

**A Guide to Convening an Inclusive Hybrid Meeting Space**  
**Making Space for Disability Equity Work Group Spring 2023**  
**Final Report**

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**Executive Summary**

During spring semester 2023, an interdisciplinary work group of North Dakota State University (NDSU) faculty and staff was established for the purpose of identifying space, technology, and design resources available on/through the NDSU campus, in order to assemble and test a model for convening inclusive hybrid meeting spaces, with a primary focus on the needs of faculty and staff. This report provides an abridged review of disability equity in academia nationally and at NDSU, a brief description of the *Making Space for Disability Equity* work group process, and a bulleted list of the disability equity guidance our work group identified as relevant to NDSU settings. References and links for additional helpful resources are included throughout the report and we conclude with a summary of lessons learned and further recommendations for meeting institutional needs identified by the work group. We hope that sharing our process and recommendations contributes to a culture of inclusivity on our campus and that this report might be found useful across other higher education settings in our communities and country.

*Why do we undertake this work?*

Because when disability is addressed in academia, attentions are most often directed toward student concerns, leaving ableism/disablism in academic workplaces for faculty and staff rarely addressed. Also, disability discrimination, and disability in general, is frequently ignored or

misunderstood. The editors of *We are Not Your Metaphor: A Disability Poetry Anthology* (Zoeglossia Fellows, 2019), explain it this way:

*Sometimes ableism is so embedded in our culture that it's hard to recognize that it's there. Getting people to be aware of it is like asking them to think about the air that we breathe in. It's subtle; it's often unconscious and not meant to be hurtful. Yet it often perpetuates untrue and demeaning images and stereotypes. That can fester and, without conscious awareness, form misperceptions about disabled people.*

Our hope is that units and departments across NDSU and other campuses will use—and add to—the guidance offered here in order to more intentionally and comprehensively create accessible, inclusive, and adaptive workplaces for all faculty and staff.

### **A Brief Overview of Disability Equity in Academia Nationally and at NDSU**

Definitions of disability vary across cultural and legal contexts, thus prevalence estimates also vary in important and relevant ways (Naraian, 2013; Torres Fremlin, 2023). Even so, disability prevalence estimates can offer a window into the scope of disability experience in specific contexts. National data (CDC, 2023) indicates that 27% of adults in the United States have a disability. Percentages of faculty who identify as members of disability communities tend to increase as the professoriate ages and the COVID-19 pandemic is adding to that number (Yong, 2022). Greater numbers of individuals with disabilities are graduating with PhDs in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, however, as of 2019 only 10.5% of doctorate holders with disabilities who were employed as university faculty held tenure-track positions (Hamrick, 2021, Table 9-31). Academic positions come with barriers when disabilities are not considered in the design and implementation of workplace policies and practices. For example, participation in typical work expectations can pose barriers for some faculty with disabilities due to inaccessible lab spaces, and/or technologies, as well as due to additional time and financial expenditures necessary for travel, personal care staff, sign language interpreters, etcetera (Trewin, et al. 2019). Despite decades of research regarding faculty diversity, we have yet to meaningfully address accessibility and equity for disabled faculty (note, however, the [2021 AccessADVANCE Capacity Building Institute Proceedings](#) for a recent NSF funded project focused on academic faculty concerns and ideas for addressing them).

Historically, disabled voices have not been included, or have been included only tangentially, in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) conversations ([Burke, 2020](#)). The recent addition of “A” (accessibility) to DEI (DEIA) efforts in the federal government as articulated in [Executive Order 14035](#) is meant to address this omission of disabled voices. Given the larger cultural changes brought on by the ongoing activism and scholarship for disability justice by disabled people (see for example [Sins Invalid](#)), the number of staff and faculty identifying as members of the disability community is likely to increase (Kerschbaum, Eisenman, & Jones, 2017). This demographic is also disproportionately affected by the *ongoing* pandemic, a point often

overlooked by institutions and professional organizations ([Krebs, 2022](#)) as a “return to normal” institutional life continues to be pursued.

Previously, both in the federal government and elsewhere, disability had been framed as a medical issue and/or a legal one ([Burke, 2020](#)). Shifting from medical models of disability where disability is viewed as an individual diagnosis to social models of disability where disability is viewed as hurdles to participating fully in home, community, and professional life due to cultural and systemic barriers (“[Medical and Social Models of Disability](#)”) is a much needed step.

