

Moving Beyond Accommodations to Access

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An increasing number of students with disabilities have enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States since 1973, largely due to the opportunities provided by the passage of disability laws that mandate accommodations be provided to students with documented disabilities (Rao, 2004, p. 19). While this has been an exciting opportunity for new learners, many faculty members, although experts in their own fields, do not understand how to implement the best teaching and learning practices for students with varied learning needs. As a result, frustration on the part of both faculty and students occurs, and student learning outcomes can be negatively affected (Zhang et al., 2010). Schools should seek to educate all students as whole persons by developing holistic plans for training and supporting faculty members through faculty professional development in the areas of differentiation, Universal Design in Instruction (UDI), and faculty-student mentoring programs (McDonald, 2014b).

Historical and Legal Background

Prior to the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with disabilities were not

given full access and accommodation to allow them to attend college without barriers. Under federal law, a person with a disability is defined as one with a “physical or mental requirement that substantially limit[s] one or more major life activities” or “regarded as having such an impairment” (McDonald, 2014a; Rao, 2004; Reilly & Davis, 2005, p. 31). These major life activities include, but are not limited to, functions such as self-care, breathing, hearing, seeing, speaking, walking, learning, sleeping, and standing (McDonald, 2014a; Reilly & Davis, 2005, p. 32). Due to years of exclusion and mistreatment of individuals with disabilities in the United States, the federal government has passed several pieces of legislation beyond the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. They include Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which was amended to broaden the definition of disability and specific accessibility regulations. Both of these laws prevent qualified students from being denied admission to universities based on their disability, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires that “reasonable accommodations” be provided on a personalized basis to students for whom a documented disability impacts one of the previously mentioned life activities (Lake, 2011, p. 244; McDonald, 2014a; Reilly & Davis, 2005, p. 31; Salmen, 2011).

Students and Accommodations

Students with documentation verifying that they have a disability are

eligible to receive classroom and residential accommodations, usually through the office of disability services on their campus. On average, 10% of college students have a disability, with learning disabilities being the most common type of disability for first year freshmen (Raue & Lewis, 2011; Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 38). Additional disabilities that faculty may see in the classroom include orthopedic and health impairments, sensory disabilities, and traumatic brain injuries (Heward, 2006; Powell, 2003; Raue & Lewis, 2011; Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. 2). Due to improvements in pharmaceuticals and improved treatment options, students with mental health issues such as depression or anxiety disorders are also a growing subcategory within this group (Brockelman, Chadsey, & Loeb, 2006). Classroom accommodations for students vary depending on disability and individual needs, with some of the most common accommodations including alternate or extended testing, note-taking services, study skills supports, and text materials offered in varied formats (Broadbent, Dorow, & Fisch, 2007; Duffy & Gugerty, 2005, p. 100; Wolanin & Steele, 2004).

However, while a student may present a faculty member with a letter describing his or her classroom accommodations, it does not mean that the instructor is going to understand how to fully implement them, or further, to improve instruction beyond accommodations to be inclusive of all types of learners. Faculty members are trained well in their content areas (Lattuca & Stark, 2009), but are not always trained to

differentiate instruction, and are often only provided with a confidential list of accommodations that they should provide to students with no further explanations or support (Zhang et al., 2009).

Faculty Professional Development: UDI

The concept of UDI originated in the field of architecture and fits naturally with best practices in disability and accessibility services. It has also broadened to the realm of design, curriculum development, and technology. In addition to its grounding in accessibility and differentiation, it conveys the idea that what is good for people with disabilities often benefits others as well. UDI provides a framework for instructors to consider individual student needs and course considerations when creating lessons and learning spaces. The seven main principles of UDI are equitable use, flexibility, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and approach for use. Specific applications in higher education and possible workshop or professional development topics include syllabus creation, diversity and inclusion practices, creation of physical spaces that promote both accessibility and collaboration, increased and multi-modal options for content delivery and communication, and maximized usage of available technology resources (Burgstahler, 2008, p. 1-3; McGuire & Scott, 2006, p. 124).

