

Creating a diverse future: Supporting health and human service students with disabilities

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Introduction

Labor market participation is strongly associated with education. This connection is even stronger for people with disabilities.

Although universities have developed support programs for students with disabilities, low enrolment and high first-year dropout persist.

Health and human service programs can facilitate students' transition into employment. There are, however, unique challenges related to educational requirements and professional standards, client safety and comfort, and the complex contexts associated with academic and clinical settings.

A lack of understanding regarding the needs and experiences of students with disabilities, coupled with a dearth of appropriate support, may contribute to limited access and low representation within this employment sector.

Objectives

Phase 1: Explore the barriers and facilitators for students with disabilities in health and human service educational programs.

Phase 2: Evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of an individualized support strategy called my Accessibility Plan (myAP).

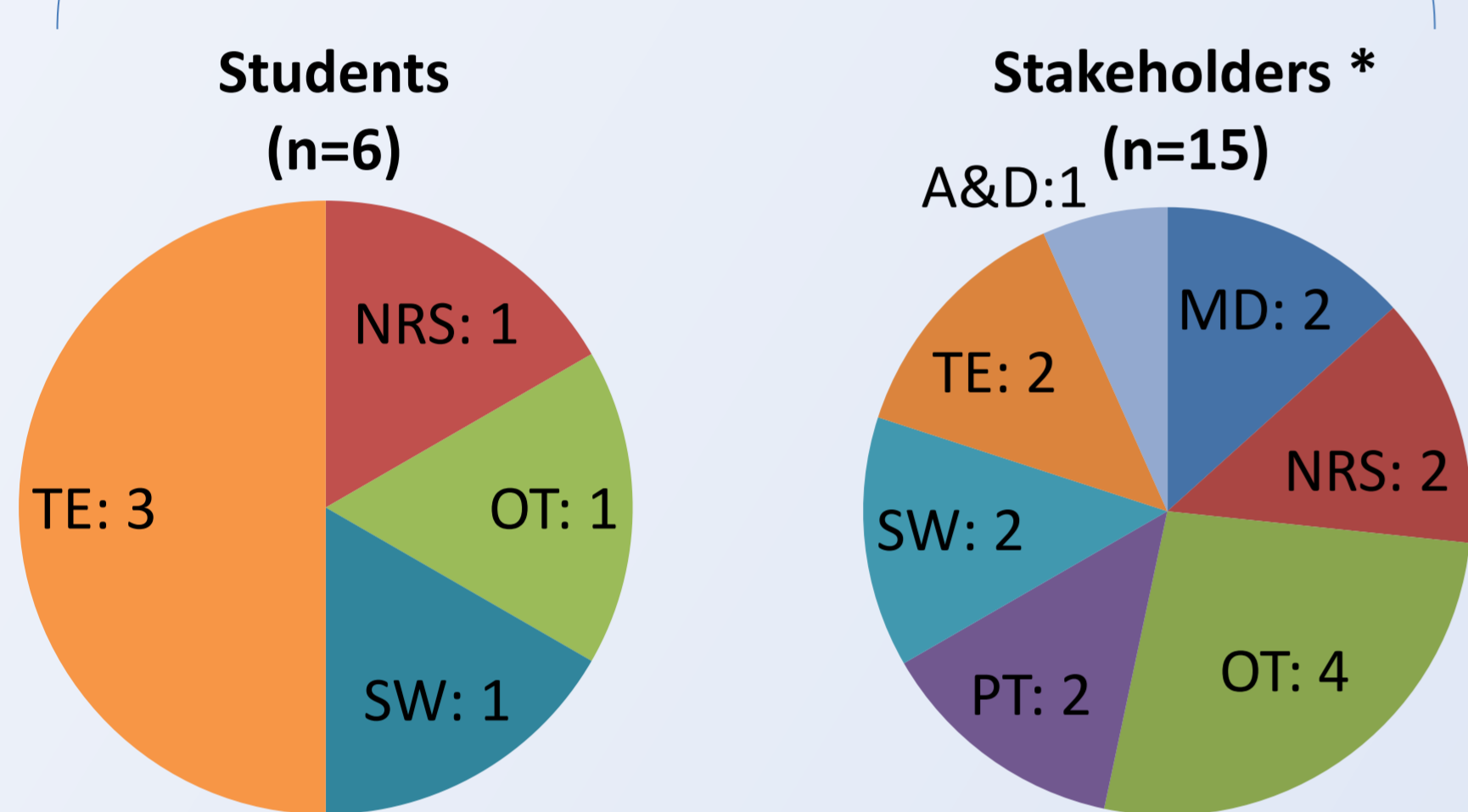
Methods

Phase 1: Collect data on barriers and facilitators through focus groups and in-depth interviews.

