

FROM COMPLIANCE TO CO-DESIGN: TRANSFORMING ACCOMMODATION SERVICES AT A CANADIAN COLLEGE THROUGH A PEOPLE-CENTRED SERVICE DESIGN AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT APPROACH

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Abstract

This study explores the transformation of academic accommodation services at a Canadian post-secondary institution through the integration of service design, systems thinking, and critical disability theory in the people-centred systems change (PCSC) framework. Using a mixed-methods approach combining interviews, operational data, and co-design sprints the research examined how outdated, compliance-driven models can evolve into values-based, learner-centred systems. Key interventions included a tiered intake process, self-directed renewal options, and faculty development modules, resulting in reduced wait times, increased user satisfaction, and improved operational efficiency. Findings highlight how student experience can serve as a leverage point for systemic change and demonstrate that meaningful redesign is possible even within complex institutional environments. This case contributes to growing scholarship on equity-informed service innovation in higher education.

Keywords: accessibility services, service design, systems thinking, post-secondary education, student affairs

Résumé

Cette étude explore la transformation des services d'accommodements universitaires dans un établissement postsecondaire canadien par l'intégration de la conception de services, de la pensée systémique et de la théorie critique du handicap dans le cadre du changement systémique centré sur les personnes. À l'aide d'une approche mixte combinant des entretiens, des données opérationnelles et des sprints de coconception, cette recherche examine comment des modèles basés sur des principes de conformité dépassés peuvent évoluer vers des systèmes centrés sur l'apprenant et guidés par des principes d'équité et d'inclusion. Les principales interventions comprenaient un processus d'admission à plusieurs niveaux, des options de renouvellement autodirigé et des modules de perfectionnement pour le corps enseignant, entraînant une réduction des délais d'attente, une satisfaction accrue des utilisateurs et une meilleure efficacité opérationnelle. Les résultats mettent en évidence la façon dont l'expérience des étudiants peut jouer un rôle de levier dans le changement

systémique et démontrent qu'une transformation en profondeur est possible, y compris dans des environnements institutionnels complexes. Ce cas contribue à l'enrichissement des connaissances relatives à l'innovation dans les services fondée sur l'équité dans l'enseignement supérieur.

Mots clés : Services d'accessibilité, conception de services, pensée systémique, enseignement postsecondaire, affaires étudiantes.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of post-secondary education over the past two decades has brought unprecedented diversity to our campuses, making academic accommodation services critical to both student success and institutional resilience (Colleges Ontario, 2017; Eisenberg et al., 2016; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2010; Parekh et al., 2024; Stanton et al., 2016; Tobin & Behling, 2018). While rising accommodation requests signal progress in reducing stigma and enhancing disability awareness (Case et al., 2024; Lanthier et al., 2023; Madaus et al., 2024; Schoper & French, 2021), this surge has exposed fundamental inadequacies in conventional service models. Current systems remain trapped within medicalized, compliance-driven frameworks that privilege documentation over dignity and procedural efficiency over educational equity (Davis, 2013; Dolmage, 2017; Fovet, 2019; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Minich, 2016; National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2018).

PROBLEM

These reactive approaches fail to address students' intersecting academic, social, financial, and health barriers (Charlton, 1998; Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2024; Shalka, 2024), perpetuating ableism through siloed services despite evidence supporting universal design and co-design approaches (Case et al., 2024; Hamraie, 2020; Lanthier et al., 2023; Thompson & Francis, 2025). As Heath (2020) argues, meaningful change requires shifting from reactive problem solving to addressing root causes upstream. Yet few institutions have embraced system-wide transformation that centres student agency and

dismantles procedural barriers (Minich, 2016; Newton et al., 2025; Siddiqui, 2023; Strimel & Francis, 2023).

PURPOSE

This case study presents the people-centred systems change (PCSC) framework as a scalable model for transforming accommodation services from compliance-focused gatekeeping to inclusive, people-centred design. Through examining one institution's journey from reactive to proactive service delivery, we demonstrate how equity-informed practices advance accessibility as a fundamental right while strengthening student, employee, and organizational well-being across student affairs divisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is structured across three interconnected domains: post-secondary accessibility trends and gaps, service design and organizational change, and critical disability theory and inclusive design.

Post-secondary accessibility trends and gaps are well-documented in empirical and policy reports that illuminate the limitations of current accommodation models, including excessive documentation demands, underfunding, poor interdepartmental coordination, and long wait times (Case et al., 2024; Lanthier et al., 2023; Madaus et al., 2024). These barriers disproportionately affect multiply marginalized students whose intersecting identities exacerbate access challenges (Case et al., 2024; Ontario University and College Health Association, 2017; Sins Invalid, 2019; Toutain, 2019). Despite

institutional commitments to inclusion, many practices remain reactive and exclusionary. Bartolo et al.'s (2025) international study reinforces these concerns, highlighting student calls for empowerment-centred systems and authentic participation in shaping supports. In response, Thompson and Francis (2025) advocate for accessibility offices to adopt culturally responsive, socially just, and equity-aligned approaches.

A consistent critique across the literature centres on the dissonance between institutional rhetoric and students' lived experience. Compliance-driven models marked by narrow eligibility criteria, bureaucratic gatekeeping, and limited accommodation menus reproduce ableist norms and restrict meaningful inclusion (Davis, 2013; Kraus, 2021; Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2010; Shalka, 2024; Toutain, 2019). Students without social, financial, or cultural capital are particularly disadvantaged. When accommodations are framed as "special treatment," learners may be perceived as burdens rather than valued members of the academic community. Furthermore, inconsistent faculty engagement continues to undermine student trust and success (Hamraie, 2020; Tobin & Behling, 2018; Toutain, 2019; Ontario University and College Health Association, 2017; Fovet, 2019), underscoring the need for transparent, proactive, and student-co-designed redesign processes.

Service design and organizational change frameworks have gained traction in response to these institutional gaps. Rather than retrofitting accommodations, approaches such as universal design for learning (UDL) and human-centred design (HCD) aim to structurally redesign systems to support diversity by default. These models emphasize proactivity, co-creation, and usability for all, shifting attention away from individual deficits and toward system responsibility.

