



Equal Access: Universal Design of Financial Aid

A checklist for making financial aid offices welcoming and accessible to all students

by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

As increasing numbers of people with disabilities pursue educational opportunities at all levels, the accessibility of financial aid offices and other student services increases in importance. The goal is simply equal access; everyone who needs to use your services should be able to do so comfortably and efficiently.

Legal Issues

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments of 2008 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 postsecondary student services as well as academic programs must be accessible to qualified students with disabilities.

Universal Design

To make your financial aid operation accessible, employ principles of universal design (UD). Universal design means that rather than designing your facility and services for the average user, you design them for people with a broad range of abilities, disabilities, ages, reading levels, learning styles, native languages, cultures, and other characteristics. Keep in mind that students and other visitors may have learning disabilities or visual, speech, hearing, and mobility impairments. Preparing your program to be accessible to them will make it more usable by everyone and minimize the need for special accommodations for those who use your services and for future employees as well. Make sure everyone feels welcome, and can

- get to the facility and maneuver within it,
- communicate effectively with support staff,
- access printed materials and electronic resources, and
- fully participate in events and other activities.

Train staff to support people with disabilities, respond to specific requests for accommodations in a timely manner, and know whom they can contact on campus if they have disability-related questions.

Guidelines and Examples

The following questions can guide you in making your campus services universally 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 services.

- Are people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, students with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, young and old students, and other groups represented on your staff, faculty, and student body in numbers proportional to those of the whole campus or community?
- Do you have policies and procedures that ensure access to facilities, printed materials, computers, and electronic resources for people with disabilities?
- Is accessibility considered in the procurement process?
- Do you have a procedure to ensure a timely response to requests for disability-related accommodations?
- Are disability-related access issues addressed in your evaluation methods?

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.

- Are there parking areas, pathways, and entrances to the building that are wheelchair-accessible and clearly identified?
- Are all levels of the facility connected via an accessible route of travel?
- Are there ample high-contrast, large-print directional signs to and throughout the office?
- Do elevators have auditory, visual, and tactile signals and are elevator controls accessible from a seated position?
- Are wheelchair-accessible restrooms with well-marked signs available in or near the office?



- Is at least part of a service counter or desk at a height accessible to a wheelchair user?
- Are aisles kept wide and clear of obstructions for the safety of users who have mobility or visual impairments?
- Is adequate light available?
- Are there quiet work and meeting areas where noise and other distractions are minimized and/or facility rules in place (e.g., no cell phone use) to minimize noise?

Consult the *ADA Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removal* at www.ada.gov/checkweb.htm for more suggestions. For computing facilities, consult the *Equal Access: Universal Design of Computer Labs* video and publication at www.uw.edu/doi/Video/equal.html.

Staff

Make sure staff are prepared to work with all students.

- Are all staff members familiar with the availability and use of the Telecommunications Relay Service, assistive technology, and alternate document formats?
- Do staff members know how to respond to requests for disability-related accommodations, such as sign language interpreters?
- Are all staff members aware of issues related to communicating with students of different races and ethnicities, ages, and students who have disabilities? (See Communication Hints at the end of this publication.)

Information Resources and Technology

If your financial aid office uses computers as information resources, ensure 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 universal access and procedures for requesting disability-related accommodations? For example, "Our goal is to make all materials and services accessible. Please inform staff 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 language(s) other than English?
- Are printed materials 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 institution or service unit? *Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology* (www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/) and the World Wide Web Consortium's *Accessibility Guidelines* (www.w3.org/WAI/) are most commonly used. For information about making your website accessible to everyone, consult *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* video and publication at www.uw.edu/doi/Video/www.html.
- Are videos used by the financial aid office captioned?
- Is an adjustable-height table available for each type of workstation to assist students who use wheelchairs or are small or large in stature?
- Do you provide adequate work space for both left- and right-handed users?
- Is software to enlarge screen images and a large monitor available to assist students with low vision and learning disabilities?
- Do you provide a trackball to be used by someone who has difficulty controlling a mouse?
- Are wrist or forearm rests available to assist some people with mobility impairments?

For more information about assistive technology, consult the DVDs and publications at www.uw.edu/doi/Resources/at.html.

Events

Ensure that everyone can participate in events sponsored by your financial aid office.

- Are events located in wheelchair-accessible facilities? Is the accessible entrance clearly marked?
- Is information about how to request disability-related accommodations included in publications promoting events?
- Is accessible transportation available if transportation is arranged for other participants?



Checklist Updates

This checklist was field-tested at more than twenty postsecondary institutions nationwide (see www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/admin.html). 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@uw.edu.

Additional Resources

An electronic copy of the most current version of this publication as well as additional useful brochures can be found at www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/. A 14-minute video, *Equal Access: Student Services*, demonstrates key points summarized in this publication. It may be freely viewed online at www.uw.edu/doit/Video/ea_student.html and purchased in DVD format from DO-IT. Consult www.uw.edu/doit/Video/ for access to other videos that may be of interest. Permission is granted to reproduce DO-IT videos and publications for educational, noncommercial purposes provided the source is acknowledged.

The Student Services Conference Room at www.uw.edu/doit/Conf/ includes a collection of documents and videos to help you make student services accessible to everyone. They include checklists for career services, distance learning, computer labs, recruitment and admissions, registration, housing and residential life, financial aid, libraries, tutoring and learning centers, and student organizations. *The Student Services Conference Room* also includes a searchable Knowledge Base of questions and answers, case studies, and promising practices.

For more information about applications of universal design consult www.uw.edu/doit/Resources/udesign.html or *The Center for Universal Design in Education* at www.uw.edu/doit/CUDE/. The book *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice, Second Edition* published by Harvard Education Press shares perspectives of UD leaders nationwide. Learn more or order online at 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 academics 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.

For further information, to be placed on the DO-IT mailing list, request materials in an alternate format, or to make comments or suggestions about DO-IT publications or web pages, contact:

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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.