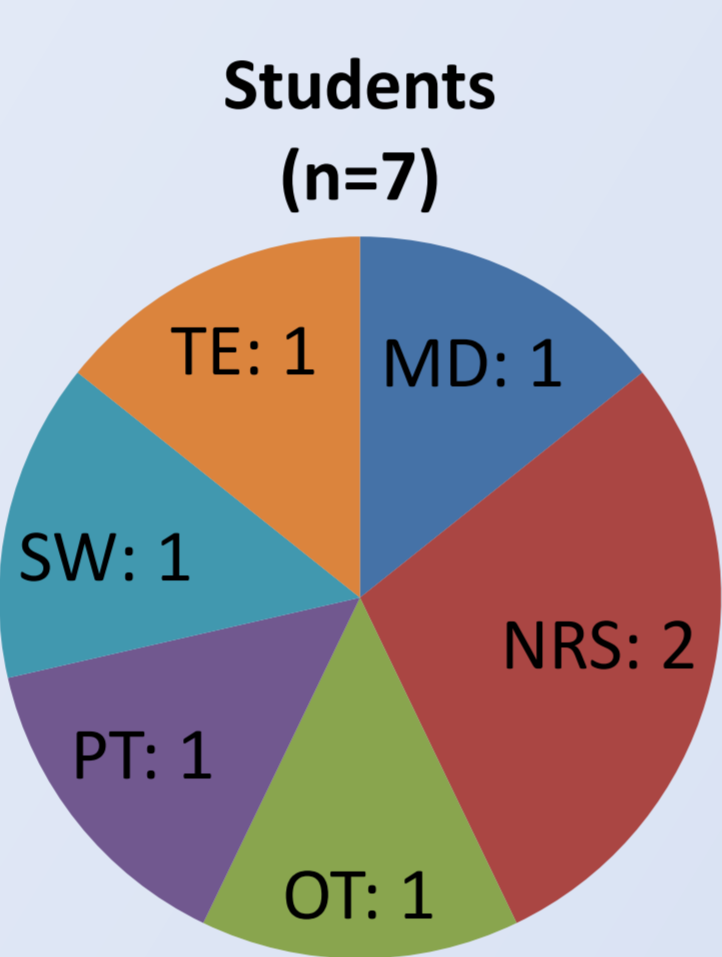
Phase 2: Evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of myAP through questionnaires (COPM and MPOC) and verbal feedback from students with disabilities.

Our two-phase project was conducted at UBC-Vancouver and UBC-Okanagan and includes participants from medicine, nursing, occupational and physical therapy, social work, and teacher education as well as an advisor from the Access and Diversity Office:

