

Acknowledging and Transforming Disabling Environments in Higher Education: AHEAD's Role

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Background Information

The term *universal design* (UD) is becoming a more widely used term by AHEAD members, community agencies, architects, design faculties, and offices for students with disabilities in higher education. As the term gains popularity, there is a growing sense of excitement when among those who are committed to practicing and living by the principles of universal design. So what is the excitement about?

There is excitement about and commitment to exploring the potential of the UD paradigm role in higher education. Experts are thinking that implementing UD in higher education may change the way students with disabilities will use campus environments (e.g., informational, instructional, physical, social) for several reasons:

- UD is based on a user-centered approach that encourages the design of environments to enhance the independence of all users with a minimum of retrofitting.
- UD guides people to a sustainable environment, whereby the environment is changed to reduce the need for individual accommodation and support. In some instances, UD can replace the accommodation model, which focuses on one individual at a time and is not sustainable.
- UD acknowledges that access is an institutional commitment. It moves away from the idea that the Disabilities Services Office has the sole responsibility for making the campus accessible. It also acknowledges that all students have the right to a postsecondary experience that provides the same opportunities for participation and engagement for all.

The struggle with infusing universal design principles into higher education is that it involves a change in the way one views disability. Typically, society has used the medical model, where the disability *is viewed* as a problem for the person, and the *focus* is on fixing or accommodating the individual so that participation to some degree is allowed. Within this model, the onus is on the person with a disability to ask for support, the opportunity to be included, and accommodation.

Disability studies scholars are exploring new ways of looking at disability and offering multiple perspectives. For example, Carol Gill (1994) has designed a sociopolitical model in which she defines the problem as a poorly designed environment when a member of society cannot function in a given environment. The responsibility falls on designers of the environment or those in power to affect change in that environment, and not the person with a disability. Thus, this model promotes the social responsibility of all persons in creating an environment that is usable by the highest number of people possible - whether it is a physical, informational, curricular, or social environment. The focus moves away from accessible and minimum code requirements to usability.

Universal design principles established by North Carolina State University (NCSU) (1997) offer a way to operationalize this sociopolitical model. If one views the design of the environment as the problem, the way to focus on good design is through the principles of universal design. This view is supported by Leslie Kanes Weisman (1999) who sees universal design as a vehicle for promoting human well-being, environmental wholeness, and the principles of participatory democracy.

Ron Mace (1998) summed it up by stating that "Universal design has the unique quality that, when done well,

Figure 1

History of AHEAD's Venture Into Universal Design

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Conference Universal Designs in Higher Education	UD strand at conference	Think tank on UD	UD publications, workshops	UD brochures	First UD leadership institute	First on-line course Second UD leadership institute 2 UD symposia at conference JPED on UD AHEAD website on UD to be launched.

it is invisible ... it requires only an awareness of need and market and a commonsense approach to making everything we design and produce usable by everyone to the greatest extent possible”

Historically, universal design principles have been applied to both the design of physical environments and the design of products. More recently, people have been applying the principles to other environments, such as the instructional, information, and curricular environments. McGuire, Scott and Shaw have expanded the original seven principles of UD established by NCSU into nine principles for universal design for instruction (UDI). “UDI is an approach to teaching that consists of the proactive design and use of inclusive instructional strategies that benefit a broad range of learners, including students with disabilities” Further, CAST (Center for Applied Special Technology) at University of Massachusetts (Boston) has created several principles for universal design for learning (UDL) and is supporting their implementation in the public school system (Rose, Meyer, 2002). These new approaches give more credence to the idea of infusing UD in educational environments and provide more information and expertise in the process of implementing the principles. The obvious outcome of implementing UD is that the majority of participants will find the environment usable, equitable and accessible without an accommodation.

Several critical questions emerge when discussing the application of UD principles in higher education; these questions offer direction for further exploration, research, and consideration: (Scott, Loewen & Funckes,)

- Does implementing UD strategies foster increased independence for students and lessen dependence on others?
- Does UD provide new and creative strategies for expanding access in higher education, thus widening the bell curve?
- Can UD be viewed as a value or an ideal to be embraced in the same way as people value sustainable development or the Green Movement?
- Does a UD educational environment change the nature of disability identity? And if so, how?
- How does this user-centered paradigm change the way we approach the provision of accommodations on campus?
- Does UD make a difference for students with disabilities? And if so, how should this be measured?
- Does UD affect workflow and demands in Disability Services Offices?

