Supporting equitable experiences through universal design

Disability Resource Center
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Disability dynamics in higher education are changing. As requests for disability accommodations increase here and at institutions of higher education around the country, and, perhaps inspired by a revived national conversation on equity, colleges and universities are grappling with how to create more inclusive campuses.

We may think that the only way to ensure disability access is through individual accommodation. While accommodations do remove barriers, they are not the only way or the most equitable way to promote inclusion.

The changes institutions made to teaching, learning and working during the pandemic highlighted the need to rethink many of our common practices. Remote work, flexible deadlines and auto-generated captions are all examples of strategies necessitated by the pandemic, many of which we continue to use because we recognize that they increase access and inclusion without compromising rigor or undermining essential responsibilities.

The pandemic was essentially a case study in universal design.

Universal design is a framework that supports the design of products or experiences to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible without the need for modification or accommodation. In thinking about how to create a more inclusive campus, UD offers promising strategies that prioritize equity and consider inclusion proactively and for all, including disabled people. For example, always turning on auto captions during remote meetings or when giving a presentation, or providing materials for a meeting in advance so participants can download them in formats that work for them.

As we reflect on Disability Employment Awareness Month, and despite decades of federally mandated disability access, we must reckon with some discouraging statistics. The disability community represents only 41% of the national workforce, compared with 78% nondisabled, and disabled people are unemployed at nearly double the rate of nondisabled people. There are also discouraging statistics about disabled people being underemployed, meaning that they are not employed to their full capacity. Though harder to cite, there could be any number of factors that support that claim; bias and inaccessible workplaces are two important ones.

At the University of Arizona, we promote disability access and inclusion both individually through accommodations and systemically through our relationships with campus colleagues, where we collectively work to inform the design of a campus that does not necessitate individual accommodation.

On our campus, workplace access is centralized through the Disability Resource Center. We work directly with employees on requests for accommodations and also consult with department heads and supervisors on how to create a more inclusive workplace. Every request for accommodation is unique and we do not disclose disability information to supervisors. DRC offers physical audits of workplaces and reviews electronic documents, software and websites for accessibility.

As much as we can, we promote universal design over individual accommodations to promote equity and proactive inclusion in the workplace. Accommodations ensure access but may not always support equitable experiences. I encourage you to think about access as a spectrum ranging from individual to universal, compliant to equitable. And please let the DRC be a partner in creating an inclusive workplace by exploring the range of possibilities that can ensure access.

Inclusion is one of our core University values and our goal is for disabled people to have a similar if not identical experience on campus with respect to access. We don’t want disabled folks who have earned their right to be here have to request and wait for access that nondisabled people get by default. An inclusive workplace minimally means that we have equal access to our job sites and responsibilities. An inclusive workplace is also one that considers disability perspectives to be value added, that celebrates the disability experience, and where colleagues are committed to conscious reflection on our beliefs about disability and actively unlearning the ableism with which we are all socialized.

So, as we spend some extra time thinking about disability employment this month, I thank colleagues who have created opportunities for this important reflection. Please be aware of all we do at the University and all the work left to do here and everywhere to support disability equity.

To learn more about accessibility and inclusion, check out these resources on the DRC website:

- Workplace Access – Learn about accommodations and inclusive workplace access.
- Universal Design – Learn what Universal Design looks like in academic and digital settings, the workplace, physical spaces and events.
- Building Accessibility – Learn how the University works to make buildings, facilities and transportation
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