It's Time to Go Beyond Accessibility

How Inclusive Classrooms
Grant Universal Access to Students

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Over the last several decades, colleges and universities have come to realize that making their campuses and courses accessible to all students is both a legal and moral imperative.

They've removed physical barriers and made student-specific accommodations so that students with disabilities can more fully benefit from higher education. After all, these students have all the intellectual tools they need to thrive in higher education. All too often, however, the barriers removed and accommodations made have not been enough, and far too many students with disabilities (including many with non-apparent, undisclosed disabilities) face gaps in their learning experiences which hinder their education. Far too often, students with disabilities give up.

Higher education professionals can and must do more to improve accessibility for students with disabilities, whether these disabilities are apparent or not. One way to start is adopting a more inclusive approach to pedagogy and curriculum design. Read on to learn how an inclusive classroom can get you over the bridge to universal accessibility. Along the way, you'll find that, while inclusivity yields obvious benefits for those with disabilities, it also results in an improved learning experience for all learners.

Introduction

Research from the National Center for Education Statistics has found that roughly 11 percent of higher education students in the United States report having some kind of disability. This represents a large and growing number of students, and it translates into the fact that, in a large lecture-style class with 100 students, there are likely to be at least ten who experience barriers to learning: limited eyesight or hearing, a physical obstacle like muscular dystrophy or a cognitive difficulty like ADHD, dyslexia, or – with the increasing enrollment in higher education of veterans of war - PTSD.

Many of these disabilities, especially those related to cognitive impairments, are non-apparent and often remain undisclosed. Studies cited in the Journal of Post-secondary Education and Disability indicate that anywhere from 60 to 80 percent of higher education students with a disability never disclose it to their schools. This means that in that same 100-student lecture class, there may be six to eight students in need of some type of accommodation. But the instructors will be unaware of this need.

Elizabeth Simister is the Accessibility Manager at Blackboard, working with product management to help ensure that Blackboard's products are accessible. She observes, "There are some disabilities that are visible, such as using a motor device like a scooter. Instructors and fellow students will recognize that they may need to interact with someone in a different way. Other disabilities are less visible, and these disabilities are more significant because it's a much larger part of the population, and most don't self-identify."

Even when disabilities have been disclosed, and accommodations made, the experience gap remains, and students with disabilities are less likely to successfully complete their higher education than their peers.

How can we close that gap?

> **"** *About 11% of higher education students in the United States report having some kind of disability."*

One way is to focus on creating an inclusive learning environment that can readily adapt to the needs of every student — whether they've been blind since birth, use a wheelchair or have difficulty focusing; whatever their learning style – visual, auditory, verbal, or physical; and whatever the time and place of their learning – online or in a physical classroom, at their desk or on the move.

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What is an inclusive classroom and why does it matter?

LaToya's limited vision means she can't see the PowerPoints being used in class. Her instructor gesturing to a slide and saying, "As you can see" isn't at all helpful to LaToya.

Ramon has a severe hearing impairment. If the videos that are part of his course curriculum aren't closed-captioned, he's left guessing about the content. Even if a transcript is provided, Ramon is missing the full context and value of the video.

Tim has dyslexia. Reading materials that use a sans serif font like Arial are easier for him to read than those using a serif font like Times Roman. A reading assignment that uses Times Roman may take twice as long to get through.

Simply put, when courses are being created, an inclusive classroom approach takes these and other challenges into account when creating courses. "It's important for instructors to create learning paths for all students, whatever the differing abilities and learning styles," says Scott Ready, Director of Customer Relations & Principal Accessibility Strategist, Strategy & Transformation Services at Blackboard. "The key is following the three basic pillars of universal design: provide various ways to REPRESENT essential course concepts that recognize that there are different learning styles; offer various ways to encourage student ENGAGEMENT, as participation is an effective way to learn; and give students various formats for EXPRESSION through which they can demonstrate what they've learned."

Are your classes inclusive?

They are if they:

- Anticipate that students will have undisclosed disabilities

- Adapt pedagogy to meet universal accessibility standards

- Proactively eliminate barriers that cause students with disabilities to fall behind or fail to learn

- Adjust on the fly to work with students' individual abilities and learning styles

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Why does an inclusive classroom matter?

