Michael Frizell: Hi I’m Michael Frizell, I’m the director of Student Learning Services at the BearClaw center for learning and writing here. When we talk about Universal design for the BearClaw itself, some of the things we considered were basic layout, tables, chairs, that sort of thing even color came into play. We started talking about the layout and design of the BearClaw we started to consider, who would be our clients? Those clients that are in wheelchairs it was necessary to have aisles wide enough for the wheelchair to access; students that are blind, even faculty that are blind, how would we steer them through the maze that the BearClaw becomes? What about ease of access to the tables, the computers, and that sort of thing? When you look at the BearClaw, the design of the tabletops, the chairs, everything is on wheels, so we’re able to move it to adjust accordingly to almost any client’s needs. The colors in the space, though, become a little more difficult to manage and maintain. We wanted to make sure that artistically the BearClaw looked like the library, however when you start talking about colorblind or blind students, it became obvious that we needed to label things such as the printers with a certain bright color or certain differentiation of colors to make sure they knew where they were going. When we implemented universal design in the bearclaw the first thing we did was sit and take a look at other designs, other learning hubs in the area, we did go to MU, I did a little research at the University of Kansas and a couple other places to see how they set it up. When we talked about universal design within the bearclaw itself we started looking about the colors and layers, the rolling tables, we made sure that every table was a certain height for the design. More when we started talking about the universal design in the BearClaw we starting talking about the training of the tutors. In the Claw we have tutors that are subject area, Mathematics, about 120 other subjects. Writing consultation happens with faculty, staff, and students. And then we also have the PASS program: Peer assisted study session, or group study session. We’ll also include Psychology 121 under graduate learning assistance. So all of these people have to be trained in a certain way considering what universal design means. How can we work with the most students, most effectively. In that case, part of the training becomes, how do you work with a diverse group of learners? How do you approach visual learning? Note taking styles that might be different for each person? How do you work with blind students, with deaf students? All these things become apparent as you work closely with your writing consultants and other learners in the Claw.

Since I responded to the universal design within the bearclaw venue, there’s been a lot of interesting comments. Most are very pleased with the way that it’s set up, the ease of access, we know now having been open for three years, that we need to redesign the claw some. So this summer which is 2012, we will be moving the writing center to the front of the space. The original plan and design called for a wide aisle from behind the check in desk all the way back to the writing center, however, the expansion of the math program is such that we can’t get people through. Plus, we have a lot of students that are blind, faculty that is blind that uses the writing center on a regular basis. By moving it to the front of the ‘Claw, we are able then to have learners in wheelchairs, blind students, etc… access the writing center a little more effectively. More, we’ll have access to large E-readers, and that sort of thing for those who may be visually impaired, by giving them more access to the equipment that they need, I think that will actually increase the number of diverse learners that use the space.
The future for the BearClaw’s universal design would be to increase training for all the tutors and consultants that work in the space, to bring in speakers from different constituents around campus. Maybe some community partners, to come in and talk a little bit about what are more effective ways to work with clients that come to the space.

I think the future of this would be to expand to more of the deaf students. Right now we don’t really have many that come in. Students that maybe are struggling learners. For the most part, the writing center works with high level writers, faculty, staff, graduate students. Freshmen though, make up a large portion of what we do in the fall. The way and nature of a learning commons at a university level doesn’t really assist the lowest level learners. And what I mean by lower level, maybe just out of the norm in some cases, or maybe others that struggle with study skills. I think at almost any point, students are coming out of high school straight into college have that one class, that one speed bump that really trips them up. What we’re hoping to do is diversify our work force in such a way that they are able to reach those learners most effectively.