Service design is increasingly used in higher education to transform operational models (Allworth et al., 2021; Newton et al., 2025). Tools such as service blueprinting, journey mapping, and empathy mapping make invisible barriers visible and actionable (Bitner et al., 2012; Roberts, 2021; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). These

methods intentionally surface user experience data, guiding institutional change that centres care, equity, and usability. Notably, co-design practices recognize students as knowledge holders, shifting power dynamics in how services are built and evaluated.

This shift from individualized casework to system-level strategies affirms the value of participatory, justice-oriented models. Techniques such as stakeholder engagement and iterative testing build trust and responsiveness into service ecosystems. For instance, Tobin and Behling's (2018) "Plus One" UDL strategy and Siddiqui's (2023) participatory toolkit exemplify how small, scalable interventions can embed equity into everyday decision making.

Critical disability theory and inclusive design further deepen these design-based approaches by reframing disability as a social, political, and cultural construct rather than a deficit to be fixed. Scholars such as Charlton (1998), Dolmage (2017), and Price (2024) reject medicalized conceptions of disability, emphasizing instead the structural roots of exclusion. The social model of disability, rooted in activism and extended by Shakespeare (2013) and Goodley (2014), underscores that disability arises when environments fail to accommodate human diversity. Support must therefore address relational and political dimensions of access, prioritizing agency, dignity, and interdependence (Hamraie, 2017, 2020; Hamraie & The Critical Design Lab, 2020; Minich, 2016; Schoper & French, 2021).

Accessibility within this lens is not a fixed outcome, but rather a dynamic, collective process. It challenges dominant norms of independence and meritocracy, instead embracing care-based, flexible, and anti-oppressive practices (Hamraie, 2020; Price, 2024; Sins Invalid, 2019). Compliance-focused systems not only reinforce ableism but also produce institutional harm, particularly for students whose experiences of disability intersect with other systems of oppression (Bartolo et al., 2025; Fovet, 2019; National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2018; Toutain, 2019).

Intersectionality is essential to this reconceptualization. Disability cannot be separated from race, gender identity, mental health, or class (Davis, 2013; Ontario University and College Health Association, 2017; Sins Invalid, 2019). The lived experiences of students with invisible and episodic disabilities challenge institutional assumptions of predictability and stability. Shalka (2024) highlights the emotional toll of disclosure, particularly when students' agency and self-authorship are undermined (Baxter Magolda, 2008).

Systems thinking enriches this framework by exposing how seemingly neutral policies such as documentation requirements and appointment scheduling can reinforce structural inequity (Meadows, 2008). Scholars advocate for trauma-informed, culturally responsive models that prioritize safety, flexibility, and learner voice (Hamraie & The Critical Design Lab, 2020; Schoper & French, 2021; Shalka, 2024). Accessible services are also linked to improved retention, mental health, and satisfaction (Eisenberg et al., 2016; Stanton et al., 2016), while disability justice scholars frame access as a political imperative rooted in collective care, rest, and resistance (Minich, 2016; Sins Invalid, 2019).

Leadership is central to sustaining this transformation. Equity must be embedded across institutional systems and beyond siloed programming to inform planning, budgeting, and operations (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). As Kraus (2021) and Loewen and Pollard (2010) emphasize, systemic change requires collective vision, discomfort tolerance, accountability, and continuous reflection.

Together, this literature affirms the urgent need for proactive, participatory, and justice-oriented accommodation services. The following conceptual framework builds on these insights to propose a systems-based redesign grounded in human-centred and critical theory approaches.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To address the complex challenge of transforming academic accommodation services from a

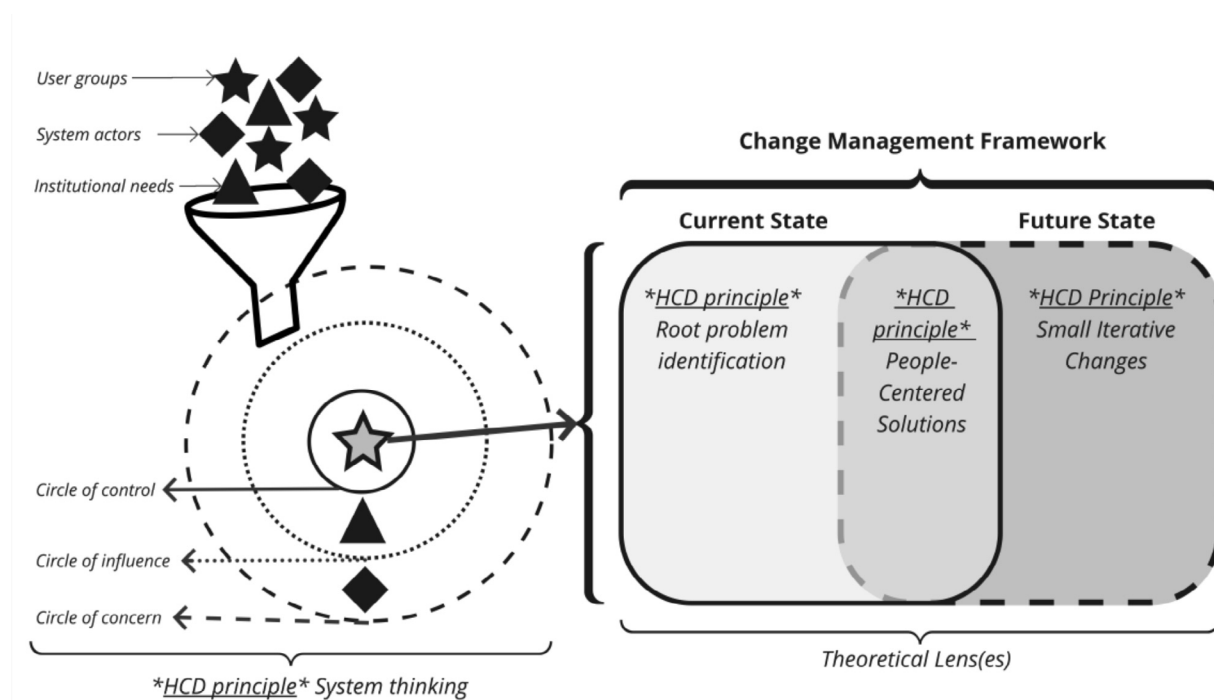
medical to a social model while maintaining operational integrity, we developed the people-centred systems change (PCSC) framework (see Figure 1). This framework integrates critical disability theory, systems thinking, and service design methodologies to offer a structured yet flexible approach to institutional transformation. We use *people-centred* rather than *human-centred* to emphasize the collective, relational nature of service redesign, acknowledging individuals as members of interdependent communities rather than isolated service users. Echoing Charlton's (1998) insistence that "nothing about us without us" be a foundational ethic, our approach repositions staff as well as students with disabilities as co-authors of the systems that affect them, challenging entrenched practices of exclusion through collective empowerment. The PCSC framework is designed to navigate system complexity while centring human experience, drawing on Meadows's (2008) emphasis on feedback loops and leverage points in systems reform and IDEO's (2015) advocacy for co-designing with, rather than for, users.

