

Report on Canadian Post-secondary Institutions and COVID-19 Response: Safe Return to Campus and Management of Attendant Service Programs

Executive Summary

A recent study of 102 public and private institutions of higher education in Canada finds that virtually all of them mandate the wearing of non-medical masks in indoor (and some outdoor) settings, and that about 56% of public and 45% of private schools require most students to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Thus, public schools tend to have more stringent vaccine requirements than private schools.

Results vary geographically, with Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario scoring high on vaccine requirements and Nova Scotia and British Columbia scoring less well. Schools in three provinces—Quebec, British Columbia, and New Brunswick—allow for a great deal of flexibility in their vaccine requirements, offering students and staff opportunities to evade mandates by submitting to frequent COVID-19 testing.

Information about attendant services programs (ASPs) was difficult to find, with most schools' websites devoid of any information whatsoever. Further research is needed to determine whether programs exist but are simply not being publicized.

Introduction

This report details research on a sample of Canadian post-secondary institutions selected from ten provinces and three territories. As many schools work to transition students back to on-campus learning, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact higher education for students with disabilities disproportionately as compared with non-disabled students. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought accessibility issues into sharper focus, particularly as home and online schooling, isolation from friends and teachers, and the loss of district-provided services continue to challenge our youth. As students transition to college age, it is important to note that young people aged 15–24 are more likely to experience mental-health-related disabilities than any other age group in Canada. At the same time, three out of five students with disabilities have a mental health-related disability, and rates of anxiety and depression have only risen since the start of the pandemic. The more severe a student's disability, the less likely a student is to be employed after completing secondary education.

Objective

The objective of this study is to collect data to aid new and returning students in answering these questions:

- What are post-secondary institutions in Canada doing to ensure a safe return to campus?
- How are post-secondary institutions managing their attendant services programs (ASP) on campus?

To help answer these questions, the website of each school in the sample was searched for answers to these questions:

- Does this school publicly share its "safe return to campus" policies and procedures?
- What themes and commonalities may be found in how post-secondary institutions are addressing the safe return to campus?
- Does this school have an ASP in place for students with disabilities?
- How have these ASP services been impacted, if at all, by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodology

Using institutional data collected for a previous project (see NEADS State of the Schools Report, 2021), websites were searched using the following search terms:

- "ASP services"
- "Attendant service"
- "Attendant care"

Note that the search term "asp" was not used alone because many websites use Active Server Page technology, with web filenames ending in ".asp". Because of this, search results often showed long lists of ".asp" pages, rather than relevant results.

Additional information was obtained by returning to each school's "Fall Return to Campus" link. In some cases, links were broken; a quick search for "COVID-19" or "Fall 2021" usually located the needed information. A few websites, however, had no COVID-19 information available through search, and some websites did not offer a search tool.

Data were collected into an Excel spreadsheet, with columns for each of the following data points: name of institution, location, province/territory, public/private, *url* of fall return to campus information, summary of safety policies, whether ASP services appear on the website, (and a link to those), and whether ASP services have changed since the pandemic began.

Results

This section summarizes the results of the 102-institution study, breaking them into two categories: safety measures on campus and changes to ASP services.

Campus safety measures

One major finding of this study is that vaccine mandates are in place for a majority of Canadian institutions, following provincial/territorial guidelines. The study also finds that virtually all schools mandate mask wearing in indoor spaces. Information about other safety measures, such as enhanced sanitation, self-reporting of symptoms and self-isolation, designated access points, reduced room capacity, physical barriers, restricted public access to the campus, and required testing for unvaccinated students varies widely.

Table 1 provides a breakdown by province/territory of public and private institutions, indicating the number of schools with vaccine mandates in place. Note that for the purposes of this study, a vaccine mandate is defined as the requirement that all but those with approved accommodations to provide proof of vaccination by a certain date during the fall term (it may not necessarily be by the start of the term, and it may include testing requirements for those not yet vaccinated). For those schools that require either vaccination *or* frequent COVID-19 testing (as defined by the school), with no set date for universal vaccination, this policy was not considered a vaccine mandate. For schools “requiring” vaccine proof but using language such as “for those who choose not to be vaccinated for medical, religious, or cultural reasons” and allowing those people to opt to be tested regularly, this was also not considered a mandate.