UDI also provides opportunities for students to receive natural supports that limit the need for them

to be singled out or excluded. “Stigma is often exacerbated when students with disabilities are singled out by being required to take tests in separate locations in order to be afforded extended time . . . or to enter through the back of the building when that is the only location of an accessible door” (Johnson & Fox, 2003, p. 8). Most importantly, UDI principles provide a framework for faculty to design instruction in a way that moves beyond merely fulfilling required student accommodations to designing instruction that is differentiated for all students (Salmen, 2011).

Faculty Mentoring Programs

Students who have the opportunity to develop relationships with faculty members tend to have higher rates of satisfaction with their learning experiences (Harris, Ho, Markle & Wessel, 2011, p. 27). Ball State University created a program in 2006 that has provided dual support to students and the faculty members who serve them. Their Faculty Mentorship Program (FMP) seeks to provide direct support to new students with disabilities by matching them with a faculty member in their intended program of study and facilitating activities and strategies to encourage a mentoring relationship between the two (Harris et al., 2011, p. 28). Although the program was intended to improve student learning outcomes, interviews of faculty and students involved revealed that the program also created benefits for faculty members. Findings indicated that faculty relationships with their student mentees increased faculty members’ understanding of working with

students with disabilities, and thereby improved their overall practice of teaching (Harris et al., 2011).

Zhang et al.’s (2009) review of faculty instruction of students with disabilities supports these findings, revealing four important influences that impact classroom practices and interactions with these students: “faculty knowledge of legal requirements, personal attitudes regarding students with disabilities, perceived institutional support, and level of comfort in interacting with individuals with disabilities” (p. 277). The findings of the Ball State University program are further supported by Brockelman et al.’s (2006) study that examined faculty perceptions of undergraduate students with mental health conditions, a growing population of students served by disability services. Researchers found that professors who had a personal relationship with someone who had been diagnosed with a mental illness were less likely to view students negatively based on stereotypes (Brockelman et al., 2006; McDonald, 2014a).

The faculty mentoring program at Boise State University went a step further in its approach by creating both a Disability Advisory Group (DAG) and a Faculty Mentoring Group (FMG). The DAG was interdisciplinary and comprised of faculty, staff, and students that met monthly to discuss issues related to students with disabilities. Some of the topics discussed included physical accessibility on campus, service animals, and UDI principles (Humphrey, Woods & Huglin, 2011). The second group, FMG, was

comprised of at least one faculty member from each college within the university. The members met once a month with the DAG Director, and served as liaison support to the faculty members in their respective colleges (Humphrey et al., 2011). The mentoring program at Boise State demonstrated the power of administrative support and institutional resources. In addition to the positive effect on students, institutional and faculty outcomes of this mentoring program included an increase in faculty members (not just disability services personnel) speaking at new faculty orientations, improvements in syllabus writing, and the incorporation of UDI into the accreditation process (Humphrey et al., 2011).

Recommendations For Best Practices

If colleges and universities want to move beyond the minimum legal requirements of disability law, they must use professional development instruction that teaches faculty members how to understand and follow accommodations, communicate effectively with students with disabilities, and incorporate UDI methods into their curricula. Such instruction will both improve instruction for all students and minimize the need for students to be singled out for basic accommodations that could be incorporated into a flexible course structure. In addition to selecting the type of professional development needed, such as UDI, schools need to consider who will provide the training, how it will be supported financially and

institutionally, and how it will be delivered. A wide variety of training methods should also be considered for broader access (Getzel & Finn, 2005).

Another recommendation for best practice is the creation of faculty mentoring programs. Unlike professional development for accommodations and UDI instruction, these programs may be better suited for voluntary participation as a way to produce informal teacher mentors who can serve as supports for other faculty mentors within each college. Both Boise State University and Ball State University created models that were the best fit for their own practice. A further extension of such a program would be the creation of a teaching and learning program, such as was borne out of the Boise State University program, which combined professional development, UDI techniques, and additional interdisciplinary teaching and learning tools. These best practices can lead to embedding differentiation of instruction into a school's institutional culture (Harris et al., 2011; Humphrey et al., 2011; Lattuca & Stark, 2009).

Students with disabilities are here to stay, and their presence on college campuses will continue to enrich and diversify the college experience for both students and faculty. Faculty members who want to facilitate best practices and holistic learning opportunities that push beyond the minimum expectations of accommodation adherence need access to professional development and mentoring partnerships that are supported and sponsored by their institution.

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