At NDSU, there has been an increase in staff and faculty reporting disabilities and chronic conditions: 16.5% in 2017 and 19.4% in 2021 ([Berg & Besse, 2021](#)). In the 2021 NDSU Campus Climate Survey, faculty and staff who identified as having a disability or chronic health condition reported lower rates of job satisfaction, with only 32.4% indicating they would “Strongly recommend” their department or unit as a place to work, compared with 43.9% of all survey respondents ([Berg & Besse, 2021, Table 30](#)). Disabled faculty and faculty with chronic health conditions were also “considerably less likely than the rest of the other underrepresented groups to report being treated with respect by colleagues in their department/unit” ([Berg & Besse, 2021, p.94](#)); only 67.6% indicated they agreed/strongly agreed that they are treated with respect by unit colleagues, compared to 73.3% of faculty not endorsing disability ([Berg & Besse, 2021, Table 22](#)).

Our work group convened to address some of the systemic barriers experienced by disabled faculty and staff at NDSU. Specifically, we set out to curate the resources available on our campus in order to develop and test a model for fully accessible, well-resourced, and intentionally welcoming hybrid (virtual + in person) participation options—for department meetings, office work, and classroom duties. Hybrid options create opportunities for marginalized faculty to fully participate in their department and in their field ([Wu et al., 2022](#) and [Sarabipour, 2020](#)). It is important to note “the disabled community is not a monolith, and how people experience a disability is filtered through their race and other characteristics, and vice versa” ([Burke, 2020, para. 23](#)); thus, applying an intersectional lens to meeting and event planning is essential (see *General Considerations* below). Providing hybrid options for all work meetings and events is one element of a broadly inclusive workplace.

### **Making Space for Disability Equity Work Group(s)**

Hosting and facilitating hybrid meetings comes with challenges. Remote and/or or hybrid access are not congruent with accessibility by default. Meeting hosts must be intentional in their approach – in design, in preparation, and in practice.

In the fall of 2022, NDSU faculty and staff were invited to participate in a cohort of NDSU community members interested in accessibility and disability equity. Eighteen faculty and staff joined the *Making Space for Disability Equity Work Group*. The group met four times over 2023

spring semester (January 27, February 17, March 24, and April 21), with subcommittees meeting in the interim. Work group members also hosted an asynchronous virtual gathering space on Slack; this space was used to share accessibility resources and raise accessibility concerns. Our focus was on one relatively tiny but impactful thread: drawing together the resources available on/through our campus to assemble and test a model for convening an inclusive hybrid meeting space.

To address the challenges associated with hybrid work, the work group considered the essential functions of faculty positions as viewed through a Universal Design lens. The group also identified resources available at NDSU to address the need for a welcoming and accessible hybrid (virtual + in person) space.

Because we wanted our model to be data-driven, our first two meetings focused on researching what peer institutions were doing to support hybrid events and meetings as well as investigating recommendations for hosting hybrid events and meetings from reputable disability advocates and organizations. Our research helped us create a checklist for our colleagues to use to host and facilitate hybrid meetings and events.

We used our final two meetings to pilot our hybrid approach and are pleased to report our meetings were engaging, meaningful experiences. Based on our research, lived experiences, and lived experiences of our colleagues, we recommend scheduling all workplace gatherings as hybrid meetings using hybrid conferencing systems (such as a Meeting [OWL](#)). This allows for the greatest amount of participation, as hybrid meetings allow for flexibility and more accessibility features as compared to in-person only. Finally, it is important to note there are many other reasons to support a hybrid approach to work; it can help caregivers, those who are temporarily ill, and to reduce weather-related risks associated with travel and campus accessibility.

### **Disability Equity Guidance & Recommendations for Hybrid Workspaces**

Virtual participation is not inherently lesser than in-person and vice versa. It is important not to treat technological options as secondary, or else they are guaranteed to become secondary. More important is consideration of how virtual technologies are used. It is likely that they cannot be used in the same way as face-to-face channels. This is why it is important to consider goals and outcomes, and then to consider how various technologies can be used in the service of those goals, rather than focusing on how to replicate the process of face-to-face communication.

