

STEPping into the future

The STEP program at UNB helps to ensure students with disabilities get the proper training to help make the transition into the workforce

by Lauren Kennedy

After a three year pilot program, Jane Howard, the Transition Coordinator of STEP (Successful Transition to Employment Program), is pleased that the program will continue at UNB.

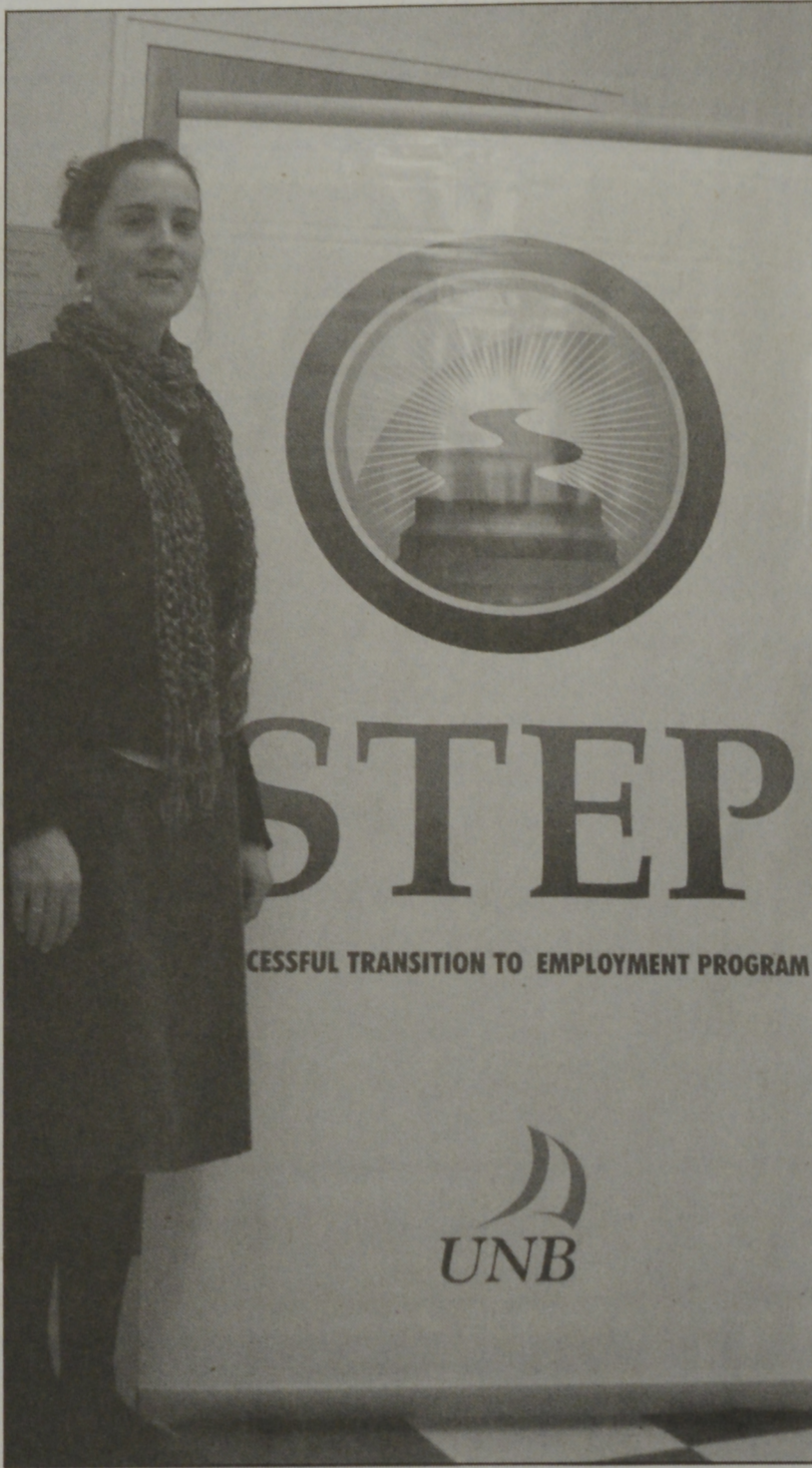
"The program has been sustained but we will still be continuing to look for funds to keep the program sustainable," she said.

The program works in partnership with the UNB Student Accessibility Centre, Easter Seals New Brunswick, and TD Canada Trust, a company which donated \$25,000 to help continue the program at UNB.

STEP provides services to over 60 students a year and pairs students who have a wide variety of disabilities with mentors who are in the student's specific field, for example, an engineering student would be paired with a graduate student working in the field which the student would like to one day get into.

The main focus of the program is to work with students at the level they are at, explained Howard.

"We work with students who are at very early stages of their university careers, right up to students who are preparing to graduate. The skills they learn can be very different depending on where they are in their own specific stage," she said. "It's a very self directed program and students work on job skills that are paired to their own needs. It's not a cookie cutter approach by any means."



Andrew Meade / The Brunswickian

Lindsay Welsford, Technology Mentor of the STEP program at UNB helps students ease into an easy transition in the work place

STEP works with employers in the community to raise awareness around employing students with disabilities and offers conferences throughout the year on what types of accommodations that are available to employers. Howard explains more.

"Individuals with disabilities, in

terms of statistics, are lower in terms of finding employment than the general population. At our conferences, we try to dispel some of the commonly held myths around hiring a person with a disability."

The perception, according to Howard, that STEP sees a lot of is that employers believe there would be more human resources that would have to be put in place to employ a person with a disability. But she says that is not the case, and that often there can be very small types of accommodations that can be manageable within the employer's budget and also in terms of flexibility.

