universal design for learning (UDL) vs. individual accommodation

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a way to make learning more attainable for all students, including students with disabilities. It may also reduce the need for some individualized accommodations.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) refers to the process of making course concepts and skills attainable to a greater number of students, regardless of their differing learning styles, physical, sensory organizational and linguistic abilities. Rather than the “one-size fits-all” approach, UDL stresses flexible delivery of content, assignment and activities. UDL allows the learning process to be more accessible without singling out students with disabilities.

Drawing on the principles of universal design in architecture and product design, UDL aims to accommodate the widest spectrum of students possible. The process emphasizes adjusting teaching practices and information presentation to meet varying educational needs and learning styles.

how UDL works:

- UDL removes barriers to the learning process without watering down academic standards.
- UDL provides flexible and customizable delivery of content, assignments, and activities.

for example:

- Using a variety of teaching strategies, such as models, animations, field trips, and discussion groups, offers students opportunities to master information through discussion, application, and experience.
- Using captioning is a necessity for students with hearing impairments; it also reinforces concepts and vocabulary for most students. Captioning can eliminate confusion when auditory systems are less than optimal. It is especially helpful to students who speak English as a second language.
• Providing digital copies of overheads, lecture outlines, and PowerPoint slides allows many people to read more easily because they can enlarge the text, change the font, etc. Having digital copies also enables students to use assistive devices, such as screen readers and voice activated programs, to access the information.

digital technology in science:

• Using measuring devices with digital readouts enables students who have fine motor impairments and students with visual impairments to take precise measurements. This new technology and others like it benefit all students by providing an easier way to conduct experiments.
• Using alternative materials, such as substituting dangerous chemicals for less caustic solutions, presents fewer safety risks to all students, especially students with disabilities. Alternative materials should replicate the experience and not compromise the integrity of the activity.
• Incorporating virtual experiences into the curriculum provides an effective way to help all students conduct and review activities outside of the lab/field sessions or can be useful as a supplement. Further, virtual experiences can be used when the real experiences are too dangerous.

One qualifier: While UDL may eliminate the need for some accommodations, individualized accommodations will still be necessary for some students. Individualized disability-related accommodations are vital to some students with disabilities when their needs cannot be met another way. In these cases, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (see below) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (see below) require reasonable accommodations to be made.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973:
Requires that institutions of higher education provide students with disabilities the same opportunities as non-disabled students.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):
Civil rights legislation prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities in:
• employment,
• state and local government,
• public accommodations and services, and
• transportation and telecommunications.

* Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973:

** Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):