

BLACK, INDIGENOUS, PEOPLE OF COLOUR



A STUDENT GUIDE TO POST-SECONDARY ACCOMMODATIONS

Navi Dhanota, PhD

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How this handbook came to be:

The first time I asked for academic support was during university. Though I was aware there was an office for students with disabilities, I had never considered myself as being eligible for its services. In my last year of university, when I finally registered for academic accommodations, I found myself unpacking a lot of shame about seeking help; I was struggling with my beliefs about asking for support and my perceived aptitude for school. I even feared that receiving accommodations was taking away services from someone more deserving. I remember that I felt reluctant to identify as someone who needed more than what I thought was *normal* (an idea that I continue to unpack to this day). I felt relief in finding support, hesitancy in trusting the process, guilt when interacting with faculty, but yet, also a sense of reassurance that accommodations had become essential to my ability to succeed.

I can now imagine a more empowered version of myself asking to explore more options for accommodations to ensure my academic journey was less stressful. I wish I had felt more empowered throughout the accommodations process and had been able to accept myself as someone who benefitted from accommodations because I needed and **deserved them**.

Later, when I became an Accessibility Advisor, I saw Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) students who shared similar challenges navigating the accommodations process in their accessibility/disability office. Then, as part of my PhD research, I wanted to expand on this dialogue around shared pathways. I conducted interviews with BIPOC students and BIPOC accessibility staff across Ontario about their experiences with receiving and recommending accommodations in college and university (I have more about my research methods in the appendix).

When I talked to BIPOC students it was clear that they shared an acute awareness of their experience as being influenced by both their racialization in education and having a need for accommodations. I found that there were unsaid understandings of the BIPOC experiences in educational institutions that are not explicitly addressed in institutional policy or process.

Institutional recognition of these realities impacts the ways that students feel invited to bring themselves to engage in their educational experiences. It is important that students can feel like they can be authentic when asking for and receiving academic accommodations that speak to them honestly. And it is important that the accessibility/disability office acknowledge that our community is underserved in the accommodation office and to address this gap.

My goal is to empower BIPOC students to navigate and thrive in academic settings. To take what they need to succeed and to do so with acceptance and even pride that they can benefit from these supports.

I am deeply thankful for the time and support of these fellow BIPOC students and professionals who generously shared their experiences. I am inspired by their participation in my research, driven by a shared desire to document their perspectives and advocate for positive changes to the accommodation process.

I found healing in my own journey and recognized the potential to share their message with others facing similar challenges. This handbook is a culmination of their insights and dreams for other BIPOC students, like **you**.

Chapter One: Getting in the door

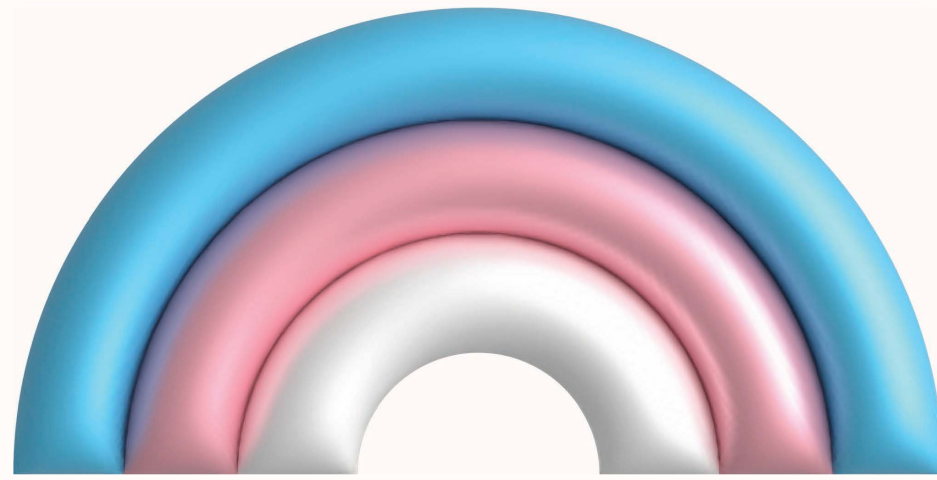
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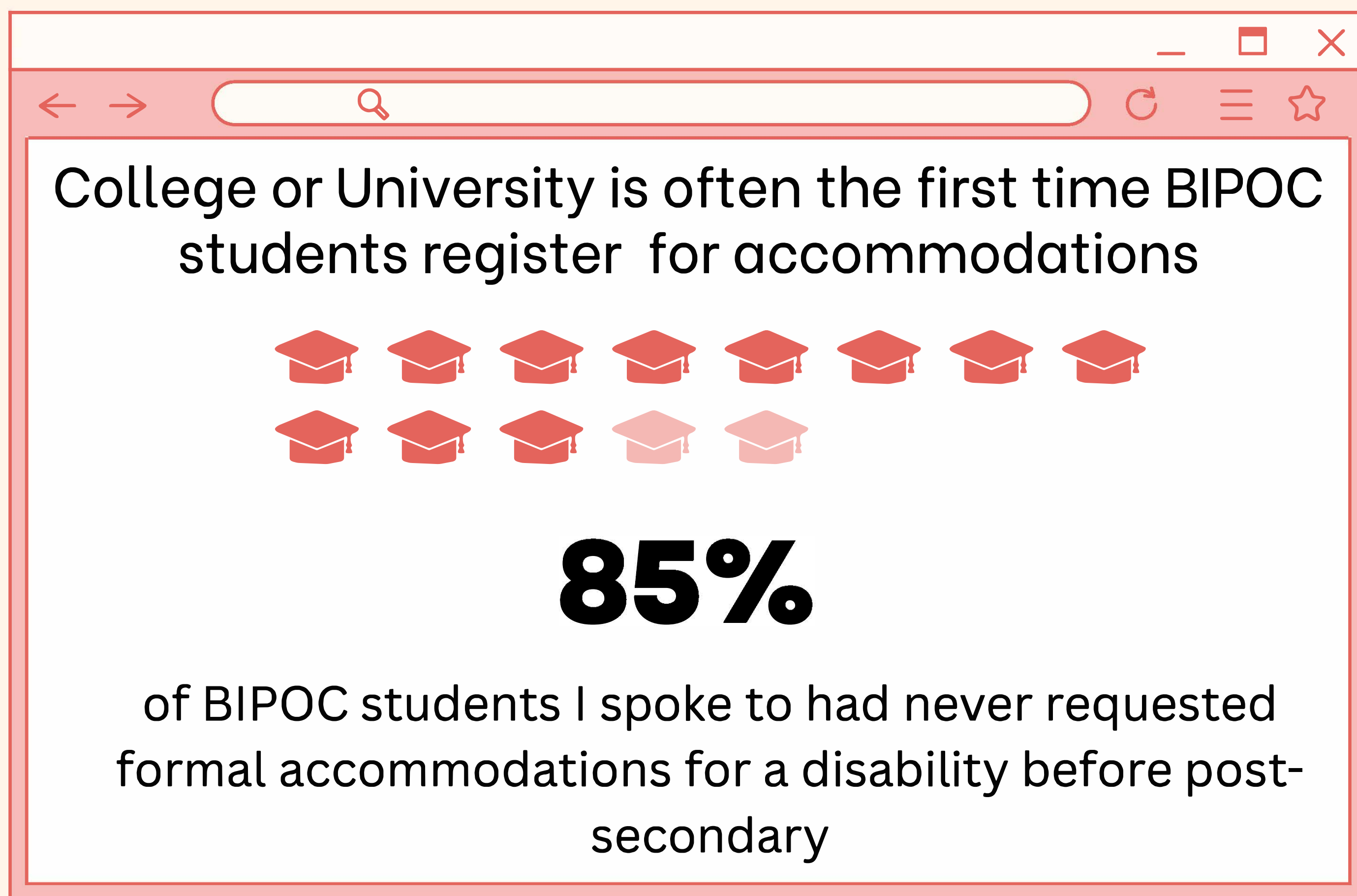


I should know myself best, but in a way you kind of don't. So, that's how I think gender and my racialized identity kind of shaped all of this. It wasn't until recently that I took it upon myself to be like, *okay, maybe I have this thing*. And it wasn't until I found all this information online from activists and content creators. It wasn't until I saw for myself that you could be of any ethnicity, race, gender, age to have a learning disability... and I actually started to believe it like deep down...You know, on a surface level you don't really believe it until you see the representation.

I don't blame us. I think it contributed to my knowledge of myself and who I thought I was, based off of when I would see myself on TV. When I see myself in the media. When I see other Chinese people, Chinese immigrants, being reflected back to me and that's what they look like. And that's what people say they are. So I'm like, that's what I must be. I must be just another kind of quiet, good, cooperative Asian kid, you know, with my own differences. I have my own quirks. But generally, this is how I understood myself to be when I was younger.

I think that is why I never thought of myself as someone who could have a disability. I never thought I struggled more or less than anyone else in school. And if I did, I thought it was just because I didn't work hard enough. So all of that kind of factored into me not knowing until last year. And now I'm doing the work, at 22 years old, to kind of accept that and learn to love myself again.

-Jaiden Zhao (they/them)



85 % of the BIPOC students I spoke to first applied for academic accommodations in college or university and first identified as a student with a disability in that context. This delay in seeking accommodations was most often attributed to a lack of awareness about available resources, inadequate academic support systems and the development of self-advocacy in post-secondary.

Underrepresentation of BIPOC students

The underrepresentation of BIPOC students in the disability office points to a larger systemic issue in providing services to BIPOC communities. If BIPOC students often do not identify their disability office as a service *for* BIPOC students, it should be a responsibility of universities and colleges to consider this inequity in their student service provision. For instance, it is likely that BIPOC students could struggle with their mental health and identify their struggles as something troublesome but not warranting entitlement to supports through **disability** accommodations. How are BIPOC students being engaged to understand these avenues in a way that speaks to their experience?

As an Accessibility Advisor, I often see BIPOC students come in tearful, having struggled for many months, or even years, not knowing that they could qualify for something like extensions to support them when they are unwell. I realized that help often didn't feel *accessible* to BIPOC students. I have found that the identification with the term disability is also complicated in various BIPOC communities for political, historical and cultural reasons (BIPOC students are not a monolith and so each community's relationship to accessing supports as a person with a disability is significant).

You, or a student group at your college or university, may like to ask your accommodation/disability office, *what are they doing to address the needs of BIPOC students in service provision?* Are they tracking who is using their services as a way to better them? Are they providing registration information that considers issues of in/equity? My research found that most accommodations/disability offices are just starting to think about this question. The good news is that this starting place is also an opportunity to provide your input to transform the BIPOC experience in your own community.

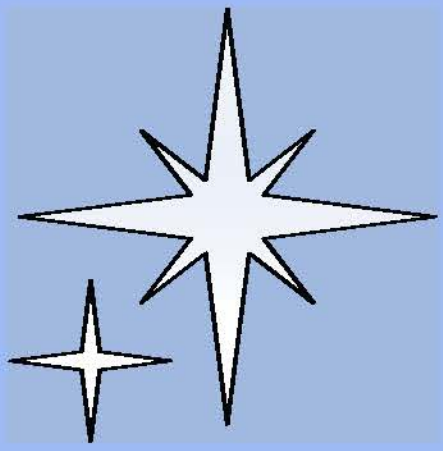
Would I qualify for accommodations?

In 2022, Statistics Canada reported that 27% of the Canadian population aged 15 and older had one or more disabilities. That is approximately 8 million people! In colleges and universities people with disabilities must be offered supports to create equitable access to education; accommodations are intended to even the playing field of the educational experience. That means that accommodations do not provide an advantage to people with disabilities. Unfortunately, many BIPOC students that may qualify for accommodations do not seek them out, creating more disadvantage for students who may not even know that they are eligible for supports.

Most disability/accommodation offices require students to provide documentation from a doctor, or regulated health care practitioner to qualify for services; often these internal registration forms will be hosted on the department's website. Documentation can be completed by regulated health care practitioners, such as, family doctors, audiologists, podiatrists, chiropractors, dentists, homeopaths, massage therapists, midwives, naturopaths, registered nurses, occupational therapists, optometrists, physiotherapists, registered psychotherapists, and traditional Chinese medicine practitioners, to name a few.

It is important to know that disclosing your disability diagnosis or having a permanent disability is not required to qualify for accommodation. Temporary or provisional diagnosis are eligible for accommodation as well.

Knowing if you qualify for accommodations can be extra tricky for students with mental health issues. The following discussion is aimed at equipping you with information if you are thinking about accommodations for your mental health.



Would I qualify for accommodations?

“I thought disability was only physical?”

You might recognize the universal symbol for accessibility that features a person using a mobility device/wheelchair on accessible door buttons. Mobility limitations represent just one type of disability under the diverse disability umbrella. Disabilities can also include anxiety, depression, learning disabilities, chronic pain, low vision, autism and ADHD (among many others). While other groups represented under the disability umbrella could also form a cultural group, such as members of the Deaf community who identify as a linguistic minority or those who identify as part of the autistic community.

“I struggle with my mental health, but I don’t think it would qualify as a disability”

If you have recently started struggling with your mental health—such as experiencing low mood, losing sleep, and excessive worrying—you could qualify for support. Students with a temporary or provisional diagnosis also qualify for accommodations, **including those who do not yet have a diagnosis**. Speaking with your health care provider is an important first step in assessing whether the impacts you are experiencing qualify for short or long-term academic accommodations.



“I don't think my experience is severe enough. I have never talked to a doctor about my struggles because I don't want to take medication”

Decisions about your treatment options are a personal one. Accepting referrals to a specialist or taking medication is not a requirement to qualify for academic accommodations. When your doctor completes your registration form their documentation of your areas of impact is the most important information that your accommodation/disability office requires. This means that your health care provider can help to provide access to **academic accommodation as part of your healthcare and treatment plan** on their own.

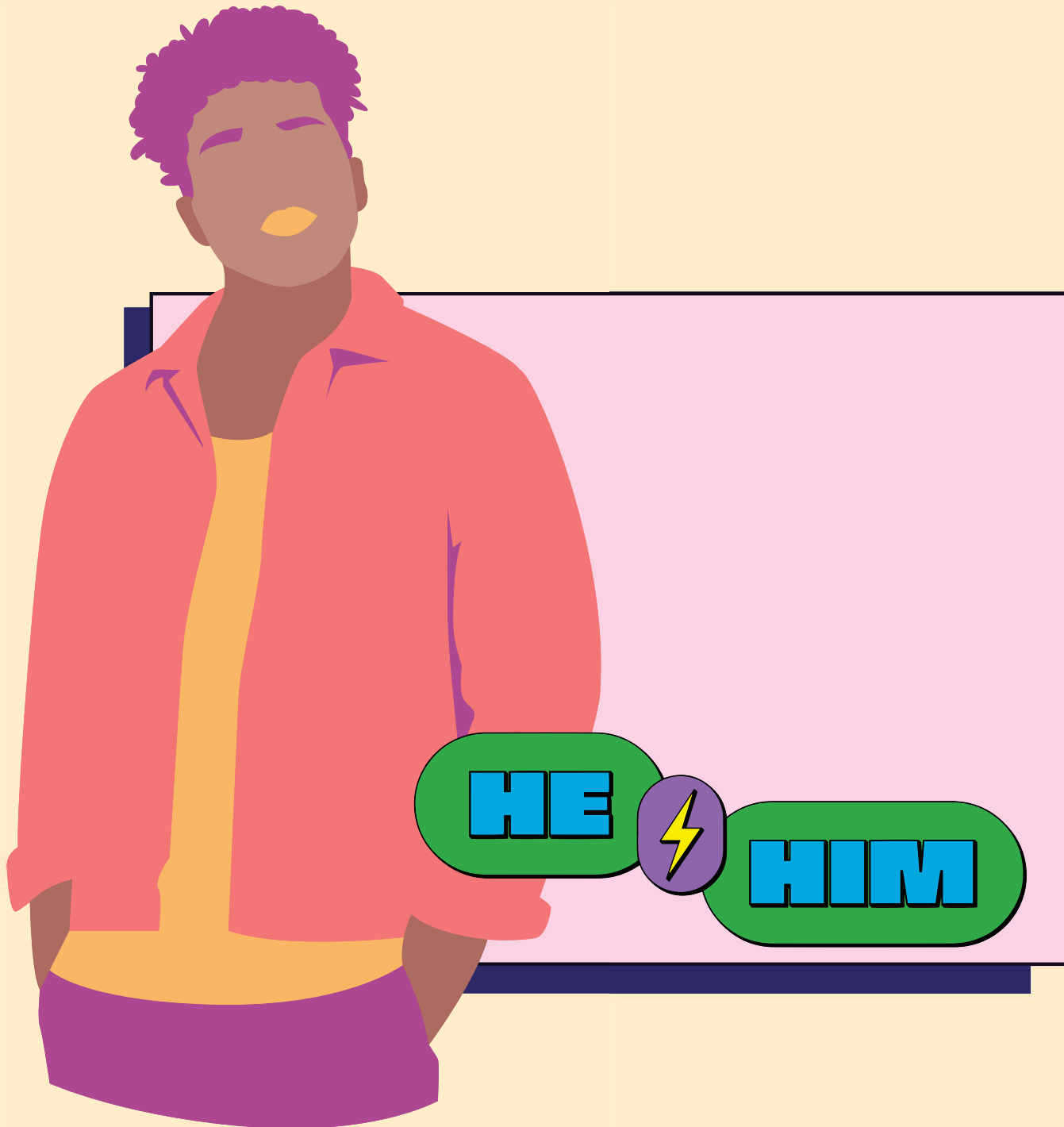


“Western health care has harmed my community. I do not trust asking for support.”

It is important that our education systems also recognize historical harms that have been inflicted on BIPOC communities and the ways that these harms continue to this day. Unfortunately, my research has shown that there are few college and university accommodation/disability offices that have formalized alternate ways to register based on these concerns. For BIPOC people, the hesitation to trust regulated healthcare providers or educational institutions can be a practice to preserve safety and *should* be considered in the registration process.

If you receive health support from other types of services or community hubs, this handbook provides information on how to request your accommodation office to accept this type of documentation. While I cannot guarantee your accommodations office will accept this request, or have a process already in place to receive it, I will provide some guidance should you like to advocate for this. Should you choose to pursue this route, it could carve out pathways for alternate registrations processes for future students too.