The challenges faced by students with both visible and non-disclosed disabilities underscore why students with disabilities have a harder time succeeding in the classroom and earning their degrees at the same rate and time as their peers without disabilities. Even after physical accessibility has been achieved, and accommodations made that meet the particular needs of students – e.g., providing an aide to help a student with limited mobility - many barriers to learning remain in the way of students who lack neither intellect nor ambition. Adopting inclusive practices - most of which are simple and straightforward, and many of which are made possible through today's learning technology – removes these barriers. And removing these barriers is essential, in terms of both benefitting individuals and for the overall benefit of society.

Elizabeth Simister points out that a focus on inclusivity has become paramount because the face of higher education is changed. "Today, it's absolutely critical to think about who's in your classroom. There are more non-traditional students, more ESL learners, more ex-military – many with non-disclosed disabilities."

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It's not just those with disabilities who benefit from inclusivity. Scott Ready likes to use the analogy of curb cuts.

"When curb cuts were widely introduced thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act, everyone pretty much recognized that this was going to benefit those in wheelchairs and other mobility devices. What most of us didn't realize ahead of time is that everyone benefits from curb cuts: some pushing a stroller or pulling a grocery cart, the elderly, runners, cyclists, and everyday walkers. Curb cuts make navigation easier for everyone. The same goes for inclusive learning."

Simister seconds this. "Think about a mom with a full-time job," she says. "If you provide course content in an audio file that she can 'read' while in her car or on public transit, rather than have to pore over written materials, there's a better chance that she'll be able to complete her education."

How to make higher education classes more inclusive

It's important to remember that disability takes many shapes, and that many students have multiple disabilities. For starters, you need a big-picture approach to the four categories of disability — seeing, hearing, moving and thinking — and a sophisticated understanding of how to address them.

"Say, for example, a student discloses they are blind. Immediately you think they are unable to see any item and they use a braille reader," says Scott Ready. "In reality, the person might have Usher's syndrome and they need a high contrast between the print and background because their scope of vision is reduced."

An inclusive classroom anticipates that no two disabilities are alike and proactively grounds itself in the fundamentals of universal access. A well-designed inclusive classroom doesn't get sidetracked by accessibility issues – it has accessibility built-in.

"Some courses are just not designed with accessibility in mind," Ready says. For example, a course may have a video that lacks captioning. Trying to correct the barrier after a student identifies a disability requires extra work and time. The student's ability to fully access the video is likely going to be delayed.

"If the course had been built as an inclusive course and closed captions had already been included in that video from the beginning, the instructor would not have to go back and retrofit it."

Where to begin

Start by putting yourself in your learner's shoes.

Deaf students who use a sign-language interpreter want you to speak to them, not to their interpreter, for instance. Students with verbal limitations can still contribute to a class if they have a computer that lets them type what they have to say.

Being aware of these nuances in how students learn can help you create environments where students with disabilities know they can succeed and don't feel like they're fighting through every aspect of learning.

- Take some time to understand how the four main kinds of disability affect students' ability to learn.
- Look for multiple ways to convey the same information in class so it can be absorbed by people with multiple abilities and learning styles.
- Audit content from third-party publishers and insist that they make the materials accessible to all learners.
- Get more training on the fundamentals of universal access so you understand how to structure documents that devices like screen readers will understand.

When instructors and course designers learn about inclusive practices, you can quickly see these light bulbs going off. Suddenly, teachers are thinking about issues like color blindness when they're adding colored type to their assignments. They're dropping flashy animations that bother students with light sensitivity. They're planning ahead to make sure videos are close-captioned.

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When it comes to inclusivity, technology plays a critical role. So do humans.

For the past 15 years or so, colleges and universities have placed considerable effort on accessibility, but have typically taken a somewhat narrow definition. "Institutions have focused on students with severe and obvious difficulties," says Nicolaas Matthijs, Product Manager for Blackboard Ally. "They've provided ladders for students to get over any roadblock or walls they're running into. A student, for example, could request that their course materials be made available in a format that worked for them. For the institution, this was a time consuming, laborious process: someone was responsible for manually going through the course content so that it worked for the particular student."

