

Studenting Season 2 – Building More Accessible Communities (Transcript)

Guests: Bella from the Office for Students with Disabilities, peer mentor leader Macy and peer mentor Hannah.

Host: Derah

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Derah: Thank you everybody for being here today. I'm your host, Derah. I have three wonderful individuals with me here today. Could you please tell me a little bit about yourselves?

Bella: Yeah. Hi everybody, my name is Bella. I am the senior advisor for Learning Supports with the Office for Students with Disabilities and Tutorial Services. Basically, that means that I do all of the stuff that's not accommodations at our office. So we do academic support, note taking, tutoring and our lovely peer mentoring program, which is what we're mostly talking about today.

Macy: Hi everyone, my name is Macy and I use she/her pronouns. This is my second year being involved with the Office for Students with Disabilities, and this is my second year as a peer mentor, and I'm also a mentor peer leader this year.

Hannah: Hi, my name is Hannah. I'm a second year student here and it's my second year with the OSD as a peer mentee.

Derah: It's great to meet all of you. The angle for this season is to build community among students. And specifically for this episode, we're looking at building community among students with disabilities. You mentioned that today we're specifically talking mostly about the peer mentor program, so could you please tell us a little bit about the program?

Bella: Yeah, of course. So the OSD's peer mentor program is designed to really enrich the student body as a whole, both on the side of students registered with our office and the rest of the McGill community. The idea is that we pair up students who are registered with our office as mentees with students who may be registered with our office, maybe not, as their mentors. The mentors are typically further along in their academic path to provide mentorship. The goal is really just to facilitate their learning, their support, and inclusion. We want to ease the transition to university life for first year students or students coming back after a little while away, and we just want to help them build new skills and gain resources. A big part of it is we really want

everybody to gain skills. So we want the mentees to grow their skills, but we also want our mentors to grow and gain engagement and inclusion and everything like that.

Derah: That's awesome. I think it's very important that you said that through this program, both the mentees and the mentors can gain. Macy and Hannah, do you have anything to say about the peer mentor program from your personal experiences or from what you've seen, what you've engaged in?

Macy: Yeah. So for us, it looks like peer-to-peer support. We meet as often as three times a week or as few times as every other week, and we discuss everything from study tips, to navigating life at McGill, Montreal-specific topics. Sometimes we just check in and as we discuss student life, and it's really a great way to maintain a relationship through an academic setting.

Hannah: Yeah, I found it really helpful, especially last year. My first year I was in residence and I found it could be quite isolating. You had that connection to the people in your residence, but really nothing to McGill outside of it. And having Macy made me feel like I almost had a tether to McGill outside of, you know, Carrefour Sherbrooke. It made me feel like I was part of the McGill community and that there was something more to be discovered at McGill.

Derah: For the past year, you mentioned that you were in residence. How was that with the pandemic, and how did the OSD operate with that during the pandemic?

Hannah: We did it virtually, so it was kind of par for the course for last year. But it was also very different being one-on-one, I think, especially with first year classes being so large and last year being fully online. All of my experiences with McGill, if you weren't in my residence basically I wouldn't see you or talk to you one-on-one, even if it was virtually. Even just having a one-on-one meeting with someone was completely different than last year.

Bella: And we're continuing to do virtual mentoring and tutoring and other services at this time as well. Our hope is that as things open back up, we can do some in-person stuff. But I think we'll also probably keep some of the flexibility that the virtual experience has offered. It just creates a way more open, accessible space for students who maybe can't physically get places or are experiencing other barriers that would prevent them from showing up in person.

Macy: I feel like for me, it really provided perspective on what it's like to be a first year student in a residence and have online classes, you know, and not really be able to go on campus necessarily, or meet people the way you could so easily when everything was in person. So for me, I thought it was really interesting to hear another student's perspective.

Derah: You mentioned that having online services kind of created flexibility with your programs. What other resources at McGill within the OSD have you found helpful, or have students found helpful?

Bella: Specifically during the pandemic or in general?

Derah: During the pandemic and outside the pandemic as well.

Bella: Yeah, I mean, we have tons of services through the OSD and we were actually already offering virtual services before the pandemic started. So we just kind of ramped those up, and now we're seeing it even out to 50/50 a little bit as things open back up. But I think some of the most useful resources that we've seen on campus to promote mental health and community engagement are things like this program [peer mentorship], things like the Wellness Hub and the various workshops and resources that they offer. I know that TLS [Teaching and Learning Services] also offers lots of resources for students, both specific to the online world and the in-person world.