With this in mind, the *Making Space for Disability Work Group* created the checklist below including evidence-based best practices for faculty and staff to follow. The checklist is meant to help departments host an event or meeting that is accessible to a broad number of participants, reducing the number of accommodations needed. We acknowledge that this is a living document, and we expect additional guidelines to be added as we all become more familiar with hosting

hybrid events. Please note that the information included below reflects content generated during our work group sessions as we considered hybrid workplace needs at NDSU. We highly recommend, in addition to the current document, visiting the [How can conferences, meetings, presentations, and events be made accessible?](#) webpage from the University of Washington DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) Center as it is regularly updated and includes more in depth guidance on the many facets of accessibility.

## **Before the Meeting**

### *Select a Date and General Considerations*

- Plan gatherings using this checklist so accommodations are not needed; when accommodations are requested (not accounted for in pre-event planning), refrain from asking personal information or passing judgment.
- When possible, avoid scheduling meetings that fall on K-12 no-class dates, religious holidays and celebrations.
- If serving food, consider dietary restrictions/ needs. Make sure to label and use separate utensils, placing them in an accessible area.
- If there is a cost for the event, consider offering scholarships to attend.
- Consider fragrance-free policies and develop a statement such as “Please minimize use of scented personal care products to allow for participation of persons with fragrance sensitivities.”
- Have disposable face masks available for use.
- Be conscious of eating during meetings / during holidays such as Ramadan.
- If serving food, is there space for religious prayer or private space.

### *Evaluate Pre-Meeting Communication*

- Include an accessibility statement on publicity materials, such as “Our xyz department/unit is committed to removing barriers and providing support for all employees to complete the essential functions of their position through the promotion of policies and practices grounded in principles of universal design and by providing reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities. Information for obtaining accommodations as an NDSU staff / faculty member can be found at: [https://www.ndsu.edu/hr/employee\\_resources/ada\\_accommodation/](https://www.ndsu.edu/hr/employee_resources/ada_accommodation/).”

- Ensure that requests for accommodations have been received *and addressed*; consider suggesting that accommodation requests be cc'd to meeting hosts, then consult with the staff who are charged with addressing accommodations.
- When sending out an email invitation to an online meeting, ensure the appropriate link is provided to join.
- If applicable, print materials prior for those who wish to follow along. Ensure the print of your meeting materials are large enough and in an easily readable contrasting colors/ font (see for example, guidance on preparing slides available on the [Making Events Accessible Checklist](#) from World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C).
- Ensure marketing for the event is accessible; use alt texts on images and closed captioning on videos.
- Provide contact information for participants, in case they have difficulties or have questions prior.
- Establish expectations of meeting / training (e.g., use of microphones if applicable); consider best use of chat and/or Q&A functions to be most inclusive for both remote and onsite participants.
- Make sure to have signage (visual and Braille) for the event location if in a large building.

### *Evaluate Physical Space*

- Ensure the room is equipped with appropriate technology such as a large screen with integrated speakers and microphone system in the room. Double check electrical outlets.
- Double check space for visibility and acoustics: seating layout should be such that screens are easily viewable from every location within the meeting room; if possible captioning should run along with audio-visual presentation.
- If the meeting size or space acoustics warrant amplification, ensure that microphones are available, in working order, and that participants use them.
- Ensure that if tables are provided they are at a correct height (28 to 34 inches) for people using mobility devices.

- Ensure that there is sufficient space for people using mobility devices to move through the space and access seating/tables. Double check to make sure there is an elevator, automatic doors, and accessible bathrooms are nearby.
- Ensure space for meeting participants to stand and/or move during the meeting if needed to manage physical comfort or support attention.
- Ensure there is space for service animals.
- Host the meeting in a space that has physically accessible [gender neutral bathrooms](#) and [lactation rooms](#) nearby.

### *Evaluate Virtual Space*

- Disable the waiting room for those who may get disconnected; this will make it easier for them to rejoin.
- Make sure to consider online security.
- Enable live captions and make transcripts available after – make sure host sets up in the settings to have closed caption available prior to the meeting.
- Record the meeting after providing notice to participants.
- For larger events, consider muting participants upon arrival to reduce background noise.
- Pay attention to camera view and angles; if attending remotely, consider blurring backgrounds.

