



SPECIAL REPORTS

Disability Experts Debate Merits of Universal Design

By *Ben Gose* | SEPTEMBER 18, 2016

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Courtney Perry for The Chronicle

Wendy Harbour, a college instructor and director of the National Center for College Students with Disabilities, uses a video phone service — a technology popular with hearing users as well — to communicate with her mother via sign language. An interpreter (seen on the screen along with Ms. Harbour) helps, since her mother does not know sign language.

A generation after the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, the process by which students request accommodations — adjustments such as extra time on exams or flexibility on attendance, meant to help level the playing field — continues to frustrate students, administrators, and faculty members alike.

That helps explain why the principles of "universal design" — an elegant philosophy advocating accessibility for all — are in vogue among those who deal with college disability issues.

Roughly 11 percent of college students have a disability, according to Education Department figures, and about two-thirds of that group suffer from one or more so-called invisible disabilities, such as learning disabilities, ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder), and mental-health and emotional disabilities. According to the

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Latest data from UCLA's annual Freshman Survey reveal that 3.7 percent of first-year students at four-year institutions reported having a learning disability, 5.9 percent said they had ADHD, 7.4 percent reported a psychological disorder such as depression, 0.7 percent said they were on the autism spectrum, and 3.7 percent cited a physical disability.

Diversity in Academe: Disability on Campus

This special report examines the challenges that students, academics, and colleges face in dealing with physical disabilities as well as conditions that are less visible.

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An increasing number of students are arriving at college with more than one condition, disability-services administrators say, making the accommodations process more complicated than ever.

Other problems abound. Students who need help don't always ask for it — nationwide, only 17 percent of college students with learning disabilities receive accommodations, according to the National Center for Learning Disabilities. Students who do seek assistance sometimes complain that administrators aren't identifying the kinds of practices that would help them the most. And some professors question the research — or lack of it — justifying certain accommodations, like extra time on exams.

Universal design promises a way out of the accommodations morass — or does it?

The term originated in architecture. The term Universal Design, at North Carolina State University, describes the concept 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." The curb cut is a classic example — designed to help people who use wheelchairs, it also aids cyclists and parents pushing strollers.

Wendy Harbour, an instructor at St. Catherine University, in Minneapolis, and director of the National Center for College Students with Disabilities, regularly gives talks on how professors and colleges can use universal design to improve education.

Captioning all videos is one step faculty members can take, says Ms. Harbour, who is deaf. It helps deaf students the most but benefits others as well.

Distributing lecture notes to all students is another such step. Some colleges provide note takers for, say, students with learning disabilities or ADHD who have trouble focusing when a professor talks. By handing out the notes, a professor helps all students and eliminates the need for stand-in note-takers. That not only helps the student with a disability avoid embarrassment but also sharply cuts the cost of the accommodation.

"I think of universal design as a philosophy," Ms. Harbour says. "There isn't a list of things you have to do. You just need to think about what's really essential in your course — and then the rest is all up for discussion."

More than 40 organizations, including associations focused on students with disabilities, but also broader groups, like the National Education Association, have formed a coalition urging the use of universal-design concepts in setting federal, state, and local education policy. At this summer's annual meeting of the Association on Higher Education and Disability, known as Ahead, universal design was among the most-discussed topics, surpassing even emotional-support animals, a controversial subject as more students seek to bring their pets to campus.

When the State University of New York's Buffalo State College and Empire State College jointly offered a MOOC last spring about how to use universal design in courses, more than 1,600 people registered. At Buffalo State, the disability-services office and the

Instructional-design team work together to encourage professors to incorporate universal-design concepts into their courses. Lisa T. Morrison-Fronckowiak, director of disability services, says making courses as accessible as possible is smart, since plenty of students need help but might not ask for it, including veterans with brain injuries, students with partial vision loss, and older students.

Salt Lake Community College's Universal Access Committee, whose members include an associate provost, academic deans, and faculty members, advocates including universal-design principles in courses and throughout the campus.

"My ultimate goal is that fewer and fewer students need to come to us — that courses are open and accessible from the get-go," says Candida Darling, director of the college's disability-resource center.

Universal design becomes controversial in the realm of graded assignments and testing. "Universal design for learning," a framework developed at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is the most commonly used application of the concept at all education levels. It calls for a curriculum that lets students use "multiple means" to express what they know.

At Landmark College, a Vermont institution whose mission is to serve students with learning disabilities, those with ADHD are often given the option of creating a wiki online instead of writing a term paper. "Allowing them to create a wiki affords that creativity that many students enjoy," says Manju Banerjee, an associate professor who oversees a Landmark research center on learning disabilities.

Ms. Harbour suggests that for courses in which writing isn't the central focus, professors should consider permitting oral presentations in place of term papers. That change would be welcomed not only by students whose disabilities, like ADHD, make writing difficult, but also by all students who struggle with writing.

