Is Your Higher Education Institution Accessible for All?

How Inclusive Classrooms Grant Universal Access to Learners

AN EDUCATION DIVE PLAYBOOK
Students with disabilities have all the intellectual tools they need to thrive in higher education. Yet too many give up because of lack of accommodations which can create unnecessary barriers. In many instances this lack of accommodations can also create gaps in their learning experiences which can hinder them even more in their education.

Even if the necessary accommodations are not currently available, higher education professionals can do more to improve accessibility for students with disabilities. 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.
Introduction

About 11 percent of higher education students in the United States have some kind of disability.\(^1\) Anywhere from 60 percent to 80 percent of higher education students with a disability never disclose it to their teachers or administrators.\(^2\)

That means a large lecture-style class with 100 students has at least 10 who experience barriers to learning: limited eyesight or hearing, a physical obstacle like muscular dystrophy or a cognitive difficulty like ADHD or test anxiety. And at least six of them will never reveal these challenges to their teachers. These are just some of the reasons why students with disabilities are less likely to graduate from higher education than their peers.\(^3\)

How can we close that gap? One way is to focus on creating inclusive learning environment that can readily adapt to the needs of every student — whether they’ve been blind since birth or they’re in a wheelchair for six weeks after a holiday-break ski mishap.

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“Hassim is a law student at a prestigious U.S. university. He has Cerebral Palsy and most days travels using a wheelchair. He also has trouble with what he sees due to a neurological disorder called Balint’s Syndrome. CP causes him to tire easily and Balint’s affects his brain’s perception of what his eyes see – he can see words but has a hard time understanding sentences. If there’s a pen and a water bottle on the table next to him, he might aim for the pen but pick up the water bottle because Balint’s causes a misfire in his neural circuitry.”

Students with disabilities like Hassim’s often need to hire personal care assistants and arrange with their school to have scribes, note takers and other accommodations. Organizing for these accommodations often keeps many students from going to college. And those who do make it into higher education live with isolation and misunderstandings every day.

Challenges like these underscore why students with disabilities have a harder time earning their degrees. “It’s not for a lack of intellect or a lack of ambition,” says JoAnna Hunt, accessibility manager at Blackboard, the global learning-technology company. “It’s simply because at some point
it just gets too hard for them to keep banging against the same walls. And our society is missing out on educating a lot of super-talented individuals."

Hunt’s job is to ensure that all of Blackboard’s technology solutions are accessible to all students, especially those with disabilities. “Unfortunately, a high number of people still do not realize that these students are just as capable, and that we are putting barriers in front of them by not thinking about inclusive practices,” Hunt says.

So what exactly is an inclusive classroom? It may help to contrast it with an integrated classroom, which ensures that students of all abilities attend the same classes and complete the same work.

Inclusive classrooms aim higher.

“In an inclusive classroom,” Hunt says, “you’re really thinking ‘how can I help that person be successful, what does that individual need to learn the information, and how can I assess their knowledge based on their own individual communication methods and learning styles?’”

Here’s a quick checklist to assess whether your higher education classes are inclusive:

- Anticipates that students will have undisclosed disabilities.
- Adapts pedagogy to meet universal accessibility standards.
- Proactively eliminates barriers that cause students with disabilities to fall behind or fail to learn.
- Adjusts on the fly to work with students’ individual abilities and learning styles.

Next, we’ll explore how to embrace inclusiveness in college classrooms.
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, an expert on inclusive education and customer relations director at Blackboard. “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.

“Some courses are 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.”

So, where do you start with building inclusive classrooms?

Start by putting yourself in your learner’s shoes. “Students who have disabilities have been isolated and ostracized almost their entire academic careers,” Hunt says. “They’ve been sitting on the outside because the people trying to teach them or their peers in the classroom don’t actually understand the way they communicate, the way they learn, or some of the challenges they face.”

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, Hunt says, 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.

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JoAnna Hunt, Accessibility manager at Blackboard
Hunt suggests these strategies for developing inclusive courses:

- 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.

At a more tactical level, you can:

- 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.

Hunt draws hope from the scores of seminars she has conducted introducing teachers to the essentials of universal access and inclusive classrooms.

“One of the most heartening things I’ve seen is that within an hour’s worth of conversation with teachers about inclusive practices, you can really quickly see these light bulbs going off. All it takes are a few slight shifts in mindset to have very positive impacts on student success.”
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.

“You can really quickly turn people’s perception around when you start talking about inclusive practices,” Hunt says.

Furthermore, Ready says, accessibility and inclusiveness can help students with various learning styles. The captions on a video can help English-as-second-language student while also ensuring that a deaf student comprehends the content. These kinds of synergies happen across the educational spectrum.

What do schools lose when they fall short on accessibility?

“Number one, students,” Ready says. “Students will drop out and may not succeed. Once a reputation of not providing an accessible learning environment is created, the word spreads. Second of all, students don’t hesitate going to the Office of Civil Rights or hiring an attorney and filing a lawsuit.”

How to Serve Students Who Have Disabilities Better

Here are four things higher education institutions can do to better serve students who have disabilities according to Blackboard’s JoAnna Hunt, accessibility manager, and Scott Ready, customer relations director:

1. Create strong accessibility policies and well-defined procedures to implement them.
2. Provide thorough universal accessibility training to instructors.
3. Give teachers and curriculum designers extra time to create and provide inclusive, accessible courses.
4. Ensure adequate funding for technology and adaptations to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

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JoAnna Hunt,
Accessibility manager at Blackboard
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.

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