Hannah: I know one thing I used last year was the note taking services that the OSD provides. I find with online classes I always get down on myself, I have no excuse not to write down everything the prof has said. But that also means that it takes like two and a half hours to do a one hour class, and it just was not a viable way to do my classes last year. So I found with the note taking services, it was a really good way to supplement my notes and also help me maintain a better schedule in terms of my academics and doing classes.

Derah: Yeah, I find what you said interesting, Hannah. You know, going from a one hour class to making a one hour class a two and a half hour class because you're trying to write down everything the professor said. I can relate to that experience as well. So the note taking service seems to be very, very important because it helps students focus on what is most important during classes while having other notes to supplement their learning. And you mentioned the TLS, just for our listeners could you please clarify what the TLS does?

Bella: Yeah, TLS is teaching and learning services. So Tutorial Services, which is through our office, is one of the areas that I'm responsible for. We offer a lot of learning supports and academic engagement tools, and then TLS is support for Teaching and Learning Services. So they have support for teachers, they have supports for students learning how to use Zoom. Workshops and webinars, information on how to use myCourses and things like that, that can be really helpful for students.

Derah: For the past year and a half, almost two years, it's [been] pretty challenging for people to form connections because of the pandemic. What resources or groups or initiatives would you

recommend for students with disabilities to build more connections with other students with disabilities?

Bella: Yeah, this is a great question, and it's one that when we saw these questions a little bit in advance, I wanted to make sure I had a good resource of information. I think though the first most important piece about, you know, when we're talking about students with disabilities is that you're probably already interacting with students with disabilities, right? Invisible disabilities are super prevalent. Actually, more than 64% of students registered with our office have an invisible disability. So an invisible disability for anybody who doesn't know, is basically a disability you can't see. So if somebody is utilizing a wheelchair, that's something that I know about you when I look at you. If somebody is experiencing challenges with their mental health or has ADHD or a learning disability, these are not things that I can see by looking at a person. So it's just really important to know that probably everybody is already interacting with people with disabilities, and so you just want to be as open and inclusive with everybody that you interact with at all points in time.

That being said, for students who do want community specifically with other students experiencing the same barriers that they face, our office is not the right place to go. Because we really value student confidentiality, and so we really make sure that we protect student identities, we don't share that information. In fact, in our peer mentorship group, we do not share information about disability with our mentors. The mentees can choose to share that and disclose with the mentor that they work with, but it's not something that they're going to get from our office. So if you're looking for that, there are other resources across campus.

There's the McGill Disabled Students Network, this is a Facebook group and it's student run. It's actually student created, student run, student managed, you can look into that. SSMU [Students' Society of McGill University] also has a lot of resources, they have groups specific to students with concussions, specific to liver or heart related diagnoses, communications disorders, and other groups like this. I know that PGSS [Post Graduate Students Society] has a working group on mental health. And so many other things, we have a group for fitness access, it's called FAM, so there's lots of different resources depending on what kind of community you're looking for.

Derah: And another question: how can student groups, clubs and other extracurricular initiatives make themselves more accessible to students with disabilities?

Macy: I can speak to this one.

Derah: Sure.

Macy: I think that it's really important to consider accommodations on an individual level, whether that be having extra time for an exam or taking it in a different space, or having access

to large print software, if that's relevant. I also think that as things become more in-person it's important to incorporate accessibility into events, such as including accessible spaces. So if there's stairs, having ramps or elevators, having spaces to sit down and take a break from whatever event it is, if that involves standing especially. Or having quieter spaces, if there's loud music, for example.

Derah: Mm-Hmm.

Bella: Yeah. And when we're talking about accessible spaces, just like everywhere else in Montreal, not everywhere in the McGill campus is accessible. There is an accessible map though, that's been created that you can look up. Just search 'McGill accessible map' and it'll tell you which buildings have accessible entrances, it'll plan accessible routes from one building to another, and it'll really increase access when you're picking those spaces for students who do have reduced mobility.

I think another great way that we can promote inclusion and openness in other extracurricular activities is when we say--just like any other marginalized group--when we say, "we are open to students with disabilities" or "we are open to accommodating students with disabilities," that just opens the door for people who maybe otherwise wouldn't even ask because they're not sure if that's available to them. So just stating that, "we welcome students with disabilities in this space, we're open to adjusting and accommodating as needed" can create a lot of access.

Macy: And going off of what Bella was saying, even asking the question like, "Are your accessibility needs being met in this environment?" Whether that's virtually or in person, it can decrease the stigma and allow students to feel more comfortable disclosing disabilities or asking that their accessibility needs be met.