BIPOC Accessibility Advisor perspectives: why accommodations matters

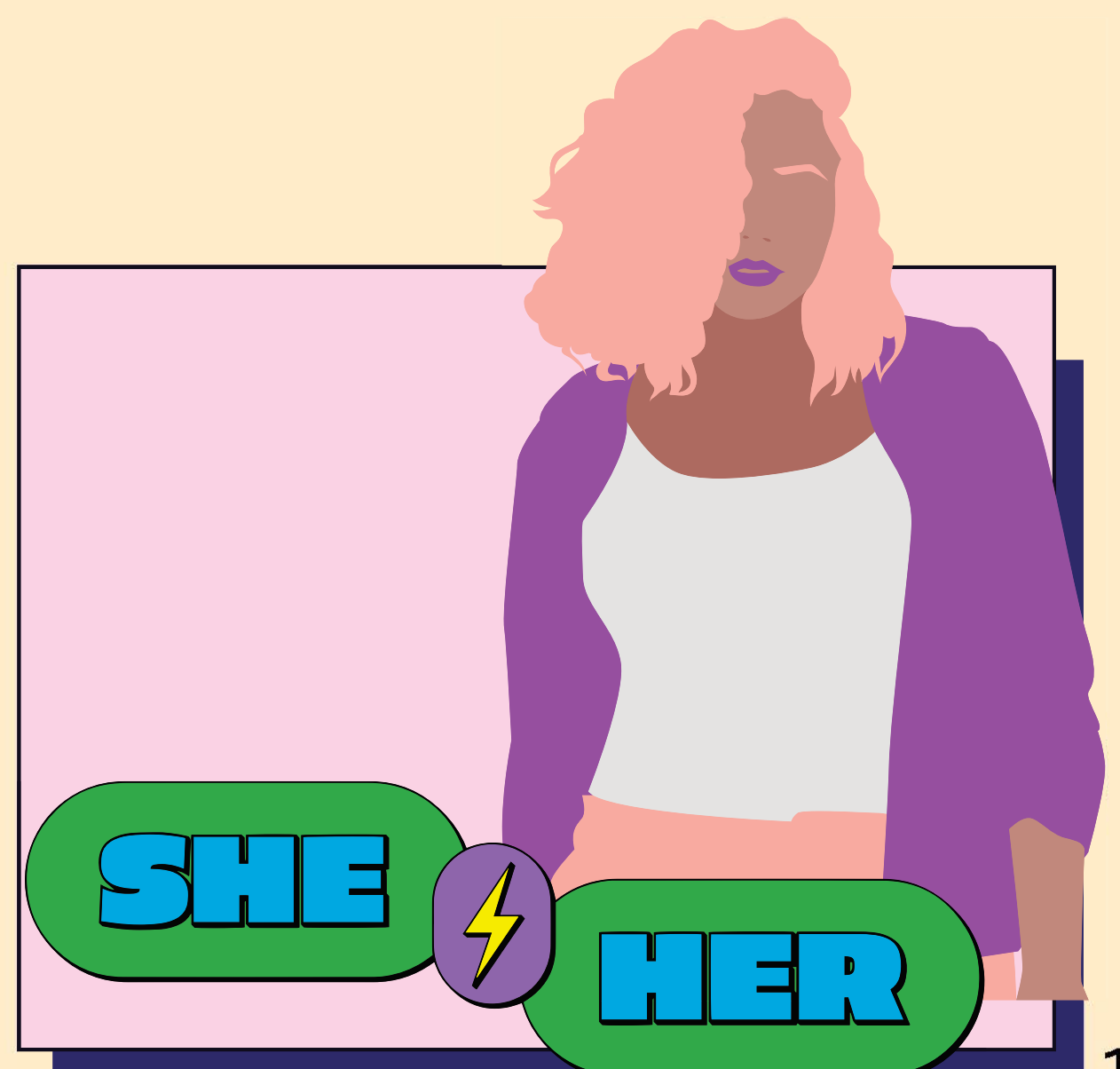


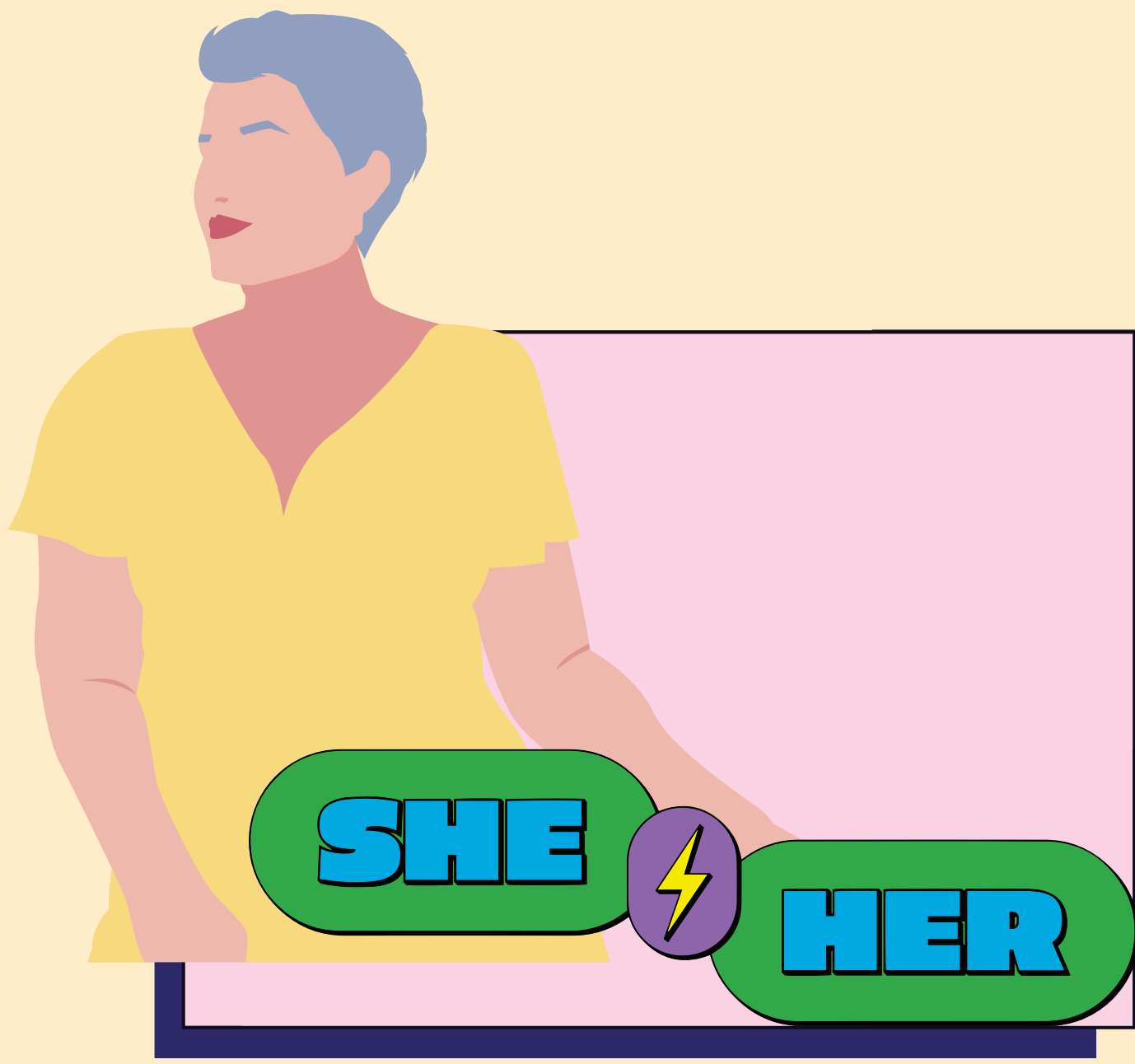
Eli

I know what it's like to be a Black student. Navigating space and feeling like you constantly have to overachieve. And that is kind of, that is empirical that like, often times, my students have to have higher achievement... I know all of those things. When you come in and I say, 'how are you?' It's an unwritten thing and almost like a look on the face. It's to put it into words. It's a check-in. It's an acknowledgement of those things.

Aesha

I don't approach my work as sort of an us and them. And so saying, 'You know what, I hear ya, and I walk with you from the other side of it, as a staff'. You know, just lending space for validity.



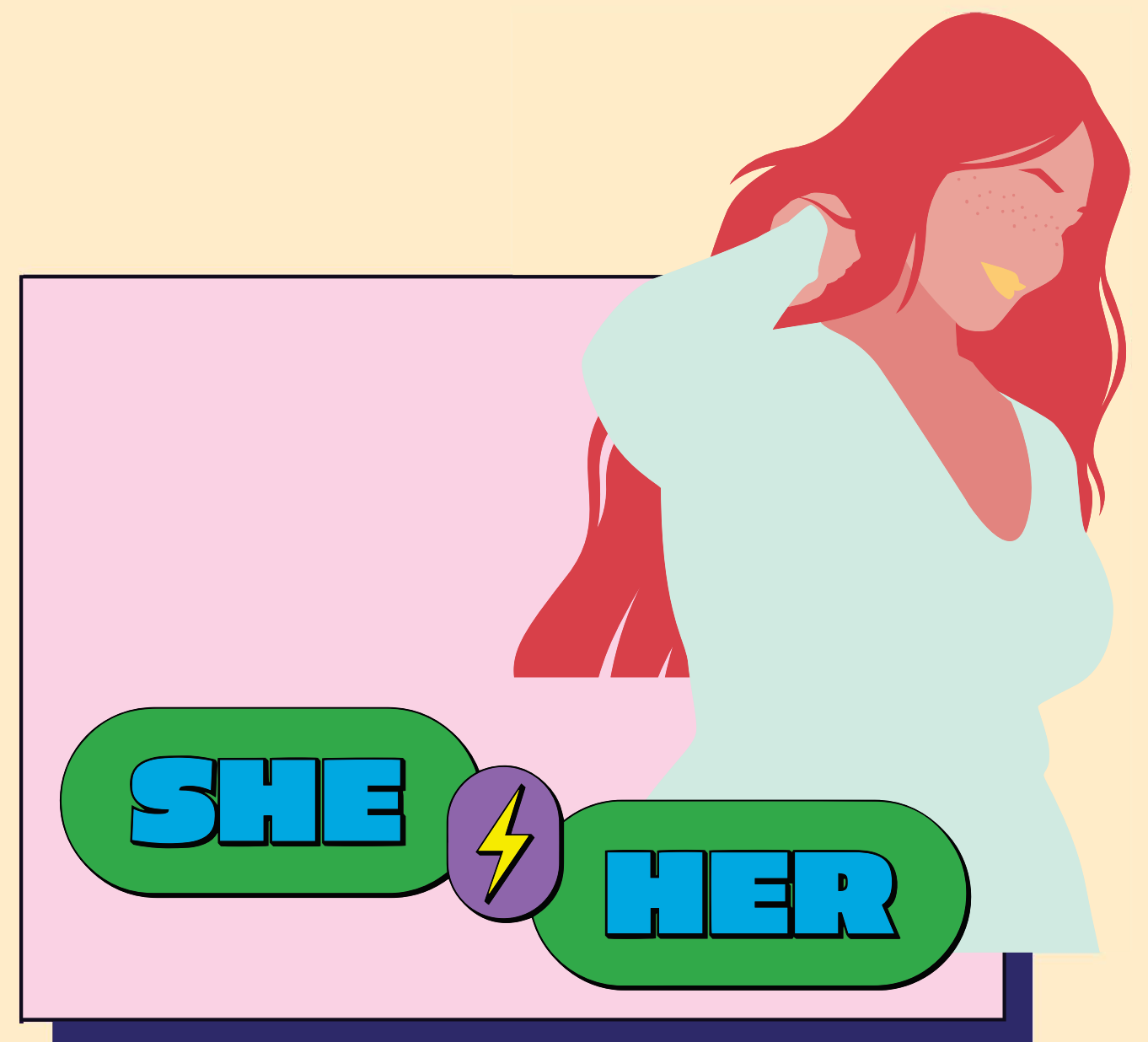


Aponi

What the students notice, and it sounds unintentional but maybe it's somewhat intentional, is the decor in my office. I have a picture of corn, Indian corn to the Americas. I have books and a bookshelf with a lot of Indigenous literature and writers. And when I speak to them, if I have knowledge, maybe I know their last names. Maybe I have some knowledge about that and generally kind of chat. Open the discussion, 'so where are you coming from?'... You know, those types of things? It's definitely a different interaction (from standard intake process). I can say that.

Alisha

People's comfort with the topic of disability is definitely a factor... Sometimes people are at the point where they're asking for help but culturally disability is not something that you are comfortable talking about freely or carrying that title. It can definitely play a role in terms of our appointment. How much I can come to know about what supports to get? Kind of the likeliness or their comfort with taking those up. And so, I have definitely found that more so with my BIPOC, or international, or children of immigrant parents, individuals that I'm working with.



Types of Documentation

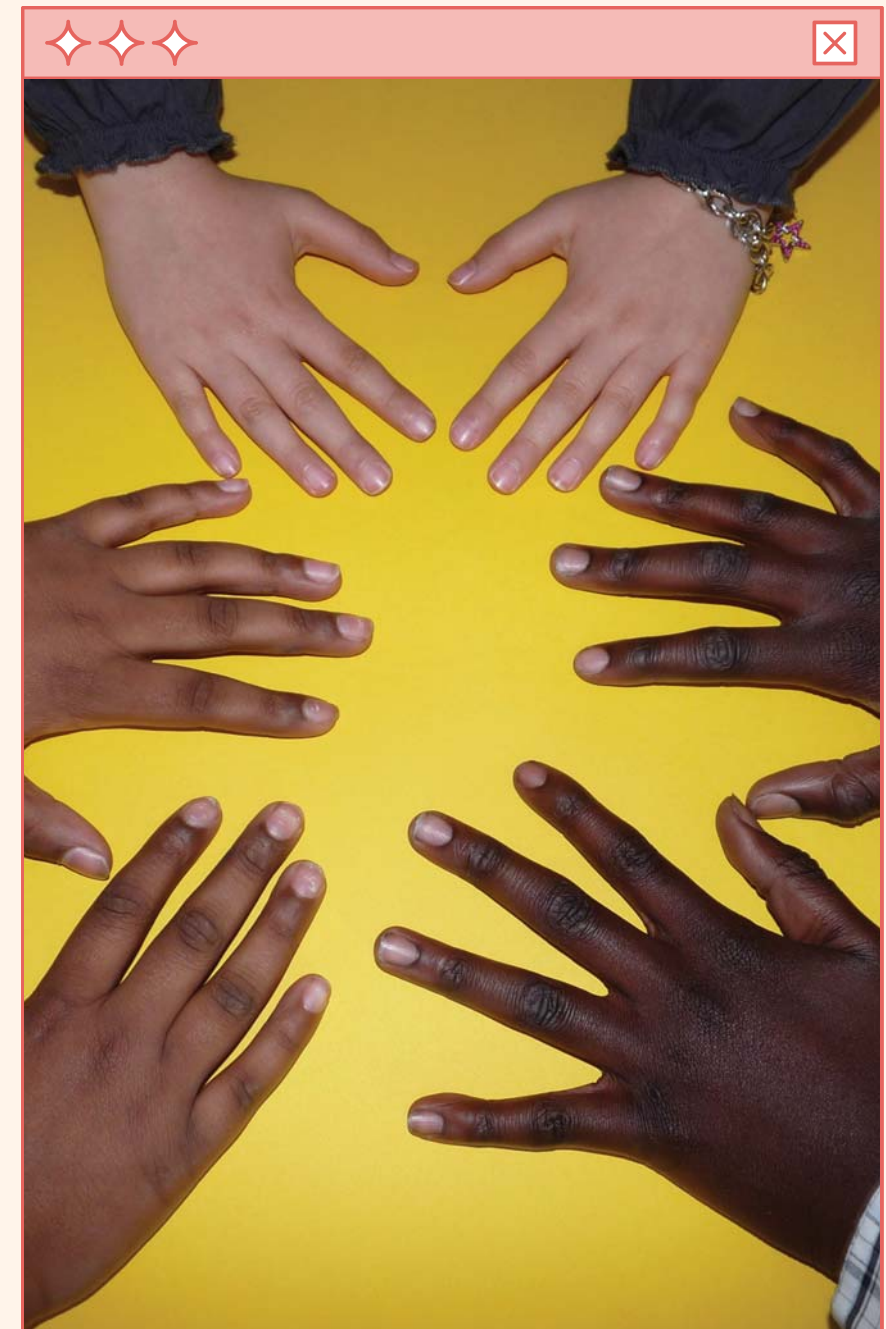


IEP (Individualized Education Plan):
If you had accommodations in high school or elementary school, an IEP can help inform your accommodation recommendations.

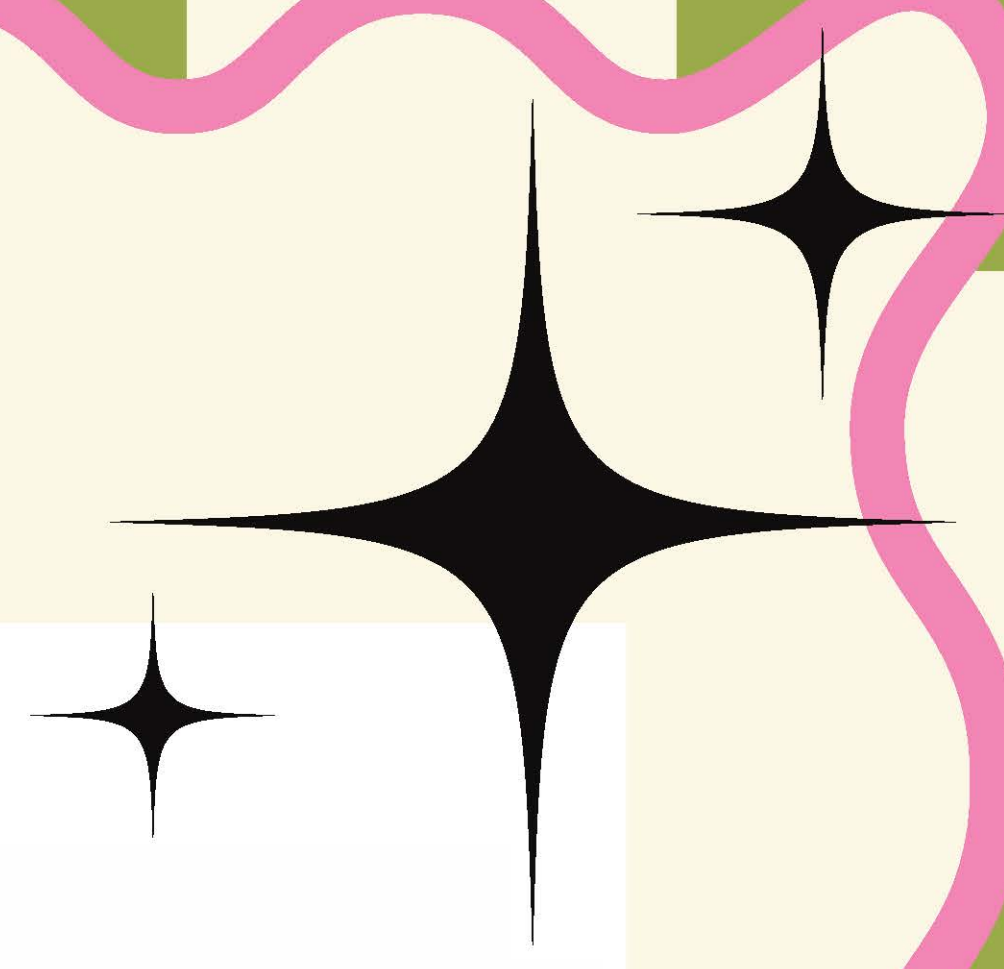
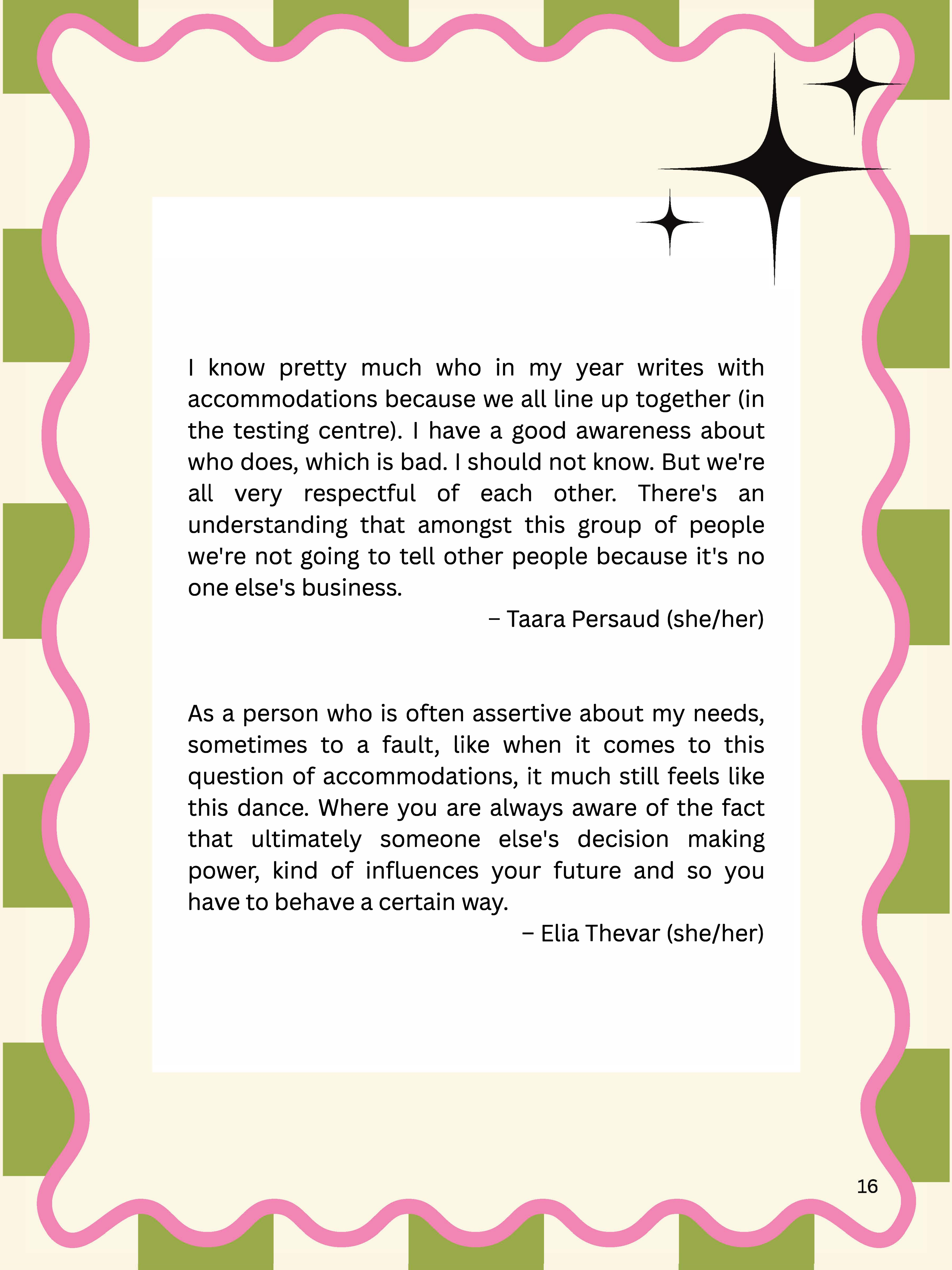


Medical assessment from any regulated health care practitioner:
Audiological reports, psycho-educational assessments, letters from your doctor.