To implement a change in philosophy on campus, staff in Disability Services offices must explore and identify changes that they can make in their offices and departments in order to model the paradigm shift to other institutional staff. This is easier said than done, as the

medical approach to disability is so pervasive and entrenched in our society.(Oliver, 1990) Questions to consider:

- How can I shift my focus to the environment and not individual students with a disability?
- What activities and strategies can I use so that my work demonstrates sustainability?
- What challenges to UD does the model and delivery of our services present to students with disabilities?
- What activities and strategies can I use to minimize the need for individual accommodations?
- What changes can I make so that the sociopolitical model of disability and UD principles inform my actions every day?

We are grappling with the task of changing the focus toward removal of the barriers that people with disabilities face in everyday life. In the social model of disability, the emphasis shifts from the need for service providers (as experts or helping persons who provide services) to a focus on the importance of allies. As an ally, our primary efforts are directed to serving or changing the environment, not the “client” or individual student. While we know that some students will always need individual support, the belief is that with some environmental changes, many students who typically get supports from Disability Services might be independent in many campus activities.

A starting point might be to analyze the framework or model of disability that informs the language used in the following Disability Services documents and situations:

- DS mission statement
- Job descriptions
- Website
- Brochures
- Correspondence
- Letters to faculty

As DS providers, it is imperative that we start to look at the design of the Disability Services office and its information, and evaluate the message we are sending through the following aspects of the office:

- Signage
- Usability of space
- Location on campus and in departmental hierarchy
- Usability of web site
- Formats for reading brochures and publications
- Diversity of information and photos

Disability Service providers can start at “home” by making Disability Services Offices friendly and easily

usable by consumers. These consumers are students, faculty, staff, parents and the community. Many DS sites are difficult to locate on college websites because they are called different things, have different functions in some cases and are located physically and or structurally within various units of the university or college.

The first step towards becoming consumer friendly and usable is for the office to be easily located on the Web, on campus, in directories, and in all published materials. This takes a systematic and methodical approach to review every piece of paper that exists on campus to look for references to the DS office. In cases where the office is called something without the word disability in it, consider cross-referencing it with the term *disability*.

The challenge is to identify, and subsequently change ways that the Disability Services Office continues to promote the medical model of disability and focuses on activities that are consumable and informed by the medical model. For this reason, the challenge facing the field is:

- To provide the tools and resources necessary to support the evolution of universal design in higher education
- To create awareness of the public movement, to sway or change public opinion to request new ways of thinking that incorporate universal design
- To reframe disability through a focus on universal design as an issue of sustainability, equity, and social responsibility, and
- To infuse universal design through promotion, marketing and education in order to make this evolution occur.

Through these approaches, AHEAD hopes that members can create a bottom-up paradigm shift in attitude and action to transform our current institutions to environments of diversity, social justice, and equality.

AHEAD’s Vision and How It Is Being Addressed

AHEAD’s vision for universal design began with the 2000 AHEAD conference in Kansas City. Sue Kroeger, AHEAD’s president at the time, wanted participants to be exposed to the concepts of universal design and to begin thinking about its potential impact on the field. The Kansas City Conference was entitled “universal designs in higher education.” Gladys Loewen, Lydia Block, and Kent Jackson served as the program chairs and were able to integrate a few sessions with a universal design theme into the conference program. AHEAD’s leaders envisioned “higher education communities that value the disability experience and universally designed environments and infuse them to the greatest extent possible.” (Block, Kroeger, & Loewen, 2002,)

In 2001, Sue Kroeger, Gladys Loewen and Lydia Block proposed that a think tank on universal designs in higher education be incorporated into the 2002 AHEAD conference in Washington, DC. The universal design think tank was created and think tank members agreed, "UD is a paradigm that requires new thinking, a new conceptualization of disability, and a re-defined role of disability services. This new paradigm will require leadership, initiative and commitment from the Board to modify the language, activities, and focus of the Association." Using UD Principles and the sociopolitical model of disability, invited participants spent a day developing a vision, applying UD principles to information and instruction environments, exploring roles of DS providers in building the capacity of campus communities to commit to UD, and developing recommendations for AHEAD. A proposal was made to AHEAD's Board of Directors, in July, 2002, to continue the effort through a "Universal Design Initiative." The proposal was accepted and \$5000 was initially budgeted.

