Commitment to Universal Design at Missouri State University

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is an outcome of Katheryne Staeger-Wilson’s participation in the Universal Design Leadership Institute affiliated with the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). The information documented herein is adapted from information shared within AHEAD’s Universal Design Leadership Institute and a white paper entitled, “Commitment to Universal Design in Education on University of Wisconsin-System Campuses” written by Dr. Roger Smith (UW Milwaukee), Dr. Renee Sartin-Kirby (UW Parkside), and Tim O’Connor (UW Madison). This paper was reviewed and approved by Missouri State University’s Disability Services Advisory Committee.
Commitment to Universal Design at Missouri State University

Background

Missouri State University is committed to enhancing diversity and retaining a diverse community. Missouri State is also committed to providing reasonable accommodations to persons with disabilities as well as providing equal access to our programs and services. There are multiple policies within our system that support these statements. This priority is also stated within our University’s long range plan.

“Commitment to diversity – The University will be inclusive and create a climate for diversity so that we can recruit excellent faculty and students from many backgrounds who enjoy the freedom to express and debate diverse viewpoints and ideas. We want to have a campus community that looks more like the world, and have our students, therefore, prepared to function well in that world” (Missouri State University, 2007).

Historically, many universities, including Missouri State, have provided people with disabilities reasonable accommodations; only providing the minimal equal access required by law on a case-by-case basis. While our University provides high quality accommodations, our faculty and staff still inquire what they “have” to do and what they are legally responsible to provide to students with disabilities. Many times, the University community does not always think in creative terms of what we could provide in order to include everyone. Many people still question the minimal access requirements. For example:

- “Do we have to hold our program in an accessible room?”
- “Do I have to make my course materials on line accessible?”
- “Why can’t Disability Services just take care of it?”

Rather, we should always be thinking, “how can I make our programs and services accessible and usable to everyone?”

The Association on Higher Education and Disability summarizes best how most Disability Services offices have worked historically,

“In the past, many Disability Service providers built their service and philosophical constructs on the tenets of the medical or rehabilitation model. Although this has been effective in most cases in providing programmatic access and accommodations for individuals, one person at a time, it reinforces a “separate but equal” system rather than full inclusion within a community of peers. It does not provide an avenue for the development of self-determination or disability pride for the person receiving services. This model does not take into account that the environment and the curriculum design often limit the full participation of disabled individuals” (p. 3-4).

Through this medical model approach, people with disabilities eventually obtain equal access to University programs and services. However, obtaining the accommodation takes a great deal of time, patience, and is many times not inclusive.
This medical model approach inherently creates several disadvantages for people with disabilities:

1. It requires a special accommodation.
2. The accommodation is typically a segregated service. Examples: a student must sit in a seat different from other students, a student must wait for a copy of overheads in an alternative format, a student takes their exams in the disability services office, a student must participate in an event down on the floor rather than on the stage like everyone else.
3. Individual accommodation can be costly and is typically not sustainable. Example: a video is not purchased as a captioned video. The student receives a transcript of the video as an accommodation. The student may receive the transcript (information) later than their fellow students. Staff time and resources are used on a one time accommodation when there would have been no additional expense if it had been purchased captioned.
4. Many times an accommodation is impractical or fails to work. Example: the technology may fail to work, waiting on a textbook in an alternative format because the professor did not select a textbook until the week before the course started.
5. People have to self-identify to obtain the accommodation. People hesitate to identify themselves as having a disability which puts them at risk to fail.
6. It limits the person to work/learn/participate in the university community independently. Example: The recreation center is “accessible” but it is not usable. Programming is not designed for the disabled and the equipment is not usable to people with disabilities. Or, the professor does not keep accessibility in mind when planning a field trip.
7. It requires the person with a disability to go to a special office, allow time for the accommodation process and obtain documentation supporting the disability and need for accommodation. This is a process that other members of the university community do not have to undertake. (Smith, Sartin-Kirby, & O’Connor, p. 2, 2004)

It is the responsibility of everyone within our campus community to support and retain all students. It should not just be the responsibility of Disability Services. Everyone has the shared responsibility of making all students feel welcomed and included.

