Promoting Universal Design in Higher Education

Introduction
The R₂D² Center (Rehabilitation Research Design and Disability), at UW–Milwaukee, has launched a national demonstration project called ACCESS-ed (Accessible Campus Climate Environment Support Systems for Education). The project generates and compiles resources and tests campus models supporting universal design in higher education. This includes all individuals: those with disabilities and those without disabilities.

The University of Wisconsin System and its President’s Advisory Committee on Disabilities have endorsed the ACCESS-ed Project. Provosts, faculty, student disability service providers, and students have responded positively.

Even though this wall-mounted kiosk is lowered, it is not easily accessible for wheelchair users because of the limited foot room and the non-tilting screen.

What is Universal Design?
Universal design (UD) 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. Examples of how UD benefits diverse groups of consumers include curb cuts on sidewalks, captioning on TV, and use of electronic doors.

Why Universal Design in Education (UDE)?
• UD is a proactive approach to include students with disabilities and students without disabilities.
• UD benefits students of all ages, cultures and abilities.
• UD creates products, communications, and environments to be as inclusive as possible at little or no extra cost.

Virtually every higher education institution has observed their budgets tightening every year. Creative approaches to serving a growing number of higher education students with disabilities, particularly the growing percentage with learning disabilities, have become essential.

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Historically, colleges and universities provide services to students with disabilities with an exclusive one-to-one student-staff delivery model, known as “individual accommodations.” Students must often seek out services in a separate disability services office on campus and must fulfill requirements for documenting their disability. The need for individual accommodations will never be totally eliminated, but universal design can improve on a shared model of inclusive education and add value for all students. This combined approach can involve all campus departments in the effort to teach to all learners.

Accessibility in PowerPoint presentations is facilitated when presenters voice the text descriptions of slides. Verbal descriptions of PowerPoint slides benefit all students. This is an example of utilizing multiple ways of representing content to improve the engagement of students with the curriculum.

Universal Design on Campuses—Four Strategies

1. **DARCs (Departmental Accessibility Resource Coordinators)**
   The ACCESS-ed Project promotes creation of a campus-wide network of DARCs. The project describes how the DARC system can be utilized in all campus departments to create a supportive network for change. DARCs assist their colleagues by promoting resources for universal design in education and being positive advocates for accessibility on campus.

2. **UDE Materials & Techniques**
   A variety of universal design in education (UDE) materials and resources already exist in the field. The project identifies and centralizes these UDE materials, and searches for new developments. ACCESS-ed also creates new resources to fill identified gaps.

3. **Website**
   [www.r2d2.uwm.edu/access-ed/](http://www.r2d2.uwm.edu/access-ed/)
   The ACCESS-ed website is designed to support campus faculty, administrative staff, and other interested parties to quickly locate needed resources.

4. **Evaluation & Assessment**
   Evaluation and Assessment activities target data collection from a variety of sources, including the students. Campus self-audits and UD skill testing of faculty and administrators will help identify areas where resources are needed.

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