This can include letters from occupational therapist, optometrist, chiropractor and psychotherapists. An extensive list of can be found by an internet search for regulated health care providers in your province.



Interim/Referrals:
If you are in the process of being assessed for a disability you can qualify as a student with a suspected disability or provisional diagnosis. Some colleges and universities have a referral form from their counselling office to provide access to interim support. This can be helpful when formal documentation is not available.



I know pretty much who in my year writes with accommodations because we all line up together (in the testing centre). I have a good awareness about who does, which is bad. I should not know. But we're all very respectful of each other. There's an understanding that amongst this group of people we're not going to tell other people because it's no one else's business.

– Taara Persaud (she/her)

As a person who is often assertive about my needs, sometimes to a fault, like when it comes to this question of accommodations, it much still feels like this dance. Where you are always aware of the fact that ultimately someone else's decision making power, kind of influences your future and so you have to behave a certain way.

– Elia Thevar (she/her)

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Submitting documentation from your cultural health care provider

Why it is important...

Recognizing the value of diverse health care perspectives is crucial, especially for BIPOC students. Submitting documentation from these providers can ensure that your cultural or traditional contexts and understandings are considered in your accommodation plan. This may include a religious leader, an Indigenous elder, healer, or cultural health care providers such as ayurvedic doctors or herbalists.

Unfortunately, accommodations offices are not currently required to accept alternate forms of documentation in place of those from a regulated health care practitioner. However, after the pivotal Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, issues of structural oppression are being discussed more often. I have heard from BIPOC Accessibility Advisors that some accommodations offices have started to develop partnerships with equity serving student groups to better understand how to accommodate BIPOC communities.

While there is certainly a lot of work remaining to provide BIPOC focused accessibility, there are some pathways emerging that could light the way forward.

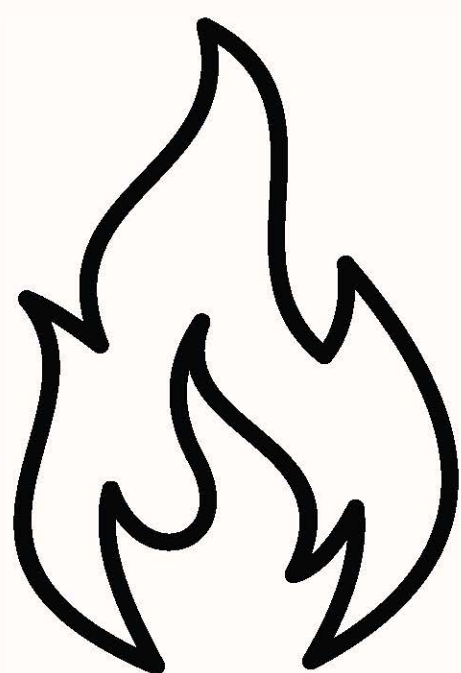


**You can request to submit
documentation from your cultural
health care provider.
If a process does not exist to accept this
documentation, ask to have your
documentation reviewed.**

Indigenous
Traditional
Elders/Healers

Cultural health
care providers
(non-western
types of medicine)

Religious Leaders



One of the challenges I find is that those models (of accommodations and accessibility) are very much based...in a Western model which places not only the impetus of identifying and seeking accommodations on the student who, you know, especially if they're Indigenous, or already marginalized, and depending on their identity, may be further marginalized. Because perhaps they're also Black, Native or Afro-Indigenous. Perhaps they may be coming from a rural community... they could have had difficulty when accessing post-secondary in the first place...

The community outreach office is an office that basically goes into communities and builds relationships with that community.

- Sean Kinsella Director of The Eighth Fire at post-secondary institution (they/he)

How to Request ?

Initial Request: Inform your accommodations office that you are experiencing impacts to your academics due to mental/physical impacts and you are currently seeing a cultural health care provider or other action you are taking for support. Explain the significance of this type of support/documentation in relation to your health care needs.

Interim accommodations: While seeking documentation, students can qualify for accommodations based on their self-report, called *interim* accommodations. This provides students time, usually a few months to a semester, to ascertain more health care information.

Escalate if needed: If your accommodations/disability office does not have a process to accept your culturally specific health care information , request to have your request for interim accommodation reviewed by a manager.

Student group advocacy: Connect with a student association or other identity/culturally specific student group to request assistance with advocacy and communication.

Alternate Documentation Request Template:

“Dear (Manager of academic accommodations),

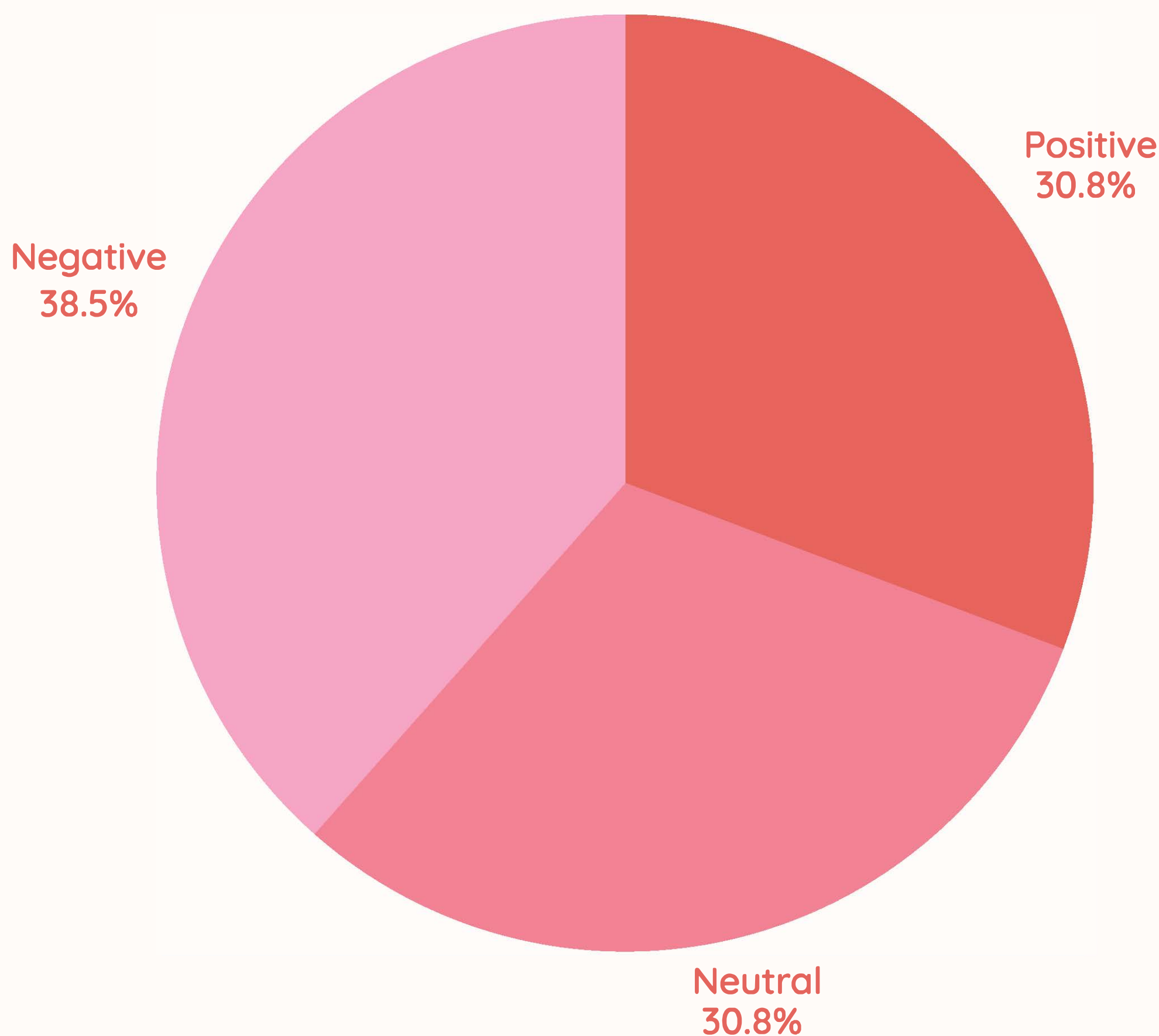
I am writing to request for you to review my eligibility for accommodations based on documentation from my cultural health care provider. As a (cultural background/optional) student, I receive support from (name and title of provider/community group), who is aware of my history and has been supporting me weekly during my program here at (college/university name).

This documentation is crucial for an accurate understanding of my needs and developing an effective accommodation plan. As I am from out of province/based on my (history of medical harm/racism), I am still on a waiting list for a family doctor in the area/do not have access to other forms of health support. I appreciate your consideration and am happy to provide any additional information needed to facilitate this process.

Sincerely,
(Your name)

Experiences requesting medical documentation:

Students have varied experiences when requesting documentation from health care providers. While some find the process straightforward, others encounter challenges.



Students report that getting documentation from a doctor can be a challenging process

Of 13 students:

- 4 had a positive experience
- 4 had a neutral experience
- 5 had a negative experience

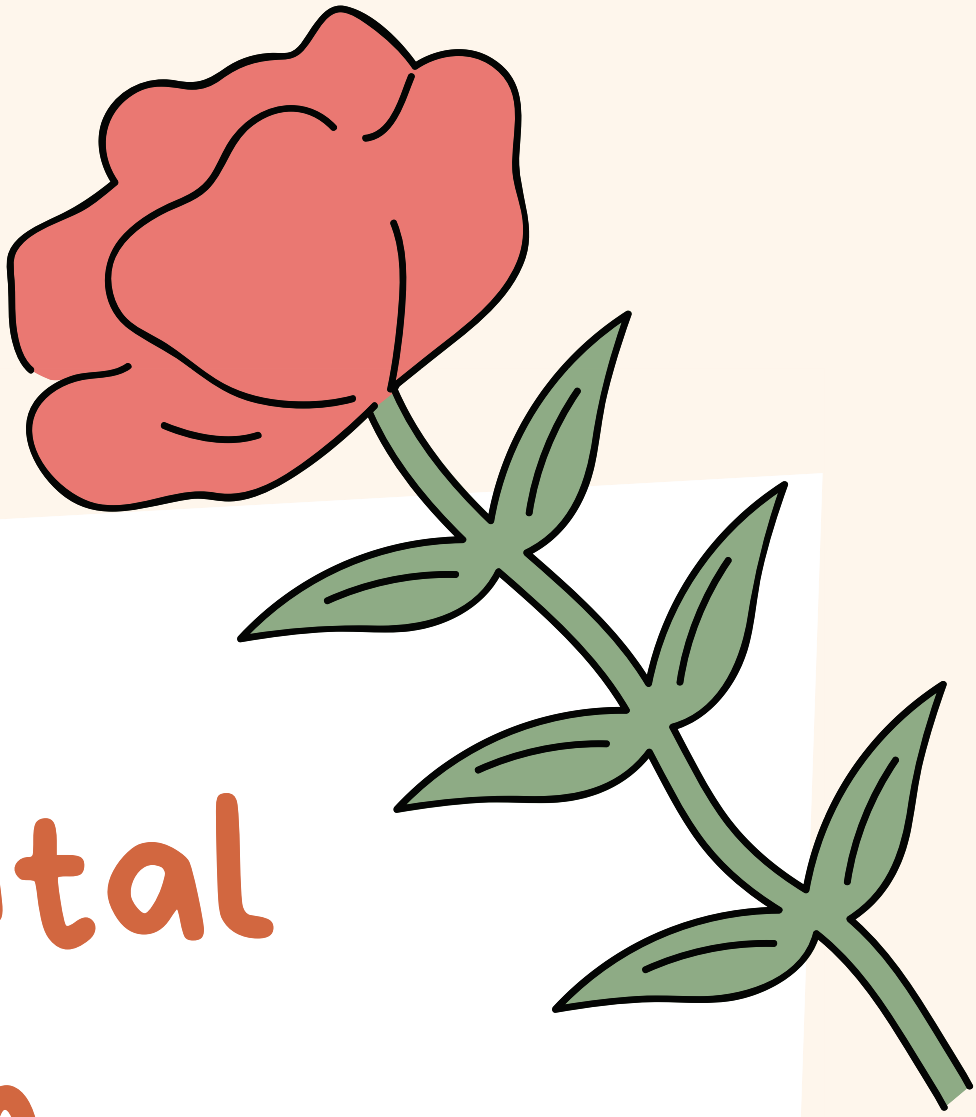
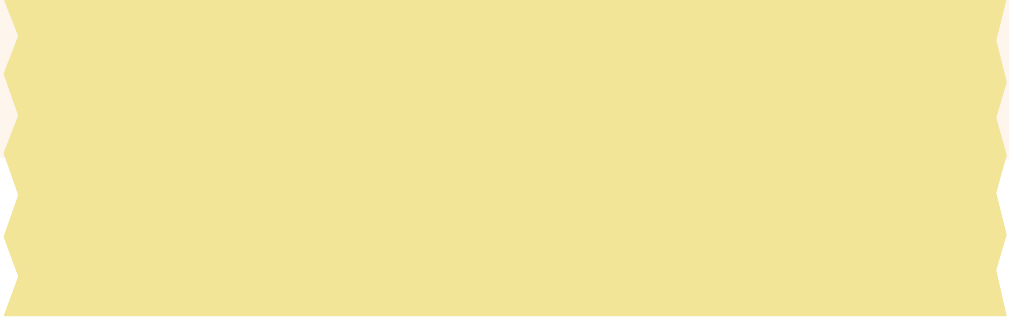
Experiences requesting medical documentation

In a survey of 13 students:

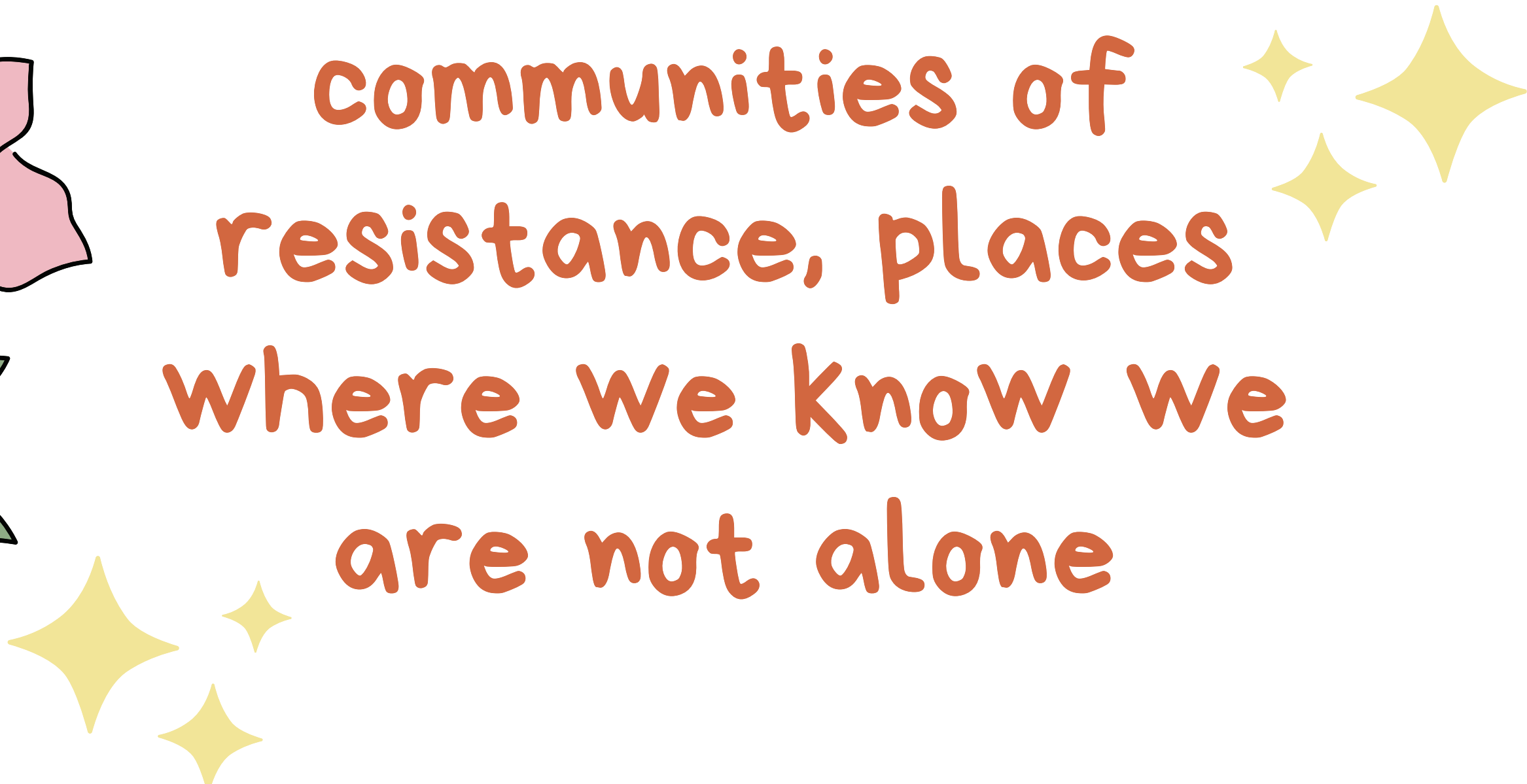
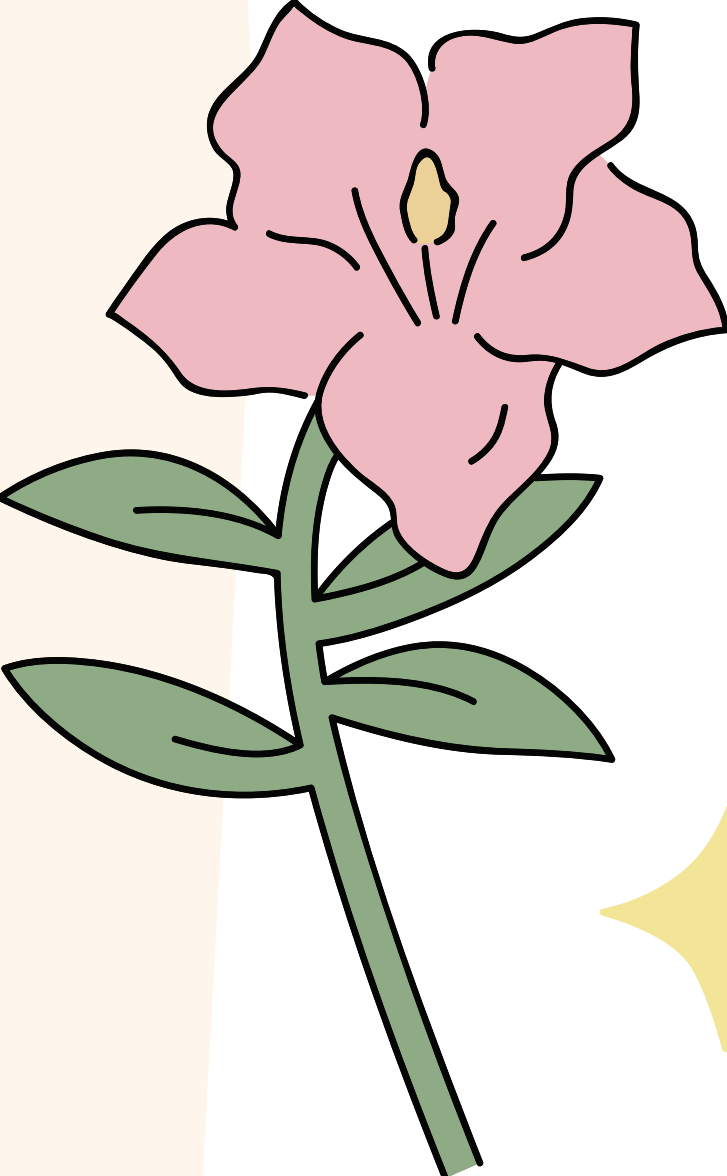
Positive experience: 31% of students reported that requesting documentation was not challenging. Factors contributing to a good experience included having an established rapport with the health care provider. While some students emphasized the importance of sharing a cultural background with their provider, most found trust and safety built over time were crucial to positive rapport.

