

# Equal Access: Universal Design of Student Services

Adapted from the University of Washington Publication of the same name  
([http://www.washington.edu/doi/Brochures/Academics/equal\\_access\\_ss.html](http://www.washington.edu/doi/Brochures/Academics/equal_access_ss.html))

## A checklist for making campus services welcoming, accessible, and usable

by [Sheryl Burgstahler](#), Ph.D

As increasing numbers of people with disabilities pursue educational opportunities at all levels, the accessibility of admissions offices, libraries, computer labs, counseling and tutoring centers, 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 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 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 student services as well as academic programs must be accessible to qualified students with disabilities.

### Universal Design

To make your student services operation accessible and useful to everyone, 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 disabilities. 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 if they have disability-related questions.

### A Process for Universal Design

Universal design of all student services is a long-term goal. Deliberate, small steps can make that goal attainable for your service department. Below you will find a series of steps to lead you through the re-design of an existing service or the creation of a new one. As you travel through the phases of implementing universal design, remember to plan ahead and keep the diverse needs of your campus' population at the forefront.

1. *Identify the service.* Select a student service (e.g., library, tutoring center, career services office). Consider the purpose of the campus unit, specific services and resources provided, facility constraints, budget, and other issues that impact the range and delivery of services provided.
2. *Define the universe.* Describe the overall population and then consider the diverse characteristics of those who might potentially use the service (e.g., students and other visitors with diverse characteristics with respect to gender; age; size; ethnicity and race; native language; learning style; and abilities to see, hear, manipulate objects, read, and communicate).
3. *Involve consumers.* Involve people with diverse characteristics (as identified in Step 2) in all phases of the development, implementation, and evaluation of the service. Also, gain perspectives of students through diversity programs such as the campus disability services office.
4. *Adopt guidelines or standards.* Review research and best practices to identify specific strategies for the delivery of an effective service (e.g., best practices for housing and food services, career services, a tutoring center, or other services as identified in Step 1). Create or select existing universal design guidelines and standards for the service. Integrate universal design practices with other best practices within the field of service.
5. *Apply guidelines or standards.* Apply universal design strategies in concert with other best practices, both identified in Step 4, to the overall design of the service, all subcomponents of the service, and all ongoing operations (e.g., procurement processes, staff training) to maximize the benefit of the service to students with the wide variety of characteristics identified in Step 2.
6. *Plan for accommodations.* Develop processes to address accommodation requests (e.g., arrangements for a sign language interpreter) from individuals for whom the design of the service does not automatically provide access.
7. *Train and support.* Tailor and deliver ongoing training and support to student service staff.
8. *Evaluate.* Include universal design measures in the evaluation of the service; evaluate the service with a diverse group of students; and make modifications based on their feedback. Provide ways to collect ongoing input from service users (e.g., through online and printed instruments and communications with staff).

## **Guidelines and Examples**

The following questions can guide you in making your campus service unit universally accessible. This content does not provide legal advice. To clarify issues, consult your campus legal counsel or ADA/504 compliance officer, or call the 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, men and women, young and old students, and other groups represented on your staff 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 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 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?
- Are universally-recognized icons used on signage?
- Is at least part of a service counter or desk 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 disabilities?
- Are there quiet work or meeting areas where noise and other distractions are minimized?
- Is adequate light available?
- Are there quiet work or meeting areas where noise and other distractions are minimized and/or are facility rules in place (e.g., no cell phone use) to minimize noise?

For more information on planning accessible events (and modifying physical environments) visit the new Cornell University Accessibility Checklist at <http://disability.cornell.edu/docs/accessibility-checklist.pdf> (accessed via <http://disability.cornell.edu/events/>).

## **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 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 service unit uses computers as information resources, ensure these systems employ 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 and on your website, do you include a statement about your commitment to universal access and procedures for requesting disability-related accommodations? For example, you could include the following statement: "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 a 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 your specific project or funding source? *Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology*<sup>3</sup> and the World Wide Web Consortium's *Accessibility Guidelines*<sup>4</sup> are most commonly used. For information about making your website accessible to everyone, consult the *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* video and publication.<sup>5</sup>
- Are videos used by your service 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 staff members aware of accessibility options (e.g., enlarged text feature) included in computer operating systems and of assistive technology available in the facility?
- Are procedures in place for a timely response to requests for assistive technology?

