



DO-IT

Equal Access: Universal Design of Student Organizations

A checklist for making student organizations welcoming and accessible to everyone

by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

As increasing numbers of people with disabilities pursue educational opportunities at all levels, the accessibility of campus services and student organizations increases in importance. The goal is simply equal access. Everyone should be able to access services and programs 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.

Universal Design

To make student organizations accessible to everyone, employ principles of universal design. Universal design means that rather than designing a 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 may have learning disabilities or visual, speech, hearing, and mobility impairments. Preparing your program to be accessible to them will minimize the need for last-minute, unexpected changes. Make sure everyone can get to the facility and maneuver within it, access materials and electronic resources, and participate in events and other activities.

Train staff to respond to specific requests for accommodations in a timely manner and know whom they can contact on campus if they have disability-related questions. Having a knowledgeable staff can make your resources more accessible. Consider hosting a training at the start of each semester, hosted by the disabled student services office.

Guidelines and Examples

The following questions can guide you in making your student organization universally accessible. Consider those that apply to your situation. This content does not provide legal advice. To help clarify issues, consult your institution's legal counsel or ADA/504 compliance officer or call the regional Office for Civil Rights (OCR) can also help clarify issues.

Planning, Policies, and Evaluation

Consider diversity issues as you plan and evaluate student organization activities.

- Are people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, students with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, young and old students, and other groups represented in planning and review processes and advisory committees 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, electronic resources, and activities for people with disabilities?
- 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?
- Are you planning a variety of activities that appeal to an audience with a range of abilities, interests, and perspectives?

Physical Environments and Products

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

- Are there parking areas, pathways, and entrances to the building that are wheelchair-accessible and clearly identified?
- 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 all levels of the facility connected via an accessible route of travel?
- Are wheelchair-accessible restrooms with well-marked signs available in or near the office?
- Is at least part of a service desk or counter 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?
- Is adequate light available?
- Are there quiet work and meeting areas where noise and other distractions are minimized?

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.

Paid or Volunteer Staff

Make sure staff and volunteers are prepared to work with all students.

- Are all staff members familiar with the availability and the use of the Telecommunications Relay Service 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 with different characteristics regarding race and ethnicity, age, and disability? (See Communication Hints at the end of this publication for content in this area.)
- Is the student organization webmaster knowledgeable about accessible web page design? Consult the video and publication *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* for further information (www.uw.edu/doi/Video/www.html).

Information Resources and Technology

Ensure that publications and websites welcome a diverse group, are accessible to all visitors, and technology within the service area is accessible to everyone.

- Do pictures in your publications and websites include people with diverse characteristics with respect to race, gender, age, and disability?
- Are all printed materials within easy reach from a variety of heights and without furniture blocking access?

- Are videos used by your organization captioned? Audio described?
- In key publications and on your website, is there a statement included 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.”
- Do electronic resources, including webpages, adhere to accessibility guidelines or standards adopted by your institution or your organization? *Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology* (www.access-board.gov/508.htm) and World Wide Web Consortium’s *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines* (www.w3.org/WAI/) are most commonly used. For information about making your website accessible to everyone, consult the *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* video and publication at www.uw.edu/doi/Video/www.html.

Events

Ensure that everyone can participate in events sponsored by your student organization.

- 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 sponsored by your organization?
- Is accessible transportation available for events where transportation is arranged for others?

Checklist Updates

This checklist was field-tested at more than twenty postsecondary institutions nationwide (see www.uw.edu/doi/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 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.washington.edu/doit/programs/center-universal-design-education/overview. 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 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.

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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.