Activities as a Result of the Initiative to Date

More professionals got involved with the initial initiative, and as a result UD was infused into the Dallas, Miami, Milwaukee, and San Diego conferences (concurrent, plenary, and poster sessions). These sessions were, at least in part, reports of activities of projects that had been funded by the U.S. Department of Education. AHEAD members have maintained communication concerning the UD initiative with board of directors through annual progress reports. Three ALERT articles have been published on this topic, and one article was published in the newsletter *Disability Compliance in Higher Education*. A JPED article on UD and the AHEAD think tank as well as other articles on UD have also been published. Further, three brochures, Universal Design in Higher Education, Universal Design: a Guide for Students and Universal Design for Inclusive Lectures and Presentations, have been published by AHEAD.

In addition, two UD leadership institutes (UDLI) have been held during the AHEAD conferences in Milwaukee (2005) and San Diego (2006). This was accomplished by soliciting applications through an online application process. Forty-five AHEAD members applied for the Institute and 17 diverse (race/ethnicity, country of origin, gender, disability) participants were selected for the 2005 UDLI. Seven online training modules were developed in collaboration with the AHEAD office staff and the modules were posted and facilitated in order to promote pre-institute training and information. Two days of interactive activities and training were developed and provided on site for UDLI participants preceding the AHEAD conference in Milwaukee.

In 2006 an on-line course, Acknowledging and Transforming Disabling Environments Through Universal Design, was designed and delivered to 75 participants. It was offered in six modules offered from March 6 through April 14, 2006. Two days of interactive activities and training were developed and provided on site in San Diego for 10 new participants and one day of training for 9 UDLI 2005 participants. Two half-day symposia on universal design and its potential for redesigning service provision on postsecondary campuses were also developed and presented at the San Diego conference. Over 150 professionals pre-registered for these symposia. Several UDLI participants presented conference concurrent sessions and wrote Alert articles.

The Institute in 2006 San Diego included both new participants who had taken the UD on-line course and returning participants from the 2005 Milwaukee Institute. Returning participants reported on the initiatives that they had started on their campuses as a result of participation in the Institute, as follows.

1. Renee Sartin-Kirby initiated and helped develop a new mission statement for her program that has been posted on the website of University of Wisconsin – Parkside:

The Mission of Disability Services: The University of Wisconsin-Parkside is committed to high-quality educational programs, creative and scholarly activities, and services responsive to its diverse student population, and its local, national and global communities. To fulfill this mission, Disability Services recognizes disability as an aspect of diversity and appreciates disability as an integral part of society. To that end, we collaborate with students, instructors, staff and community members to create useable, equitable, inclusive, and sustainable learning environments.

2. Mary Lee Vance initiated an interesting practice with her students with disabilities: When she meets a new student and does the DS office intake, she spends time with the student introducing him/her to the medical model and the social model of disability as well as universal design paradigms. Then she gives them each a set of the three AHEAD brochures on universal design and empowers students to discuss these ideas and their wish for a useable learning environment with each instructor as their accommodation. This initiative has significantly reduced the number of exams that the DS office administers. This is an excellent use of the AHEAD brochures and allows students to take some responsibility for changing the environment for themselves using these paradigms as a foundation.

3. Chris Lanterman is a faculty member in Education.

"I have worked [as a faculty member] over the last

few years to implement principles of UD, UDI, and UDL into my courses, both in content and in delivery. It is my opinion that creating a course that implements principles of UD is evolutionary and dynamic in nature. I am sure I still have a long way to go, but thinking about how things can move forward, I suppose, is the exciting part of the process. I always have students bring letters from DSS to introduce the accommodations for which they are “qualified.” However, I have had no students, in the past two years, require any additional accommodations from me beyond those that are built into the courses I teach, with the exception of [sign language] interpreting.”

4. Tim King from the DS office at the University of Dayton discussed the UD principles and the social model of disability with a philosophy instructor and mentioned that he wanted to try to find a professor who would model UID paradigms in delivering the course. The instructor volunteered, and for two classes he prepared all his materials in a variety of alternate formats (lecture, text, exams, etc.), provided lecture notes on his website, negotiated alternate assignments, etc. He explained all these options at the end of the semester to his students on the first day of class and reported that not a single student had asked for extra accommodations - a rarity, as in past semesters he always had students and DS making requests for accommodations. This faculty member felt that all his students’ needs had been handled through his efforts. Since the instructor prepared all his own materials, the DS office realized a time saving. Tim and his office staff provided support and information on the paradigms to the instructor instead.