*The Universal Design in Education Strategy*

The socio-political model of disability promotes universal design, disability pride, self-determination, and independence of the individual. With this model, the limitation is not found within the person who has the disability, but in the design of our architecture, curriculum, policies, programs, and services.

“The socio-political model works extremely well with the principles of universal design. For the first time, true societal, environmental and learning barriers, which historically were not acknowledged by the old medical model, are now placed in their proper perspective. It is the environment as well as societal and institutional beliefs which limit people with disabilities to be successful (AHEAD, p. 3–4).”
Universal design principles were first developed in the field of architecture. Ron Mace was a leader in the creation of the Universal Design Principles. Ron Mace described universal design as the following, “Universal design is 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” (North Carolina State University, 2006). McGuire and Scott (2006) used Table 1 below to illustrate how the Principles of Universal Design relate to Universal Design in Education.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Principle 1: Equitable use</td>
<td>Instruction is designed to be useful to and accessible by people with diverse abilities. Provide the same means of use for all students; identical whenever possible, equivalent when not.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principle 2: Flexibility in use</td>
<td>Instruction is designed to accommodate a wide range of individual abilities. Provide choice in method of use.</td>
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<td>Principle 3: Simple and intuitive</td>
<td>Instruction is designed in a straightforward and predictable manner, regardless of the student’s experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. Eliminate unnecessary complexity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principle 4: Perceptible information</td>
<td>Instruction is designed so that necessary information is communicated effectively to the student, regardless of ambient conditions or the student’s sensory abilities.</td>
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<td>Principle 5: Tolerance for error</td>
<td>Instruction anticipates variation in individual student learning pace and prerequisite skills.</td>
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<td>Principle 6: Low physical effort</td>
<td>Instruction is designed to minimize nonessential physical effort in order to allow maximum attention to learning. Note: This principle does not apply when physical effort is integral to essential requirements of a course.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principle 7: Size and space for approach and use</td>
<td>Instruction is designed with consideration for appropriate size and space for approach, reach, manipulations, and use regardless of a student’s body size, posture, mobility, and communication needs.</td>
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<td>Principle 8: A community of learners</td>
<td>The instructional environment promotes interaction and communication among students and between students and faculty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principle 9: Instructional climate</td>
<td>Instruction is designed to be welcoming and inclusive. High expectations are espoused for all students.</td>
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Potential Cost

Historically, most universities, like Missouri State, have operated under the medical or rehabilitation model of disability. This is a “back-end” approach to meeting the diverse needs of people with disabilities. It is inefficient and more expensive than universal design. Utilizing concepts of universal design in all aspects of campus services would be more efficient, less costly, and would include all users and learners (Smith, et. al., 2004).

Achieving Universal Design in Post-Secondary Education

Nationally, one in eleven entering college freshmen report having a disability (Henderson, 1999). Implementing this systemic change from the medical model to the socio-political model of disability will significantly improve and equalize access to the University’s programs and services. It could also be a factor in increasing our University retention rate. Knowing that one in eleven entering freshmen report having a disability, if we created our programs and services with disability in mind, these students would feel more accepted and supported within our campus community. In addition, the ways in which we proactively support and make our campus more accessible to students with disabilities can also further enhance the learning of others. These principles must be implemented by developing and allocating resources to increase the knowledge base and skills of our faculty and staff to implement universal design.

Once faculty learn how to incorporate principles of universal design within their curriculum, they are able to do so at no additional cost. It eventually becomes second nature for faculty to support and teach to a diverse group of learners. For example, Block, et. al. 2006 quotes Christopher Lanterman, a faculty member in Education as stating,

“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 the DS to introduce the accommodations for which they are “qualified”. However, I have had no student, 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” (p. 120-121).