Neutral experience: 31% of students reported having a neutral experience. These students did not face any significant challenges and were able to ascertain documentation without any notable difficulties.

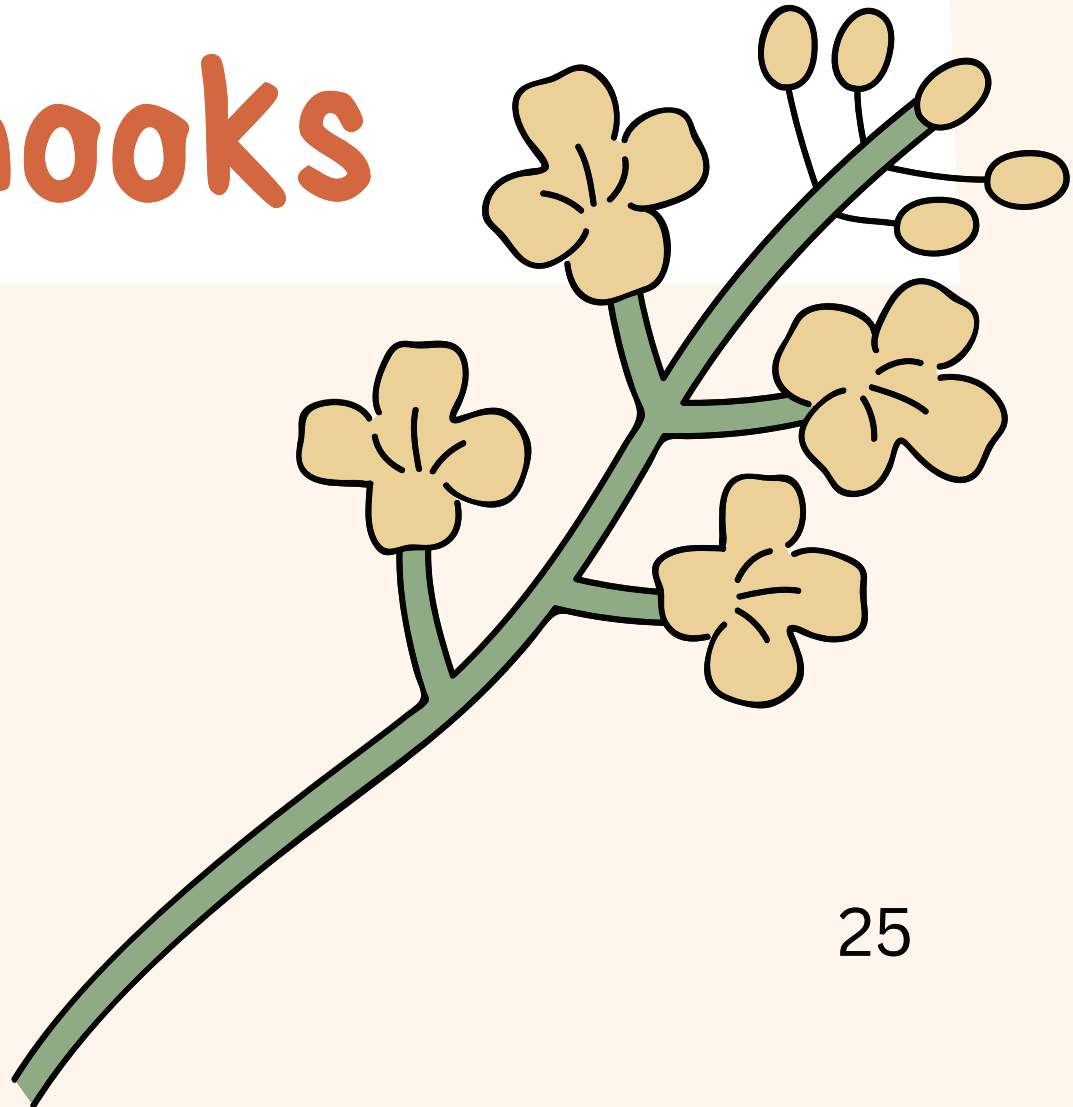
Negative experience: 39% students reported a negative experience. They encountered obstacles such as uncooperative health care providers, medical gaslighting (dismissing or downplaying concerns, leading to a delay in appropriate care), lack of understanding about impacts to their academic program, and delays in receiving documentation.



One of the most vital
ways we sustain
ourselves is by building
communities of
resistance, places
where we know we
are not alone



- bell hooks



Confidentiality concerns and international student perspectives

Though the disability/accommodation office is required to provide support to all registered students, there is often hesitation in engaging these services due to concerns related to confidentiality. For international students, registration can raise concerns about how medical documentation is stored and if/when this information would be shared with external/government organizations.

International students are often underrepresented in the disability office, which points to some concerning realities about the pressures that international students experience and the limited supports that they feel able to engage with while enrolled in college/university.

While each college or university will have their own confidentiality policy in place, there are some general guidelines that underscore them. Before registering for services, you can request more information about confidentiality without formally registering for services.



Medical documentation is stored securely in the disability office

At most schools, the disability office sends a generalized letter of accommodation to teachers. This letter will state the accommodations you are eligible for without revealing your diagnosis or sharing medical information. There are legal situations where a confidentiality agreement would be required to be broken. For accommodations in a co-op, field placement or clinical, you may like to have more focused conversations with your disability office about the information being provided to these settings and where disclosure would be necessary.



You do not have to disclose a diagnosis in Ontario

While it can be supportive to share information about your diagnosis, in Ontario it is not required to disclose it. Information from your health care provider related to the impacts you are experiencing is the most important factor in assessing accommodation needs. Most accommodations offices will have their own medical documentation forms that include space to report the severity of functional impacts in areas like standing, lifting, reading, attention, concentration, and public speaking. Ensuring these impacts are documented accurately is important for the types of accommodations you can request, more than the diagnosis itself.



Your accommodations office should not share your registration as a student with outside organizations without your consent*

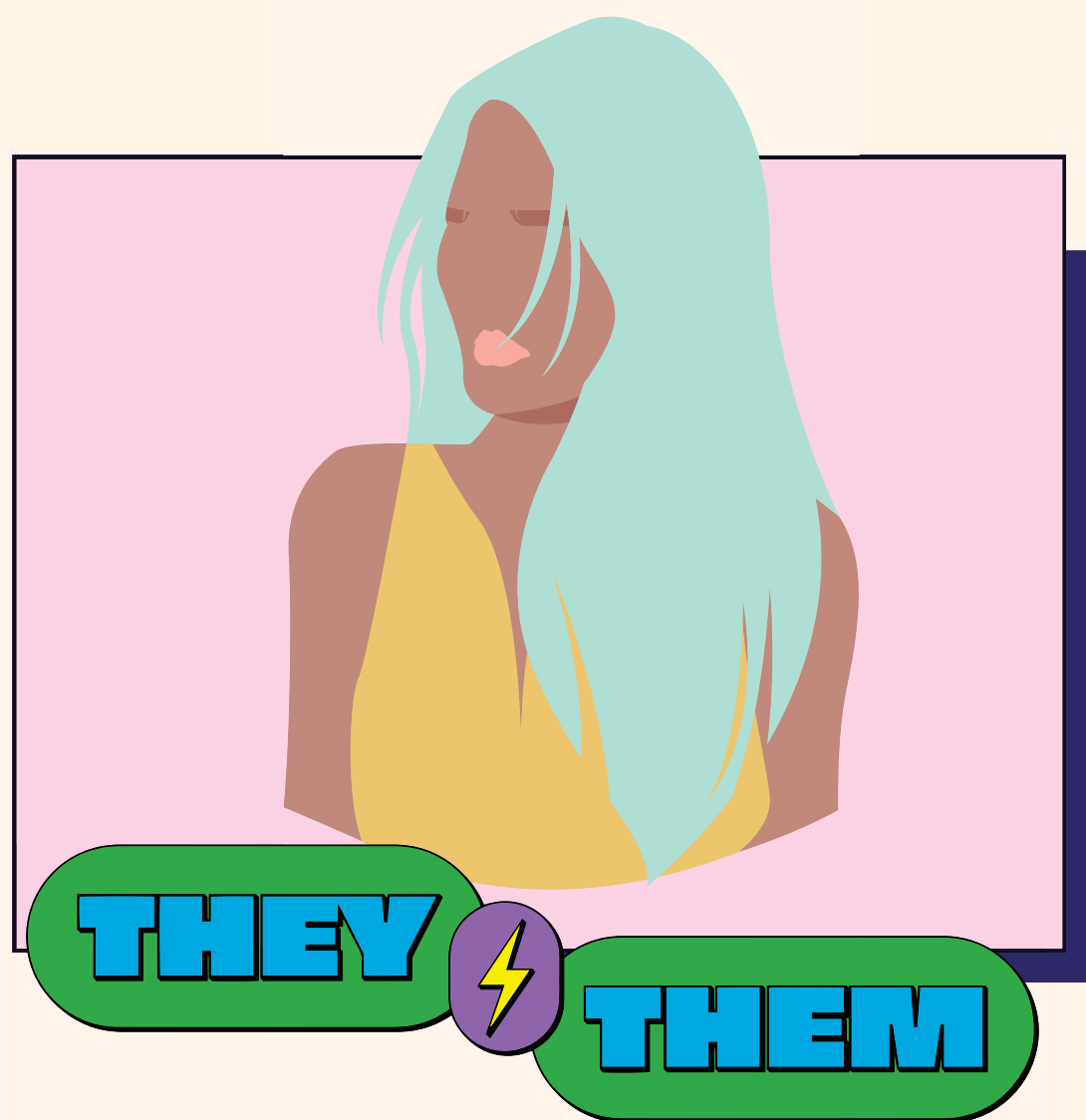
- a. Always check in with your Accessibility Advisor when requesting accommodations in a field placement or clinical setting, where your accommodations plan would be shared with your field supervisor or clinical instructor. For some, these settings can become opportunities for eventual employment and this disclosure may be of concern to some students.
- b. Always check in with your international student advisor if you have questions about confidentiality and your ability to receive accommodations privately. When you apply for a job, another post-secondary program or permanent residency/citizenship, your registration with the accommodation office should remain confidential and should not be shared without your consent.
- c. For international students some accommodations like a reduced course load or taking a medical leave would require disclosure to government organizations because of your school's extension request for your student visa or study permit. Always check with your Accessibility Advisor or International Student Advisor about which accommodations you can access given your situation and comfort with disclosure.

*Post-secondary institutions will have varying policies and procedures in place to support you. While I am providing guidance about how these systems can be structured, always check with your educational institution about their specific policies.

Student perspectives: hesitation with the accommodation process

When I asked BIPOC students to reflect on the first time they registered for accommodation services, I learned that many described a common feeling of struggle. The experiences of Shayani, Taara, Zahra, Aryan and Jugmin highlight this complicated ways that BIPOC students access supports and the ways that BIPOC students can find it challenging to feel like it is a place where they belong and can bring the entirety of their identity.

When I first registered for accommodation I had never considered myself to be a person with a disability and it felt like a category I was not comfortable to assume at school. For BIPOC students, the first encounter with the accommodations/disability office is often a meaningful one. Because of this, it is even more vital to our well-being to make community understandings of what can happen.



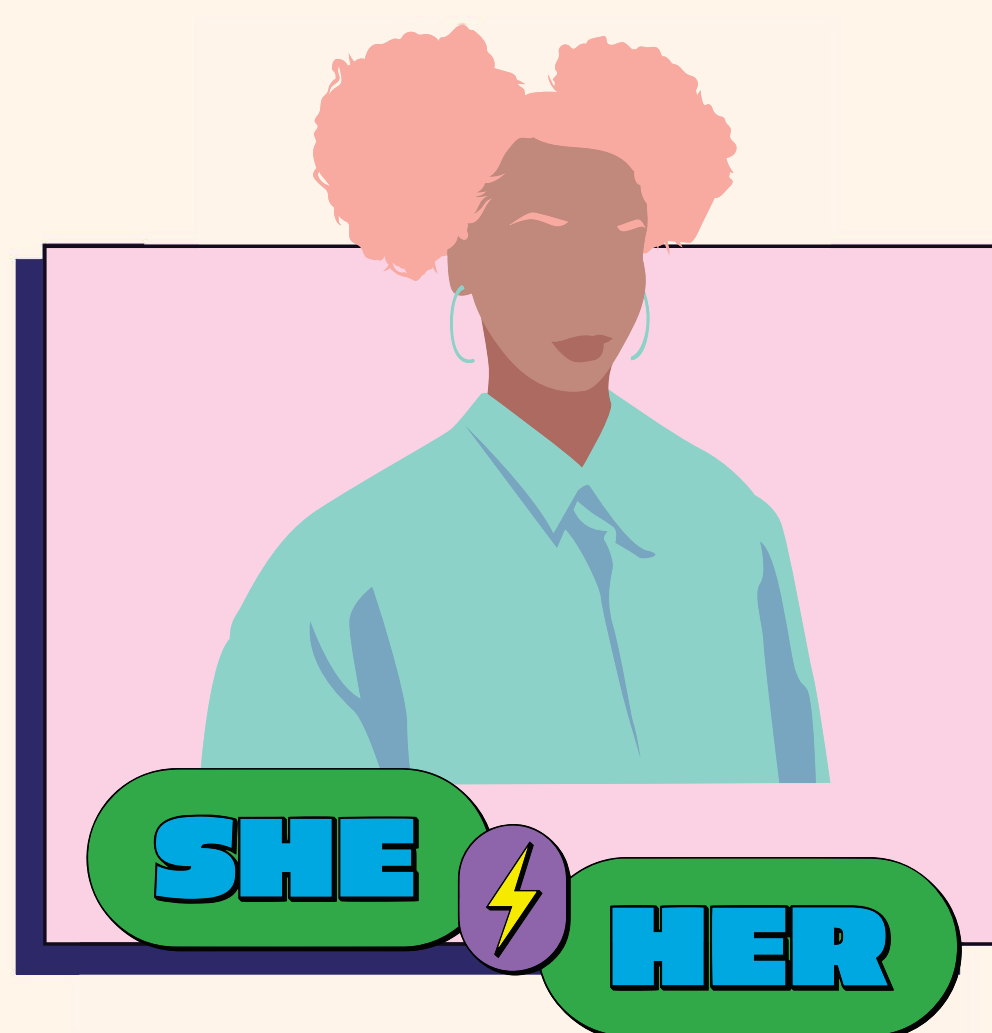
Shayani

I just see my diagnosis as something that gives me access, and I narrativize it as such... Even though I need accommodations because of mental health stuff, because of chronic pain stuff, but also because this just constantly feels like this institution is not built for me.

Shayani explains they utilize the label of disability strategically, to enable access to the educational experience. In this way, Shayani may not identify as a person with a disability outside of a school setting or they may not identify with institutional understandings of disability that heavily rely on medical diagnosis as a means to define eligibility.

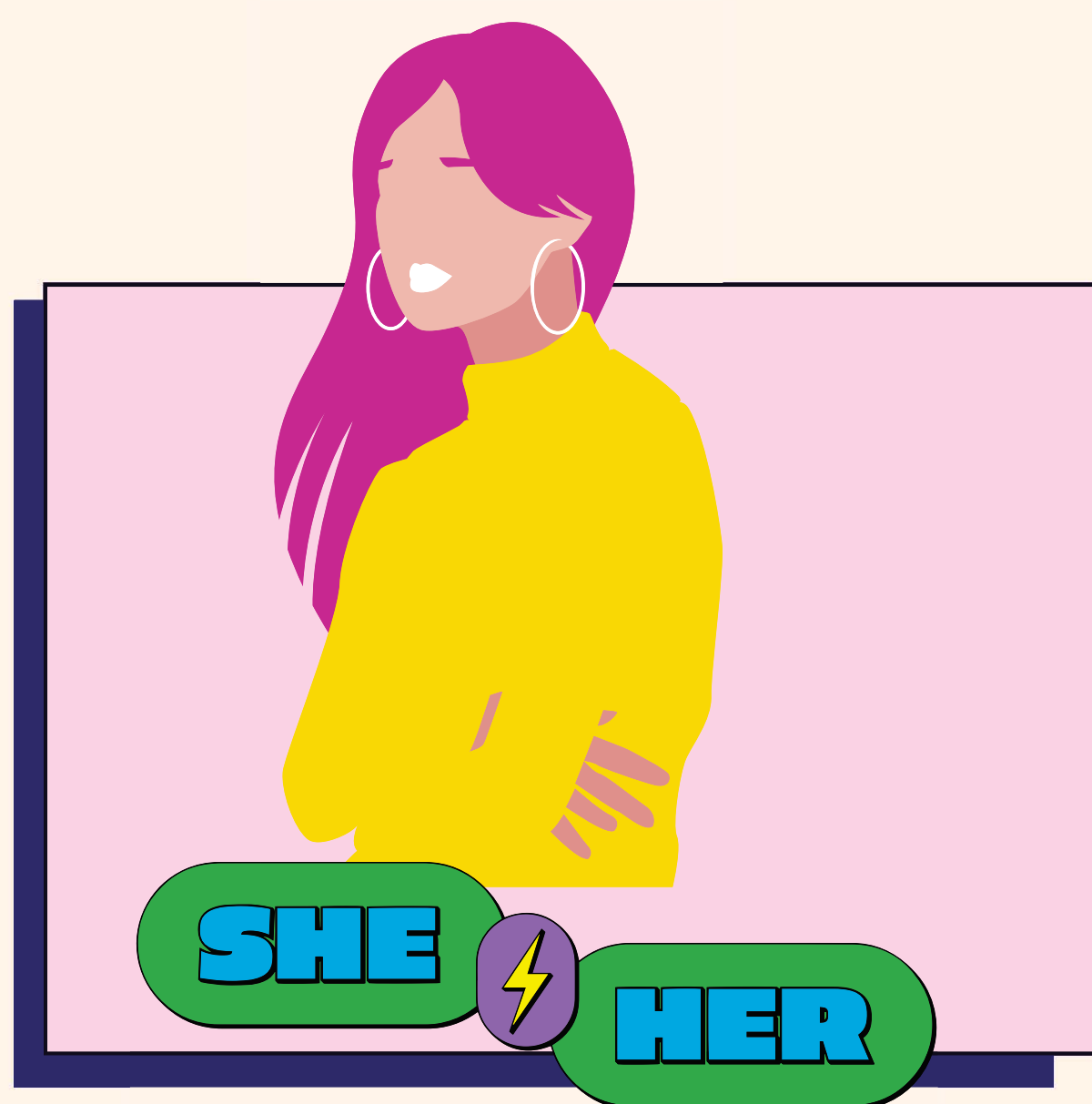
Other students I spoke to underscore the difficulties inherent in the process, where students can feel pressure to demonstrate that they are *deserving* of supports. As Taara describes, this can present as both an internal struggle and one that Zahra and Jugmin struggled to communicate to faculty.