Note that your organization need not have special technology on hand for every type of disability but should have available assistive technology that can benefit many people. For more information about adaptive technology, consult the videos and publications.<sup>6</sup>

## Events

Ensure that everyone can participate in events sponsored by your 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?
- 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 [sheryl@uw.edu](mailto:sheryl@uw.edu).

## Additional Resources

An electronic copy of the most current version of this publication as well as additional useful brochures are available online.<sup>8</sup> A 14-minute video, *Equal Access: Student Services*<sup>9</sup>, demonstrates key points summarized in this publication. An online version may be freely viewed or purchased in DVD format. Permission is granted to reproduce DO-IT videos and publications for educational, noncommercial purposes provided the source is acknowledged.

*The Student Services Conference Room*<sup>11</sup> 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](http://www.washington.edu/doi/Stem/kb.html) (<http://www.washington.edu/doi/Stem/kb.html>) of questions and answers, case studies, and promising practices.

For more information about applications of universal design (<http://www.washington.edu/doi/Resources/udesign.html>) consult *the Center for Universal Design in Education* (<http://www.washington.edu/doi/CUDE/>) website, or the book *Universal design in higher education: From principles to practice*, published by Harvard Education Press. To receive a 20% discount on your order of this book through DO-IT, visit the DO-IT website.<sup>10</sup>

## Cited Web Resources

1. [www.ada.gov/checkweb.htm](http://www.ada.gov/checkweb.htm)
2. [www.uw.edu/doi/Video/equal.html](http://www.uw.edu/doi/Video/equal.html)
3. [www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/](http://www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/)
4. [www.w3.org/WAI/](http://www.w3.org/WAI/)
5. [www.uw.edu/doi/Video/www.html](http://www.uw.edu/doi/Video/www.html)
6. [www.uw.edu/doi/Resources/at.html](http://www.uw.edu/doi/Resources/at.html)
7. [www.uw.edu/doi/Brochures/Academics/admin.html](http://www.uw.edu/doi/Brochures/Academics/admin.html)
8. [www.uw.edu/doi/Brochures/](http://www.uw.edu/doi/Brochures/)
9. [www.uw.edu/doi/Video/ea\\_student.html](http://www.uw.edu/doi/Video/ea_student.html)
10. [www.uw.edu/doi/UDHE/coupon.html](http://www.uw.edu/doi/UDHE/coupon.html)
11. [www.uw.edu/doi/Conf/](http://www.uw.edu/doi/Conf/)
12. [www.uw.edu/doi/Resources/udesign.html](http://www.uw.edu/doi/Resources/udesign.html)

## **Communication Hints**

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration with which you treat others. There are no strict rules when it comes to relating to people with disabilities. However, here are some helpful hints.

### **General**

- Ask a person with a disability if he or she needs help before providing assistance.
- Talk directly to the person with a disability, not through the person's companion or interpreter.
- Refer to a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation. If so, mention the person first and then the disability. "A man who is blind" is better than "a blind man" because it puts the person first.
- Avoid 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!
- Do not interact with a person's guide dog or service dog unless you have received permission to do so.

### **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 content presented with overhead projections and other visuals.
- When guiding people with visual disabilities, 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 Disabilities**

- Sit or otherwise position yourself at the approximate height of people sitting in wheelchairs when you interact.

### **Speech Impairments and Language Disabilities**

- Listen carefully. Repeat what you think you understand and then ask the person with a speech impairment or language disability to clarify or repeat the portion that you did not understand.

### **Deaf or Hard of Hearing**

- Face people with hearing disabilities so they can see your lips. Avoid talking while chewing gum or eating.
- Speak clearly at a normal volume. Speak louder only if requested.
- Use paper and pencil if the person who is deaf does not read lips or if more accurate communication is needed.
- In groups raise hands to be recognized so the person who is deaf knows who is speaking. Repeat questions from audience members.
- 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.

### **Mental Health Disabilities**

- Provide information in clear, calm, respectful tones.
- Allow opportunities for addressing specific questions.

## **Cornell University ADA Coordinator Team**

The ADA Coordinator Team is responsible for guiding the University's efforts in disability compliance. Each member can provide guidance and advice about disability access questions.

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