Derah: Mm-Hmm. Yeah, I think that's an excellent point, because sometimes people don't reach out unless they're reached out to. So it's important to ask questions like, you know, like you said, "are accessibility needs being met?" It's also important to state that we're open to students with disabilities because students may not ask if they're not told, students may not know if they're not told. So that's an excellent point. Still, on the concept of accessibility and inclusivity, what does inclusivity mean to you?

Macy: I can go first. I think accessibility and inclusivity to me means removing barriers that would prevent students from participating or being involved or feeling comfortable doing so. I think it also means non-judgmental acceptance and support, regardless of anyone's background or the different barriers they're facing, as well as taking concrete, actionable steps that reflect an inclusive mindset.

Hannah: Yeah, I would say comfort to me would probably be the key word that I would use to describe that. Whether it be, you know, physically comfortable if you require physical accommodations, but also just comfortable in terms of, you know, you're able to do something and you don't feel hindered by anything and you have the accommodations that you need and that it's just generally a safe space.

Bella: I would add to that comfort, speaking up if there's something that you don't need. When we talk about inclusion, we usually talk about the social model of disability. This is where we envision disability as something that happens due to barriers in the environment. So it's not because I have ADHD that I have a disability, it's because the system and the space that I'm living in doesn't fit my needs, like it doesn't fit me. Not that I don't fit it.

Derah: Yeah.

Bella: And so when we're talking about inclusion, it's how can we adjust the environment to better suit my needs or to better make me feel more comfortable or settled. Part of that means asking, because there's no way that one person planning an event or an initiative can think of absolutely every single barrier that somebody is going to experience. So I think that, you know, leaving that space, having a textbox: "Have your needs been met? Is there anything you'd like to share with us? We're open to accommodating. We're open to spending money on accommodations." All of those things are really important because you can't plan for everything, but we can make people comfortable asking.

Derah: Yes, I think those are excellent definitions of inclusivity. It's a concept and a term that we have to keep thinking about because we have to create a society that is more inclusive and accessible to everybody and to, you know, in this case, to students with disabilities.

Bella: Can I just mention something right there? I think it's important that you said inclusion for everybody, because right now we're talking about inclusion with relation to students or persons with disabilities. But lots of these principles that we're talking about apply to inclusion of various groups and various people, and all different settings, so just widening our mindset a little bit.

Derah: For sure. Kind of back to the concept of the pandemic and virtual events, how has the pandemic and the increase in virtual events influenced what we know about accessibility? And what lessons can we carry from that going forward?

Bella: Yeah, I think that's a great question, and it's one that we at our office have been asked quite a bit over--well since the pandemic started. I think that there's lots of lessons we can take from it. I know that having virtual events has increased access and a ton of ways. We've created access to people with reduced mobility who maybe can't show up places, or people who maybe

just can't afford to travel there, or find means to get places and all of those things. And in that sense, it's really, really great. It's also made it a lot easier for event planners to be inclusive in lots of respects. We have, you know, we don't have to spend money on space or spend money on adding ramps to spaces that aren't physically accessible. And so in that case, it's opened up a lot of movement for accessibility as well.

At the same time, there are some things that we still need to consider. When we are online we're often sitting, and when we're sitting it's usually for a long period of time when we're not moving, and this can be challenging. I mean, I know it's challenging for me, and I know that it can be a huge barrier for some students with disabilities or persons with disabilities. So you want to make sure that if you're planning a virtual event, you're planning a break at least once an hour. You're giving people the opportunity to stand if they need to, to turn off their camera if they need to, to communicate in different ways.

Sometimes we think that because we're virtual, everybody is just going to be super happy to show up and stay. But you know, the communication online is very different, giving people the opportunity to engage in different ways by chat, by unmuting themselves, by emailing you afterwards can be really, really helpful. Also, I find sometimes with virtual events because we know it increases access in so many ways, we forget to ask about other forms of access. So Zoom has free transcription available. This is awesome, everybody should always turn it on. The free transcription is not going to be sufficient for somebody who relies on transcription as their only means of obtaining that information. So we still need to ask, we still need to make sure that we're opening up the door for people to let you know what they need from you and what works for them. To make sure that we're not just assuming that being online automatically makes things accessible for everybody.

Macy: Yeah, I was definitely going to mention in response to your question about virtual events and accessibility, having live transcripts or closed captions is really important. Oftentimes you're able to access these again later and you can go back and edit them if changes need to be made and provide them to everyone involved in an event. Similarly, recordings of virtual events can be really helpful for students with different barriers or different needs in terms of accessibility.

