

## Abstract

This study identified social support services offered at, or by, post-secondary institutions in Northern Alberta, for adolescents and young adults (AYAs) who have survived cancer. Eight post-secondary institution's websites in Northern Alberta were analyzed for social support programs offered on campus. A number of education support programs and resources for students with disabilities were uncovered. No such programs or student groups specifically geared to post-cancer adolescents were found at any post-secondary institution suggesting a direction for future resources.

## Introduction

Young people diagnosed between the ages of 15 and 39 make up the adolescent and young adults (AYAs) group of patients and survivors (Jones, 2008). There are a myriad of side effects that accompany cancer treatment. Physical effects include neurocognitive impairment, osteoporosis, cardiotoxicity, additional malignancies, organ damage, diabetes, and obesity (Jones et al., 2011).

On top of physical effects, psychological effects can include depression, anxiety, distorted self-image, posttraumatic stress disorder, poor self-esteem, isolation from peers, developmentally incongruent fears of death, foreshortened sense of the future, and reduced social skills (Jones, 2008).

## Transitioning

Since adolescents is a transitioning period from child to young adult, post cancer AYA's suffer an identity paradox where they are stuck in between a sick, child identity and a cured, young adult identity. Cancer survivors are up to four times more likely to experience difficulties in school due to decreased school attendance, reintegration problems, and struggles maintaining peer relations (Pini, Gardner & Hugh-Jones, 2013). In a separate study, it was found that the younger the patient was when diagnosed with cancer, the more there was a need for special education (Mitby, et al., 2003). Another study found that teenagers have a harder time reintegrating back into school in general (Bonneau, et al., 2011).

This study seeks to identify social support services for AYA's in post secondary institutions for older post-cancer survivors.

## Methods

The researcher looked at the populations of universities in northern Alberta to narrow down the largest institutions who would most likely have some sort of program or group for post cancer AYA's. The search was narrowed down to five institutions in Edmonton, two colleges in northern Alberta and one online institution. The institutions studied were: The University of Alberta, Grant MacEwan University, Concordia University, NAIT Polytechnic, and Norquest College from Edmonton, Grande Prairie Regional College in Grande Prairie, Keyano College in Fort McMurray, and Athabasca University which was the only online institutions researched.

Academic services offered in institutions was found under terms such as accessibility, students with disabilities, advising, counselling, student success, current students, health and wellness, and student association. These results showed a few academic services for those with disabilities.

Looking under tabs such as programs and services, clubs, peer support, wellness, mental health, student services, and student groups expanded the search. These results were more directed to social support for individuals with mental illness or sickness.

## Results

Institution labels for resources included "Students with Disabilities", "Accessibility", "Student Life", "Campus Life", or "Services". For the students with disability sections, each section states that students with disabilities need to book an appointment anywhere from two to six months in advance to their upcoming term, to see if they qualify for these additional services. A few institutions specifically ask for a medical note that states the disability and how it will impact the student's education. Services that are available for students with disabilities include the following:

### Note Taking

Note taking services varies depending on the institution but includes peer note takers, online notes from peers, and recording lectures. All institutions offer some sort of note taking service except for two: Keyano College and Athabasca University (since it is an online institution).



Source: Sweetclipart.com, 2014

### Tutoring

Tutoring is available for all students. Grande Prairie Regional College offers tutoring specifically to students with disabilities. Four other institutes also offer various degrees of tutoring. Only MacEwan University and the University of Alberta do not offer tutoring services through the school, but state there is tutoring available from other students in the school.

### Course Load Adjustment

Course load adjustment means that for those who meet the criteria of being a student with a disability, they would be considered full time students, but would only have 40-59% of a normal full time course load. This means that those students are applicable for various benefits of being considered full-time students, such as more funding from student loans. Only four institutions offer course load adjustment.

### School Skills

Some schools offer workshops to help students develop skills such as test taking strategies, public speaking strategies, study skills, memory, time management, writing, etc. This can be found on the websites under "Students with Disabilities" or "Student Success Centre". All eight institutions that were researched have this service.

### Exam Accommodations

Exam accommodations can include extra time, a different space with minimal distractions, exam audio, speech-to-text software, or assistive technology. Seven institutions have these exam accommodations.

### Clubs

A few institutions have various clubs that aim to promote mental health. Majority of information found about these clubs spoke of more common forms of mental health issues such as depression.

### Peer Support

Peer support programs allow AYAs to talk with peers about the issues since the volunteers are going through similar experiences. AYAs who have survived cancer can talk to peers about the struggles they face being a student even if the volunteers have not been through cancer themselves. Four institutions have peer support programs.

### Counselling

Four institutions offer counselling by trained professionals to help deal with issues such as depression, grief and loss, stress, anxiety, etc.. For AYAs post cancer, counselling means easy access, possibly free of charge, and counsellors who are helping other students with similar problems, albeit, not necessarily post cancer effects.

## Discussion

This research highlights the need for specific services in post-secondary institutions for AYAs post cancer. There is a wide variety of educational services, with a few social support services that are available to those with disabilities. Most of the institutes required a doctor's note explaining the student's disability/illness and how it would impact their educational attainment. Since cancer is not a disability, this would mean doctors would have to formally indicate that AYAs post cancer are still sick, which is not technically accurate. That said, the long-term implications of cancer warrant the need for social resources in post secondary institutions.

## References

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