For BIPOC students, their knowledge of their disability and its impacts is just one piece of the accommodation process, where communicating the validity of their experience can be central to the experience of qualifying and receiving accommodations too.



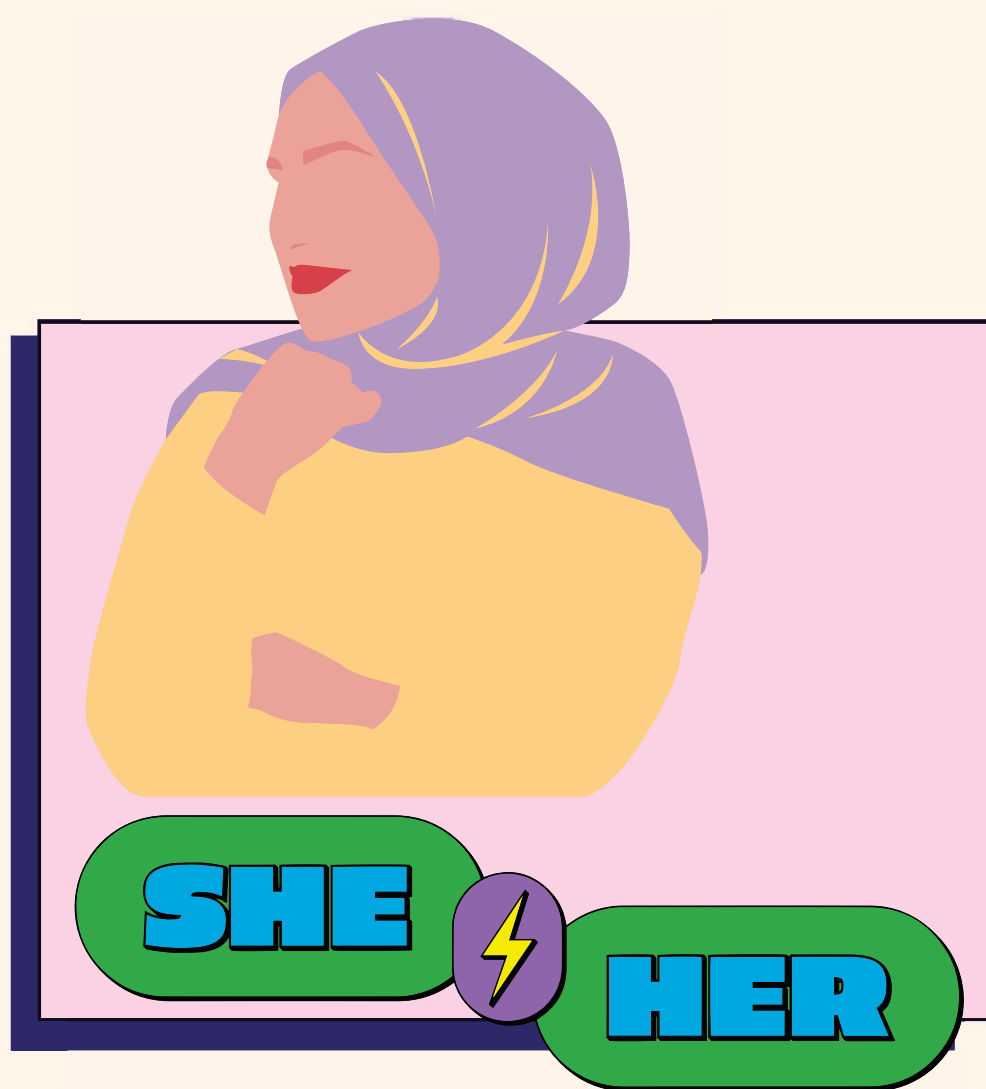
Zahra

The fact that they see the word (Cerebral Palsy) and then they assume that I'm in a wheelchair. (Some teachers) could not adapt to the fact that somebody that can have CP and look able-bodied...I'm not cheating. I'm not using this as an excuse to not get the work done. I'm not looking for a way out. I'm telling you this is just how I am.



Jungmin

The reason that I'm asking for accommodations is that I'm legally blind, they (faculty) don't think that I'm blind because I can see and I walk without a cane...so they thought that I'm making things up...But even though I have this letter, I had to explain it to them. So actually, I wasn't sure if this letter actually really helps...because I used to have to tell them everything about me. Otherwise, I didn't feel like I was going to get what I need.



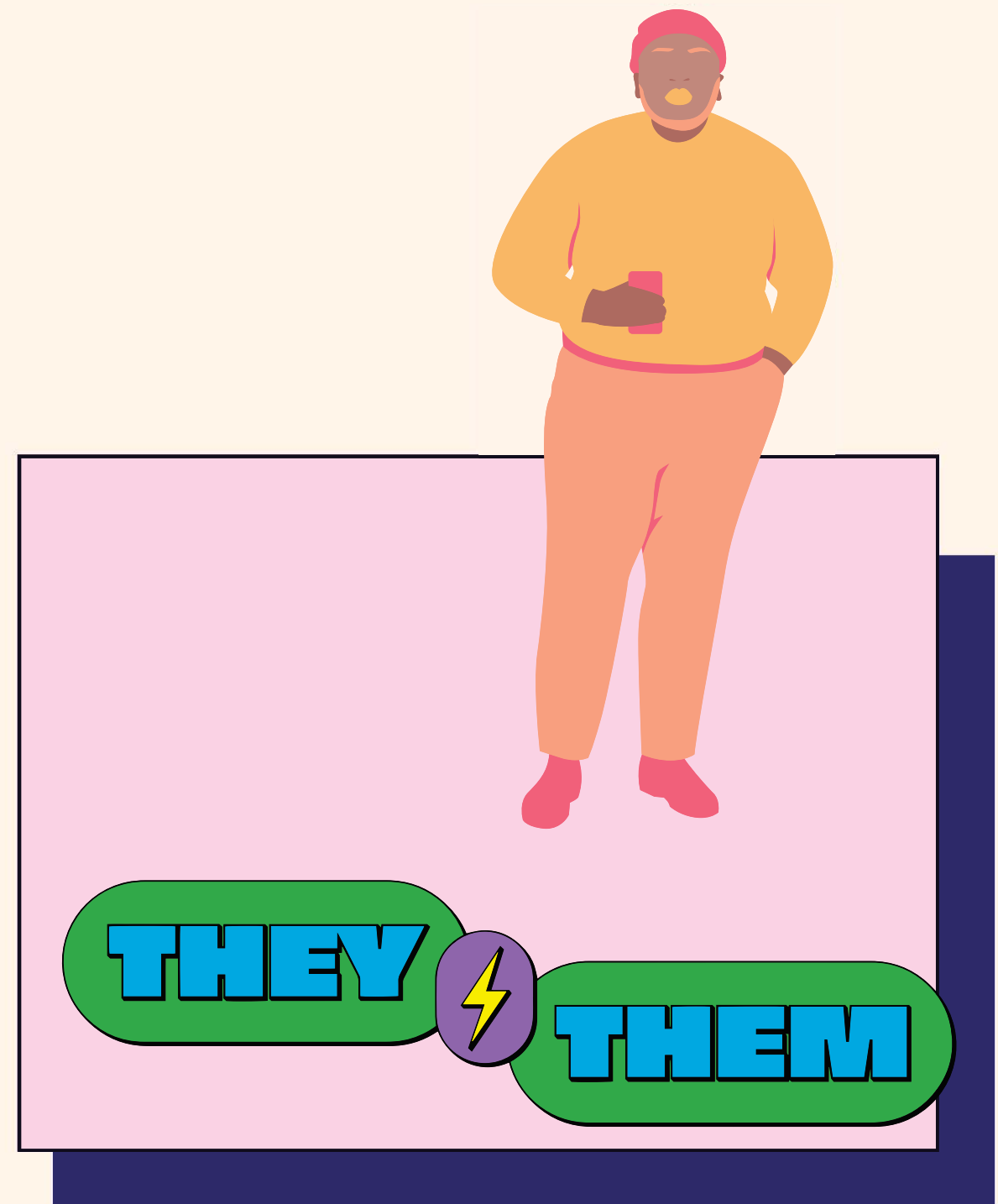
Taara

I think that it caused a combination of weird guilt and shame about needing to get accommodations but also guilt for being sort of questioned on whether or not I actually needed them, because it made it feel like my integrity is being questioned a little bit, which I didn't love.

Other students highlighted the limitations of institutional definitions of disability, especially for chronic and episodic disabilities, where their experiences in their bodies may change day by day. It can also be particularly difficult for students with chronic illness to get the documentation they need because of the nature of the diagnostic process.

Aryan

It's not just my mental health. I'll be having back pain and ...when I had the flu like, I got depressed...my back pain was worse, and I got depressed also, because I was stuck at home. There needs to be an understanding of these things as comorbid... It also depends on your doctor, you know, you got to find someone that believes you. There's a lot of gaslighting from doctors and health services in general.



Shayani, Zahra, Jugmin and Aryan described how their understanding of the accommodation process was anything but straightforward. At times, they struggled to receive and request accommodations. In fact, at times the balance of power was described as interrogating. Unfortunately, BIPOC students are painfully aware of the ways that racism, marginalization and micro-aggressions can contribute to the experience of requesting academic support, with or without accommodations.

While the accommodation process can include these challenging situations, accommodations themselves were described as an essential pathway to access education. It is important to note that an accommodation/disability office is also responsible to assist in the negotiation of accommodations with your faculty if a request is denied or not implemented. For this reason, it is best to make/confirm accommodation requests in writing and follow the guidelines at your college or university.

Chapter Three: Racism and Ableism

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Navigating Intersectionality

A significant barrier that BIPOC students experience in the accommodation process is losing an opportunity to discuss their intersectional experience. The BIPOC experience of disability is often interwoven with intersecting systems of oppression, such as sexism, racism, and classism, among others. For the BIPOC students I spoke to, it was common to express feeling disconnected from the accommodation process; students described that there were parts of their identity that felt invited into conversations about their need for academic accommodations while also recognizing that the process missed the complexity of their experience.

When I was working as an Accessibility Advisor I would see BIPOC students in a program I was working in describe a somewhat similar pattern of events that would lead them to register for services. Many would come in and describe that they were experiencing testing anxiety caused by a high-pressure testing environment. When students shared information about their social and economic circumstances, it was common to hear that the same students with testing anxiety were also working late shifts or were the primary caregiver for their child or were having difficulty balancing the demands of full-time school, working, responsibilities at home and keeping up with studying. The ongoing pressure of daily life started to impact their mental health and in turn their ability to concentrate and process information during a test.

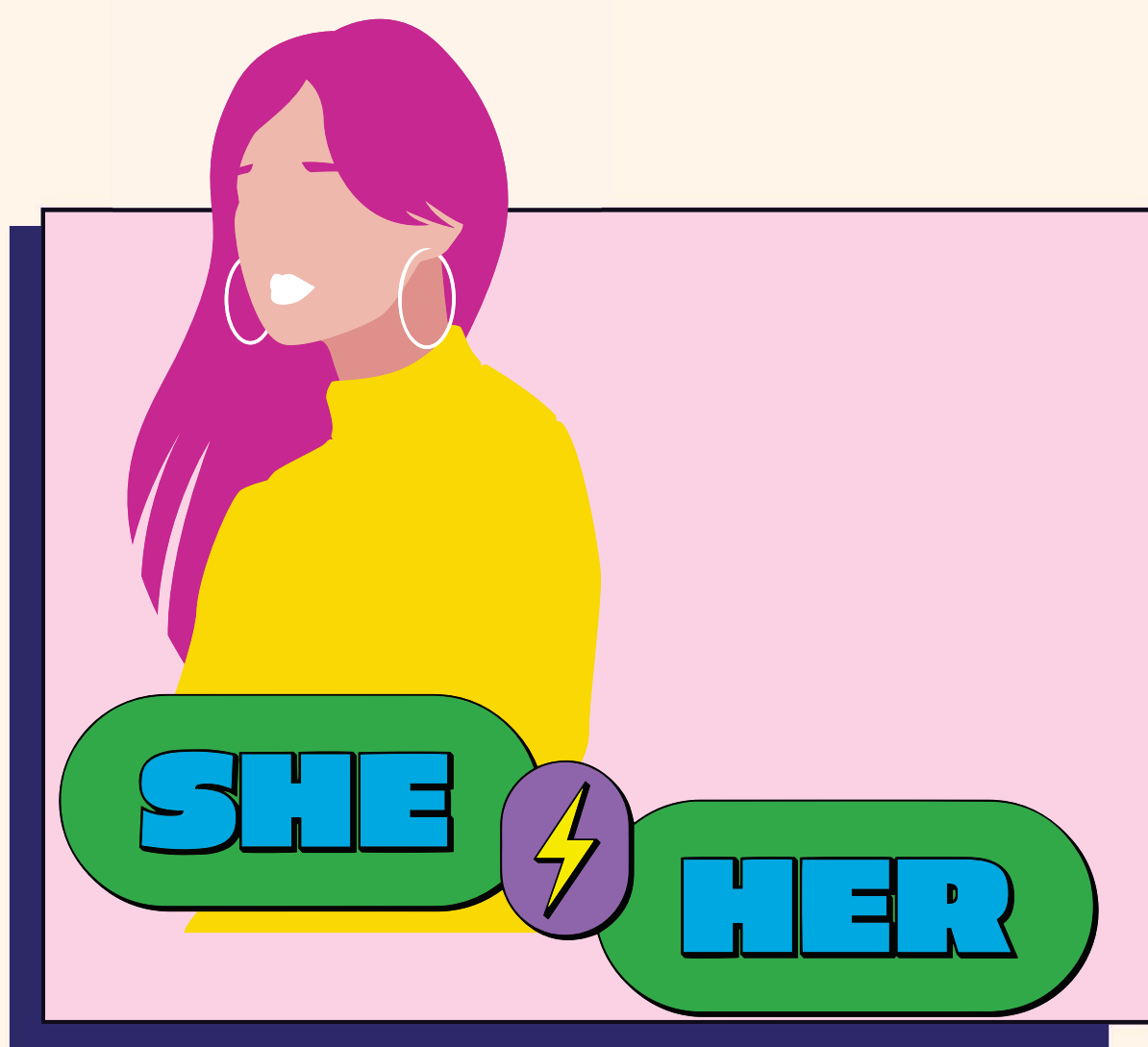
When I spoke to BIPOC Accessibility Advisors, they echoed concerns that the standard accommodation process could be limiting in the ways that BIPOC students were invited to relate to their broader experiences of systemic barriers. BIPOC Accessibility Advisors expressed that they too shared similar complexity in their own lives and this informed the way they approached making accommodation recommendation and provided purpose in their daily work

Unfortunately, I found that there were very few formalized policies related to intersectionality and BIPOC students in the disability office. I also learned of important work happening on an informal basis, to build better pathways for marginalized students. As Sean Kinsella notes, these pathways are built from meaningful engagement with student experience from colleges and universities,

“Our Director of Counseling worked at an institution previously... and was on a lot of the committees that did reconciliation work at their former institution, so has a lot of interaction and understands Indigenous students and the Indigenous ways of knowing better than the standard person might. So we're very fortunate because that means I don't have to have those conversations with that person to say why cultural safety is important...So to me (accessibility) relies on those relationship. Because a student in my experience, especially Indigenous students, and the way our communities are structured, because they're relational” – Sean Kinsella (they/he) (Director, Eighth Fire Ontario post-secondary institution)

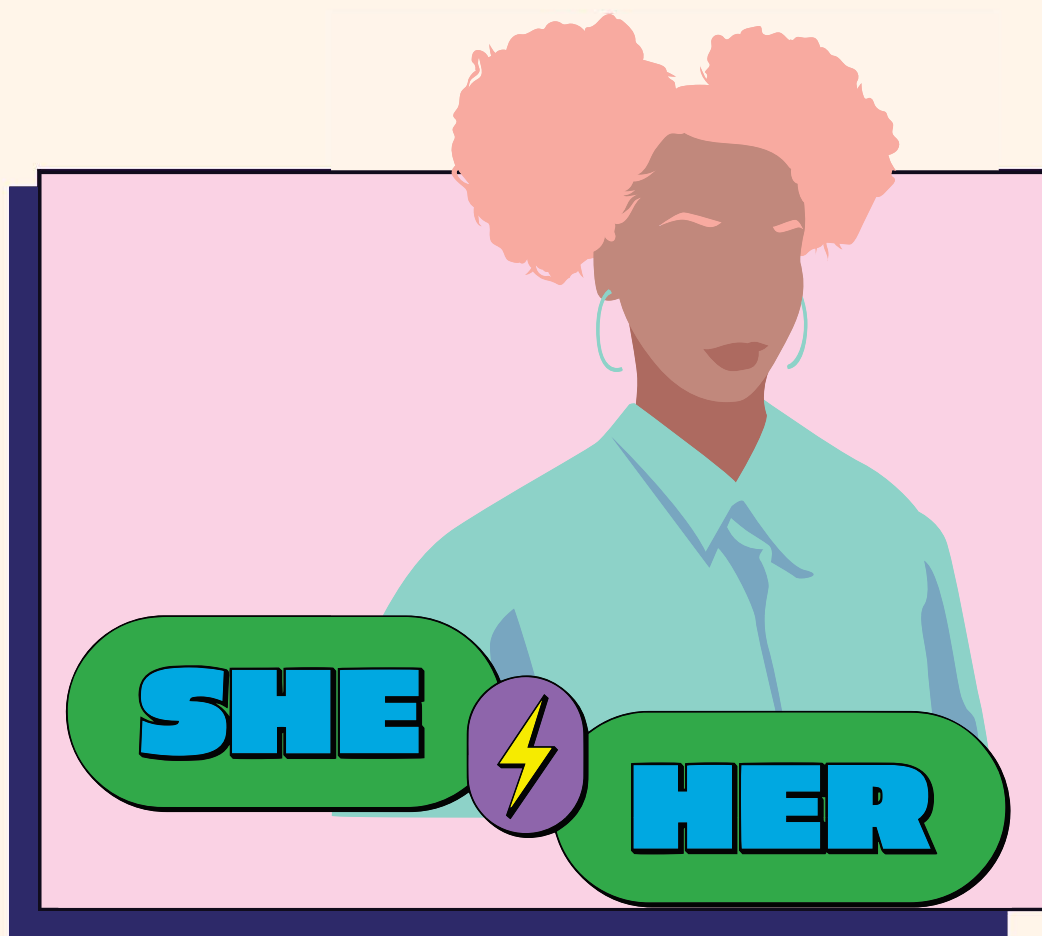
Student Perspectives: Navigating Intersectionality

In the following discussion with Jugmin and Zahra, they discuss instances where ableism interlocked with other forms of oppression, including racism and linguicism; they highlight the lack of clear pathways to address intersecting oppressions effectively. Both Jugmin and Zahra's examples demonstrate that the difference in institutional power between teachers and students can result in students feeling pressured to prove they are deserving of accommodations and disempowered in the accommodation process when the integrity of their request is undermined.



Jugmin

Because it's hard to prove. You can sometimes feel that this person is treating me different because I am disclosing my disability, and also I'm Asian, but also English is my second language. That's why sometimes you have this feeling and then you feel the person is racist a bit. At the same time it's hard to prove, you know? Sometimes I'm like, am I being too sensitive? It's very complicated.



