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# The Atlantic Centre

of Research, Access, and Support for Students with Disabilities



"A place where everyone believed I could succeed"  
– **Karen Larsen**, BA '94

"I couldn't have kept up with other students without the Centre's resources. Without the interpreting services, I don't think I would have made it through"  
– **Marie-Josée Nault**, BA '97

"With the pedways connecting most of the buildings on campus, it means that I don't even have to go outside to attend the majority of my classes"  
– **Patrick Harrington**, BA

"Teaching me to be my own self-advocate"  
– **Andrew Fuller**, BComm '97  
Global Services, RBC

"The Atlantic Centre not only helped me academically, but it also helped me prepare for the rest of my life"  
– **Kevin Penny**, BComm '00  
Campus Consultant, Department of Education

**Geoff Woodworth**, BComm '94  
Account Manager, Personal Financial Services, Royal Bank Financial Group.

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Atlantic Centre of Support for Students with Disabilities  
Saint Mary's University  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
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**Saint Mary's University**  
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

# The Atlantic Centre

Supporting Students with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities are working to achieve equality, independence and full participation in our society.

For more than 30 years, Saint Mary's University has played a leadership role in ensuring that higher education is accessible to individuals with disabilities.

## The History of Saint Mary's University

**S**aint Mary's University is primarily an undergraduate institution. It has grown steadily during the last decade, reaching a student registration of 11,000+. The university was founded in 1802 as a church-related educational institution, but is now a public, non-denominational co-ed institution that welcomes students of all races and creeds. It is dedicated to academic and research excellence, local, national and international outreach and fiscal responsibility. Saint Mary's maintains the traditions of its long history, but its highly qualified teaching staff and modern facilities make it a completely up-to-date academic institution. It offers undergraduate programs in arts, commerce and science, while its Graduate specialties include applied psychology, astronomy, Atlantic Canadian studies, philosophy, history and international development studies, to name a few. Co-op programs are available in commerce (small business, entrepreneurship, computing science and business administration) and science (biology, chemistry, environmental studies, geology and computing science).

**All buildings on campus are wheelchair accessible and most are joined by walkways, pedways or tunnels. Some residence rooms are adapted to meet the needs of students who use wheelchairs.**



The university has a strong international flavour, with many overseas students on campus and strong links with the countries of the Pacific Rim, Europe and the former communist bloc.

The commerce faculty is the largest in Atlantic Canada, offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in all disciplines. It aims to prepare students with disabilities to compete in the global market of the 21st century.



Photo Credit: The Halifax Herald Ltd.

## The Atlantic Centre – Milestones

*The Atlantic Centre was one of three Centres of Specialization in Canada supported by the Federal Government to enhance the full participation of citizens with disabilities in higher education. It has grown from 13 students in 1984 to in excess of 200 today.*

- **1968** The Edmund Rice Student Residence was constructed. Four floors are specially designed for students with physical disabilities.
- **1975** A tape library was established to serve students with visual impairments at the post secondary level.
- **1981** Initiatives were made to accommodate students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. In 1985, the Atlantic Centre, under the directorship of Dr. David Leitch, began operations. The Department of the Secretary of State grants Saint Mary's University funds to found the Atlantic Centre of Research, Access and Support for Students with Disabilities.
- **1988** The Employment Connection, a program specifically designed to help students with disabilities find meaningful employment both part and full-time, begins operations.
- **1988** Ms. Deborah Robar, B.Ed, becomes Canada's first deaf student to act as a Canadian University valedictorian.
- **1990** The Atlantic Centre's Learning Disability Support Program begins.
- **1992** The Atlantic Centre Computer Lab opens.
- **1997** The Atlantic Centre hosts the inaugural meeting of the Canadian Association of Disability Service Providers in Postsecondary Education (CADSPPE).
- **1999** The Atlantic Centre receives a \$1.2 million grant from the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation, allowing the Liberated Learning Project to begin using speech recognition to enhance accessibility.

**Since its establishment, the Atlantic Centre has been dedicated to meeting four main objectives:**

- Encouraging the participation of persons with disabilities in higher education.
- Providing direct support services to students while they pursue their education.
- The placing of graduates into career related employment.
- Conducting and encouraging research relevant to the education of persons with disabilities.

### Orientation

The Centre holds an orientation session each September for new students. This gives them an opportunity to ask questions about all aspects of university life.

### Scholarships

Thanks to generous donors, Saint Mary's University has a growing number of scholarships for students with disabilities.

### Counsellors

Individualized counselling sessions form the basis of our support programs. Counsellors each have different areas of expertise and students are assigned a counsellor based on the nature of their disability. Assistance includes help with various procedural matters and course selection, as well as working with students academically, suggesting organizational and learning strategies to enable them to better cope with the rigours of university. Counsellors also act as a liaison with faculty to ensure all necessary support services are implemented.

### Interpreters

An interpreter works in classrooms and laboratories to facilitate communication between faculty and students who use American Sign Language. In addition, interpreting is provided at Convocations, scholarship receptions and other public functions.

### Note Takers

Note takers use special paper to duplicate their own notes for students who are unable to write their own.

### Alternate Exam Accommodations

The Exam Coordinator assists students who need extra time or must use such alternative methods as dictation to tape, scribed exams, or the use of large print or Braille.

### The Employment Connection

An employment counsellor within the student employment office specializes in working with students and prospective employers to find meaningful employment related to the student's education/degree. Well-educated persons with disabilities who assume significant positions in the labour force will serve as models for future generations.

### Ferguson Tape Library

This special library serves students who are print handicapped. It has a reading machine and an inventory of more than 800 taped titles. Volunteer readers record new titles to meet students' needs.

### Technology

Access to adaptive technology. Computer labs and laptop systems, as well as specialized electronic work stations enable students with visual and motor impairments to work independently with adaptive

software. Students with learning disabilities benefit from speech recognition software and advanced speech programs.



### Resources

The Atlantic Centre has been a model of service and a resource centre for educational institutions throughout Atlantic Canada, initially regionally and now globally. The Centre extends an invitation to visitors from around the world who wish to replicate the Atlantic Centre in their own community.

**Following its mandate, the Centre has conducted various research projects including:**

- Liberated Learning Project - Introduction of speech recognition (SR) technology in university classrooms. Students with disabilities acquire equal access to lecture content through the display of text and SR-generated notes. The Atlantic Centre's collaboration with IBM Research evolved into an international team including universities from Australia, the United States, and Canada.
- History of deaf education in Nova Scotia.
- Study of literacy levels amongst persons with cerebral palsy, ages 17-34.
- Development of a historic video collection of Maritime Sign Language (MSL).
- Demographic research on number of persons with disabilities enrolled in Canadian universities.
- Demographic research on deaf/blind persons in Canadian universities.

**Atlantic Centre staff visit high schools in Nova Scotia to ensure that students with disabilities are aware of the opportunities that exist for them at the post secondary level.**