminary survey responses as they gave a clear direction for recommendations going forward. These recommendations come from survey responses and qualitative interviews and can be used to ameliorate accessibility on campus. Therefore, this report recommends the following actions:

1. Address the Barrier of Medical Documentation
2. Reinstitute Paying Student Note Takers
3. Mandate UDL Training for all Professors
4. Support Field Placement Learning
5. Improve Data Collection and Assessment for Future Funding

### **1. Address the Barrier of Medical Documentation**

To improve accessibility of current and future students with disabilities, there must be adequate support measures in place to ensure that all students get the help they need. This report has demonstrated the concerns of students who self-identify having a disability and who have struggled to obtain the proper medical documentation to register with the SAA. The SAA should consider alternate avenues of approving accommodation requests for those who are temporarily awaiting further evaluation. This looks like moving away from medicalizing and pathologizing model of assessing disability and moving towards a social and universal model of assessing disability. This may also look like having a resource in place to consider the concerns of those who self-diagnose as a person living with a disability. This may also look like mandating UDL framework in all classrooms to meet the needs of diverse learners and assessing them based of their learning style.

### **2. Reinstitute Paying Student Note Takers**

The SAA should increase collaboration with student societies to figure out a more cost-effective way to have good-quality notes as the volunteering framework is not effective to meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities. The previous compensation model should be reinstated to ensure that all students with disabilities receive notes and that note sharers are adequately compensated for their labour. Another alternative would be to register online recordings of lectures so that all students can have access to teaching materials should they need to revise and revisit the course material.

### **3. Mandate UDL Training for all Professors**

Like the mandatory online sexual violence education program “It Takes All of Us,” the university should implement an obligatory training of the UDL framework for professors. This would ensure a campus culture of inclusion based on respect and accessibility to help create a community free of ableism. The

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

training should follow the CAST Guidelines and use character-driven scenarios to teach important topics surrounding accessibility and its impact on student learning. My mandating a UDL education program, this would eventually improve compliance among professors and enable them to design courses with accessibility in mind. SAA can develop better strategies to get more professors to follow their accommodation plans such as creating workshops and meeting with them.

#### **4. Support Field Placement Learning**

Students partaking in practicum have articulated the need for accommodations in their field placements. The SAA and field placement coordinators should work together to provide students with disabilities workshops and trainings to better integrate into the workforce. This can look like video modules and other resources to learn how to self-disclose to supervisors and potential employers. This can also look like having workshops on disability rights within the workforce and educating students on their rights prior to entering the field.

#### **5. Improve Data Collection and Assessment**

This document serves as a preliminary report and suggests that SSMU follow-up on student concerns regarding the SAA. Future data collection should be conducted to gather more student input about their experiences with accessibility on campus, including the Macdonald Campus. This researcher suggests further qualitative and quantitative data collection to obtain future glimpses of student experiences in regard to the changes adopted by the SAA.

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## 8. APPENDIX

### Survey Questions

1. PART 1 - STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS - This section consists of questions about yourself, your year of study and identity.

#### 1.1. Please select which faculty you belong to\*

*Ex: Faculty of Arts*

- Faculty of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences
- Faculty of Arts (Ex: Max Bell School of Public Policy, School of Social Work, Bieler School of Environment, School of Information Studies (SIS), School of Religious Studies)
- Faculty of Arts and Science
- School of Continuing Studies
- Faculty of Dental Medicine and Oral Health Sciences
- Faculty of Education
- Faculty of Engineering
- Faculty of Law
- Faculty of Science Business and Management
- Schulich School of Music
- Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (Ex: School of Communication Sciences & Disorders, Ingram School of Nursing, School of Biomedical Sciences, School of Medicine, School of Physical & Occupational Therapy, School of Population and Global Health)
- Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
- Other

#### 1.2. What year of study are you in?

\* Please select one answer.

- U0
- U1
- U2
- U3
- Grad school
- Alumni
- Other

#### 1.3. Are you a full time or part time student? \*

- Full-Time
- Part-Time

#### 1.4. Are you completing a practicum/internship as part of your degree?

- Yes
- No

#### 1.5. Are you working full time or part time? \*

- Full-Time (40hrs)
- Part-Time (30hrs or less)

- Casual (Sporadic)
- Not working

**1.6. If you are working/completing practicum, about how many hours do you work per week? (Only answer if you selected YES in Question 1.5)**

**1.7. I identify as...**

*(Please check all that apply. If you do not wish to answer, please skip to next question)*

- Visible/racialized minority
- Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit, Métis, non-status, etc.)
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, etc.
- Transgender, non-binary, Two-Spirit, gender-nonconforming, etc.
- Intersex
- Living with a mental illness
- Living with a disability or chronic illness (physical or otherwise)
- First-generation migrant, undocumented immigrant, or refugee
- Religious minority
- Working-class or low-income

2. PART 2 - EXPERIENCE WITH THE OFFICE FOR STUDENT ACCESSIBILITY AND ACHIEVEMENT (SAA) - This section asks questions about your experience with SAA.