Zahra

We as racialized persons... and disabled (people)... We're going to experience racism and ableism at the same time. It's just something we can't prove, but you have to be aware of the attitude... I was aware of the attitudes that I experienced from professors that is not ableism, but it's racism. But sometimes it's ableism at the same time, just connected together. It's embedded. So sometimes it can be very frustrating. But when it comes to accommodations, you have to really tie it down to the ableism. That 'this is ableism', rather than saying 'this is racism', because sometimes racism cannot help the situation because accommodation offices are for accommodations. So I have to be very strategic about how I organize my argument and how do I come together?

Jugmin and Zahra identified that when advocating for their accommodation needs in the classroom they became painfully aware of racism and microaggression. As Zahra explained, because of the siloed nature of the disability/accommodation office, she is conscious of how she frames her need for advocacy from an Accessibility Advisor when it comes to racism and ableism. Zahra explains that omitting experiences of racism is in response to the lack of clear pathway for the disability office to advocate in situations of intersecting oppression like racism and ableism.

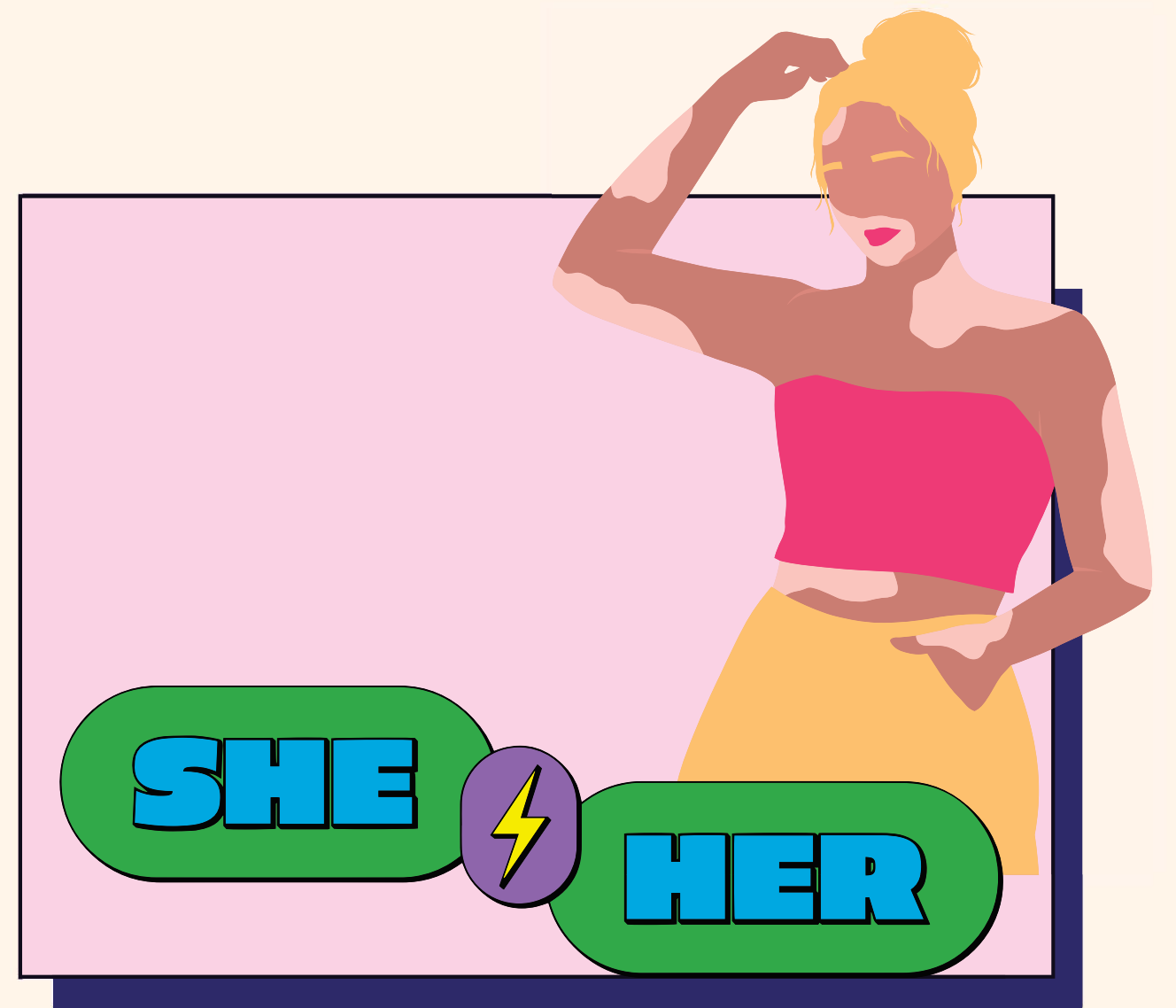
When asked about her experience of being a BIPOC student receiving accommodations, Sophia provides important insight into her trajectory of her personal understanding systemic oppression and university being as influential in this recognition. For Elizabeth, she describes addressing racism and ableism in her community as a type of emotional labour that she is careful to think about expending before addressing.

Sophia

×

The school I went to, I was one of the only people of colour in elementary school and junior high. High school it was a little bit better. But still, even in my group of friends, it was like me, and I never really felt anything by it. So, I think that's why, it's for me...it's an afterthought, because you're kind of used to that.

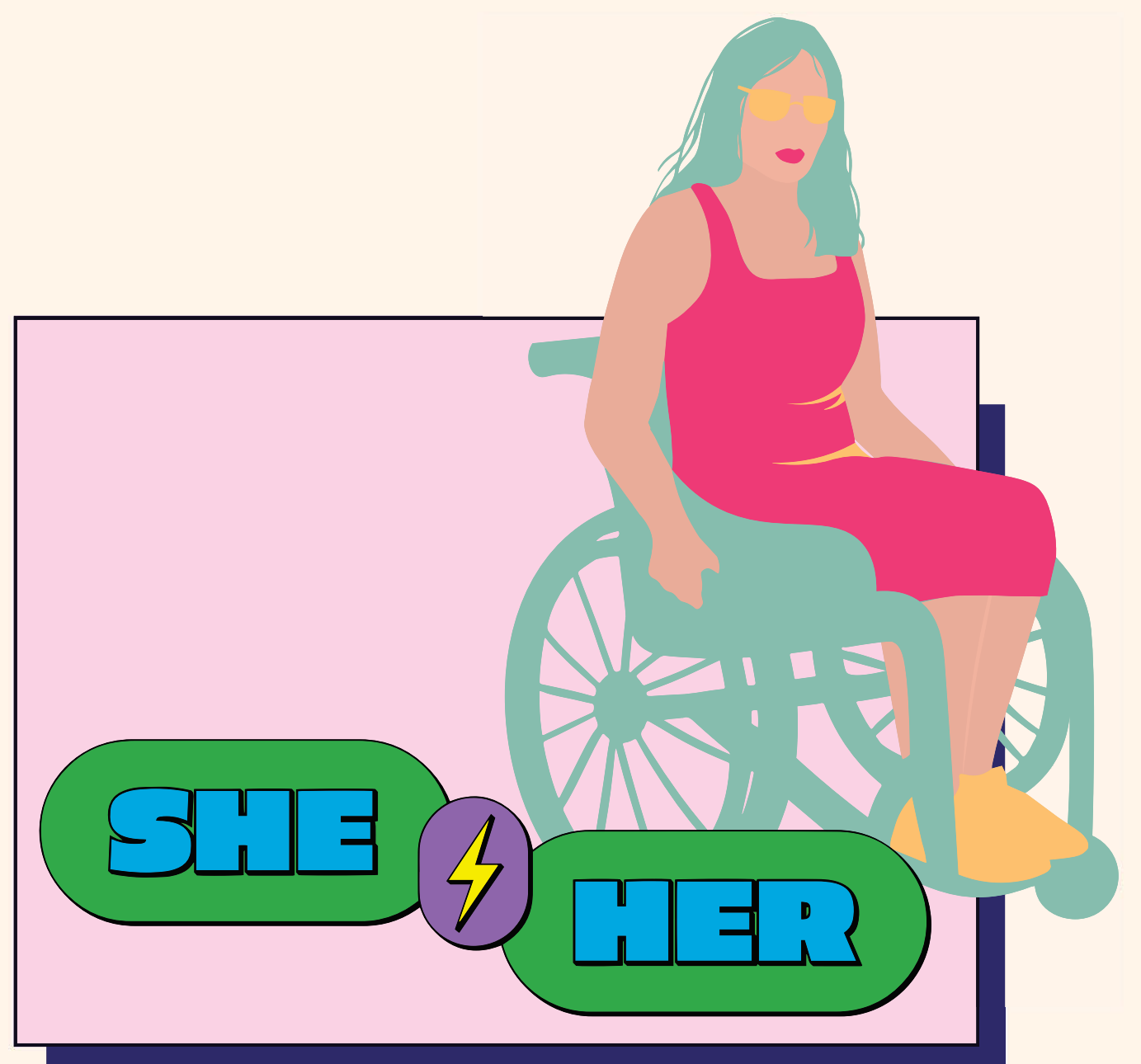
But then when you grow up and you know about all these things like prejudice, discrimination, racism, and then once you realize and you're like, *oh, okay, I didn't feel anything (overtly racist) in that situation, but how are they seeing me?*"



Elizabeth

×

If I'm close enough to the person then I'm like okay, you have enough redeeming qualities that I'm just gonna let it slip. I'll explain to you why that's not acceptable. I grew up in a really weird area where people tend to be racist and ableist. (Laughs). You just never know when it's going to come up.



Taking care of yourself and mapping spaces for support

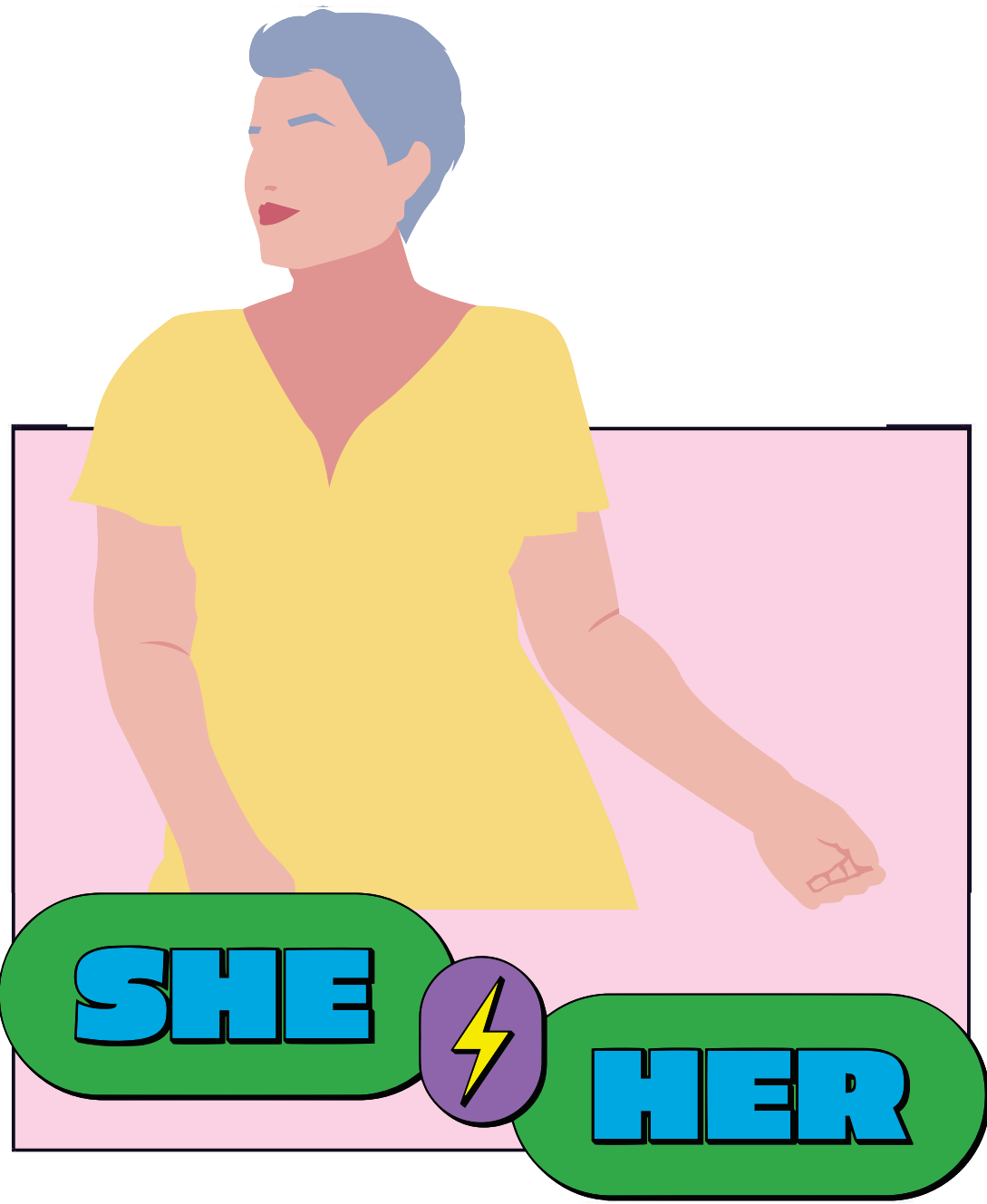
Navigating post-secondary demands is stressful and at times advocating for accommodations can add to that pressure. In the following sections, I'll share more practical advice on how the process of applying for academic accommodation typically work, along with tips and templates to help you navigate them.

Before that, I'll pause to offer some suggestions for self-care that might be helpful. While it is important to name the problems this guidebook responds to, the gaps and barriers BIPOC students face in accessing supports are not individual failures. They are system-level issues. While caring for ourselves is important, **self-care is not the solution to systemic problems**. We need system change.

Here are some ways to care for yourself during the process:

- Take note of your experience requesting accommodations in the disability office or in the classroom. Talking to a friend or counsellor can be a good starting place for understanding how we are impacted from these conversations. When asking for support, did you feel listened to? Did you feel that your authenticity was acknowledged? In what ways can you protect your peace and strategically utilize emotional labour?
- Join or create a support group for BIPOC students with accommodations. Even if the group is informal, discussing your experience with others that have lived-experience can provide opportunities for community building and sharing knowledge about navigation.

- After registering for services it may be helpful to audit your initial expectations and what you received. This could be quantitative (numerical) and/or qualitative (felt experience). For example, did you receive the type of accommodation support you requested? How did you feel about the interaction? If needed, are there avenues for receiving better support in the future? For instance, requesting support from your Accessibility Advisor to advocate for your needs with a specific teacher. Alternatively, if the emotional labour of pursuing change feels like too much, this is also important to honour for self-preservation.
- Set boundaries to avoid burnout, such as taking breaks during advocacy efforts. Take note of the different types of supports and resources that are available to you at your school. This could include supports from friends, Accessibility Advisors, cultural student group, human rights office, food programs, financial grants, scholarships and local health care. It may be helpful to note that many college and university student associations provide students with access to a lawyer when necessary to consult on education related legal concerns. Counselling supports at your college or university are generally included in your student fees and provides quicker wait times than many community supports.
- If representation in educational service matters to you, ask your counselling office or disability office if you can access supports based on these identity needs. For instance, an LGBTQIA+ counsellor. Though it may not be readily available as an option, these requests can create changes to representation considerations in the future.

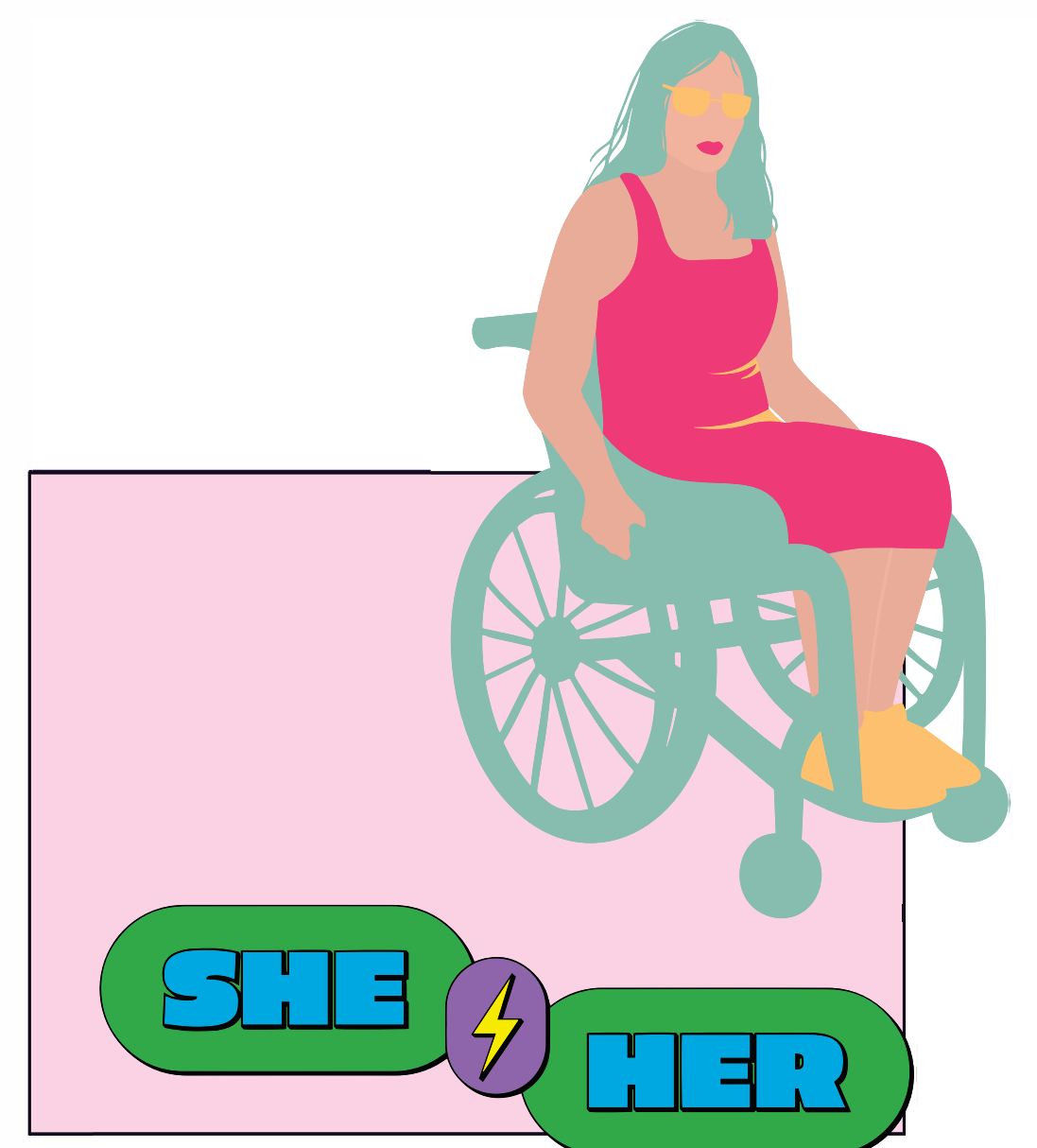


Aponi

I am very connected with the community here... So the community knows that there is an Indigenous person in Accessibility Services and the parents will call and ask to see their child to specifically work with me to access those services. So that's been really helpful. So they feel welcome... So there will always be that representation and somebody who can help them navigate the college waters. And that's really what it's been about.

Elizabeth

I think mostly people (Accessibility Advisors) were willing to contact my professors and they had a positive attitude towards helping out students and treating you like a human being, and not just like a student who's super needy... (they are) just here to make sure that you're on an equal playing field with everyone else.



Chapter Four: What types of accommodations are available?

