

Anticipating Diversity: Weaving Universal Design into your Campus Tapestry and Beyond

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Abstract

Implementing universal design concepts on a college campus requires involving the whole campus. To undertake such an effort, those involved must be openly committed to the values of inclusion and the social model of disability. This paper explores the strategic planning process as a tool for moving your campus forward – for opening minds and changing the culture at your school. We review the values that drive current practice, explore the tenets of organizational change, and discuss the social model of disability as a way to reframe disability and move your campus forward toward the vision of universal design.



Introduction

Most of us recognize the need for change toward a more universally designed, inclusive environment. We value, or even embrace, the concepts of universal design and inclusion. Many of us even try to put the principles into practice in our sphere of influence and incorporate them into our professional development activities. At the same time, many of us feel powerless to initiate change on a higher level in the institutions where we work. We are left with more questions than answers. What is the current organizational culture? How does change happen on an organizational level? How can we play a role in making it happen?

Our challenge is not a new one. Corporations have faced this challenge for many years—the challenge of getting people moving in a new direction, the challenge of obtaining support for new ideas. The problem, then, is not that it cannot be done, but that those of us who are most interested in seeing these changes happen do not have all of the information we need. We can step outside of our discipline and benefit from the knowledge base of organizational change strategists who have worked to change corporations for years. There are many and varied strategic approaches that we can adopt as models.

Organizational change can seem like a daunting task, and there are many books and models out there that can feel overwhelming to process. However, most of them can be whittled down to the following seven ideas:

- Creating a shared vision
- Communicating that vision to others

- Finding allies
- Increasing driving forces
- Decreasing resisting forces
- Celebrating wins—big and small
- Recognizing the importance of the individual

Strategic planning can be an effective tool to accomplish the task of organizational change. It is often helpful to have an objective ‘outsider’ to facilitate discussions about where we are and where we want to be.

The strategic planning process is really quite simple. It involves beginning with the end in mind. It involves considering the following questions:

Who are we? What is our mission? What is our vision? What do we value? What makes us unique?

Where are we now? What are our strengths? What are our weaknesses? What opportunities exist? What threats exist for us?

Where are we going? Do we need to change? Does where we are now and what we are doing match who we are?

How will we get there? What are our goals? Objectives? What activities will take us toward those goals? Who will be responsible for what?

How will we know when we are there? What template do we hold up as the vision? How will we measure and evaluate our progress? What will our stakeholders be saying? Doing?

The Importance of Vision

The need to have a clear picture of where we are headed seems to be hardwired into us. In fact, many examples of this basic biological phenomenon can be seen in nature. One illustration of this can be seen in the butterfly, *Pieris virginianensis*. A group of ecologists were studying how this species of butterfly identifies its host plant. They did two experiments. In the first, they placed a leaf of the host plant on one end of a box and a leaf of another plant on the other end. The larvae of this butterfly were released in the box. They traveled randomly about half ending up at the host plant and the other half at the other plant. Eventually they all ended up at the host plant. In the second experiment, they placed the leaf of the host plant flat in the box and the other leaf upright on a stick. This time all of the larvae traveled toward the non-host plant first. It was apparent from the experiment that the larvae are in search of “uprightness.” They are genetically wired to do so. We, too, need to have a vision or template to guide us in our work. We propose the principles of universal design and culturally affirmative environments as a template to guide our work. Therefore, one of the goals of this discussion is to establish a clearer vision—to think about what it will look like if we are successful in our work. We’ll begin with an effort to establish some shared language.

Pathological vs. Cultural View of Deafness

Professionals who work with the Deaf community will be very familiar with the comparison between the pathological view of deafness as compared to the cultural view. Those who view deafness through a pathological perspective see deafness as a deficiency. They are likely to think of it as a problem to be ‘fixed.’ Those who view deafness from the cultural perspective are likely to see being deaf as a difference, as an aspect of diversity. They are likely to understand Deaf pride

and to see American Sign Language as equal to any spoken language. They are likely to recognize the Deaf Community as having its own culture and rich history.

Medical Model vs. Social Model of Disability

Similarly, there are views of disability that frame it in different ways. These frames are sometimes referred to as the Medical Model of Disability and the Social Model of Disability. In the Medical Model, being disabled is seen as negative. Disability resides in the individual. Remedy or cure is the normalization of the individual. The agent of remedy is the professional who affects the arrangements between the individual and society.

By contrast, the Social Model frames disability as a difference—an aspect of a person’s diversity, just like race or sexual orientation. It’s just a part of who you are, with no value judgments attached. Being disabled, in itself, is neutral. In the Social Model, disability does not reside in the individual at all. Disability comes from the barriers in our environment. The remedy in the social model is a change in the interaction between the individual and society. The remedy is designing environments to be accessible for everyone. The agent of remedy can be the individual, an advocate, or anyone who affects the arrangements between the individual and society.

This has enormous implications for how we approach what we do. Rather than us being the gatekeepers for individual accommodations and services for students with disabilities, our focus must shift to changing our campus environments for the better. And anyone can be involved in that process.

Accommodations versus Universal Design

Many campuses are beginning to provide resources and training on universal design. In most instances, disability resource professionals are looking across the campus at instruction and information technology environments and considering how universal design might be implemented. More recently, many of us are realizing that we need to take a closer look at our own practices. When we respond to an environmental barrier with an accommodation, we need to consider the implications of that response.

Accommodations are needed when environments are not universally designed. In the accommodations model, access is a problem for the individual with a disability, and should be addressed by that person and disability services. Access requires that accommodations are made, or existing requirements are retrofitted. Access is retroactive in nature. Access is often provided in a separate location or through special treatment. And finally, access must be reconsidered each time a new individual uses the system.