**2.1. Are you registered with Student Accessibility and Achievement (SAA)? \***

- Yes, I am registered.
- No, I am not registered.

**2.2. If you replied 'NOT REGISTERED' in the previous question, please indicate the reason. (Ex: I tried to, but SAA did not approve my application because I did not have sufficient documentation)**

**2.3. Have you had to ask for accommodations related to testing/exam writing?**

- Yes
- No

**2.4. Have you had to ask for accommodations related to note-taking?**

- Yes
- No

**2.5. Have you had to ask for accommodations related to specialized equipment?**

- Yes
- No

**2.6. Have you had to ask for accommodations related to a tutor?**

- Yes
- No

**2.7. What was your experience in requesting and receiving or not receiving these accommodations? Please skip if you do not wish to answer.**

**2.8. What do you think about the name change, from being the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) to being the Student Accessibility and Achievements (SAA)?**

*Please skip if you do not wish to answer.*

**2.9. Have you used the new ClockWork system?**

- Yes
- No

**2.10. What was your experience using ClockWork?**

*(Ex: It is better than the previous system)*

**2.11. Is there anything else you'd like us to know about your experience with Student Accessibility and Achievement? Please skip if this question does not apply.**

3. PART 3 - MENTAL ILLNESS - These questions are about your experiences living with mental illness and navigating campus resources.

**3.1. Have you been formally diagnosed with a mental health illness?** *Please Skip if you do not wish to answer.*

- Yes
- No

**3.2. If you answered YES, please select all that apply.** *Please only answer if you replied to Question 3.1.*

- Mood disorders (Major Depressive Disorder, Bipolar Disorder, etc.)
- Anxiety disorders (Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Agoraphobia, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, etc.)
- Personality disorders (Borderline Personality Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, etc.) Psychotic disorders (Schizophrenia, Schitzo-affective disorder, etc.)
- Other

**3.3. Would like to specify?** *(Ex: Mood Disorder - I have Major Depressive Disorder)*

**3.4. If you are not diagnosed, are you waiting to see a mental health professional for a formal diagnosis? (Psychiatrist or Psychologist)** *(Ex: I am waiting to see a doctor because I feel like I have no motivation and I'm feeling depressed)*

- Yes
- No

**3.5. What are some things you do to improve your mental wellness this semester?** \* *Please select all that apply*

- Exercise/Sports Spend time with loved ones (friends, family, pets, etc.)
- Bake or cook
- Creative/Artistic activities (painting, singing, drawing, dancing etc.)
- Spending time outdoors (Go on walks, exploring new places, etc.)
- Substances (weed, alcohol, nicotine, psychedelics, etc.)
- Talk to a mental health professional (Local Wellness Advisor, therapist, etc.)
- Take psychotropic medication (SSRIs, SNRIs, Mood stabilizers, etc.)
- Other

**3.6. Have you used any of the mental health resources at McGill this academic year?** *(e.g. Peer Support, Nightline, Local Wellness Advisors, Wellness Hub)* \* *Ex: I have been using the McGill Student Nightline*

- Yes
- No

**3.7. What was your experience like? Did you experience any challenges accessing these mental health resources?** *(Ex: It is hard to get an appointment at the Wellness Hub, when I finally saw a psychiatrist, I got my medication changed)*

**3.8. Would you recommend any of these resources to other students?** \* *Please skip if this question does not apply*

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**3.9. What are ways in which McGill and SSMU could expand and improve their support for students in regard to their mental health?** *Please skip if this question does not apply.*

4. PART 4 - SCALING QUESTIONS - The following are scaling questions relating to your personal experiences with mental illness/symptoms, with 1 being the lowest/least to 5 being the highest/most.

**4.1. What is your mood level on a scale of 1-5?** \* *1 being lowest mood (sad), 3 being neutral, 5 being highest mood (happy)* 1 2 3 4 5

**4.2. How long have you felt this way?** *Please skip if this question does not apply.*

**4.3. What is your current stress level on a scale of 1-5?** \* 1 2 3 4 5

**4.4. How often have you felt tired or had little energy in the past week?** \*

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes

- Often
- Always

**4.5. How often have you had trouble concentrating on things, such as completing assignments or studying in the past week? \***

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

**4.6. Does your McGill workload impact your mental health? \***

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

**4.7. How accommodating are your professors in supporting your accessibility needs? \***

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

**4.8. Does your job/internship impact your mental health? \*** *Please select 'does not apply' if you do not have a job/internship.*

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always
- Does not apply

**4.9. If you have a job or internship, how accommodating are your supervisors in supporting your accessibility needs? Please skip if you do not have a job/internship.**

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

**4.10. Does your financial situation contribute to your level of stress? \***

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

**5. Is there anything you would like to add?**