The PCSC framework consists of three interconnected elements that together support iterative, user-informed service transformation: system inputs and spheres of influence, a change management framework, and an iterative improvement cycle.

1. System inputs and spheres of influence

The framework first situates service transformation in relation to multiple input streams: user groups (e.g., students, frontline staff), institutional needs (e.g., compliance, resource constraints), and broader system actors (e.g., ministries, accrediting bodies). These are mapped against Covey's (1989) circles of control, influence, and concern, enabling practitioners to strategically target interventions where they have the greatest capacity for change. Radical acceptance (Brach, 2004; Linehan, 1993) is foundational here, as it allows change leaders to acknowledge current constraints without resignation, promoting psychological safety as a precursor to adaptive engagement.

Figure 1
People-Centred Systems Change (PCSC) Framework



Note. Adapted from Covey's (1989) circles of control and IDEO's (2015) human-centred design principles.

2. Change management framework

Building from Allworth et al. (2021), who frame design thinking as a cultural intervention within student affairs, the second element, on the right side of the image, focuses on how transformation efforts are “held.” This cultural shift requires what Bitner et al. (2012) call a “service lens”—a belief that “service systems exist in order to serve consumers, collectives, and society at large.... Value is co-created by students, not delivered to them” (p. 40). This fundamental reorientation from service delivery to value co-creation underpins our entire transformation approach. A suitable change management model creates a container for trust, structure, and shared direction. We selected Prosci's ADKAR model (Hiatt, 2006; Hiatt & Creasey, 2012) because it explicitly integrates individual and collective dimensions of change

(awareness, desire, knowledge, ability, and reinforcement) offering a roadmap that aligns with relational and iterative leadership. Crucially, this model does not dictate *what* should be changed; rather, it supports stakeholders *through* the change process.

3. Iterative improvement cycle

Informed by human-centred design (IDEO, 2015) and service design thinking (Meadows, 2008; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011), the third element centres an iterative cycle of discovery, ideation, prototyping, and testing. Root cause identification begins with mapping current service experiences using empathy mapping, stakeholder interviews, and service blueprinting to reveal both visible and invisible barriers, consistent with Bitner et al. (2012) and Roberts (2021). These insights are interpreted through critical disability theory (Dolmage, 2017;

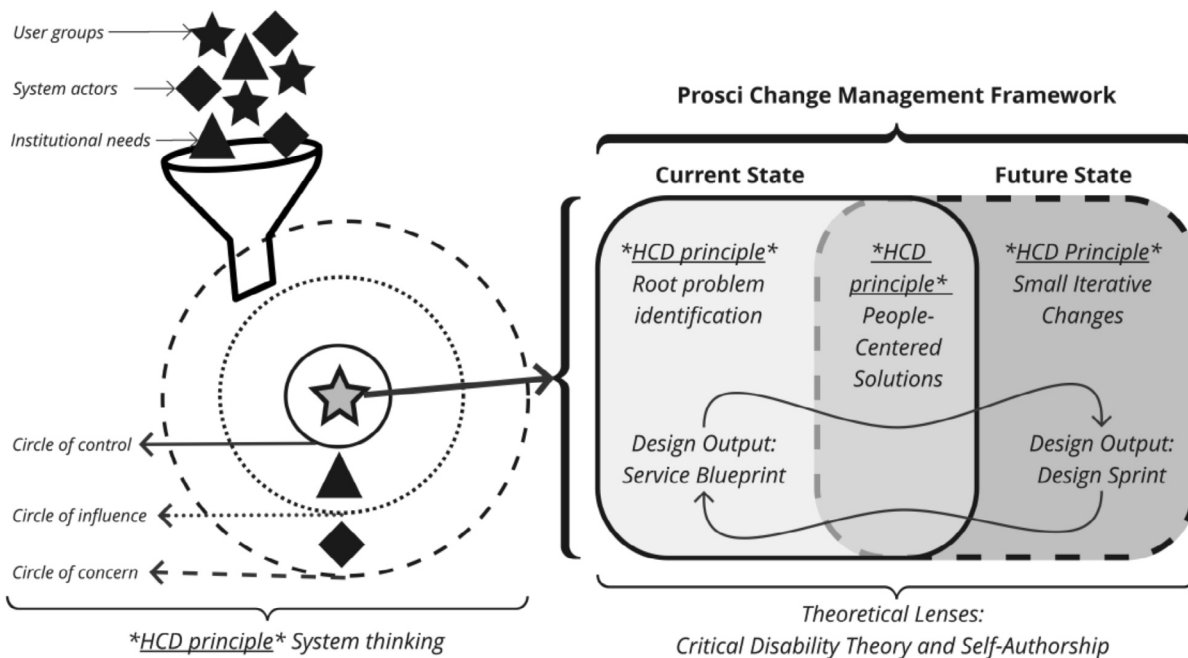
Hamraie, 2017; Minich, 2016; Sins Invalid, 2019) and student development theory, such as Baxter Magolda's (2008) self-authorship, to support the design of interventions that are developmentally appropriate and justice-informed.

This iterative methodology was operationalized by redesigning academic accommodation services via the social model of disability (Goodley, 2014; Shakespeare, 2013). Recognizing the institutional scale and interdependencies of student services, we explicitly narrowed our intervention to the academic accommodations process as a space within our direct control while acknowledging the potential

ripple effects across the broader post-secondary system. This localized scope allowed us to move forward with intentional action grounded in Meadows's (2008) systems thinking: "The future can't be predicted, but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being" (p. 161).