Hannah: I mean, another thing I might throw in is just also visual aids and pictures and maybe PowerPoints. I mean, this kind of goes back to classes, but I had some profs last year who would just record themselves talking standing up, no notes, no scripts, no PowerPoint. And, you know, it was horrific. Whereas you know, I had other profs who took the time to actually make sure that they had interesting, compelling slideshows or that they had a transcript and that that was available for students. That was really helpful in terms of not only accessibility but focus for everyone. I had friends who don't have the same barriers who totally agreed and had the same issues.

Bella: Yeah, I think that's an important point. Often when we're increasing access for one group, we're opening access to other students who maybe have different needs at the same time. I just want to go back to your point, too, about the PowerPoint slides and things like that. These are great resources, and if you can share them in the most open format possible, that's great. If you're going to be sharing things as a PDF or any other type of Microsoft thing, Microsoft has a free accessibility checker where you can go in and just like a grammar checker, you can turn it on and it'll tell you if your document is accessible or where you need to make changes so that it can be used with screen readers. It can be used by various adaptive tech to make sure that everybody has access to the information you're sharing.

Derah: Yeah. I think that's an excellent point. The Microsoft accessibility checker is pretty good. I know sometimes it warns me that I haven't included the alt text for images.

Bella: Yeah.

Derah: But yeah, I think these were excellent responses. What I got out of this is that virtual events most times make events more accessible to people, but it's also important not to forget the other aspects of accessibility that are important. We cannot create virtual events and have that perk of having it virtual increasing accessibility and forget about, you know, the other aspects of accessibility.

Bella: Well and as I'm sure as we've all experienced, virtual events don't replace in-person events. They're very different things, and everybody who's taken an online course versus an in-person class can attest to that. So just knowing that we're not planning a virtual event like it's an in-person event, just like we're not planning an in-person event as if it were virtual. They have different needs and different things to consider.

Macy: If I can add one thing, another thing with virtual events that I found really helpful, and I've heard feedback that it's been very helpful, is if there is visual media or a presentation or handouts--anything like that involved--to provide them to the students or attendees of the event ahead of time. So that way, if their accessibility needs are not being met they can let you know and they can be accommodated ahead of time. Or if something needs to be printed out, or something needs to be put into larger text all of those things can happen ahead of the event, whereas an in-person event maybe someone could raise their hand and bring this to light. With a virtual event there's different requirements, I guess.

Derah: To the concept of getting involved, how can other students who are not part of this community get involved and support your initiatives?

Bella: The peer mentorship program is open to everybody at the university to be a mentor, so in order to be a mentee and receive services through our office, similar to almost all of the other services that we offer, except for the stuff on the tutorial services website and our workshops which are widely available to the McGill community, you have to have it as a part of your accommodation plan through our office. So that means that you've met with an advisor and they've determined this to be in line with your needs and something that we can support you with.

Derah: Mm-Hmm.

Bella: On the other side, though, to be a mentor, you do not have to be registered with our office. You don't have to have any background knowledge or information on mentoring. We do trainings. We give you resources. You get to meet with a peer leader like Macy to support you along the way and make sure that you feel comfortable. So if you are in good academic standing and you've been at McGill for at least one year, you can apply on our website and join our wonderful team.

Macy: Yeah, it's really easy to be involved with this program as a mentor. You don't have to have prior experience in mentorship or leadership. If you're in good academic standing, you will receive the trainings, you have weekly check ins, you have access to resources through McGill through the OSD that enable you to be a peer mentor.

Bella: Yeah, everybody come join, sign up!

laughter

Derah: That's great. A question for you Macy, how has your experience been as a peer mentor and what have you taken away from that program?

Macy: I have three different peer mentees through the Office for Students with Disabilities, and I feel like it's really given me a wider perspective on what it's like to be a student at McGill. I had only known my own experience before, very closely, but being able to follow the academic and personal lives of some of my peers and understand their day-to-day, their experiences, has really broadened my perspective and made me more appreciative of different people's experiences of the school. I'm taking away from the program an emphasis on mental health, on decreasing the stigma around talking about mental health, on decreasing barriers that everyone, any student, may face when it comes to accessing academic and personal support materials.

Derah: Yeah, thank you for sharing your experiences, Macy. And as for you, Hannah, how is your experience being a mentee in the program?

Hannah: Yeah, I think it was really incredible. Like I said earlier, I came into first year McGill coming from like, I mean, my high school experience had gone online, so I hadn't really been in person for quite a while and then moving to a strange city into a new residence completely online. It was really, I mean, weird is kind of the only word for it. I hadn't even toured McGill before I came here, so I really did not feel like I knew the school at all. And so having the meetings with Macy really made me feel like, "Oh, there's actually other people at McGill outside of my residence!"