"Now with inclusivity, we're seeing that there are parts of accessibility that can help all students. Schools no longer have to provide individual ladders – they're expensive to construct and limit the benefits to those who've declared their disability. The focus now is to remove the walls to begin with, so that there's no need for ladders."

Digital technology is enabling colleges and universities to remove those walls. "To take just one example: automatically converting content to an audio format certainly helps students with visual impairments to access content. But it also lets all students access it while they're in their car or study while out running," Matthjis adds. "And with today's technology, content can be converted so that it works better on a phone or a tablet. Content can be converted to a Braille version, to ePub. It can be checked for color contrast issues."

While technology is a major enabler of inclusivity, the human element remains important, as well. Scott Ready offers the example of an image of George Washington used in a history course. "Facial recognition technology might be able to state that this is a picture of George Washington. But if the content being studied is about period clothing, someone would need to make sure the image has been tagged to indicate that what's important in the image is not George Washington, but what he has on."

Taken together, technology combined with the human element is enabling the inclusive classroom.

How to better serve students who have disabilities

Here are four things higher education institutions can do to better serve all students, whether they have disclosed or non-disclosed disabilities or not:

- Create strong accessibility and inclusivity policies and well-defined procedures to implement them.

- Provide thorough universal learning design training to instructors.

- Give teachers and curriculum designers extra time to create and provide inclusive, accessible courses.

- Secure adequate funding for technology and adaptations that meet the needs of students with disabilities.

- Ensure that all available support services are promoted and made visible to all students, instructors, and administrative staff.

There are a number of simple tactics that those creating course content can put into immediate practice to make their courseware more inclusive – and they don't require any specialized technology beyond what is standard in most institutions:

- Make sure the documents you create in Microsoft Office are formatted for maximum access.

- Ask for access to Adobe Acrobat Pro so you can format PDF files to be more readily translated by accessibility devices.

- Find out the best way to use color in your assignments.

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With a Master's of Social Work, Caitlin Bartley works at the Missouri Department of Mental Health-Division of Developmental Disabilities as their National Core Indicators Project Coordinator. (NCI is a nationwide project to provide participating states with survey tools that can measure and track system performance over time.) As someone who has experienced the life-long challenge of living with Muscular Dystrophy, Bartley is also someone intensely familiar with the struggles that those with disabilities face when it comes to higher education. "Technology has made me a lot more independent," Bartley says. "When I got my Master's degree, my textbooks were on the computer so that I could easily access them, something I couldn't do with heavy physical books that were just too unwieldy." Bartley has also taken a number of courses online. "I really like online," she says, "And totally benefitted from being an online student. My professors didn't know I have a disability unless it told them!"

While technology matters, Bartley also believes strongly that there's a need for more widely based education on accessibility and inclusivity for instructors and administrative personnel. As an undergrad looking for an internship, she was told not to have "false hope" that she'd ever be a social worker. Bartley persisted and, with the help of a more knowledgeable and enlightened counselor, secured not one, but two, offers of internships.

"There needs to be more education. There are still a lot of assumptions about what someone can do or cannot or do. Don't tell me I cannot do it. Let me tell you how I can do it."

Conclusion

The perfect learning environment for every learner doesn't exist. But you can make sure each learner competes on a level playing field. The first challenge is to be aware of the differences among learners; equity creates opportunities for equal access. True inclusion means actively engaging with diversity on an on-going basis. Universal accessibility and inclusive learning experiences can help move the needle for learners on every level.

SOURCES:

1 National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60

2 Schelly, C., Davies, P., & Spooner, C. (2011). Student perceptions of faculty implementation of universal design for learning. Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability, 24, 17–30.

3 Rutgers Study: For College Students with Disabilities, Success Linked to Mentoring, Self-Advocacy and Perseverance. http://news.rutgers.edu/news-releases/2012/10/rutgers-study-for-co-20121016#.V6M6XI69c2c

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