Megan: Hi I’m Megan O’Rourke; I’m the associate director of Disability Resource Center/Access Technology Center. Here at Missouri State University we’re part of the division that is for Diversity and Inclusion. We value students with disability and consider them a part of our valued diversity here on campus. If you’re new to universal design, don’t be overwhelmed, it sounds much more intimidating than it really is. Chances are, you are already incorporating universal design in your everyday teaching. If you are familiar with Universal Design concepts I hope you’ll take away a few more tips today and resources that you can use in the future. The concept of universal design basically means that all students will be included in a class, whether that be participation, reading, hearing, learning; are they able to participate whether they are a student that has a disability or they are English as a Second Language or they have a different learning style. The concept of universal design is all students, all inclusive, all participatory.

So, what does this mean as an educator? It basically means using all those skills that you learn, and most likely use. Are you allowing for full participation of all students no matter who they are, where they’re from, or what their learning style is? I’ve provided this simple checklist to use for Universal Design; hopefully you are already incorporating some of these tasks, and maybe some of them will be new to you. As you move through the universal design checklist, check and see if you are using that already in your classroom; whether you are on campus in the traditional setting, or on the online platform. If you’re not, try to think of how you might incorporate those new concepts, those new tasks and hopefully you’ll get some great examples from faculty who are using universal design.

So, the first thing is, focus on content then design. As you know, as a student you may have had a class that wasn’t designed the most easy way to navigate it. Maybe you had some classes that were really easy to navigate and keep up with. So think back to that experience as you are designing your class, whether a traditional class, online, or even a blended class. Think about how you can put that content out there for students where it is in a constant format of easy to find, easy to navigate and there’s consistency week-to-week. Also think about are you making sure that all your students can access that information. If it’s visual, make it auditory, if it’s auditory, make it visual. And how do you do that if you don’t have the resources or the equipment to do that? That’s when you can call the Access Technology Center here at Missouri State University, we’re located in the Meyer Library, second floor, near the proctoring center. We can assist you in figuring out a way to make that material auditory or visual—whatever it needs to be. That’s what we’re here for, to serve as a resource for students, faculty and staff with disabilities but also the faculty and staff here on campus. If you have something handwritten on a blackboard, overhead or even a whiteboard are you allowing all of your students to access that information? How do you make that handwriting available to everyone? You can contact my office and we can assist you in finding software to help with that, or my staff can help you with that process.

When selecting your assignments to give to your students are you allowing all your students with all different learning styles the full participation or the full learning opportunity? Many of the faculty that will be sharing their experiences will tell about how they are using
rubrics, to show their students exactly what they are looking for, whether that being in a quiz or in a discussion board. Using those rubrics they will also mention that they are using different opportunities for students to learn. They may have a choice between an assignment and a discussion board and with that rubric they will know what is expected of them. With that said, are those assignments accessible to everyone? Can everyone do them, can everyone learn from them? Are your discussion boards set up so that students can easily navigate through them, whether that will be visual or with speech software that will read the material to them? All of these concepts, like I said, may be ones you are using, but there are always new resources around the corner that can benefit us all. As technology changes our teaching styles may need to be altered in several ways, meaning we’re going to have to figure out if there is a barrier for a student, how we are going to get around that barrier.

MSU has a lot of great resources on campus for faculty and staff to utilize at any time. You can feel free to call the Access Technology Center, the Disability Resource Center, the Learning Diagnostic Clinic, the Institute for Equity and Compliance, and the office for Diversity and Inclusion. All of our offices can assist as you run into barriers as you go through this checklist. If we are unable to help you, we know where to find the information and the resources so there is always a way. As you develop your course, no matter what format that course may be in, the traditional classroom the online and blended courses—all of them can be used to look at this checklist. Going through the checklist, see what you are using, or what could be improved and what that is going to take on your part. It may seem that you are spending a lot of extra time to make your course universally designed course, but in the end, as many of the faculty will share, the pre-planning ahead of time will assist you in the future. So, thinking ahead, and planning ahead that time will cut down on your time for grading, for getting around barriers, for assisting students that are struggling to find material in your course. So, as I said, there are resources here on campus and feel free to utilize us at any time.