



# Equal Access: Universal Design of Professional Organizations

**DO·IT**

A Checklist for Making Professional Organizations Inclusive  
by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

As increasing numbers of people with disabilities participate in academic opportunities and careers, the accessibility of professional organizations increases in importance. The goal is simply equal access; every member or potential member of your organization should feel welcome and be able to use your resources and participate in sponsored activities.

## Legal Issues

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities. According to these laws, no otherwise qualified person with a disability shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity of a public entity. This means that professional organizations be accessible to all participants and potential participants. This is true for organizations funded by federal, state, corporate, or private grants, gifts, cooperative agreements, or contracts.

## Universal Design

An approach to making facilities, information, and activities accessible to and usable by everyone is called universal design. Universal design means that rather than designing for the average user, you design for people with differing native languages, genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, abilities, and disabilities. The universal design of your offerings will make everyone feel welcome and minimize the need for special accommodations for those who participate in your activities or access your information resources. It is also important to make sure that staff and volunteers are trained to support people with disabilities, respond to specific requests for accommodations in a timely manner, and know who to contact regarding disability-related issues.

## Guidelines and Examples

Addressing the following questions provides a good starting point for making the information resources and activities of your professional organization universally accessible. This content does not provide legal advice. Contact the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) about legal mandates.

## Planning, Policies, and Evaluation

Consider diversity issues as you plan and evaluate services.

- Are people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, men and women, young and old students, and other groups represented in the organization's planning process?
- Do you have policies and procedures that ensure access to facilities, events, and information resources for people with disabilities?
- Are disability-related access issues and other diversity issues addressed in program evaluation plans and instruments?

## Information Resources

If your professional organization uses computers as information resources, ensure that these systems employ accessible design, that staff members are aware of accessibility options, and systems are in place to make accommodations.

- Do pictures in your publications and website include people with diverse characteristics with respect to race, gender, age, and disability?
- In key publications, do you include a statement about your commitment to access and procedures for requesting disability-related accommodations? For example, you could include the following statement: "Our organization's goal is to make materials and activities accessible to all participants. Please inform organization leaders of accessibility barriers you encounter and request accommodations that will make activities and information resources accessible to you."



- Are all printed publications available (immediately or in a timely manner) in alternate formats such as Braille, large print, and electronic text?
  - Are key documents provided in a language(s) other than English?
  - Are printed materials in your facility or at an event within easy reach from a variety of heights and without furniture blocking access?
  - Do electronic resources, including web pages, adhere to accessibility guidelines or standards adopted by your organization, funding source, or the federal government? *Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology*<sup>1</sup> and *Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)*<sup>2</sup> are most commonly used. For example, are text alternatives provided for graphic images on web pages? Can the content be accessed with a text-only browser and by using the keyboard alone? For general information about making your website accessible to everyone, consult the video and presentation *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design*.<sup>3</sup>
  - Do you include a statement on your website affirming your commitment to accessible design? For example, you could include the following statement: “We strive to make our website accessible to everyone. We provide text descriptions of graphic images and photos. Video clips are captioned and audio-described. Suggestions for increasing the accessibility of these pages are welcome.”
  - Do videos developed or used in your organization have captions? Audio descriptions? For more information, consult the *Creating Video and Multimedia Products That Are Accessible to People with Sensory Impairments*.<sup>4</sup> For making distance learning accessible, consult *Real Connections: Making Distance Learning Accessible to Everyone* video presentation and publication.<sup>5</sup>
  - Are there parking areas, pathways, and entrances to the building that are accessible from a seated position?
  - Are all levels of the facility connected via an accessible route of travel?
  - Are aisles kept wide and clear of obstructions for the safety of users who have mobility or visual impairments?
  - Are wheelchair-accessible restrooms with well-marked signs available in or near the office?
  - Is at least part of a service or counter desk at a height accessible from a seated position?
  - Are there ample high-contrast, large-print directional signs to and throughout the facility, indicating accessible routes?
  - Are universally-recognized icons used on signage?
  - Are telecommunication devices for the deaf (TDD) available?
  - Is adequate light available?
- Consult the *ADA Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removal*<sup>6</sup> for more suggestions. For computing facilities, consult the *Equal Access: Universal Design of Computer Labs* video and publication.<sup>7</sup>

### Staff and Volunteers

Make sure staff and volunteers are prepared to work with all members and program participants.

- Are all staff members and volunteers familiar with the availability and use of a TTY/TDD, the Telecommunications Relay Service, and alternate document formats?
- Do all staff members and volunteers know how to respond to requests for disability-related accommodations, such as sign language interpreters?
- Are all staff members and volunteers aware of issues related to communicating with participants who have disabilities? Do staff deliver conference presentations and exhibits that are accessible to all participants? See “Presentation, Exhibit, and Other Communication Hints” at the end of this publication.
- Are project staff, contractors, and volunteers in specific assignment areas (e.g., web page development, video creation) knowledgeable about accessibility requirements and considerations?

### Physical Environments and Products

Ensure that facilities, activities, materials, and equipment are physically accessible to and usable by all students, and that all potential student characteristics are addressed in safety considerations.