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Accommodation types 50

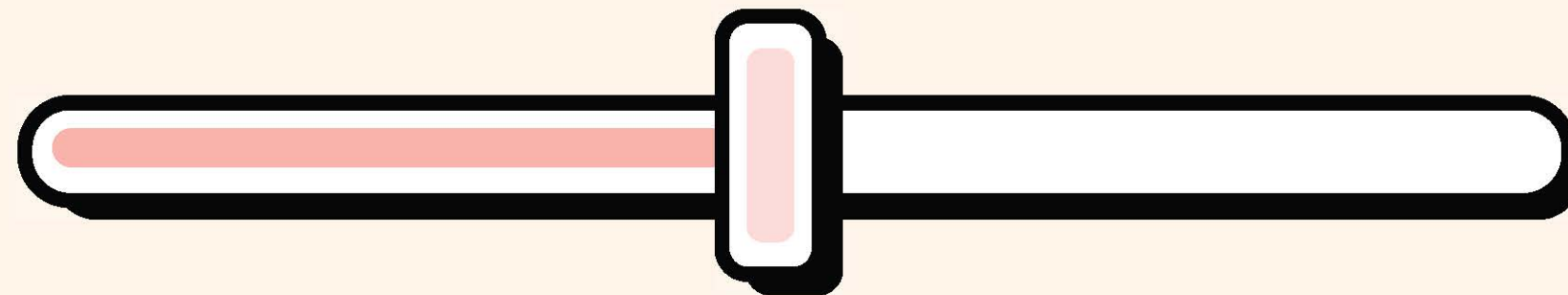
Test accommodations 51

Academic accommodations 52

Impact Meter:

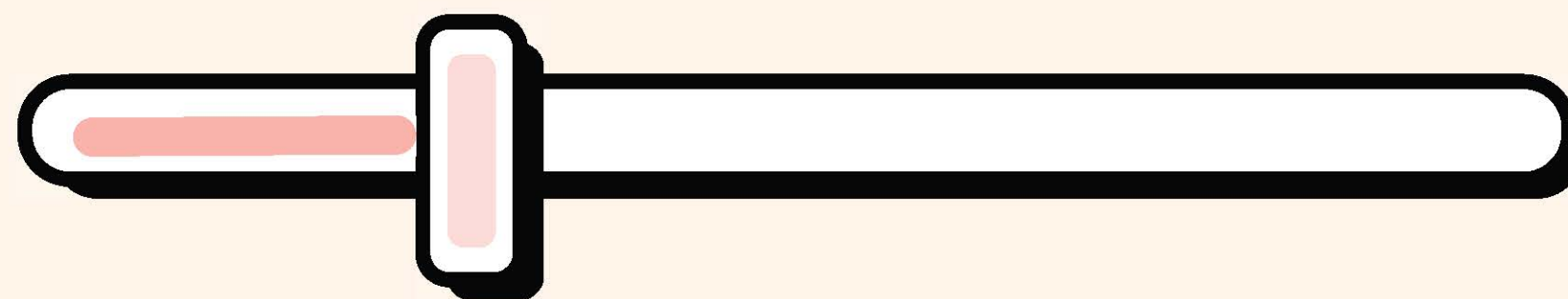
When considering academic areas that have been challenging to you, it can be helpful to gauge how often you are experiencing impacts and in what contexts you encounter these difficulties.

Reading Textbooks



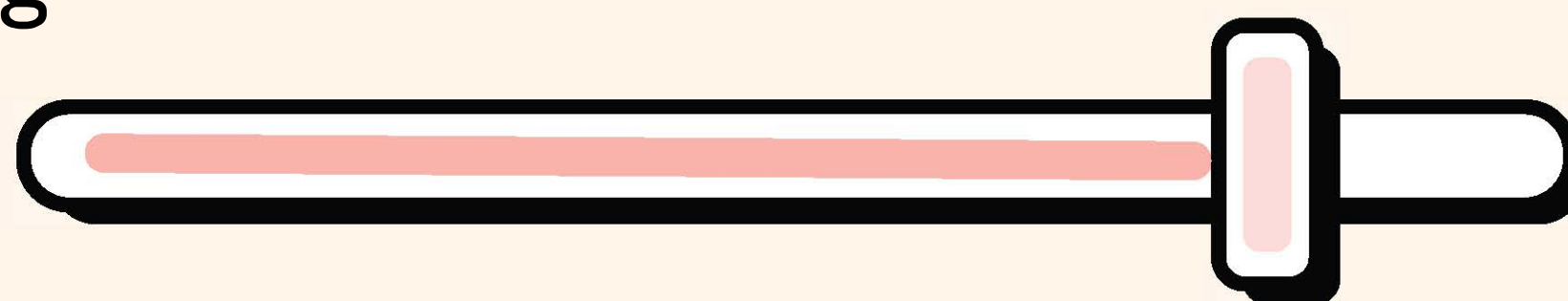
For assignments that require a lot of research, I use additional time to understand and process the information and fall behind on assignment deadlines.

Presentations



When I present individually, I spend many days worrying about the presentation and am challenged to remember my rehearsed content during my presentation.

Standing



When I am in classes that require standing for periods longer than 2 hours, I start to experience pain. This mostly happens in my field education class. When I can sit for ten minutes, I can then resume my activities.

Any amount of impact is worth discussing!

Preparing for your intake appointment

When meeting with an Accessibility Advisor for an intake appointment, it is helpful to prepare specific instances of impact. While your Accessibility Advisor will guide you through this process, your preparation can direct the conversation and contribute to the success of your accommodation recommendations. Here are some questions to help guide that discussion:

- Where are you in your understanding of your accommodation needs? If this is the first time asking for accommodations, what questions do you have about what is possible or what can be accommodated?
- When do you find it most challenging to concentrate? Notetaking in class or when reading at home?
- Do you experience difficulties processing information during tests? What happens and what can you imagine being supportive to you?
- Do you take regular breaks during class/studying/tests? Why is this needed?
- Are you frustrated by the time it takes to understand material when you are studying? Have you experienced this difficulty throughout your education?

-What technology do you use to complete work? If you use a screen reader to complete weekly readings, do you find assignments take you longer to complete?

- Are there personal circumstances that are further complicating your health? Are you experiencing housing or food insecurity? Are you also working while attending school? If English a second language, maybe technical language is taking additional time to acquire?

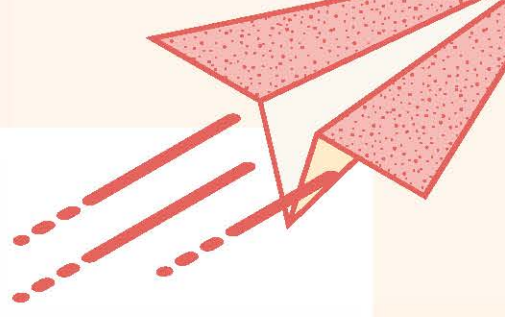
- Are you using supplementary materials to support your learning? Online videos or other learning software? Why is it helpful?

-Are you losing sleep due to workload demands? Are there reduced course load options?

-Do medical appointments cause you to miss class frequently?

-Is managing time and organizing assignments challenging for you? Would you like to learn skills to make managing multiple demands easier?

-Where do you need support in self-advocacy?



What types of accommodations can I request?

The types of accommodations available to you are based on a combination of your medical documentation, your description of the impacts you are experiencing, and the recommendations of your Accessibility Advisor. It is your Accessibility Advisor's role to determine if the accommodations are *reasonable* based on the learning outcomes in your program and your medical need.

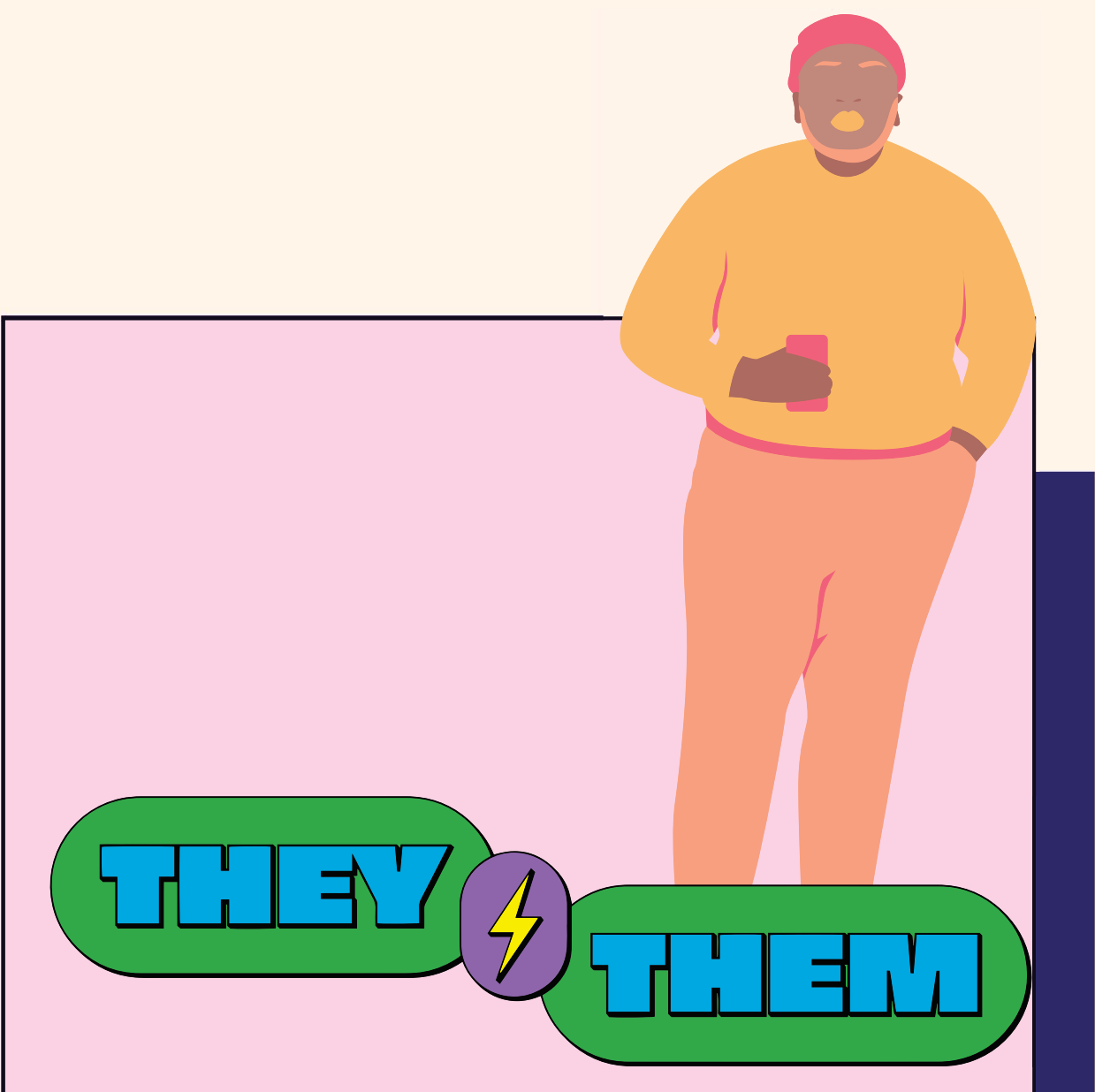
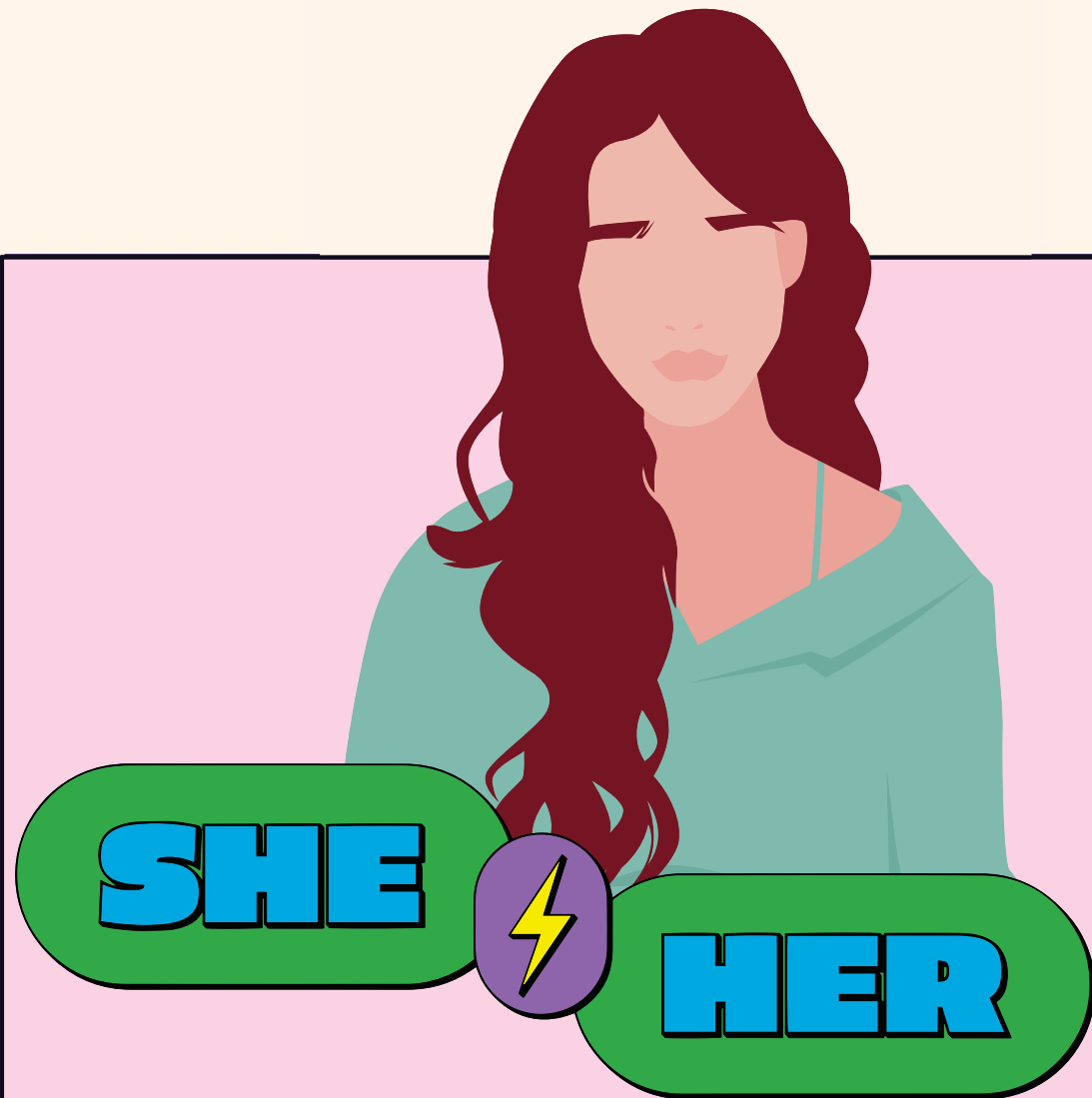
If there is not enough information in your documentation, your Accessibility Advisor may request more information from your doctor to assess your request for a specific accommodation. In Ontario, if your accommodations office requires documentation for registration there should also be a process that assists students with cost. Make sure to ask your Accessibility Advisor about this. (The Ontario Human Rights Commission's Policy on accessible education for students with disabilities (2018), states this on page 71.)

Understanding what the learning outcomes are for a class can be an important piece of self-advocacy in the accommodation process. It is important to consider that accommodations cannot change learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are generally listed in a course outline and summarize the goals of the course that everyone must demonstrate. For instance, in a course that teaches public speaking it would be an outcome to deliver a speech to an audience. An accommodation could be to scaffold learning, building slowly to demonstrate delivering a speech to a class. An accommodation may look like presenting to a teacher first, or a presenting to smaller group and then building learning to present to the class. Maybe, instead of relying on memorization, written notes could reduce impacts. However, in a history class, a research project may culminate in a group presentation, where the learning outcome is not public speaking but the understanding of a history topic. In this case, recording a presentation, delegating presentation tasks to another group member or an alternate assignment format may be a suitable accommodation to demonstrate learning of the specific topic.

Student perspectives: What positive support looks like

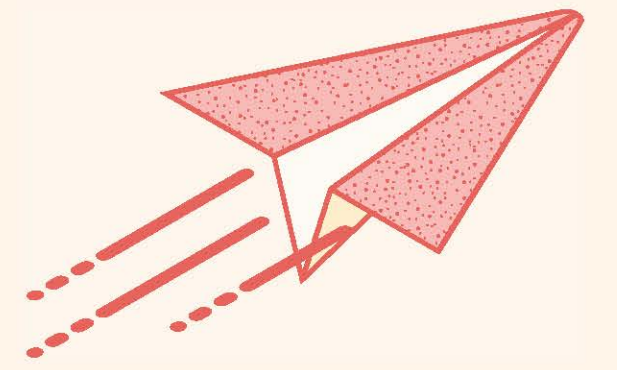
Mia

I had an amazing counselor (Accessibility Advisor). I really still keep in touch with her... she's fantastic. She didn't just teach me what I should be asking for, but how i should be asking for it... (She) sat down with me for one session, it was an hour and a half, and taught me how to approach the professor, how to speak about it (accommodation requests) and how to advocate for myself in a very diplomatic way.



Aryan

It also depends on your Accessibility Advisor...She (would) talk to anybody she could...email wise and everything, you know, she would work extra hours, stuff like that. She had a true passion, she really wanted to help people...so that made the process a bit easier.



Cassandra

(My Accessibility Advisor) would personally write letters to my professor and stuff. So I didn't even have to go through the shame of being like 'hey', I haven't spoken to a professor in this many weeks and 'you are missing all my coursework', but I have someone to back me up, which helped a lot.



Accommodation Types

Below is a list of some accommodations that are commonly available. This is not an exhaustive list and should you have any suggestions for the way that an accommodation would best address the functional limitations you are experiencing you can suggest alternative solutions.

The list of accommodations can assist in better advocacy with health care practitioners and your disability office.

Should you not qualify for an accommodation you request, I have a section later on covering alternate supports and appeals pathways.

Test Accommodations*

- Extra time added to tests: often provided at 1.25x, 1.5x (time plus half) or 2x (double time)
- Reduced distraction setting for testing
- Use of a computer: a computer can be provided for completing tests
- Breaks: periodic use of breaks to use the washroom, stand, manage disability impacts
- Food or Drink: permission to have food or drink during a test
- Limiting tests: restriction on the number of assessments in a single day
- Adaptive software: software like text to speech that reads text aloud
- Private Space: a private room for test-taking
- Alternate lighting during tests

*Note: Medical documentation support the need for these accommodations. Depending on your program or institution not all accommodation may be available.

Academic Accommodations*

- Classroom breaks: leaving the class periodically to manage disability impacts
- Audio recording: recording lectures to replay later
- Notetaking: assistance with taking notes during lectures, either through a peer note-taker or note-taking software
- Presentations: alternative options for in-class presentations, such as presenting to the teacher after class or recording the presentation
- Extensions: requesting additional time to complete assignments
- Reduced course load: taking a smaller number of classes in a semester
- Periodic absences: missing class due to medical appointments or sudden disability exacerbation
- Periodic lateness: arriving late to class due to disability impacts
- In-class assignment extensions: submitting work assigned in class by the same evening, or alternate agreed time

*Note: Medical documentation is often required to support the need for these accommodations. Depending on your program or institution not all accommodation may be available.