5. Molly Sirois discussed her concerns with focus on documentation with her DS director and a higher-level administrator. They agreed to support her in her aim to reduce the need for documentation and the importance it played in their office. Documentation and eligibility for services are no longer mentioned in DS publications. When new students make contact with the office, they are asked to bring in any documentation or paperwork that can provide information so DS may better support them. For students without documentation, a conversation with the student serves to identify barriers and solutions, from talking directly with the instructor about different options for evaluating learning to utilizing technology, working with the instructor, or collaborating with classmates to get lecture material. Documentation is asked for when a student is seeking some exception to a policy, such as financial aid adjustments, major requirement waiver or substitution, housing policy exception. The de-emphasizing of documentation and eligibility has significantly improved the nature of communication and contacts with and within Disabil-

ity Services without any negative ramifications to date.

6. Barbara Blacklock, a 2006 participant, launched a project at her university where the focus of removing barriers on campus for students with psychiatric disabilities was reframed to focus on removing barriers for all students accessing mental health resources. The attention of the university provost was obtained and a provost committee on student mental health was organized with leadership from the Disability Services office. The committee’s charge is to raise awareness about issues related to mental health, effect policy change on campus, improve conditions on campus for students with mental health conditions, and serve as a model of collaboration for the campus and other universities.

The committee is composed of representatives from 12 key campus offices and includes a faculty representative from the Academy of Distinguished Teachers and a university student. Committee members support student mental health as a campus-wide, public health issue. Recent accomplishments include coordination of mental health services and resources on campus, improved role clarification between campus offices, the development of a web-based resource for faculty and staff to assist students in distress, and the development of a centralized campus website, studentmentalhealth.umn.edu, designed to serve as a web resource for students, their parents, faculty, and staff. The benefits of this initiative are numerous, and the support of the provost has raised student mental health to a prominent level. The campus community is beginning to talk about student mental health in new way, focusing on student mental health as a public health issue that affects all students, staff, and faculty on campus.

7. Kathyryne Staeger-Wilson is launching a poster campaign on her campus targeting students, faculty, and the general public at large. Two versions of posters to faculty are as follows:

- “Engaged students, increased retention, better teaching evaluations, fewer individualized accommodations, inclusive learning...universal design”.
- “Our student population is changing and is more diverse. Learn more about how to proactively design your curriculum for inclusive learning. Contact Disability Services about universal design.”

The San Diego conference proved to be a large step forward in AHEAD member interest in universal design. Stephan Smith, executive director of AHEAD, reported that sessions with UD in the title had high pre-registration numbers. Many sessions presented examples of UD pedagogy and practice, and some sessions demonstrated UD without the presenters even recognizing their shift to a more equitable treatment of students and the creation of fully usable environments. For example, one presenter

from the California Community College system explained how she taught faculty in three colleges to use the Kurzweil 3000 study tools in order to mark up an electronic version of a textbook to give prompts to students while reading the e-text. This was a valuable learning tool for ALL students in the class, not just those with print disabilities.

Future Plans

The most recent institute participants expressed interest in creating templates for letters to faculty members and DS job descriptions, and rethinking the title of DS offices. AHEAD's immediate plans in relation to its UD initiative include:

- Mentor institute participants as they implement systemic changes on their campuses
- Evaluate '05 campus projects, '06 Leadership Institute, and on-line course
- Develop a UD website for all AHEAD members
- Collaborate with AHEAD staff to incorporate UD into programs and publications
- Offer audio conferences and repeat a "new and improved" online course
- Explore a possible initiative with Society for Disability Studies (SDS)
- Develop and publish a long-range study of institute participants, their leadership skills, and impact

The AHEAD UD Initiative Work Team, which has taken the responsibility for training and mentoring participants, consists of Carol Funckes, Beth Harrison, Sue Kroeger, Gladys Loewen, Elaine Ostroff, Bill Pollard, and Sally Scott. It is expected that as institute and on-line class participants get more involved, they will begin mentoring others. AHEAD's goal is to make information and resources available to members with every level of understanding of universal design so that AHEAD members understand the importance of breaking down disabling environments so that we can move from thinking about accessibility to creating usable and inclusive environments. As Katheryne Staegar-Wilson, a 2005 participant, stated: "Just because there is a ramp into a recreation center making it accessible, does not mean it is usable."

According to Gladwell (2000), "The point of all of this is to answer two simple questions that lie at the heart of what we would all like to accomplish as educators, parents, marketers, business people and policy makers. Why is it that some ideas of behaviors or products start epidemics and others don't? And what can we do to deliberately start and control positive epidemics of our own?" (p.14) This cursory analysis of the AHEAD initiative on universal design indicates that AHEAD members are starting the evolutionary process to change the global environment of higher education to one that is useable, flexible, equitable, and sustainable. AHEAD members are starting to model new thinking as they approach their work with the aim of making the universal design paradigm irresistible and practical.

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