Phase I: Focus Groups and Interviews



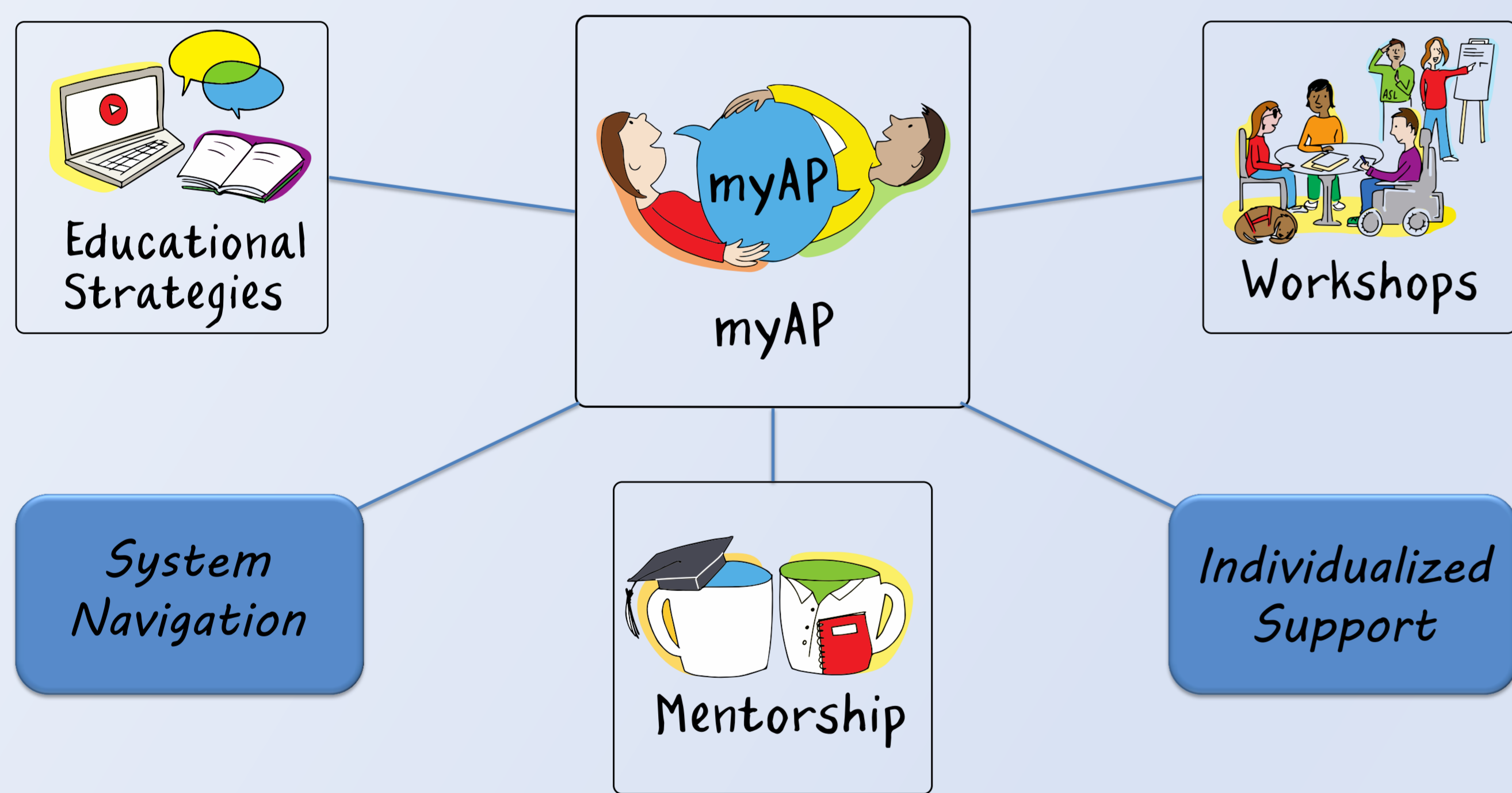
Phase II: myAP



A&D: Access & Diversity; MD: Medicine; NRS: Nursing; OT: Occupational Therapy; PT: Physical Therapy; SW: Social Work; TE: Teacher education.

* Faculty, clinical supervisors, professional licensing bodies, professional association representatives.

Components of myAP



Phase 1: Results

Theme 1: "Step up, Sink or Swim" - Values/Beliefs about Disabilities

Non-Visible Vs. Visible Disabilities	Prejudgment	Everybody Can Do Everything
Physical disabilities appear more readily accommodated than non-visible disabilities, & stigma is greater for learning disabilities and mental illness.	Prejudgment often artificially limits students' opportunities as well as prevents them from disclosing their disability and the challenges they experience.	The value of being more inclusive is recognized; however, the idea that everyone can do everything is unrealistic.

"There's a lot of sympathy and empathy and helping for [visible disabilities]. If there's something less visible...then doctors are the least sympathetic of the bunch. It's like, get going, step up. Sink or swim, kind of mentality around in medical school." Sarah (Faculty)

"Due to absences that I had related to [disorder] and although I had documentation from doctors explaining the absence...I was told by the head of the program...that if he were my boss he would have fired me. That my problem was that I didn't smile and I could just get over it." Dana (Student)

Theme 2: "Can we Maintain Patient Safety?" - Conflicting Demands and Perspectives