They work very closely with many different employers, mostly with banks and particularly with TD. They provide funding as well as job shadow opportunities for students and help with providing workshops. However, at

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this point, STEP is not using the word "internship" to describe what students get to experience in the program; they use the word "job shadow".

"We're not at this stage using the word 'internship' - we are looking at the future and hoping to work with employers who do provide internships. We have, on the other hand, been using the word 'job shadow' for now, but that doesn't mean that in the future, we couldn't be looking to have more substantial opportunities for students," explained Howard.

So far, Howard has said that the program has experienced some very positive feedback from students who have participated, and as far as she knows, the program here at UNB is the only one of its kind.

No obstacle is too big

by Naomi Osborne

University is a time of enlightenment for every student, even those who may have to overcome unexpected obstacles in their everyday lives.

Both St. Thomas University and the University of New Brunswick are dedicated to ensuring that every student is able to stay on the same playing field with each other when it comes to both education and accessibility. Each campus has departments that focus on providing the best services to students who need them most.

Director of Student Life at STU, Jane McGinn works with students who have added challenges in their lives, and she says she is amazed by them.

"I know students with physical and academic challenges and they astound me with their determination, good humour, and assertiveness," said McGinn. "I'm in awe of them."

She works alongside with Marina Nedashkivska, the Coordinator for Student Accessibility at STU. Together, they work with students on an individual basis to hear what their specific needs are.

"Our job is to make sure all our students have the opportunity to learn and grow," said McGinn. "It is great to see them all being successful."

Some of the needs turn out to be simple ones, such as hiring a student to take notes for a person who is hearing impaired, or hiring a student to guide a person who is visually impaired around the campus. Many of these obstacles are easily fixed because everyone on this campus is good at working together.

"We are a community, we are all here together so that people can learn and grow," said McGinn. "If there are barriers, we need to figure them out and fix them. It's all about leveling the playing field."

In order for students to be hired for one of these jobs, they first have to go through a training program and sign a confidentiality agreement. It is very important for them to take it seriously because they are signing up to help one of their fellow students with issues that may be private.

Shirley Cleave is the Chair of the Accessibility Committee at UNB, and their services are very similar to the ones provided at STU. Both campuses help students who may have difficulty learning or writing exams by providing a quiet place for them to write their exams.

Cleave says it is important for students to realize they could find themselves at any time in a situation where they need some type of help.

McGinn says that one of the most rewarding things is that these services allow students to improve.

"Every student improves. If you're a student with an obstacle and you try to go straight ahead, you [might find you] can't go through that brick wall. You need to find a way to either go under or around it."

McGinn and Cleave both feel it is important for students to be aware that at any time, they could find themselves as the one who is in need of certain accessibility services.

It is not only the academic side of accessibility that is important, though - the physical side is just as concerning. One of the biggest problems that STU faced when the new building, Margaret Norrie McCain Hall, was built was providing access for all students from the lower level of campus, said McGinn.

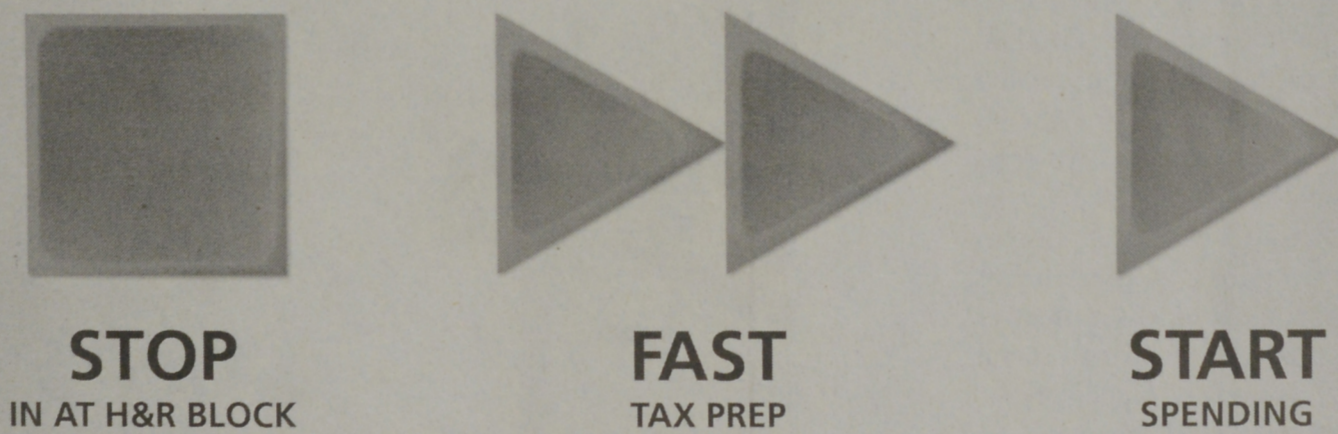
Campus has been made accessible for all students, including those with wheelchairs. With McCain Hall, the newest building built on STU's campus, the opportunity to provide a larger elevator presented itself and it was immediately taken.

"It is important because it is possible that someone with a larger wheelchair could come to the university, and we want to be able to accommodate them," said McGinn.

Even though the STU campus is very accommodating and wheelchair accessible, winter is still an obstacle that is much too big.

The important thing to realize is that by making campus accessible to people who are facing challenges, it is ultimately making accessibility better for everyone, said McGinn.

"Not one of us is perfect; we have to strive to be perfect. You have to keep pushing, improving, growing, and changing."



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