



The Office of Diversity & Human Rights Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Education Resource

Intersectionality & Disability

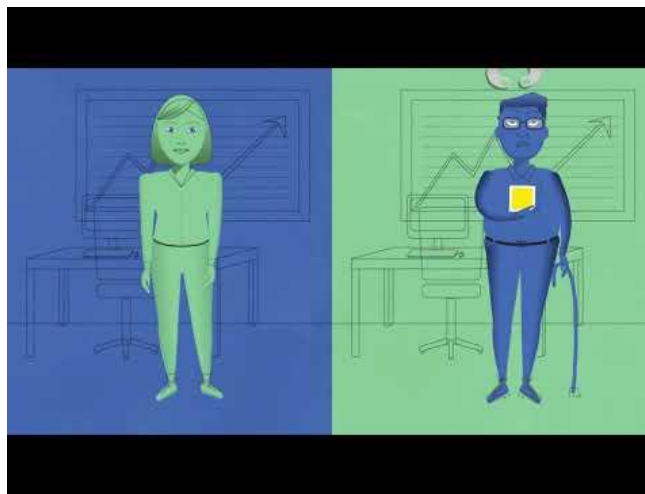
What is intersectionality and why is it important?

The term “intersectionality” was first coined by American civil rights advocate and law professor [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#). It can be defined as “a framework or prism for understanding the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect to create unique barriers and lived experiences for people with multiple marginalized identities”.

Intersectionality acknowledges that systems of oppression are complex and best understood when considering historical context, and the present-day relationship between identities and societal norms or systems. These systems cannot be considered in isolation.

The following video from Newcastle University further describes the concept of intersectionality.

[What is intersectionality?](#)



Policies and programs that center an intersectional framework are more inclusive and efficient at meeting the needs of equity-deserving groups. Intersectionality ultimately allows us to better understand and respond to discrimination by exposing the various forms of systemic oppression.

How do people with disabilities experience discrimination differently based on their other identities?

The [Ontario Human Rights Commission](#) has long recognized that “the concept of intersectional discrimination recognizes that people’s lives involve multiple interrelated identities, and that marginalization and exclusion based on Code grounds may exist because of how these identities intersect.... Particular stereotypes may arise based on the intersections between these identities that place people at significant disadvantage.” The following



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are just a few examples of how persons with disabilities may face particular barriers due to other aspects of their identity.

Disability and Race

Research published by Statistics Canada shows that disabilities are more prevalent amongst Indigenous communities in comparison to the rest of the population, and Indigenous persons with disabilities have been subject to discriminatory treatment while accessing healthcare services. In 2008, an Indigenous man named Brian Sinclair, died while awaiting medical treatment at a Manitoba hospital. Following the inquest into his death, a report was released ([Ignored to Death](#)) which suggested that the lack of medical treatment was in part due to unconscious racial bias and assumptions that were made about him due to his Indigeneity. Sinclair was assumed by some to be drunk and homeless, when in fact he was seeking medical care for a treatable bladder infection. Sinclair died in the emergency room after waiting 34 hours.

Disability, Sexuality, and Gender

An individual with a disability who is also queer may have trouble accessing events or services offered within the LGBTQ2SIA+ community, causing them to feel isolated or further disadvantaged. Those with visible and physical disabilities may be adversely impacted or devalued if they don't meet societal expectations regarding desirability that are found to exist within queer communities.

In a 2016 survey on mental health, sexual minority women, bisexuals and trans persons were twice as likely to have their mental healthcare needs unmet as compared to heterosexual and cisgender women. Untreated depression amongst sexual minorities has been identified as a form of systemic discrimination within healthcare. Moreover, higher rates of disabilities were found amongst women, as compared to men.

Disability and Age

Based on a 2017 survey on disabilities amongst the Canadian demographic, Statistics Canada reported that seniors ages 65 and over were almost twice as likely to have a disability than those ages 25 to 64 years old. While anyone can have a disability at any age, the prevalence of disabilities has been shown to increase overtime with age. The societal and attitudinal barriers that limit persons with disabilities are further compounded by ageism, as both older adults and persons with disabilities are subject to stereotypes and assumptions about their ability to function effectively. Both groups face low employment rates.