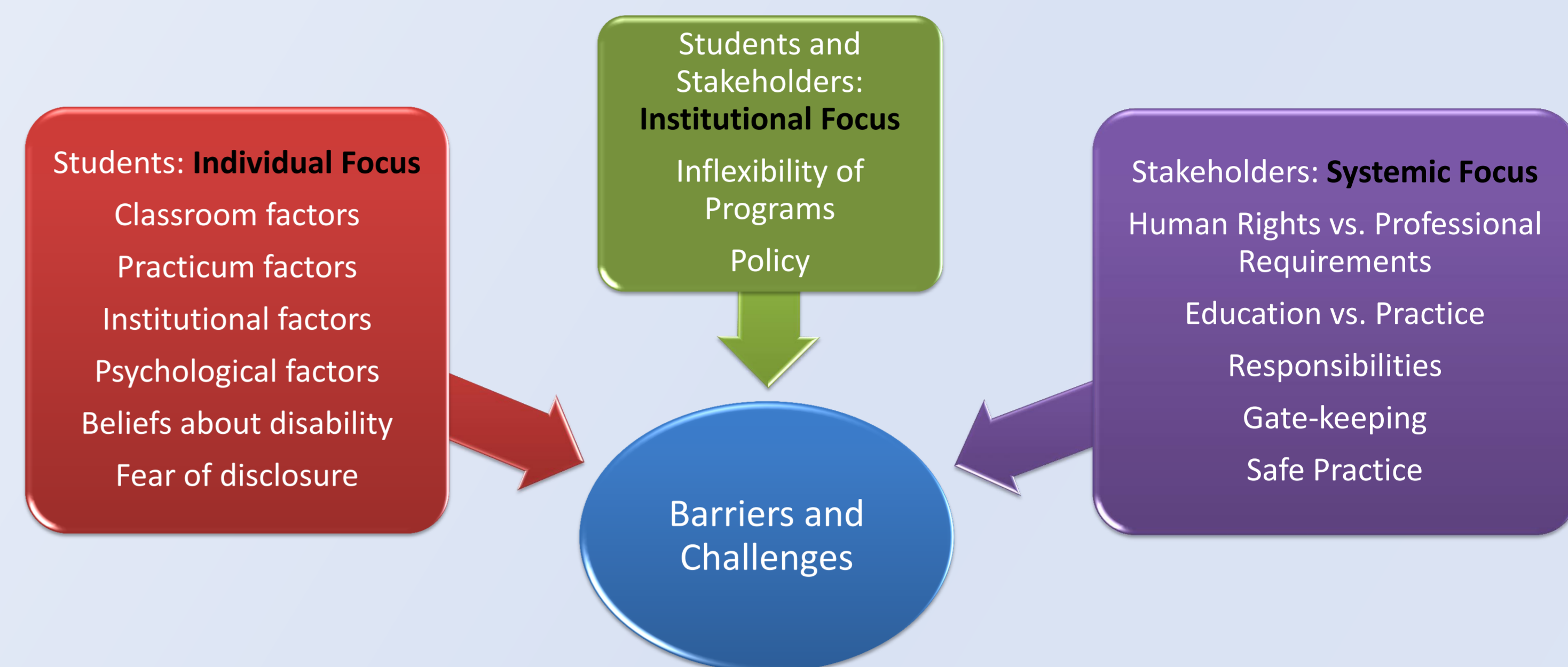


"There is a tension between, can the student get through this rigorous, ridged, difficult program and can we maintain patient safety while they're doing that." Sarah (Faculty)

How do you accommodate somebody's disability while still giving them the opportunity to learn?" Ruth (Professional association representative)

You've got educators who want to help their students to succeed, [who] are put in a position of almost excusing them from meeting the professional standard in order to allow them to proceed because they've already invested... in having chosen that career path." John (Professional association representative)

Theme 3: "You've kind of hit a wall" - Barriers and Challenges



"I've had a hard time voicing [my needs] because the department will say, 'Well that's what we're about...That's our game, and if that doesn't fit for you then maybe this isn't the right area for you.' ...I know that I can do this, it's just hard to learn that way." Pam (Student)

Theme 4: Whose Responsibility is it Anyway?



"And I think that part of the challenge is, it's up to the student to know what accommodations they're going to need and having the courage to ask for that. Because it does take a lot of courage." Dorothy (Clinician with a disability)

"What's the university's role? ... Should the university accommodate to whatever is comfortable to them [students] or do they [the university] have a social responsibility to prepare people who are actually going to be in the system after graduation?" Ruth (Professional association representative)