As Siddiqui (2023) observes, post-secondary service development in Ontario lacks a standardized approach. This necessitates a clear, repeatable process model for systemic change in student affairs. Our adaptation of the PCSC framework integrates ADKAR and Bitner et al.'s (2012) service blueprinting methodology as twin engines of transformation.

Figure 2
Applied People-Centred Systems Change (PCSC) Framework

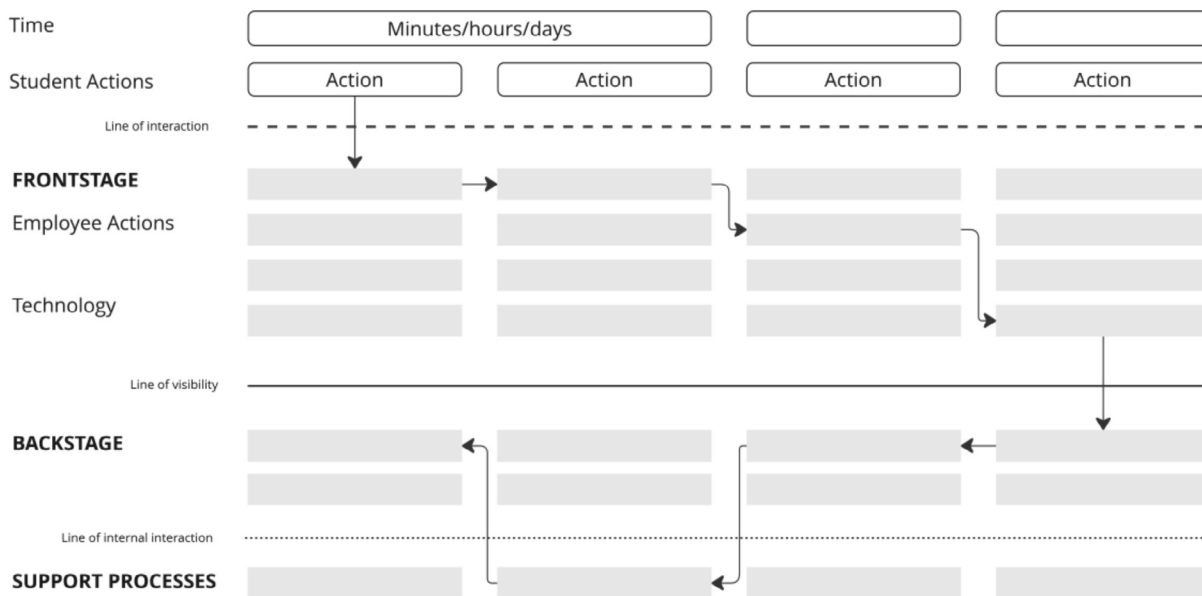


To operationalize the PCSC framework within our institutional context, we integrated the ADKAR elements directly into the service design process to align individual and collective transformation. *Awareness* was cultivated through service blueprinting exercises that visualized current-state challenges and made visible the lived realities of students navigating accommodation services (Bitner et al., 2012; Roberts, 2021; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). *Desire* was fostered during co-design sessions where students and staff collaboratively articulated a shared vision for inclusive and responsive service models (IDEO, 2015). *Knowledge* development was prioritized through a series of workshops exploring accessibility frameworks, systems thinking, and trauma-informed approaches. As the process evolved, *ability* was strengthened through iterative prototyping and cross-functional collaboration, offering staff

hands-on opportunities to test new practices in low-risk environments. Finally, *reinforcement* was built into the structure of the project through consistent feedback loops embedded in sprint reviews, process mapping, and individualized coaching, ensuring ongoing reflection and momentum toward long-term cultural change.

Service blueprinting (Bitner et al., 2012; Roberts, 2021; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011) served as our anchor methodology for identifying *what* and *where* issues exist, allowing us to trace student experiences through frontstage (visible) and backstage (invisible) processes. These tools provided a shared visual language for identifying friction points, role clarity gaps, and policy misalignments. Blueprinting also helped maintain institutional alignment across executive sponsors, middle managers, and frontline staff.

Figure 3
Service Blueprint Template



Recognizing that successful design work is relational, not just procedural, we embedded stakeholder trust-building into every stage. The establishment of a dedicated Service Design role (Siddiqui, 2023) provided both facilitation expertise and a critical distance from internal politics. This role enabled inclusive engagement practices and helped build confidence in the co-design process. Meanwhile, department leadership modelled transparency and care, creating space for vulnerability and shared learning, what adrienne maree brown (2017) and Stephen Covey (2006) might call intentional adaptation at the speed of trust.

Senior leadership served as sponsors signalling alignment from the top of the organization and communicating messages of support, particularly during moments of discomfort. Direct managers held decision-making authority while participating as co-learners, ensuring that ownership of the process was distributed but clear.

The application of critical disability theory and self-authorship enabled us to interpret service transformation not only as a policy shift, but as a reconfiguration of power, belonging, and institutional responsibility (Minich, 2016; Price, 2024; Shalka, 2024). In line with Price (2024) and Hamraie (2017, 2020), we viewed design as a political act that can affirm or deny students' full participation. Meadows (2008) reminds us that lasting system change requires more than redesigning feedback loops; it demands rethinking the goals of the system itself.

Design sprints (Knapp et al., 2016) were strategically embedded within the iterative improvement cycle of the PCSC framework to bridge insight and action. These structured, time-bound design sessions involved five key stages: mapping challenges, sketching solutions, deciding interventions, prototyping, and user testing. By grounding sprint activities in our earlier service blueprinting and stakeholder feedback, we ensured that each prototype addressed root-level issues, not just symptoms.

As Heath (2010) notes, "every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets" (p. 26). Our sprints functioned as short, sharp pulses of change within a larger strategy allowing for real-time testing, feedback, and visible prog-

ress. These small interventions built momentum and stakeholder confidence, signalling a broader shift from compliance-driven casework to a justice-oriented model of access.