How can we apply an intersectional lens to our work?

1. **Understand diverse identities.** Identities are not singular and distinct nor are they static. Think about the intersecting identities of the people you engage with or may engage with. It is likely they will have multiple identities that shape their lived experience. [Pause for Reflection](#) is a simple activity from the University of North Carolina to help acknowledge intersectionality.
2. **Stop and reflect.** We all come to the table with our own assumptions and biases. Examine your own unconscious biases about people. For example, think about how you define a “good” student or staff member. Consider what aspects of your definition are based on norms of disability, race, gender, or other



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identities ([Schalk 2023](#)). Watch this [video](#) about unconscious bias and consider taking the trainings in the “Additional Resources” section.

3. **Include Accessibility in your I-EDI conversation.** Too often, approaches to Indigenization, equity, diversity, and inclusion (I-EDI) fail to make an explicit link to accessibility. All these things should be considered together, while keeping in mind that accessibility is not an endpoint but a process.
4. **Meaningfully engage with communities.** Carefully examine the sources that you are relying on to develop your understanding of an issue. Invite, include, and centre voices of those who may not always be considered the “experts”, but possess the kind of knowledge that can only come from lived experience. Remember that not all people who share similar identities have the same lived experiences, perspectives, or values.
5. **Develop some knowledge of [Universal design](#).** Universal design means products, environments, programmes, and services are designed to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Inaccessible design – of physical spaces, learning, and communications - can produce multiple intersectional forms of exclusion.

Additional Resources

Concepts of power, privilege, and intersectionality are complex. The following trainings and activities are suggested to supplement this resource.

1. **[Equity Essentials: Intersectional Allyship](#):** Participants will reconnect with baseline knowledge about power, privilege, identity, and intersectionality, and explore what allyship means on the ground. Contact DHR to request this training.
2. **[Opposing Oppression: Building Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Competencies](#):** This session provides concrete suggestions for identifying and interrupting oppressive behaviours. Contact DHR to request this training.
3. **[Inclusive Language Handbook\(Coming Soon!\)](#):** This resource will give you an understanding of foundational I-EDI concepts and how to engage in respectful dialogue with and about equity-deserving communities.
4. **[Building Community eBook](#):** This resource helps readers to recognize systems of oppression that manifest in our society, and encourages us to work proactively, consciously, and continuously to interrupt oppression.
5. **[Principles of Belonging: Anti-Oppression & Anti-Racism](#):** This online training module provides participants with an introduction to equity and inclusion on campus and four broad core anti-oppression principles that are applicable across a broad range of identities.



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6. [Accessible Service Provision](#): This online training module aims to provide participants with the understanding of customer service standards under the Accessibility with Disabilities Act (AODA), how to identify barriers to accessible customer services, and how the Ontario Human Rights Code as it relates to persons with disabilities.

Recognizing the intersecting identities of every member of our community helps to build the necessary resources and supports to create a university environment where everyone experiences an authentic sense of belonging.

Resources used in the creation of this Guide.

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Elisa S Abes and Michelle M. Wallace. "People See Me, But They Don't See Me: An Intersectional Study of College Students with Physical Disabilities." *Journal of College Student Development*, Volume 59, Number 5, September-October 2018. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/703297>

Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear. "Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, Volume 4, Number 2, 2010. <https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/20934>

Sami Schalk. "Inclusion in Action: Understanding Black Disability Justice: Advancing Disability Justice in Postsecondary Contexts." University of Toronto. Webinar. <https://www.dlsph.utoronto.ca/event/inclusion-in-action-understanding-black-disability-justice-advancing-disability-justice-in-postsecondary-contexts/>

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<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2018002-eng.htm>

University of Guelph, Office of Diversity and Human Rights Resource Library, “Inclusive Language Handbook”.

University of Massachusetts. Diversity, Intersectionality, and Disabilities. <https://www.umassp.edu/inclusive-by-design/who-before-how/diversity-intersectionality-and-disabilities>

University of North Carolina School of Information and Library Science. Disability & Libraries Toolkit. Module 1, Section 1.3 “Intersectionality.” <https://cedi.unc.edu/dl-toolkit-intersectionality/>