Summary

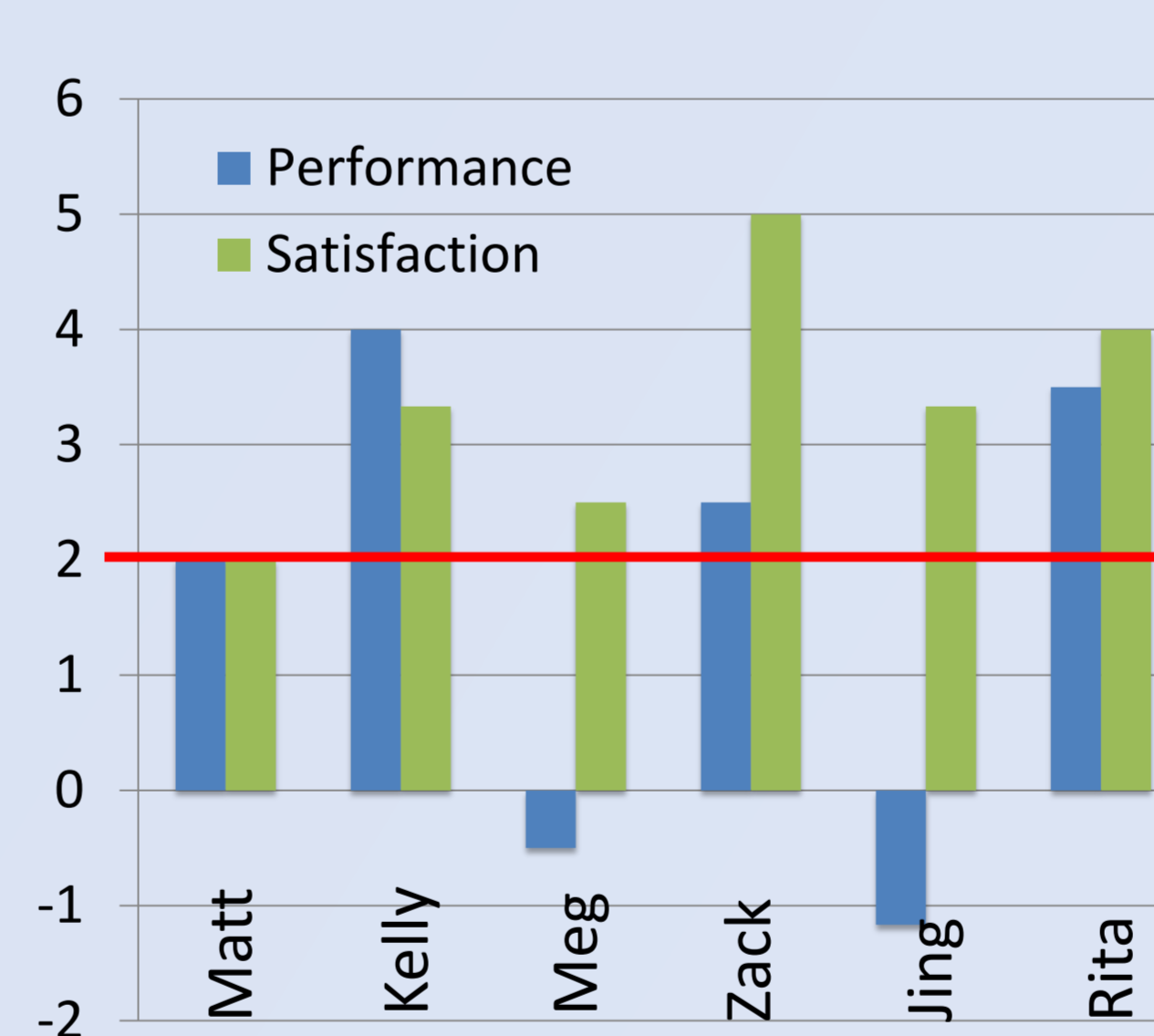
A fear of being stigmatized and a lack of understanding of non-visible disabilities greatly impact students' success with receiving the accommodations that they are entitled to.

There are complex issues with multiple tensions (e.g., between stakeholders' perceived role as gatekeepers and the ideal of inclusion).