METHODS

This mixed-methods case study examines the transformation of academic accommodation services at a large Canadian college that serves more than 30,000 learners across three campuses. With 6% of the student population registered with Accessible Learning Services annually, and significant representation from international, first-generation, and racialized students, the institutional context reflects broader national trends in equity and access in post-secondary education (Humber Polytechnic, 2024). Despite a stated commitment to inclusion, the college's accommodation services had historically operated within a compliance-focused, medically oriented model—an approach echoed across Ontario institutions grappling with increasing demand, caseload pressures, and evolving learner needs (Case et al., 2024; Colleges Ontario, 2017; Lanthier et al., 2023; Madaus et al., 2024; National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2018).

At the onset of this transformation, frontline staff reported long wait times (often exceeding six weeks during peak periods), inconsistent documentation requirements, and siloed service interactions. These operational challenges, coupled with a growing awareness of the emotional and cognitive load placed on students navigating support systems (Kurth & Mellard, 2006; Shalka, 2024; Thompson & Francis, 2025), prompted the department to move beyond often unsustainable and surface-level improvements, such as increasing staffing or modifying intake forms, and toward a structural redesign grounded in the social model of disability (Goodley, 2014; Shakespeare, 2013) and human-centred, equity-informed approaches (Newton et al., 2025; Sins Invalid, 2019).

The redesign was guided by the people-centred systems change (PCSC) framework. The department employed Prosci's ADKAR model (Hiatt, 2006; Hiatt & Creasey, 2012) as a flexi-

ble change management structure and applied tools such as service blueprinting, empathy mapping, and journey modelling to visualize institutional barriers and identify areas for intervention. Drawing on the insights of Allworth et al. (2021), Hamraie (2020), and Siddiqui (2023), this redesign emphasized co-design with learners, prototyping, and trauma-informed facilitation to build trust, transparency, and responsiveness into every phase of service delivery.

Study Design

A mixed-methods case study design was used to examine the implementation and outcomes of the academic accommodation service redesign over five academic semesters. The goal was to assess both the process and impact of transitioning toward a more proactive, student-centred model of support. Grounded in participatory and human-centred research frameworks (Allworth et al., 2021; IDEO, 2015; Roberts, 2021), the study sought to elevate the voices of students and staff in diagnosing system issues and co-creating solutions.

Participants and Setting

A total of 130 participants were involved in the study, including 76 students who were actively engaged with our accommodation services, 33 faculty members, and 21 staff. These individuals were drawn from across the institution and represented a diversity of roles, lived experiences, and academic disciplines. The five distinct frontline roles included in the staff cohort encompassed all functions directly involved in the provision of accommodations.

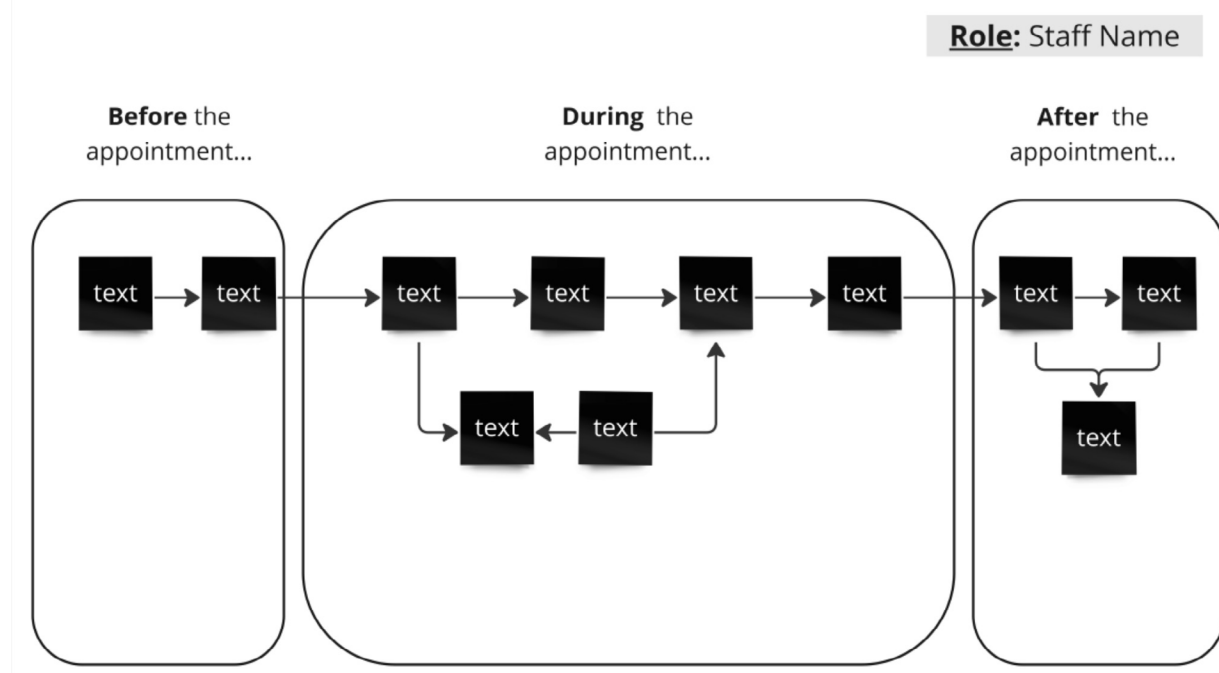
The institution selected for the case study had recently made public commitments to innovation and inclusive excellence. This created a supportive context for experimentation and co-design, especially as institutional leadership increasingly recognized the limitations of deficit-based, one-size-fits-all support models.

Qualitative Methods

Data collection included focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and online questionnaires. Students participated in four focus groups ($n = 52$) and completed online surveys ($n = 24$), while faculty contributed through two focus groups ($n = 12$) and 10 questionnaire responses. Focus groups were designed to surface learner experiences with documentation requirements, staff communication, follow-up protocols, and the clarity of institutional processes. Separate faculty and student sessions were held to support psychological safety and generate role-specific insights.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 staff members directly involved in the delivery of academic accommodations. Participants were asked three core questions to elicit both contextual and experiential insights: (1) "Please introduce yourself and share some of your institutional history"; (2) "Tell me about your role, your unique responsibilities, and what a typical workday looks like"; and (3) "What are your touchpoints with students? Where does your role begin and end?" These guiding questions were supplemented with role-specific probes to deepen understanding of participants' day-to-day experiences and professional perspectives. During each interview, a virtual whiteboard platform was used to collaboratively develop individualized process maps, capturing workflow activities across three service stages: before appointment, during appointment, and after appointment. This method yielded 21 unique service maps, revealing common barriers, redundancies, and inconsistencies in service delivery processes.