## Information Resources and Technology

If your organization uses computers as information resources, ensure these systems employ accessible design, that you are aware of accessibility options, and systems are in place to make accommodations.

- Do you ask vendors about accessibility features (e.g., captioned video, compatibility with assistive technology) before purchasing computers and software?
- Is an adjustable-height table available for each type of workstation to assist participants who use wheelchairs or are small or large in stature?
- Do you provide adequate work space for both left- and right-handed users?
- Are large-print key labels available to assist participants with low vision?
- Is software to enlarge screen images and a large monitor available to assist people with low vision and learning disabilities?
- Do you provide a trackball to be used by someone who has difficulty controlling a mouse?
- Are procedures in place for a timely response to requests for assistive technology?

For more information on this topic, consult the *Working Together* videos and publications.<sup>8</sup>

## Checklist Updates

This checklist was field tested at more than twenty postsecondary institutions nationwide.<sup>9</sup> The results of a nationwide survey to test face-validity of checklist items led to further refinement of the checklist. To increase the usefulness of this working document, send suggestions to [sherylb@u.washington.edu](mailto:sherylb@u.washington.edu).

## Resource

For more information on universal design, consult the book *Universal design in higher education: From principles to practice* published by Harvard Education Press and edited by Sheryl Burgstahler and Rebecca Cory. To receive a 20% discount on your order of this book through DO-IT, visit the website.<sup>10</sup>

## Cited Web Resources

1. <http://www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/>
2. <http://www.w3.org/WAI/>
3. <http://www.washington.edu/doit/Video/www.html>
4. [http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/Technology/vid\\_sensory.html](http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/Technology/vid_sensory.html)
5. [http://www.washington.edu/doit/Video/real\\_con.html](http://www.washington.edu/doit/Video/real_con.html)
6. <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/checkweb.htm>
7. <http://www.washington.edu/doit/Video/equal.html>
8. <http://www.washington.edu/doit/Resources/at.html>
9. <http://www.washington.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/admin.html>
10. <http://www.washington.edu/doit/UDHE/coupon.html>

## About DO-IT

DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) serves to increase the successful participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers, such as those in science, engineering, mathematics, and technology. Primary funding for DO-IT is provided by the National Science Foundation, the State of Washington, and the U.S. Department of Education. This publication is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation (HRD No. 0227995) and the Department of Education (grant #P333A050064). Any questions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Federal Government. For further information, to be placed on the DO-IT mailing list, or to request materials in an alternate format, contact:

DO-IT, Box 354842, University of Washington  
Seattle, WA 98195-4842

[doit@u.washington.edu](mailto:doit@u.washington.edu)

<http://www.washington.edu/doit/>

206-221-4171 (FAX)

206-685-DOIT (3648) (voice / TTY)

888-972-DOIT (3648) (toll free voice / TTY)

509-328-9331 (voice / TTY) Spokane

Director: Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

Copyright © 2009, 2008, 2007, 2006, 2005 University of Washington. Permission is granted to copy these materials for educational, non-commercial purposes provided the source is acknowledged.

## Presentation, Exhibit, and Other Communication Hints

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration with which you treat others. There are no strict rules when it comes to delivering a presentation, hosting an exhibit, and otherwise relating to people with disabilities. However, here are some helpful hints.

### General

- Ask a person with a disability if he or she needs help before providing assistance.
- Talk directly to the person with a disability, not through the person's companion or interpreter.
- Refer to a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation. If so, mention the person first and then the disability. "A man who is blind" is better than "a blind man" because it puts the person first.
- Avoid negative descriptions of a person's disability. For example, "a person who uses a wheelchair" is more appropriate than "a person *confined* to a wheelchair." A wheelchair is not confining—it's liberating!
- Provide information in alternate means (e.g., written, spoken, diagrams).
- Do not interact with a person's guide dog or service dog unless you have received permission to do so.

### Blind or Low Vision

- Be descriptive. Say, "The computer is about three feet to your left," rather than "The computer is over there."
- Speak all of the content presented with overhead projections and other visuals.
- When guiding people with visual impairments, offer them your arm rather than grabbing or pushing them.

### Learning Disabilities

- Offer directions or instruction both orally and in writing. If asked, read instructions to individuals who have specific learning disabilities.

### Mobility Impairments

- Sit or otherwise position yourself at the approximate height of people sitting in wheelchairs when you interact.

### Speech Impairments

- Listen carefully. Repeat what you think you understand and then ask the person with a speech impairment to clarify or repeat the portion that you did not understand.

### Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Face people with hearing impairments so they can see your lips. Avoid talking while chewing gum or eating.
- Speak clearly at a normal volume. Speak louder only if requested.
- Repeat questions from audience members.
- Use paper and pencil if the person who is deaf does not read lips or if more accurate communication is needed.
- When using an interpreter, speak directly to the person who is deaf; when an interpreter voices what a person who is deaf signs, look at the person who is deaf, not the interpreter.

### Psychiatric Impairments

- Provide information in clear, calm, respectful tones.
- Allow opportunities for addressing specific questions.