Province or Territory	Number of Public Schools	Vaccine Mandate	Number of Private Schools	Vaccine Mandate
Alberta	7	5	5	2
British Columbia	11	3*	4	2*
Manitoba	5	5	3	2
New Brunswick	4	3*	5	2
Newfoundland & Labrador	2	1	0	0
Northwest Territories	1	0	0	0
Nova Scotia	8	1	0	0
Nunavut	1	0	0	0
Ontario	24	19	3	1
Prince Edward Island	1	1	0	
Quebec	15	7*	0	0
Saskatchewan	2	1	0	0
Yukon Territory	1	0	0	0
TOTALS	82	46	20	9

* Some schools mandate vaccines for students who wish to live on campus and/or take part in certain nonessential activities on campus, such as sports, clubs, etc., or, in one case, internships in the public health fields.

Why is this information important?

These data tell us that more than half of Canadian public institutions of higher education now mandate the COVID-19 vaccine for at least some campus activities.

The only provinces with limited vaccine mandates included British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Quebec. The wording of the vaccine mandate in each province likely allows for these limitations. For example, British Columbia's mandate applies to indoor exercise/fitness establishments, indoor adult team sports for people 22 and older, indoor organized group recreational classes with more than 50 people, and post-secondary student housing. Quebec, according to Minister of Higher Education Danielle McCann, cannot mandate vaccines, so schools requiring them leave significant room for students to avoid being vaccinated by submitting to regular testing. Furthermore, New Brunswick's proof-of-vaccination requirement, which went into effect on September 22, is carefully worded to apply to many indoor gatherings (e.g., gyms, theaters, indoor eating and drinking establishments, and other indoor recreational activities), but not to school settings.

As such, many schools in these provinces word their vaccine mandates in one of two main ways:

- Either prove the student has been vaccinated, or submit to regular (often bi-weekly) COVID-19 testing; or
- No vaccine mandate to access essential services such as classes, but vaccine required to access nonessential services such as dining halls, libraries, and gymnasiums.

Several of these schools make clear on their websites that surveys of their students and staff indicate high levels of vaccination; this information is being used to support the schools' decisions not to impose stricter vaccine requirements. Many of the schools that have no vaccine mandate provide similar information indicating high levels of vaccine compliance without a mandate in place.

COVID's impact on attendant services programs (ASPs)

Very few institutions publish information on any ASPs offered. For the handful of schools that do, a few featured a working link to a web page discussing ASPs. Others mentioned ASPs in some other document on the website, but either no page featured details about accessing the programs, or the link to the program was broken. For example, Carleton University and Algonquin College offer attendant services "at no cost to students with physical disabilities living in residence." These universities are linked and share services; however, the link provided by searching Algonquin's website led to a Carleton.ca web address, whereas the link provided by searching Carleton's website was broken.

Unfortunately, it seems that Carleton is no longer offering ASPs during the Fall 2021 term: According to *The Charlatan*, the student newspaper, "current pandemic and safety requirements meant Carleton could not offer the program this fall 'in a safe manner.'" The authors opine that "some Carleton disabled students can't return to campus and student employees who are trained as personal care workers for ASP are losing their jobs."

It should be noted that the absence of published information about ASPs does not necessarily mean such services are not offered at a given school. Students should be prepared to reach out to Student Disability Services at the schools in which they are interested to inquire whether ASPs are indeed available.

Table 2 below illustrates the number of schools specifically addressing ASPs on their websites. The table is broken down by province/territory and public/private. A school was counted as offering ASPs if documentation on its website clearly specified that any type of attendant services were available to students, even if limited in scope or location or provided by peers.