Figure 4
Academic Accommodations Process Map



Quantitative Methods

Quantitative analysis involved service utilization data across five academic semesters. Descriptive statistics were used to examine patterns in student registration, accommodation type, service complexity, and staff workload. Data were also analyzed for seasonal demand fluctuations, with particular attention paid to the surge in appointments at fall semester start-up as it represents the largest intake of learners annually, as well as discrepancies in service provision across academic programs. These metrics helped illuminate how systemic factors, such as staffing allocations and administrative processes, shaped both service equity and student outcomes.

Data Analysis

Qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach, with particular attention paid to identifying patterns, service bottlenecks, and points of disjuncture between user needs and institutional processes. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and open-ended questionnaire responses.

Using an inductive coding process, four core themes were identified: (1) emotional labour associated with accessing accommodations, (2) policy–practice misalignment, (3) institutional mistrust, and (4) the cumulative impact of fragmented or opaque support systems. These themes were then mapped against collaboratively developed service blueprints and process maps generated during co-design activities to surface leverage points for system redesign (Newton et al., 2025; Roberts, 2021).

Quantitative analysis involved five semesters of administrative data extracted from the institutional accommodation tracking system. This included appointment types, learner status (new, returning, or reconnecting), accommodation categories, and frequency of service utilization. Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyze trends across semesters, revealing several noteworthy findings. First, while accommodations were broadly categorized into “Exams and Tests,” “In the Classroom,” and “Program of Study,” seven specific accommodations consistently dominated service delivery, including extra time, infrequent extensions, and note-taking support. Second, returning

learners accounted for a significant and increasing proportion of service requests, indicating sustained reliance on support over time. Third, the data illuminated seasonal surges in demand, particularly at the beginning of each academic term, placing considerable strain on frontline staff. Lastly, there was evidence of administrative burden unevenly distributed across and within roles, compounded by reliance on email-based case management and manual intake tracking systems.

Together, the qualitative themes and service utilization data were triangulated to inform a comprehensive service redesign process, anchoring future changes in both the lived experiences of users and the structural realities of delivery.

Ethical Considerations

This project was conducted under the institution's quality assurance and continuous improvement mandate and therefore did not require formal Research Ethics Board (REB) approval. Nevertheless, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and strict protocols were followed to protect confidentiality and ensure data security throughout the study.

RESULTS

Through triangulation of stakeholder interviews, service utilization trends, and co-design workshops, we were able to surface systemic barriers, visualize service complexity, and implement targeted improvements through structured design sprints. The following results are presented across three phases: understanding the current state, building shared vision, and implementation through iterative design sprints.

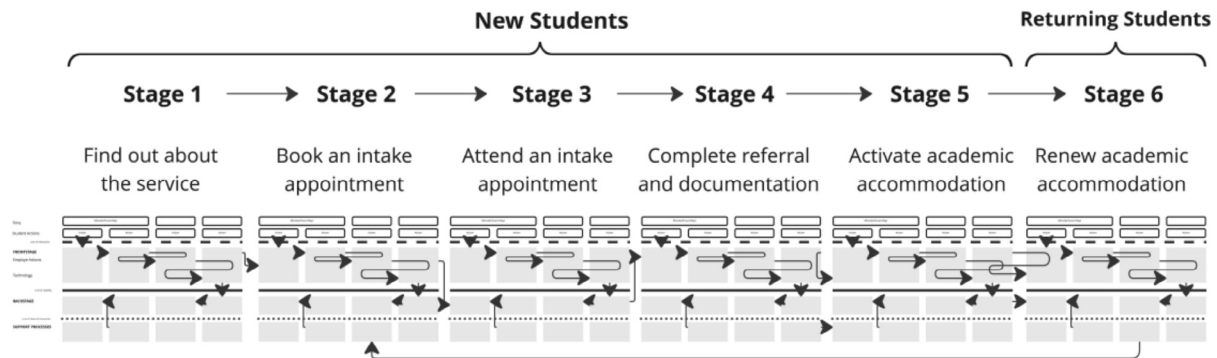
Understanding The Current State

Triangulation of qualitative and operational data revealed five key service gaps: inconsistent documentation and intake practices, unclear staff roles, insufficient communication, administrative overload, and extended wait times. These mirrored sector-wide concerns about

the structural barriers students with disabilities face in accessing academic support (Case et al., 2024; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2010; National Educational Association of Disabled Students, 2018; Toutain, 2019). Faculty expressed growing frustration with accommodation implementation, particularly in lab and group settings, highlighting a lack of training and institutional guidance. This directly aligns with Tobin and Behling's (2018) recommendations and Case et al.'s (2024) findings about faculty confusion and need for better institutional coordination. Student feedback emphasized the emotional labour required to navigate opaque systems, delays in service access, and concerns about confidentiality in faculty-student interactions. This aligns with Bartolo et al.'s (2025) empirical findings that bureaucratic, documentation-heavy systems often serve to alienate, rather than support, students with disabilities.

To better understand workflow variation, process mapping interviews were conducted with 21 staff members. These maps were synthesized into a comprehensive service blueprint, which revealed 11 distinct approaches to delivering accommodations across six key stages: discovery, intake, assessment, documentation, implementation, and renewal. This finding aligns with Bitner et al.'s (2012) assertion that blueprinting makes visible the complexity and potential misalignments in service delivery, particularly when multiple departments contribute to a single student experience. This reinforced previous scholarship asserting the importance of surfacing hidden institutional inconsistencies to drive meaningful reform (Allworth et al., 2021; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019).

