



Equal Access: Universal Design of an Academic Department

DO-IT

A checklist for making postsecondary departments welcoming and accessible to all students

by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

The group of individuals pursuing higher education is becoming increasingly diverse with respect to gender, race, ethnicity, learning style, age, disability, and other characteristics. High-tech careers are potentially open to individuals with disabilities because of advancements in assistive technology that provide access to computers. However, the inaccessible design of facilities and software, curriculum, web pages, and distance learning courses continue to erect barriers.

When it comes to an academic department, the vision is simply equal access. Everyone who qualifies to take courses within your department and anyone who is qualified to teach them should be able to do so.

Universal design (UD) is an approach that can make your department accessible to all potential students and instructors. Universal design is defined as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”¹ It suggests that, rather than design your departmental offerings for the average user, design them for people with a broad range of abilities, disabilities, ages, reading levels, learning styles, native languages, cultures, and other characteristics. More information about applications of universal design can be found in *Universal Design: Principles, Process, and Applications*².

In applying UD, keep in mind that individuals in your department may have learning disabilities or visual, speech, hearing, and mobility impairments. For some, English is not their first language. Some may be older than the average student. Make sure everyone

- feels welcome,
- can get to facilities and maneuver within them,
- is able to fully benefit from resources and courses, and
- can make use of equipment and software.

Although applying UD minimizes the need for accommodations for students, faculty, and staff with disabilities, it is also important to have a plan in place to respond to additional accommodation requests in a timely manner and to ensure that faculty and staff are prepared to work with colleagues and students who have disabilities.

Guidelines and Examples

The following questions can guide faculty and administrators in making their academic department more accessible. This content does not provide legal advice. To help clarify legal issues, consult your campus legal counsel or ADA/504 compliance officer or call your regional Office for Civil Rights (OCR).

Planning, Policies, and Evaluation

Consider diversity issues as you plan and evaluate your facilities and programs.

- Are people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, men and women, young and old students, and other groups represented on your staff, faculty, and student body?
- Are people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, men and women, young and old students, and other groups included in departmental planning and review processes and advisory committees?



- Do you have policies and procedures that ensure access to facilities, printed materials, computers, and electronic resources for people with disabilities?
- Do policies and procedures require that accessibility be considered in the procurement process for software and other information technology? (See, for example, the *Section 508 Standards for Electronic and Information Technology*³ or the W3C's Web Content Accessibility Standards [WCAG]⁶).
- Do policies and procedures require that accessibility be considered when departmental websites or software are created?
- Do you have a procedure to ensure a timely response to requests for disability-related accommodations? Is this content included on the departmental website and is it in faculty and staff orientations and periodically in other meetings?
- Are disability-related access issues addressed in any external or internal evaluations that are done of your courses or services?

Facility and Environment

Ensure physical access, comfort, and safety within an environment that is welcoming to visitors with a variety of abilities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, and ages.

- Are the parking areas, pathways, and entrances to departmental buildings wheelchair-accessible?
- Are all levels of departmental facilities connected via wheelchair-accessible routes of travel? Are accessible routes of travel easy to find?
- Is adequate light available?
- Do elevators have auditory, visual, and tactile signals and are elevator controls accessible from a seated position?

- Are there ample high-contrast, large-print directional signs to and throughout departmental labs, administrative offices, classrooms, and other facilities? Is braille signage available when appropriate?
- Are wheelchair-accessible restrooms with well-marked signs available?
- Are parts of counters and desks in student service areas at a height accessible from a seated position?
- Are aisles kept wide and clear of obstructions for the safety of users who have mobility or visual impairments?
- Are there quiet work or meeting areas where noise and other distractions are minimized?

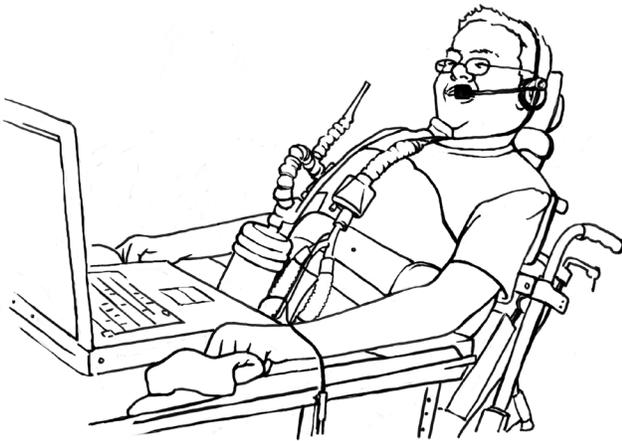
Consult the *ADA Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removal*⁴ for more suggestions.

Support Services

Make sure support staff are prepared to work with all students, faculty, and staff.

- Do staff members know how to respond to requests for disability-related accommodations such as sign language interpreters?
- Are staff members familiar with alternate document formats?
- Are staff members aware of issues related to communicating with students of different races, ethnicities, ages, and abilities? See the Communication Hints at the end of this publication.
- Is the departmental Webmaster knowledgeable about accessible web design?

Consult *Equal Access: Universal Design of Student Services*⁵ for more suggestions for making services welcoming to accessible to and usable by all students.



Information Resources

Ensure that departmental publications and websites welcome a diverse group and that information is accessible to everyone.

- Do pictures in departmental publications and on websites include people with diverse characteristics with respect to race, gender, age, and disability?
- In key publications, does the department include a statement about its commitment to universal access and procedures for requesting disability-related accommodations? For example, you could include the following statement: “The [name] Department values diversity and strives to make courses, information resources, and services accessible to all potential students and visitors. Please inform faculty and staff of accessibility barriers you encounter and request accommodations that will make courses, services, and information resources accessible to you.” Ideally use the institution’s standard diversity statement.
- Are all printed publications available in an accessible format on the department’s website and also available (immediately or in a timely manner) in alternate formats such as Braille, large print, and electronic text?
- Are key documents provided in language(s) other than English?