Province or Territory	Number of Public Schools	ASP Offered?	Number of Private Schools	ASP Offered?
Alberta	7	1	5	0
British Columbia	11	2	4	0
Manitoba	5	2	3	0
New Brunswick	4	1	5	0
Newfoundland & Labrador	2	0	0	0
Northwest Territories	1	0	0	0
Nova Scotia	8	0	0	0
Nunavut	1	0	0	0
Ontario	24	9	3	0
Prince Edward Island	1	0	0	0
Quebec	15	4	0	0
Saskatchewan	2	0	0	0
Yukon Territory	1	0	0	0
TOTALS	82	19	20	0

The data indicate that about 23% of public schools specifically publicize some offerings for attendant services. None of the private schools examined for this study published information about ASPs, however.

Discussion

Attendant care services at Canadian schools are lacking

Although further research should examine the existence and location of ASPs on Canadian campuses, the conclusion of this small study is that such services are difficult to locate for

the average prospective student. Universities and colleges should work to provide more complete information about their offerings for students with disabilities.

A national policy on attendant services does not seem to exist. Various models exist around the country, including bursary grants (BSWD) and grants for services and equipment (CSG-PDSE); March of Dimes services; Direct Funding for individuals wishing to self-manage attendant care services (Ontario); Student Financial Assistance Programs (Newfoundland and Labrador); the Centre for Independent Living in Toronto; and Alberta Student Aid, just to name a few. Further, individuals and families needing attendant care services are entitled to tax deductions for the entire amount of fees paid for care in schools and institutions.

Public discussion of attendant services is fraught with definitional and semantic difficulties. For example, the description of care management as “work” is contested. In a study of self-managed attendant care, Katzman and Kinsella (2018) argue that self-managing attendant care requires administrative and supplemental work, as well as navigating many uncertainties, and that most policy and program documents ignore this work, treating it as “invisible” (p. 1). They point out that industrial capitalism has led to a social model of expecting people with disabilities to “contribute labor in exchange for access to social supports” (p. 2). However, the work involved in self-managing attendant care is often defined as “something other than work” (p. 2).

Also, a tension exists between those who would see the word “care” rejected in disability discussions and those who would see it made “accessible” (Kelly, 2011). Referring to ASPs as “care” can mean acknowledging the highly personal nature of assisting people with physical disabilities; it can also mean differentiating hands-on care from emotional care, or what Kelly (2011) calls a distinction between “caring for (as practical tasks) and caring about (as emotions). It is questionable whether these components can be held separate for very long as care research shows ‘good’ care requires emotional and relational components, particularly long-term, ongoing support” (p. 576). People who are paid to give care to those with disabilities often find themselves marginalized, underpaid, and overworked.

Kelly and Bourgeault (2015) argue that personal support workers (PSWs) may be a good alternative to self-management of attendant services. Regulations to the PSW industry in Ontario (The Ontario PSW Program Standard) may, they argue, lead to a better-paid workforce and simplify the educational landscape, while also helping to keep the field from “becoming a self-regulated health profession” (n.p.).

At any rate, it seems unlikely that the number of schools providing attendant service programs will rise significantly while no national policy or funding program exists to mandate or regulate these services. Journalism student Kimberly Chiasson at Carleton University posts about the problem on her Instagram account (@cucare.act) and recently staged a walkout on September 22, 2021, to protest the removal of ASPs on the campus this term:

While the rest of campus has began [sic] to open up, Carleton suspended the Attendant Services Program this semester. There are no alternatives, meaning students with physical

disabilities who need care can't live on campus, even with in-person classes in session. (Instagram post, September 17, 2021)

Student Sydney Weaver told the student newspaper, *The Charlatan*, that she applied to Carleton *because of* the ASP. It was, she said, "the only university in Canada with a program like this" (2021, n.p.). Spokesperson Steven Reid told the newspaper that the program was cancelled "due to the health and safety concerns in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic" but that he hoped it would be back for the following term (2021, n.p.).

#Access4All: University Students with Disabilities want Fair Access to Online and Hybrid Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Students groups at some Canadian universities are demanding critical access to education, and they have taken to social media and even Change.org to call attention to the issues they are facing.

For example, a student with muscular dystrophy fell on the ice at Concordia in Montreal last year. Alicia-Ann Pauld was thrilled when the pandemic moved her classes online, but she was concerned in March that she would be forced to return to campus in fall 2021 (Kahn, 2021, n.p.).