### **During the Meeting**

- Start a few minutes early to allow time to address technical issues.
- Refrain from making comments privileging one mode of participation.
- Consider introductions with visual descriptions and pronouns.
- Identify yourself when speaking (This is Melissa, ...).

- Repeat or paraphrase what participants say, if the microphones/acoustics are not good.
- If a ‘chat’ function is used for online or remote participants, repeat relevant chat content to ensure that all participants can access that information.
- If there are links shared in the chat during discussion, consider that those in the physical space may not have access to those, so send out prior if possible (or highlight in transcripts following the meeting).
- Speak up when you feel an accessibility issue may be an issue.
- Consider attention spans and fatigue issues and encourage onsite participants to stand/move as needed and online attendees to switch their camera on/off as needed.

### **After the Meeting**

- Provide recordings and transcripts.
- Consider a follow-up survey to evaluate accessibility of the event or meeting.

### **Support Needed from Administration**

1. Encourage departments and colleges to adopt a policy of providing a hybrid-approach for all departmental or unit activities. Lead by example by hosting campus-wide events in a hybrid format.
2. Provide guidance regarding what campus community members can do when they encounter a meeting or event that is not accessible. Assign staff and dedicate resources to promptly and effectively address accessibility concerns.
3. Support professional development opportunities to learn how to host and facilitate hybrid meetings.
4. Evaluate current spaces to ensure that the technologies/equipment are easily accessible. For example, in some of the rooms in the NDSU Memorial Union, to plug in a USB, a user needs to get on the floor and wiggle underneath a table to plug in the USB.
5. Support departments and units in purchasing or accessing equipment and technology that addresses accessibility needs (for example, [Owl conference webcams](#)).



## Dissemination

We believe that NDSU is well-positioned to shift our campus culture to better address disability (in)equities and to contribute to an equity-focused transformation of higher education in general. In other words, we have the opportunity now to cultivate a leadership position in the growing national movement for disability equity. To that end, an article describing this work has been accepted for publication in an open access journal (Vosen Callens, Anicha, Napoleon, accepted for publication 2023). The *Making Space for Disability Work Group* also plans to share the checklist with other institutions via Educause's [Flexspace](#), a space universities can use to post information and share resources. Also, the NDSU Library is currently developing a hub/satellite project designed to provide a fully hybrid-accessible conference space in the library, along with a checkout system for accessibility-carts that can be moved into meeting spaces across campus that are not yet equipped for hybrid gatherings.

Finally, we believe that it is vital for each of us to make efforts to become informed regarding positive disability identities as well as (in)equities experienced around disability. While prevalence estimates and statistics can offer some factual perspectives, to more fully understand the nuance and complexity of the experience of disability and disability culture, it may be especially beneficial to become informed through more narrative approaches. To that end, we encourage at least a brief investigation of such resources as you engage in this work and we offer two powerful options: *Naming Ableism*, by Maria R. Palacios, a poetic prose tutorial on ableist microaggressions, and, the collected works of a group of disabled poets, the Zoeglossia Fellows, (2019), which brings a variety of perspectives on ableist language, reflected in this quote by poet Kathi Wolfe:

*For poets, one example [is]... ableist metaphors used so often in poetry to describe disabilities or those of us with disabilities. How often have you read poems that use blindness as a metaphor for spiritual ignorance, unthinking faith, or moral failings? Or deafness used as a metaphor for isolation, aloneness—a failure to emotionally communicate? Think: world of darkness. Deaf ears. Crippling rage ...*

If you are looking for ways to become more knowledgeable or to offer your perspectives and skills, please consider participating on the [NDSU Accessibility Committee](#) or one of several subcommittees, and/or by joining an affinity group such as CoDA: Coalition of Disabled Academics and/or the Disability Equity Advocates, Allies, and Accomplices (DEA<sup>3</sup>) Affinity/Work group. Additionally, a variety of professional development opportunities are hosted on campus each year through the [Learning and Applied Innovation Center \(LAIC\)](#) and the [Office of Teaching and Learning](#). We hope that sharing our process and recommendations moves us forward in creating a culture of inclusivity here at NDSU and across higher education settings in our communities and country.

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