Figure 5
Academic Accommodations Service Blueprint



Operational data from five academic semesters further revealed capacity constraints. Among accommodations across three domains (exam, classroom, and program-level), classroom-based supports were most frequently utilized. Across all domains, the top accommodations were extra time, notetaking support, and infrequent extensions. Table 1 shows the classroom accommodation frequency over five terms. Operational system data revealed that intake wait times consistently peaked at six weeks during high-demand periods, compounded by manual tracking, redundant email coordination, and limited automation. The overlap of new intake and renewal requests placed additional strain on staff and delayed first-time access. These patterns emphasized the need for more flexible, learner-directed pathways that align with cyclical demand.

Building Shared Vision through Co-Design

To transition from insight to action, a three-part workshop series was conducted with the front-line team. Grounded in psychological safety, radical acceptance (Brach, 2004; Linehan, 1993), and Covey’s (1989) “circle of control,” the sessions created space for reflection, dialogue, and collective priority setting.

The first workshop centred on the anonymized service blueprint, which allowed staff to engage with inconsistencies in a depersonalized, constructive way. In the second session,

participants co-created a working definition of the social model of disability: “The social model of disability challenges attitudinal, environmental, and procedural barriers in educational settings. It emphasizes inclusive design, learner-centred practices, and environments that promote agency, equity, and safety for all students.” From this shared definition, three guiding principles emerged to inform service redesign: (1) empower learners through transparent, user-driven systems, (2) proactively reduce barriers before they impact access, and (3) communicate clearly and consistently at every service touchpoint. The final session invited staff to assess current practices by functional role, generating over 300 ideas. This collaborative process exemplified what Baxter Magolda (2008) describes as building an internal foundation, where participants moved from external authority dependence to constructing meaning based on their collective expertise and values. These were synthesized into three priority focus areas: intake processes, accommodation renewals, and communication strategies.

Implementing through Design Sprints

The team developed a three-semester roadmap targeting the identified priority areas. Each initiative was launched using a five-day design sprint (Knapp et al., 2016), followed by a two-month implementation and testing period.

Table 1
Five-Term Review of Classroom Accommodations

Accommodation	Fall 2022	Winter 2023	Summer 2023	Fall 2023	Winter 2024
Extra time for work normally completed in class	835	751	376	796	742
All learning materials used during class to be in accessible format	151	139	68	185	178
Captioning of all visual media for in-class or online viewing	27	22	16	32	32
Use of personal computer/mobile device during class	472	416	175	437	404
Note-taking support (including audio recording)	1434	1381	740	1854	1748
Infrequent extensions	1499	1503	726	1871	1772
May require alternative arrangements	144	153	95	227	224
Alternatives	120	126	75	197	192

Figure 6
Five-Day Design Sprint Schedule

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
	Sprint Day 1	Sprint Day 2	Sprint Day 3	Sprint Day 4	Sprint Day 5
09:00					• Usability Test #1
10:00	• Set long-term goals to measure post-sprint	• Lightning round of demonstrations of others' solutions to get inspiration	• Three rounds of groups voting on best sketch	• Prototyping • Writing research script	• Usability Test #2
11:00					• Usability Test #3
12:00	• Make a map of current state				• Usability Test #4
13:00	Lunch break	Lunch break	Lunch break	Lunch break	Lunch break
14:00	• Ask the experts to fill in knowledge gaps	• Four-step sketch process by each member	• Making a storyboard of the chosen solution	• Prototyping continued	• Usability Test #5
15:00				• Test run of usability test	• Debrief and plan next steps
16:00	• Pick a target for the sprint				
17:00					miro

Intake Process Redesign

The first design sprint targeted the intake process. A new tiered structure was introduced, offering students three distinct pathways tailored to their level of need: (1) accelerated intake (30-minute appointment), (2) traditional intake (50-minute appointment), and (3) transitional intake, which allowed students to receive the institution's three most common accommodations—extra time, a reduced-distraction environment, and note-taking support—without requiring an intake meeting. This model was designed to reflect the most frequently issued supports, thereby reducing unnecessary administrative interactions.

The new intake structure was supported by a self-booking platform, enabling students to upload documentation and select their intake pathway without staff mediation. This flexibility significantly reduced appointment volume by 987 hours compared to the prior one-size-fits-all model and allowed staff to focus on more complex or urgent student needs. While team members expressed concern that the majority of learners would select the transitional appointment time as a means to “game the system” and later require more staff intervention, only 6% of learners selected this option in the 2024–2025 academic year ($n = 181$), with the majority preferring more traditional appointment formats (38% traditional, $n = 1,087$; 56% accelerated, $n = 1,612$). With these new student-driven options, the wait time to receive accommodation letters decreased by 67% (from six weeks to two weeks).

Accommodation Renewals

The second design sprint focused on redesigning the accommodation renewal process, a recurring pressure point that previously contributed to high administrative burden and extended wait times, particularly during semester start-up. The new model introduced a self-directed renewal process through a secure web portal, enabling students to review their accommodations, confirm courses, and regenerate accommodation letters without requiring a staff meeting if no changes were needed. Students requiring modifications or consultation retained

the ability to schedule appointments. Service utilization data revealed that three accommodations consistently dominated renewal requests, directly informing the model's design. As such, the redesign enabled automatic renewal of these supports where appropriate, reducing administrative redundancy.

Implementation of the self-renewal model resulted in measurable efficiency gains. In the winter 2025 semester alone, over 830 students completed the renewal process independently within the first week of classes. This shift conserved approximately 830 staff appointment hours during a critical service period, allowing greater availability for new students or those with complex needs. The self-directed renewal process supports what Baxter Magolda (2008) identifies as securing internal commitments, enabling students to act on their internally defined needs rather than being constrained by external validation requirements. Faculty also benefited from improvements in notification clarity and timeliness.

Qualitative feedback from students underscored the usability and effectiveness of the renewed process. Participants described the system as “clear,” “seamless,” and “straightforward,” emphasizing the ease of navigation and the ability to complete renewals with minimal effort. One student noted that the process “was very smooth” and allowed them to focus on coursework instead of “jumping through hoops.” Another appreciated the transparency provided by the portal, which displayed when instructors had received accommodation letters, eliminating the need for follow-up emails. Still others expressed appreciation for being able to download their letters immediately and receive confirmation in real time. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that the redesigned system not only improved operational efficiency but also enhanced students' sense of agency and trust in the process.