At the University of Victoria, students with disabilities have been told they will be returning to on-campus classes. Unfortunately for many, studying in person will not offer adequate accommodations to ensure that these students have equal access to education, they argue in their Change.org petition. Acknowledging that this issue is not new for students with disabilities, the #Access4All campaign argues that offering online study options will allow students with chronic pain, mobility issues, and other disabilities to thrive.

However, students with disabilities are not the only ones facing barriers due to the pandemic. International students also encounter difficulties when they are left waiting 6 to 8 months for student visa approval or are forced to quarantine upon arriving in Canada; the cost of finding a place to stay can be prohibitive for many. If online attendance were an option, these issues would vanish.

Professor George Veletsianos (2021) of Royal Roads University argues that more research is needed on how students are engaging with online education: "We need to know who takes online courses, in what contexts, how participation and success vary by different factors (such as disability) and why." He also suggests that instructors need more and better preparation for online teaching. "Faculty members rarely receive pedagogical training" while studying for their doctoral degrees, he explains, "let alone preparation to teach online." The pandemic, he concludes, has only made this barrier more glaringly obvious.

The University of Prince Edward Island is one school that embraces Universal Design for Learning (UDL), including it in the Strategic Plan. UDL calls for multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression and suggests ways to ensure that online education does not create new barriers and challenges for students with disabilities.

Vaccine mandates are growing in number across Canada

Overall, approximately 56% of Canadian public schools and 45% of private schools require vaccination to access at least some amenities on campus, and nearly all mandate non-medical masks in indoor settings. Because vaccination and mask wearing are currently the best-known methods for preventing the spread of COVID-19, particularly the Delta variant currently prevalent in North America, it is reasonable to state that schools with the most restrictive vaccine requirements are likely the safest. However, students must weigh safety with other priorities, such as access to desirable programs, proximity to home and needed services or medical providers, and other needs.

As of this writing, the province with the highest number of cases is Ontario, and the province with the lowest number is Prince Edward Island; however, these numbers don't tell the whole story. The rate of cases per 100,000 residents is highest in Northwest Territories (753/100,000), Alberta (512/100,000), and Saskatchewan (559/100,000); in all of these areas, the rate is more than 500 cases per 100,000 people over the past 14 days (as of September 29, 2021). Numbers on First Nations reserves are nearing 600 cases per 100,000 residents. Provinces with the lowest infection rates are PEI (23/100,000), Nova Scotia (39/100,000), Newfoundland & Labrador (38/100,000), and Nunavut (13/100,000). In addition, although the raw number of infections is highest in Ontario, the infection rate is 62/100,000 people.

The provinces with infection rates currently trending upward include Northwest Territories, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

The average death rate from COVID-19 in Canada currently stands at 1.4 per 100,000 residents. By province or territory, death rates per 100,000 are generally low (ranging 0–2.9), especially as compared with death rates in the United States. However, in Alberta (4.6/100,000), Saskatchewan (4.8/100,000), and Northwest Territories (11.1/100,000), death rates are higher than rates in the U.S., which are averaging 3.1/100,000.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, prevention through “multiple personal preventive practices” is still the best way to prevent the spread of COVID-19, regardless of vaccination status. However, the agency still recommends vaccination as the best tool for prevention:

Vaccination is one of the most effective ways to protect our families, communities and ourselves against COVID-19. Evidence indicates that vaccines are effective at preventing serious outcomes, such as severe illness, hospitalization and death due to COVID-19. (Public Health Agency, 2021)

In addition, the agency recommends people continue to stay at home when possible, minimize interactions with others, avoid crowded places and enclosed spaces, improve ventilation, wear a non-medical mask, practice hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, clean and disinfect surfaces and objects, and avoid non-essential travel outside the country (2021, n.p.).

Presently, it seems that public schools provide the safest options for students wishing to attend in-person classes and live on campus. In particular, Manitoba, Ontario, Alberta, and PEI provide many public options with vaccine requirements for all but those students and staff with human rights exemptions, as defined by Canadian law.

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