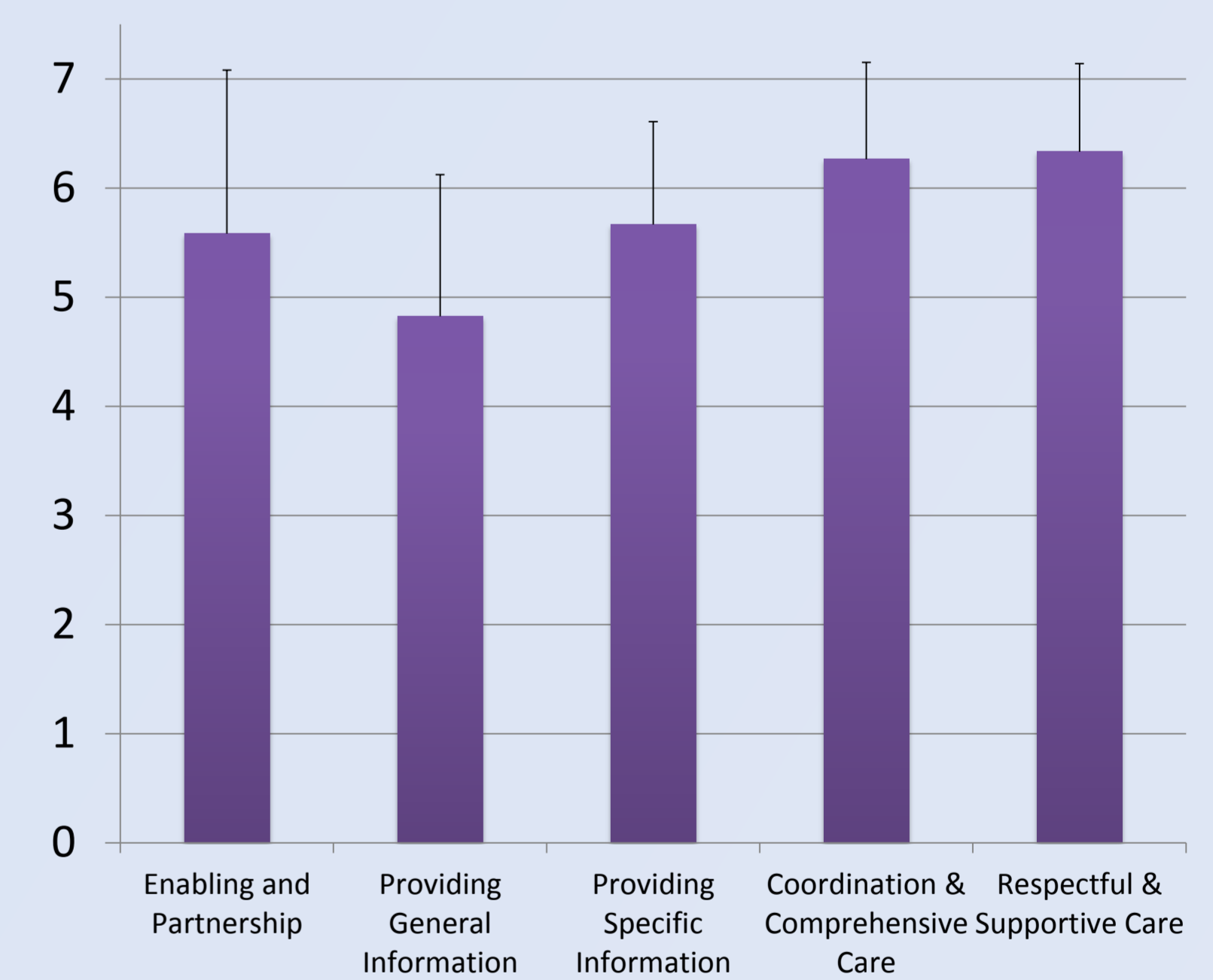
Stakeholders and students have different perceptions of the barriers, challenges, and facilitators for students with disabilities. The inflexibility of professional programs was identified by both groups as a significant barrier; however, some stakeholders are ill-informed of the day-to-day challenges faced by students with disabilities.

Phase 2: Results

Average Change in COPM Scores



MPOC Subscale Ratings



Summary

The average change score for the COPM satisfaction scale was 3.4, which is above the clinically significant value of 2.

The average change score for the COPM performance scale was 1.7, which is lower than the clinically significant value of 2. However, this was strongly influenced by one participant experiencing further health issues and another reevaluating the level at which she needed to perform.

MPOC scores indicate that participants positively evaluated the service they received, thus suggesting that the implementation of myAP was client-centered and supportive.

Conclusions

To increase the participation of students with disabilities we must address systemic institutional barriers, provide individualized support, and educate stakeholders regarding how to support inclusion in professional programs.

The pilot test of myAP demonstrates that offering students support can increase both their performance and satisfaction on key educational issues.

The next phase of the project will focus on further developing and evaluating myAP as well as providing support and education for faculty and students.

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