It was incredible to not only have the academic supports and tips from an older student who had been through it. But it's also nice to have someone else to like, ask questions of. I was like, "I'm finding an apartment, what should I--how should I do that?" And just to kind of hear about the other side, I know Macy said it's interesting to hear about my experience with it, but it was also very nice to hear that McGill isn't always like this and that you have all this stuff to look forward to. There's all these ways to get involved and be on campus, and this is what the McGill experience can be in the future. I think that was really helpful in first year in terms of, like, I was a bit more hopeful I would say. Even my friends, I would tell them about some of the stuff that Macy told me, and we were all super excited. I think it's not only just like a peer mentor in terms of academics, but also just in terms of the McGill experience was really helpful.

Derah: That's awesome. And Bella, to your original point, as we've seen, both the mentor and the mentee can gain immensely from this program. So I'm very happy to hear that both of you have gained a lot. And uh, I look forward to hearing more great work that the peer mentor program is doing. Um, and just finally, what do you want people to know about your initiative?

Macy: Yeah, I think it's really important that everyone knows that the The Office for Students with Disabilities and the Peer Mentor program are all about individualized support, so it's really need based depending on what the mentee is looking for, the type of support that they require, and also that you don't need to be having an especially difficult time or struggling necessarily in order to receive this support. It can just be checking in asking how things are going, you know, talking about things like Hannah said, like apartment hunting or just talking about all the things we're excited to do when things go back in person, that kind of thing. I think it's really about community and about making those connections. And I hope that everyone considers it as an option if they are a student with disabilities.

Derah: Mm-Hmm.

Bella: I love that answer, Macy. I think it's super true. Like we really strive through the OSD to be student centered and we don't ever follow like a checklist, but we talk to the students and figure out what their barriers are to make sure that they feel supported. And the peer mentorship program goes the same way. Like I said, we don't even disclose disabilities. So it's really just two

students meeting up talking about challenges, finding resources to support you, and then and then working through it together, right?

I also like that Macy said that you don't have to be experiencing extreme hardship to benefit from this or to be eligible for it. You can come to the OSD if you feel like it might be the right space for you and do a 15 minute drop-in appointment to see if we have services that can support you. The same goes for other resources across campus. You can go by the Wellness Hub, even if you're not feeling like you're suffering. You can still just stop by if you think you're having a bit of a hard time and you just need a little bit of support there.

Macy: And especially having those support systems in place, for if later down the road you do face an additional barrier or you do need extra support, that kind of thing. Having someone you have a connection with, having access to the resources, you know, having things like notes for all your classes. Even if you don't necessarily use them, you know you have them, you know that they're there. It's like having backups. I think it's really important that even if they're not necessary at the time, you might find them really helpful later.

Hannah: Yeah, I mean, one thing that I really admire about the mentorship program is its flexibility. I mean, you can really see from my first meeting how student based it is. When I first signed up for it, I didn't really know what to expect. Then I kind of thought it'd just be like a one semester thing. And I really enjoyed the meetings with Macy because it's not only--like you said--we're not following a checklist, it's kind of what we both want to talk about. Even in terms of meetings this year, we've had the opportunity to see each other in person a bit, but also sometimes our schedules just don't work and we can do virtually. And so, you know, not just in terms of scheduling, but the flexibility is I think something that's really incredible.

You don't have to have a three times a week really regimented meeting with someone where you're going over stuff point by point by point, like it's it's super flexible. And I mean, like we've talked about, it's very student based.

Macy: Sometimes we'd even end up chatting about how we're doing, like outside of school and just chatting about where we're from and the things we like to do. It goes beyond, you know, academics strictly. It's really about getting to know somebody who's a peer who comes from different backgrounds and just sharing those experiences.

Bella: The last thing that I'll add here is I know we already mentioned it, but I think that something that people miss is that they think the program is only for people with our office. But anybody can be a mentor and you don't even have to be in your masters or your Ph.D. to sign up. Macy was in--your third year when you first started?

Macy: Yup.

Bella: And we have people who are in their second year at McGill who just want to help out, people who are just starting, so you can come sign up. There's resources to get you started and we're super happy to have you and to keep growing the initiative.

Derah: A lot of great points to know about the OSD and the peer mentor program. It's been a pleasure speaking to all of you. I've learned a lot that I wouldn't have known otherwise, and I'm sure our listeners have also learned a lot. We're really grateful for you being here today, and we wish you all the best with, you know, all your initiatives at the OSD and the peer mentor program. And we hope to hear great things from your group.

Bella: Thank you.

Macy: Thank you for having us.

Hannah: Thank you.