- Are accessibility issues incorporated into mainstream web design and other technology training for students and staff?
- Do departmental web pages adhere to accessibility guidelines or standards adopted by your institution or your department? *Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology*³ and the W3C’s *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines*⁶ are most commonly used. For information about designing accessible websites, consult the *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* video and publication⁷.

Courses and Faculty

Ensure that faculty members deliver courses that are accessible to all students and that accommodations are provided in a timely manner.

- Do video presentations used in courses or other presentations have captions? Audio descriptions? Do podcasts have transcripts?
- Are instructors aware of issues related to communicating with students of different races, ethnicities, and ages and students who have disabilities? (See the Communication Hints at the end of this publication.)
- Are faculty members familiar with and do they employ instructional strategies that maximize the learning of all students? (See *Equal Access: Universal Design of Instruction*⁸ for a checklist of instructional strategies.)
- Do administrators and instructors promote the use of flexible methods of assessment for students with diverse abilities and learning styles?
- Do faculty members know how to respond to requests for disability-related accommodations such as sign language interpreters?



- Is universal and accessible design incorporated into the curriculum of appropriate courses (e.g., requiring software designed by students be accessible to people with disabilities)?
- Do faculty members employ accessible web design practices for their websites?

Computers, Software, and Assistive Technology

Make technology in departmental computing facilities accessible to everyone. Begin with a few items and add more later.

- Is screen enlargement software available for users with low vision? Is a large monitor available so that a larger amount of screen can be viewed while magnified?
- Is text-to-speech software available to those with print-related disabilities?
- Is a trackball available for those who have difficulty controlling a mouse?
- Can controls on computers, printers, scanners, and other information technology be reached from a seated position (e.g., easy access to power switches on computers and surge protectors)?
- Is an adjustable-height table available for each type of computer workstation?
- Are adequate work areas available for both right- and left-handed users?
- Is a wrist rest and forearm rest available for those who require extra support while typing?

For more information about making a computer lab accessible, consult *Equal Access: Universal Design of Computer Labs*⁹. For information about assistive technology, consult DO-IT's technology and universal design videos and publications¹⁰.



Checklist Updates

This checklist was adapted with permission from the checklists within the publications *Equal Access: Universal Design of Computer Labs*¹¹ and *Equal Access: Universal Design of Student Services*⁵. All of these checklists are field-tested and refined at postsecondary institutions nationwide. To increase the usefulness of the checklist for your department included in this publication, send suggestions to sherylb@uw.edu.

Getting Started

Looking at all of these suggestions may seem overwhelming. The great thing about UD, however, is it can be applied incrementally. For example, a department might begin by assigning an existing diversity committee or creating a new task force to explore ways of making the department more welcoming and accessible to everyone. Members of the advisory group could, as they go through the checklist provided in this publication, cross off items not applicable in their department, note as “done” those that have already been accomplished, and label with a recommended deadline date for those they feel should be addressed by the department. Then, using the online version of this publication, they could order the items by date and add additional notes as appropriate.

Presenting the timeline to the department decision-maker on diversity issues could be the next step. Once approval is secured, assigning staff and, when needed, securing budget funds could move the project along.



Additional Resources

An electronic copy of the most current version of this publication as well as additional useful brochures can be found online.¹² For more information about applications of universal design, consult *The Center for Universal Design in Education*.¹³ The book *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice, Second Edition* by Harvard Education Press shares perspectives of UD leaders nationwide. To learn more or order online, visit the DO-IT website.¹⁴

Cited Resources

1. www.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_ud/udprinciples.htm
2. www.uw.edu/doit/resources/popular-resource-collections/applications-universal-design
3. www.access-board.gov/guidelines-and-standards/communications-and-it/about-the-section-508-standards
4. www.ada.gov/checkweb.htm
5. www.uw.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-student-services
6. www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/
7. www.uw.edu/doit/videos/index.php?vid=35
8. www.uw.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-instruction
9. www.uw.edu/doit/videos/index.php?vid=12
10. www.uw.edu/doit/technology-and-universal-design
11. www.uw.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-computer-labs
12. www.uw.edu/doit/resources/brochures
13. www.uw.edu/doit/programs/center-universal-design-education/overview
14. www.uw.edu/doit/universal-design-higher-education-principles-practice-1

About DO-IT

DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) serves to increase the success 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 U.S. Department of Education, and the State of Washington.

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Communication Hints

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration with which you treat others. Here are some helpful hints when it comes to delivering a presentation, hosting an exhibit, and otherwise relating to people with disabilities.

General

- Ask a person with a disability if that person needs help before providing assistance.
- Talk directly to the person with a disability, not through their companion or interpreter.
- Refer to a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation.
- Avoid derogatory slang or 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.
- Do not be afraid to use common terms and phrases, like "see you later" or "let's go for a walk" around people with disabilities.
- Do not touch mobility devices or assistive technology without the owner's consent.
- Do not assume physical contact—like handshakes, high-fives, or hugs—is okay.
- Understand that not everyone uses eye contact.

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 projected content when presenting and describe the content of charts, graphs, and pictures.
- When guiding people with visual impairments, offer them your arm rather than grabbing or pushing them.

Learning Disabilities

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

Mobility Impairments

- Consider carrying on a long conversation with an individual who has a mobility impairment from a seated position.

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, and avoid covering your mouth, 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, or type things out on your cell phone, 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.