Chapter Five: Accommodations in the classroom

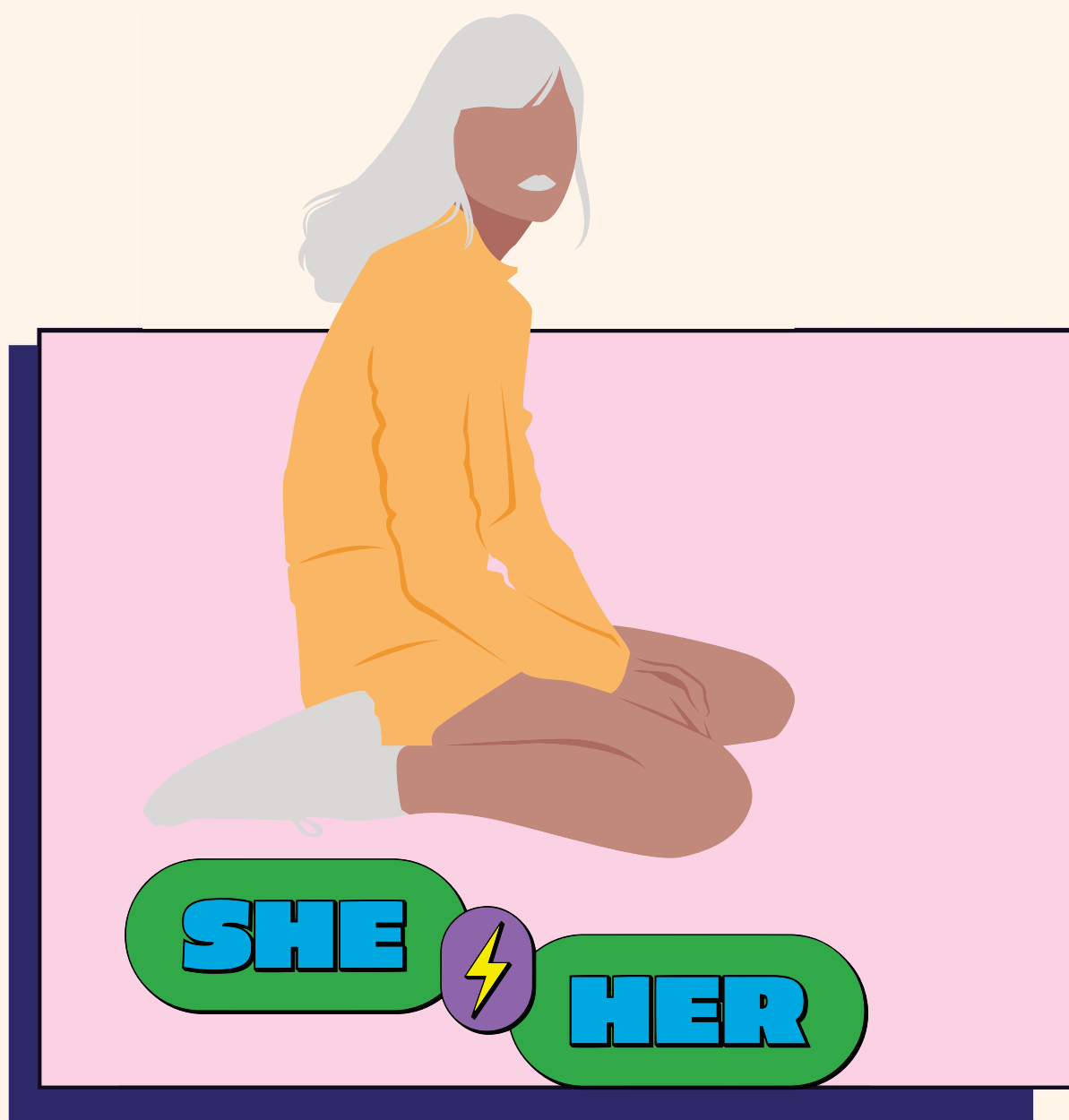
Student perspectives: accommodations in the classroom 54

Tips for discussing accommodations with professors 58

Student perspectives: Accommodations in the Classroom

Students are often responsible for communicating when they need to utilize accommodations in the classroom. For instance, requesting an extension or scheduling a test in an alternate space. After speaking with BIPOC students, I heard that making an accommodation request can be a nuanced process, as they sometimes face additional layers of bias and misunderstanding in the classroom. Students shared their experiences with navigating these complexities, highlighting the importance of understanding, responsiveness, and strategic self-advocacy when interacting with instructors.

Mia, Amanda, Zahra and Elia provide insight into the different types of experiences they have had with professors when requesting accommodations. Elia provides insight into the structural barriers that are present for both BIPOC students and staff and the importance in this shared awareness in understanding how BIPOC student support needs may present.



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Elia

I think I've noticed, and specifically with faculty who are racialized, a definite cynicism already with kind of the bureaucracy and barriers that are in place for first generation students. For students who come from like immigrant working class backgrounds, for students who have various experiences that might have them share that they themselves might have experienced at one point in their own education.

Zahra explains how she experiences ableist attitudinal barriers, coupled with micro-aggressions, that presents itself as undermining the legitimacy of her requests for accommodations.



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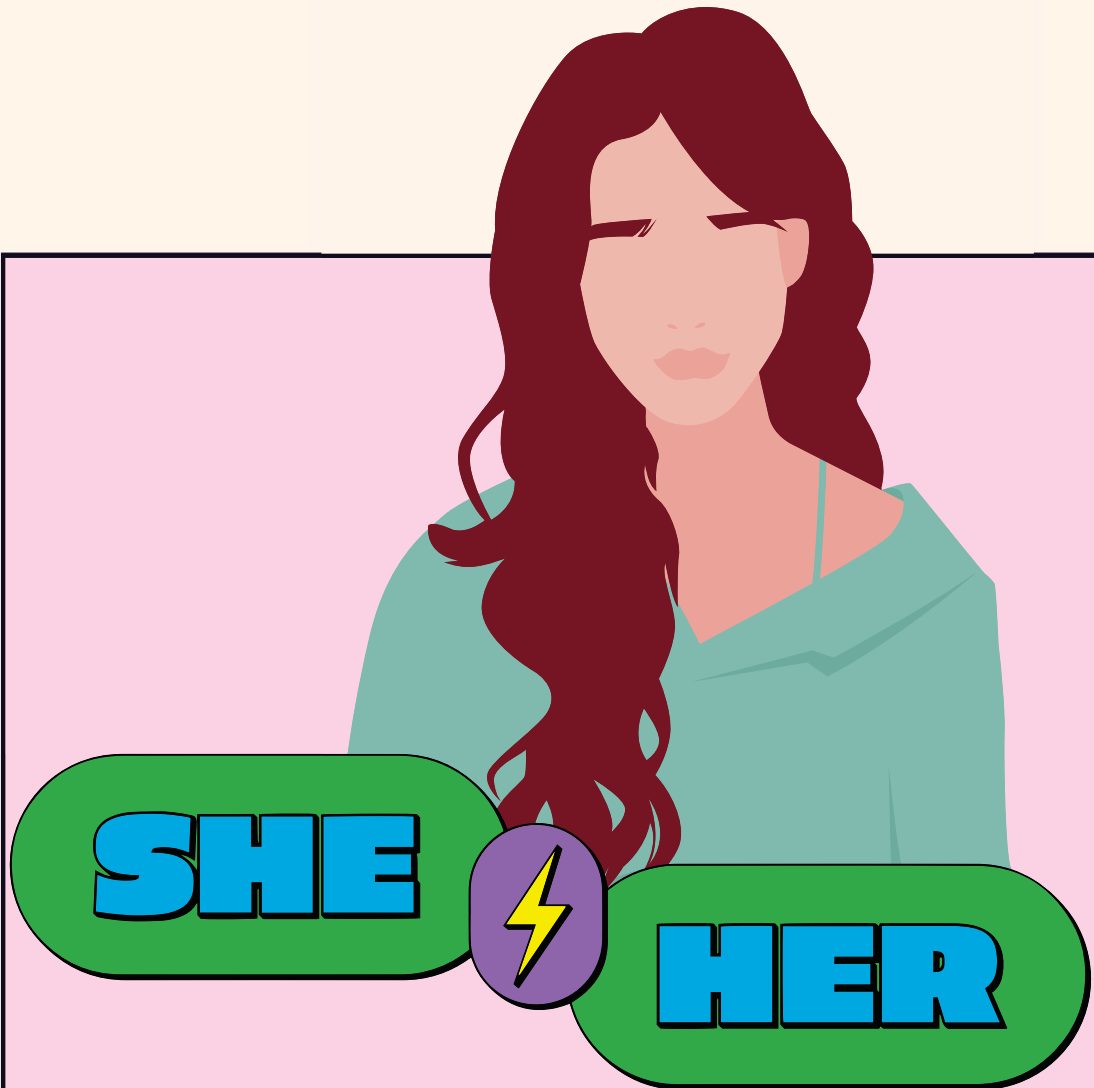
Zahra

I'm not cheating. I'm not using this as an excuse not to get the work done. I'm not looking for a way out. I'm telling you this is just how I am.

Mia shares a strategy she uses when starting a new class to get a feel for the teacher’s sensitivity to students with disabilities. Amanda provides a good snapshot of variability from faculty in responding to requests for accommodations.

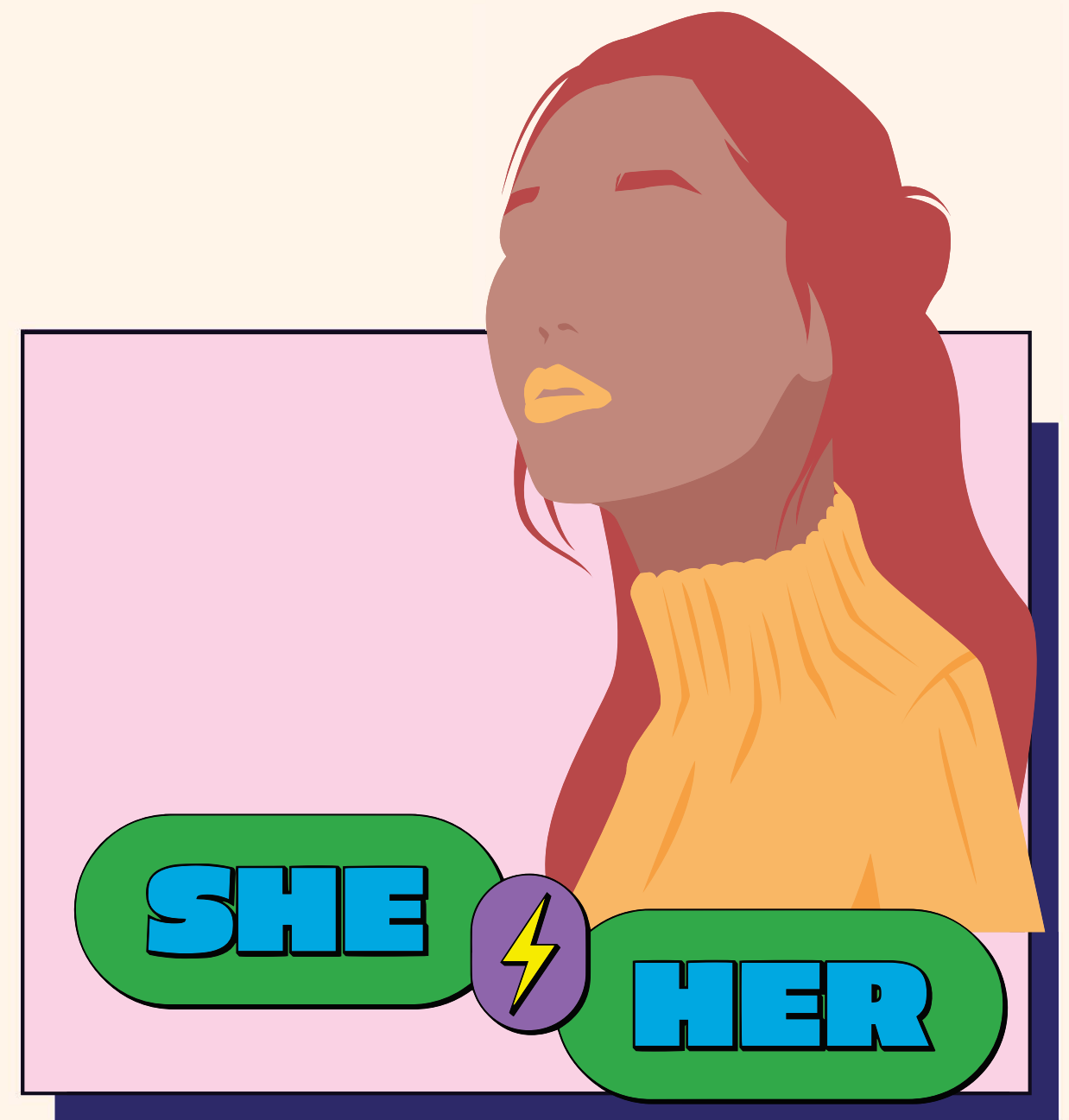
Mia

How are they (teachers) speaking to students who come in late? How are they speaking to students who are dealing with a touchy situation, (like) a mental health illness? How are they speaking in a way that is speaking about the curriculum?... I know the professor when they come to class are studying the students. I’m actually studying them. Legitimately. And that’s something I was taught by my (Accessibility) counsellor. Which one will accommodate me? Because, again, I have to invest in my success.



Amanda

So thankfully, in my experience, most of my instructors have been really receptive to my letters (of accommodation). Some of them would take a bit longer than other to acknowledge it and read it and verify that they get it. Initially, I would always make the effort to meet with all my professors beforehand prior to the start of the semester.





TIPS FOR DISCUSSING ACCOMMODATIONS WITH PROFESSORS



02

MEET WITH YOUR PROFESSOR AT THE START OF THE SEMESTER:

Making time to develop rapport with your teacher can help assess the environment of your class. Chatting for a few minutes after the first class and simply letting your teacher know your name, that you are registered for accommodations and that you will maintain communication about your accommodation needs, can be an important part of communicating your expectations of them in the accommodation process.

01

SET BOUNDARIES

Redirect questions about your diagnosis or inquiries about the reason for an accommodation to your Accessibility Advisor. This can sound like, "thank you for asking more about my accommodation needs. My Accessibility Advisor had provided this recommendation and I would be happy to connect us all to chat more about this."

03 BE CLEAR AND CONCISE:

When requesting an accommodation, focus on the request without going into personal details. Ensure you know the accommodation guidelines at your school.

04 USE SCRIPTS/TEMPLATES:

Prepare templates to use throughout the year. You can also adapt the email templates in this guide. It may be helpful to prepare a response to your teacher or Accessibility Advisor if an accommodation request is being denied or not implemented to take the worry out of a stressful situation.

Chapter Six: Email templates

Accommodation template emails 60

Assignment extensions 61

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Rescheduling a test 63

Late request for an extension 64

Denial of an accommodation 65

Accommodation Template Emails

From my work with students, I have found that communication about accommodation requests can become a barrier to utilizing their accommodations. For instance, what to say when requesting an extension, how much information to provide in a request and feeling a sense of guilt when requesting support.

Templates can be a great tool to have on hand to quickly and effectively request the type of accommodation you need.

Assignment Extension

Dear Professor [NAME],

As part of my recommended accommodations I have been granted extensions on assignments.

I would like to request an extension for [ASSIGNMENT NAME). I am requesting to submit this assignment to you by email on [DATE].

I have cc'd my Accessibility Advisor here should you have any questions.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,
[Name]

Absence

Dear Professor [NAME],

As part of my recommended accommodations I have been provided the accommodation of periodic absences. Unfortunately, today I experienced an exacerbation of my disability and was unable to attend class. I expect that I will be returning to class on [DATE].

I have already coordinated with a classmate to obtain notes for today's class. Additionally, I understand our next assignment was discussed in the last class. Could we arrange a brief meeting to discuss this in more detail?

If you would like further information about this accommodation, please feel free to connect with my Accessibility Advisor, [NAME], cc'd here.

Thank you for your understanding and assistance.

Best,
[NAME]

Late request for an extension

Hello [TEACHER NAME],

I hope this email finds you well.

As part of my accommodations I receive extensions on assignments. Unfortunately, I recently experienced an exacerbation of my disability and was unable to contact you before the deadline to arrange an extension. My Accessibility Advisor is aware of my exacerbation and is cc'd here.

Regarding the [ASSIGNMENT NAME] in your class, I kindly ask if you would consider accepting my submission by [DATE].

Thank you for your understanding and consideration of this matter,

Best regards,
[NAME]

Denial of an accommodation

Hello [ACCESSIBILITY ADVISOR NAME],

I am connecting with you due to difficulty I experienced requesting the accommodation of [ACCOMMODATION NAME] in my [CLASS NAME].

As per our institution's accommodation guidelines, I made my request [list the ways you met the guidelines]. When I submitted my request by email to my teacher (NAME), I was advised that it would not be granted due to [include email or reason].

I have made an appointment to meet with you to discuss these circumstances in more detail and receive assistance finalizing this accommodation.

Thank you for your support of this matter,

[NAME]

Appendix: Methodology

A snowball method was used for participant recruitment of BIPOC students who had interacted with their disability office; this included students who had attempted to use their institution's disability services or used their disability office but did not identify with a disability. When recruiting Accessibility Advisors, I posted a call for participants in our professional college and university listserv and contacted various disability office managers to circulate .

Interviews took place between January 2020 and November 2020. I conducted interviews with 14 BIPOC students with one student deciding not to participate. Six BIPOC Accessibility Advisors were interviewed and one BIPOC post-secondary employee who worked with Indigenous students and assisted them in accessing their disability service office.

I am deeply grateful to these participants who shared their story and even assisted me in processing my own experiences,. The community-based methodology was deeply healing for me.

Limitations:

The recruitment method used was limiting in the diversity of students that I was able to reach. The majority of the students I spoke to were attending university or college in Southern Ontario. Many of the students I spoke with were experiencing mental health related challenges during their academic pursuits. Diversifying the sites of my sample would have yielded a larger breadth of BIPOC students' experiences related to their disability. In addition, because of my limited sample size, I was not able to examine the specific barriers that exist for various racialized groups in detail, such as Black or Indigenous students experience. Anti-immigrant sentiment, for instance, elicits very specific sorts of discrimination that cannot be uniformly compared to the experiences of all students who are racialized. A further study into these intersections of experience in the academy is required to further provide attention to the mechanics of this marginalization.

Appendix: Methodology

Participant Chart

Student Name/Anonymized by request	Pronouns	Ethnicity/Cultural Identity/Background	Educational Institution
Jaiden Zhao	They/Them	East Asian	University of Toronto/Psychology
Taara Persaud	She/Her	South Asian	Ontario university undergraduate and Ontario law school
Sophia Ali	She/Her	Egyptian and Guyanese	Ontario university
Eila Thevar	She/Her	White/Tamil	York University
Aryan Farooqi	They/Them (Trans-Man)	Pakistani	University of Toronto/Psychology
Jungmin	She/Her	East Asian	York University MA in Arts
Mia M.	She/Her	Egyptian/Indigenous/British	Seneca College Humber College York University

Appendix: Methodology

Participant Chart

Student Name	Pronouns	Ethnicity/Cultural Identity/Background	Educational Institution
Shayani	They/Them	Tamil/Sri Lankan	Ontario university
Zahra Brown	She/Her	Jamaican/Canadian	York University
Katherina Yerro	She/Her	Fillipina	George Brown College/Ryerson University/ Health Science/Social Work
Elizabeth	She/Her	Chinese	UIT/University of Toronto/Health Sciences
Cassandra Myers	They/them She/Her	South Asian/Italian	York University/MSW Social Work
Amanda Ramkishun	She/Her	West Indian	McMaster University Sociology MA/Ontario University Social Science Undergrad

Appendix: Methodology

Participant Chart

Accessibility Advisor Name/ Anonymized by request	Pronouns	Ethnicity/Cultural Identity/Background	University/College Info
Aesha Williams	She/Her	Black Caribbean	Ontario University
Alisha Hafiz	She/Her	Half Indian/Half White (Muslim)	College in Ontario (variety of programs)
Eli Ababio	He/Him	African/Canadian from diaspora	College in Ontario (variety of programs)
Aponi Bernard	She/Her	Indigenous	College in Ontario
Krystal Jagoo	She/Her	Indo-Trinidadian	University of Toronto/New College
Layla Rehal	She/Her	Middle Eastern/South Asian	Ontario College/Arts and Science
Sean Kinsella	He/him They/Them	Anishinaabe	Ontario College



Wishing you support through your post-
secondary journey

If you disagree with an accommodation determination or have experienced ableism, there are avenues to seek remedy. You can initiate a meeting with your Accessibility Advisor, the manager of your accommodations/disability office or your university/college's human rights office. Many complaints are resolved following interventions at these levels. Your student association may also provide student support with advocacy through these steps.

Disability is a protected human rights ground and you also have the option to file a complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal. The Human Rights Legal Support Centre offers support and representation through the process to those that qualify.

Thank you to all the BIPOC students and Accessibility Advisors who contributed to this handbook. I am indebted to their efforts.

REPRESENTATION MATTERS