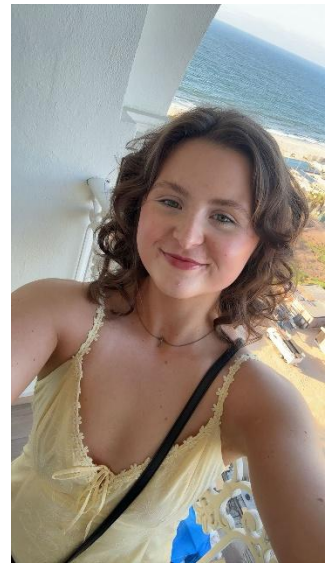




Hailey Backstrom
2026 Post-Secondary Essay Winner

Beyond the Acronyms: Why Removing Barriers Matters More Than Terminology

2026 NASA Post-Secondary Student Award Essay Submission

As a psychology student pursuing a career in industrial-Organizational psychology, and someone who has navigated university with a learning disability, I have come to understand that equal treatment is not always equitable treatment. Recent shifts away from Equity, Diversity and inclusion (EDI) frameworks toward approaches such as Access, community, and Belonging (ABC) have sparked debate about how institutions should promote fairness. While the terminology may change, the commitment to removing barriers and creating opportunities for all students and workers should remain.

Many universities, governments, and employers are moving away from traditional Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) frameworks in favour of approaches such as Access, Community, and Belonging (ACB). Supporters argue that this shift places greater emphasis on creating welcoming environments where everyone feels valued while reducing the political polarization that has become associated with EDI. This emphasis on belonging is supported by psychological research. Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the need to belong is fundamental human motivation and that strong interpersonal relationships are essential to well-being. For example, the University of Alberta explains that its transition to ACB is intended to provide a broader and more holistic approach to removing barriers while strengthening access, community, and belonging rather than simply replacing EDI with a new acronym. However, critics worry that moving away from the language of equity could weaken efforts to address systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups. Ultimately, changing the name of a framework is less important than ensuring institutions continue to remove barriers and create meaningful opportunities for all.

This discussion is especially meaningful to me because, as a university student with a learning disability, I have experienced the value of equitable support first hand. My

accommodations do not give me an unfair advantage or make my coursework easier; they simply remove barriers that would otherwise prevent me from demonstrating my knowledge and abilities. My experience also reflects a broader reality. Statistics Canada reported that more than one-third (35.4%) of employed Canadians with disabilities required workplace accommodations in 2022, highlighting that accessibility remains an important issue beyond the classroom. This experience has shaped how I view fairness and is one of the reasons I hope to pursue a career in Industrial-Organizational Psychology. I want to help organizations create workplaces where employees are evaluated on their skills and contributions rather than being limited by barriers they cannot control. Whether institutions use the language of EDI or ACB, their commitment to creating accessible and inclusive environments should remain the priority.

Unions also have an important role in supporting fairness in the workplace. Their primary responsibility is to protect worker's rights, and that includes advocating for accessible workplaces, equal opportunities, and protection from discrimination. By negotiating for fair hiring practices, reasonable accommodations, and inclusive policies, unions help ensure employees are evaluated based on their abilities rather than the barriers they may face. At the same time, unions should remain focused on these workplace issues instead of becoming involved in broader political debates that do not directly affect workers. Regardless of whether institutions use EDI or ACB, unions should continue promoting fair accessible workplaces because these principles are fundamental to protecting all employees.

Ultimately, the debate over EDI and ACB should focus less on terminology and more on outcomes. While institutions may choose different approaches to fostering inclusion, they should remain committed to removing barriers and ensuring everyone has a fair opportunity to succeed. Unions also have an important role in protecting these principles in the workplace. As I pursue a

career in Industrial-Organization Psychology, I hope to contribute to creating workplaces where accessibility, fairness, and belonging enable every employee to reach their full potential.

References

Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). *The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation*. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497–529.

Statistics Canada. (2024, October 9). *More Canadians with disabilities in the workforce, but unmet accommodation needs among barriers to equity*.

University of Alberta. (2025). *Expanding our focus: Access, Community and Belonging*.