Faculty Engagement Tools

While not a primary focus of a sprint, three asynchronous faculty development modules were also launched, focusing on: (1) understanding accommodation processes, (2) interpreting and

activating accommodation letters, and (3) embedding universal design for learning. To date, 91% of participants report improved understanding of their roles and increased confidence in supporting students with disabilities.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a concrete demonstration of how institutional units can mobilize systems thinking, critical disability theory, and service design to enact meaningful transformation in post-secondary student services. As Dolmage (2017) contends, reactive, compliance-driven systems uphold ableist architectures that marginalize students with disabilities. This redesign explicitly sought to confront and transform that legacy. The most significant finding is that by centring student experience and operationalizing the social model of disability, the administrative burden of common practices was measurably reduced, thus improving access and enhancing user satisfaction all within a context often characterized as bureaucratically constrained and change-resistant.

Leveraging Systems Thinking for Timely and Just Change

At the core of the transformation was the recognition that inefficiencies and inequities in academic accommodation services were not isolated incidents, but rather products of embedded structural patterns, or what Meadows (2008) describes as “system traps.” Rather than default to compliance-driven fixes, the team engaged in system mapping, prototyping, and iterative implementation that treated lived experience as the primary mechanism for change. Students’ feedback, both qualitative and quantitative, served as a lever to challenge internal staff norms, beliefs, and assumptions about what constituted effective service. This approach exemplifies what Bitner et al. (2012) term viewing services through a “service lens,” recognizing that value is co-created with students, not delivered to them, and that the student experience must be the foundation for analyzing and mak-

ing enhancements. In this way, the work rebuffs the myth that colleges and universities must be slow-moving and instead highlights the potential for grassroots, team-led redesign to scale upward. This aligns with Brown’s (2017) concept of emergent strategy, where small actions and connections lead to large-scale system change.

From Policy to Practice: Embedding the Social Model of Disability

While many institutions espouse inclusive principles, they often fall short of translating these values into service design. As Bartolo et al. (2025) demonstrate through their participatory research, meaningful transformation requires not choosing between systemic design or individual support, but rather integrating both through student-centred approaches. This study’s co-creation of a department-specific definition of the social model of disability served as a vital interpretive anchor. The redesign of intake and renewal processes was grounded in this lens, emphasizing transparency, user agency, and proactive barrier removal. The transitional intake option, for instance, was directly informed by historical data showing that three accommodation types (extra time, infrequent extensions, and note-taking supports) accounted for the majority of requests. By provisioning these automatically to new students needing immediate support, the department reduced both student stress and unnecessary staff workload.

Similarly, the accommodation renewal process was radically simplified, allowing students to self-renew if no changes were required. This eliminated the need for an estimated 830 hours of repeat appointments in a single semester. Students reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with this system, noting its clarity, ease of use, and capacity to reduce anxiety. The ability to download letters, track faculty confirmation, and avoid redundant consultations reflects a service that is not only more efficient but also more respectful of students’ time and autonomy. These findings reinforce and extend previous research arguing that institutional inclusion must be lived, not just legislated (Dolmage, 2017; Goodley, 2014; Price, 2024).

Transforming Workflows and Reframing Capacity

The introduction of tiered intake appointments reflected a practical application of differentiated service design. While traditional 50-minute appointments remained available, only 38% of new students opted for them under the new model. This shift freed up nearly 1,000 appointment hours over the academic year. Importantly, this redesign was not about reducing care, but right-sizing it. The redesign empowered students to choose the level of support they needed while maintaining open access for more complex cases. In line with Brach's (2004) articulation of radical acceptance, this approach invited practitioners to meet students not only with solutions, but with empathy and dignity, especially during moments of vulnerability or disclosure. The transformation from intake interviews to collaborative planning sessions reflects a fundamental shift in recognizing students' capacity for self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2008), where they become co-constructors of meaning rather than passive recipients of institutional determinations.

Faculty development was also prioritized as part of the transformation. Three asynchronous learning modules were launched focused on understanding accommodations, responding to accommodation letters, and embedding universal design for learning. Ninety-one percent of completers reported increased confidence and clarity in supporting learners with disabilities. This investment in faculty mirrors findings by Toutain (2019) and Lanthier et al. (2023) on the critical importance of upstream educator engagement in fostering accessible environments.

Limitations

While the case study demonstrates promising outcomes, limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study reflects a single institutional context and may not be generalizable without adaptation. Second, longitudinal impacts on student academic outcomes were not measured, and further research is needed to assess retention,

GPA, or graduation rates as a function of service redesign. Third, while qualitative and operational data were triangulated, the study did not conduct formal psychometric evaluations of user satisfaction instruments. Finally, the staff-led nature of the work, while empowering, may have excluded broader institutional stakeholders in earlier phases of design.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study extends existing scholarship in student affairs by offering a rare, detailed account of how unit-level redesign grounded in values and student experience can deliver systemic change without waiting for top-down mandates. For researchers, it provides a replicable model of how service blueprinting and co-design can be harnessed in accessible learning and beyond. For administrators and frontline professionals, it offers proof that accessibility transformation is both possible and impactful when student voice is treated as data, not anecdote.

Cross-sectorally, this model holds promise for other high-volume service areas such as mental health, advising, and financial aid—domains where bureaucracy often overshadows belonging (Case et al., 2024; Colleges Ontario, 2017; Madaus et al., 2024). Importantly, it repositions staff not as passive actors in institutional inertia, but as potential systems thinkers, designers, and change agents (Strimel & Francis, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that transformative change in post-secondary accessibility services is both achievable and necessary. Through an intentional synthesis of design methodologies, systems thinking, and critical disability theory, the department transitioned from a reactive, compliance-driven model to one that is responsive, relational, and just.

The outcomes—measurable reductions in wait times and administrative burden, high student satisfaction, and renewed faculty engage-

ment—illustrate what becomes possible when institutional change is led from within, informed by those most affected, and grounded in values, rather than obligation.

Ultimately, this work offers a roadmap for others navigating similar terrain. It invites practitioners and scholars to ask not only “What do students need?” but “What is our system preventing?” And it demonstrates that when we redesign around people, rather than policies, post-secondary education can become not only more accessible, but more human.

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