Professionals in the disability field believe that the concepts of universal design would not only greatly enhance the equal access for people with disabilities but enhance the learning and retention of other diverse groups. The following are a couple of examples of how many (not just those with disabilities) would benefit from universal design:
Commitment to UD

- Purchasing a video with closed captioning for a classroom. This product with captioning provides equal access to a student who is deaf or hard of hearing. An international student may be better able to grasp the content of the video when receiving the information both visually and aurally (as well as any other student). In addition, captioning would enhance learning for visual learners or anyone who may have auditory processing issues. If captioning was not thought of prior to the purchase, the student with the disability would have had to request the video be captioned (a very costly service with a month or more turn around rate) or have Disability Services staff create a transcript of the video (significantly less expensive but with a wait of approximately one week for the information).

- A professor saves his power point slides in an accessible format to his course website. There is no cost and very little time spent on this action. A student with a disability who needs to utilize a note taker may no longer need one or they can at least participate in taking their own notes. The student can create additional space and print out the document prior to class. The student can fill in information and add to their own notes. This saves time and resources. This could also be beneficial to any other student and enhance their learning. All students would have access to the PowerPoint slides. They could review it prior to class, review it after class, and use it just as students with disabilities do to enhance their own note taking.

In order for this systemic change we need to focus on the following five areas:

1. Our perception about disability. We will need to change how we perceive disability. A review of disability history and culture is helpful to understand why so many perceive disability as a negative medical malady. The ways in which disability has been portrayed historically in the media and in literature has lead to the negative stereotypes so many people have regarding disability.

2. The physical environment. The physical environment includes all campus buildings, structures, and grounds. It includes sidewalks, parking lots, campus signage, and restrooms, and campus furniture.

3. Teaching spaces and curriculum design. This would include lecture halls, laboratories, internships, field experiences, all instructional materials provided by the instructor such as power point slides, information presented on a white board, syllabi and handouts.

4. Programmatic design. Our policies, procedures, and customer service.

5. The information environment. The information environment includes web services, computers, software, online courses, and radio and television programming.

Of course, the university is already addressing many of these issues due to compliance with federal and state laws. These efforts are due to meeting the minimum requirements through the medical model approach. Through universal design, we could proactively address accessibility and usability for everyone and reduce cost.
Commitment to UD

Recommendations

This paper advocates for Missouri State University to make a commitment to universal design. This commitment would include resources to transition the university through this paradigm shift. Specific attention should address the following areas:

1. Provide the support necessary for campus programming to reframe disability.
2. Assess the campus climate regarding disability.
3. Consider hosting Dr. Sue Kroeger or Dr. Elizabeth Harrison, University of Arizona, to assist with this transition of philosophy. Dr. Harrison can further educate our University community on how universal design may help with retention and help with other multi-cultural groups.
4. Plan on all levels to incorporate universal design principles in all that we do.
5. Support online and workshop trainings regarding universal design for faculty, staff, and students.
6. Develop policies and procedures that support universal design.
7. Consider universal design in all university purchases.
8. Provide support and resources so that students with disabilities can exhibit Disability Pride and contribute to work on committees and as individuals on community disability issues through public affairs work.
9. Push all faculty, staff, and departments to include universal design in their planning of curriculum, programs, and services.
10. Identify and utilize architectural, informational, and curricular experts to assist Disability Services in carrying out this University wide paradigm shift.
11. Recognize faculty and staff who model the principles of universal design.
12. All significant architectural design projects shall incorporate universal design principles. These projects should exceed the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG) and will not only be accessible but usable to people with disabilities.
13. Include the ADA Compliance Officer on all significant architectural design projects and significant retrofit projects.
14. Clarify the University’s legal responsibility for abiding by the Missouri Information Technology Accessibility Standards (MITAS).
15. Address IT accessibility utilizing universal design principles.
16. Faculty notify the Bookstore as to which textbooks they have selected for their courses a month prior to classes beginning.
17. Provide instructional support so that faculty can learn how to incorporate universal design in their curricula.
18. Provide a curriculum review process for universal design principles that provides recommendations on how faculty can use universal design concepts more in their teaching.
19. Explore the possibility of creating a Disability Studies program.
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