Some disability experts believe that a professor at Lewis & Clark Law School was embracing universal-design principles, perhaps unwittingly, when he gave all students extended time to complete an environmental-law exam in a disability-accommodation

case that dates back to 2009. The professor redesigned a three-hour test and found that the average law student could complete the exam in that time. But after a few years of giving the test, he increased the allowed time to five hours, to reduce student anxiety and give students time for breaks.

"They can take their time, go to the bathroom, have a snack, have a nap if they want," the professor said, according to an investigation by the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights. "All they have to do is hand it in in five hours."

One student was already receiving "time and a half" on exams because of a condition that made it difficult for her to write and type. In a complaint filed with the civil-rights office, she argued that she should have received the same accommodation on the environmental-law test, despite the professor's assertion that the extra time he had already allocated would accommodate everyone. The department sided with the student, finding that she should have been given time and a half — 7.5 hours — to complete the exam.

"It's hard to universally design an assessment that you'll put a time limit on," says Jamie Axelrod, director of disability resources at Northern Arizona University and president of Ahead's board of directors. "The question is, what are the other students doing with the extra time that the student with disabilities didn't get to do?"

Some argue that universal design calls for doing away with in-class testing altogether. In an essay in *Vitae*, *The Chronicle's* career hub, David Perry, an associate professor at Dominican University, announced that he would begin assigning only take-home tests. He insisted that everyone, not just students with disabilities, would benefit from quiet spaces and extra time.

"In-class tests are the antithesis of universal design," Mr. Perry wrote. "They're built to serve only those people who can: (a) hold a writing implement; (b) see written text; and (c) concentrate in a crowded room for an



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A sign-language interpreter (left) appears on the screen along with Ms. Harbour as she uses the video phone service.

THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education extended period of time." That essay drew a mixed response: Some liked the idea, but professors in a variety of subjects objected. An engineering professor feared widespread cheating. A foreign-language professor wondered how he would assess speaking proficiency.

Universal design has some skeptics in higher education's disability community, too. L. Scott Lissner, the ADA coordinator at Ohio State University, says that while the philosophical concept is good, universal design is oversold as a way to eliminate the need for accommodations.

"I'm a firm believer in universal design," he says, "but nothing in my closet says 'one size fits all.' "

Some students with disabilities argue that instead of focusing on universal accessibility, colleges should invest more time and resources in identifying the right individual accommodations.

Omofe Ogbeide was singled out for "impulsivity" in classrooms by age 6, she says, but her parents, who immigrated to the United States from Nigeria, never thought to have her formally assessed. Brandeis University helped diagnose her as having ADHD, but Ms. Ogbeide says the university was unable to help as she struggled with writing and time management while enrolled there from 2008 to 2011. Her Brandeis transcript shows A's or withdrawals, she says; professors would see that she was capable of good-quality work, and their expectations deepened her anxieties, which made writing even more difficult.

A lot of people cared and were very interested, but they didn't understand how to help me, and that was just devastating," Ms. Ogbeide says. (Beth Rodgers-Kay, Brandeis's director of disability services, declined to comment on Ms. Ogbeide's case, but she said that the university had experienced a fourfold increase in the number of students with diagnosed disabilities in the past decade, and that it was committed to helping such students "earn their Brandeis degree and to achieve at an impressive level.")

Ms. Ogbeide ultimately transferred to Landmark, in Vermont, and acquired skills that allowed her to be successful. She began using a smart pen during lectures so that she could review the lecture later if she got distracted. (The pen tapes the lecture with an embedded recorder, and a student can jot down a "prompting word" on digital paper that allows her to return to the section where she lost focus.)

Ms. Ogbeide tried writing papers using voice-recognition software but found the process too stressful. After two years of experimenting and incorporating suggestions from Landmark professors, she finally found a writing system that worked. Now she orally records her thoughts, then writes her essays out in longhand on unlined paper as she listens to her recorded comments.

This spring Ms. Ogbeide earned a bachelor's degree from Landmark. She is now an intern in Washington at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Debbie Spinney, who oversees disability services at the University of Indianapolis, says she shares universal-design concepts with university employees, especially with new instructors. "Universal design will help," she says. "But I don't think it will make accommodations unnecessary."

Since 1990, UIndy has been providing extra help to learning-disabled students, beyond that required by the Americans With Disabilities Act, through a fee-based program called Baccalaureate for University of Indianapolis Learning Disabled, or Build.

Scott McGuire, who was diagnosed with epilepsy and ADHD, says he decided to attend UIndy because of the support he expected to receive from Build. For an extra \$5,000 per year (a state vocational-rehabilitation program picked up some of the cost), he had access to tutors several hours each week who helped him prepare for tests and write papers. During his junior year, Build connected him to an outside "life coach" at a local nonprofit group called Tangram, who helped him learn how to get organized and create a financial budget. He began using electronic calendars and reminders to get to appointments on time.

Mr. McGuire earned a bachelor's degree in social work in 2015. He now has a job at AccessAbilities, a company in an Indianapolis suburb, where he helps students with autism and intellectual disabilities work on social skills.

"I still struggled to get my degree," Mr. McGuire says. "But if I hadn't had these supports, I wouldn't have been able to do it."

This article is part of:

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