By making the paradigm shift to universal design, we see that access issues stem from inaccessible or poorly designed environments and should be addressed by the designer. All systems and environments should be designed, to the greatest extent possible, to be usable by all. Access is proactive in nature, and is inclusive. Access, as part of the environmental design, is sustainable.

So if we all stop and think about what we do, especially those of us that work on college campuses, we can see that we are at times a part of the problem. The typical scenario is that the student comes in because they are registered in classes that present barriers and we respond by focusing on what they need to gain access to the material or activity. Whatever the barrier might be, we brainstorm and fix it or find a work-around. That is the accommodation model. By looking through our new lens, we realize that we should see accommodation requests as signposts that something in the environment needs to be changed—that there is something in the design of the environment that is problematic. Once that change takes place, students will not have to ask for that individual

accommodation again. We can work proactively rather than reactively. When we fail to change the environment to be more accessible, we are creating the need for accommodations in the student. We are part of the problem, and not part of the solution.

What is Universal Design?

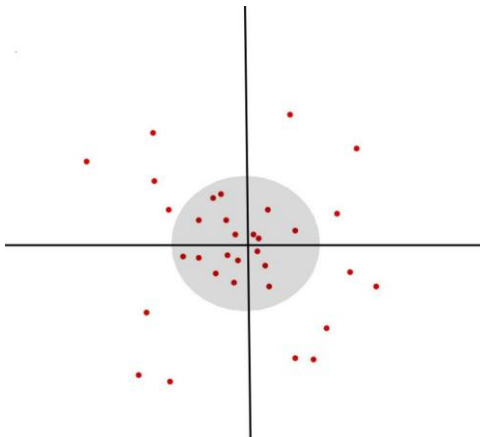
Universal design is a conceptual framework for designing and developing inclusive environments. It stems from the attitude that environments are disabling to individuals and that they could be designed in ways that are usable by a majority of people with a variety of personal differences. Universal design reframes the concept of accessibility from “special features for a few” to “good design for many.”

Ron Mace, who coined the term ‘Universal Design,’ said: Universal design 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.

Universal Design utilizes the following principles:

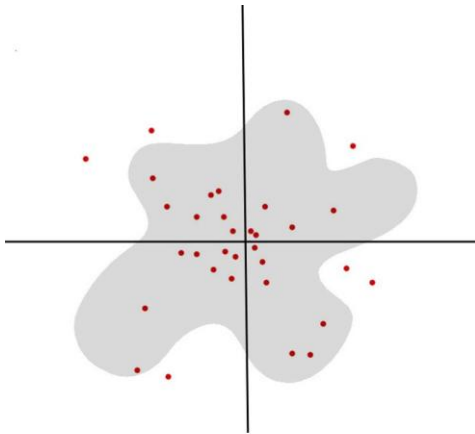
- Equitable use
- Flexibility in use
- Simple and intuitive use
- Perceptible information
- Tolerance for error
- Low physical effort
- Size and space for approach and use

The philosophy challenges us to think in new ways—to anticipate the variety of settings and conditions in which people perform a task or use an object...



Traditional Approach

... and then to design the process, course, or object with those diverse possibilities in mind.



Universal Design Approach

These illustrations might represent the instructor's teaching style (the grey shape), and the various learning styles of students in her class (the red dots). When information is presented in one way, for instance, lecturing, it is not effective for many students in the class. When the professor anticipates diversity in her students and therefore designs her class to meet all the needs she might encounter, then more students will benefit. Rather than only lecturing, she could also encourage small group activities, incorporate interactive projects, and use teaching methods that benefit auditory learners and kinesthetic learners. By designing her class in this way, with the goal of making it effective for the greatest number of students, she creates an environment in the class that is inclusive and affirming. In addition, she eliminates the need for many accommodations.

As an example, consider, consider the issue of notetaking. Most universities have a process for recruiting notetakers. It often involves the student, perhaps a deaf or hard of hearing student, bringing a flyer from the Disabilities Office to the professor. The professor announces that a student with a disability is in need of a notetaker, and works to facilitate that process. This is a process that is repeated each and every time this student takes a class.

A way to approach this using the principles of universal design would be for the professor to post her notes to the online course shell for all students to use. Another approach would be for students in the class to take turns as notetaker for the entire class, and for those notes to be posted every day. This would eliminate the need for the deaf or hard of hearing student to request the accommodation. And doing so makes the class more universally designed. Those posted notes will benefit not only the student with a disability, but also international students in the class, students from academically at-risk groups, and students whose learning style differs from the teaching style of the instructor. This also keeps the disabled student from experiencing the whole 'separate but equal' situation. Everyone benefits from this approach, and a separate process doesn't have to be utilized for the deaf student. It's truly win/win for everyone involved.

Envisioning Change: The AnyTown Model

The authors have developed an approach for creating a shared vision that has been effective with audiences that represent various institutions. Since creative brainstorming and dialogue is often inhibited by the differences between campus environments, the authors invite participants to engage in an envisioning process that suspends that reality for a time. Participants are asked to become members of the AnyTown University campus community. They adopt a new identity by taking a nametag that identifies them as a member of this community with a fictional name.

This activity follows an in-depth discussion of the social model of disability and universal design. The prompt that participants are given initially is worded as follows: “You are invited to spend some time at AnyTown University where you can leave your own institution for a while and work together toward a common goal. Participants who are committed to the values of inclusion and universal design are invited to share ideas and begin the work of opening minds and changing the culture here at AnyTown U. and in our community.”

Typically, without prompting, participants also take on the role of a stakeholder on their campus—a faculty member, a dean, a student. This approach seems to effectively enable participants to step out of the confines of their institutions, and their perceptions that change will be difficult or impossible, and to immerse themselves in the possibilities, rather than the limitations.

To set the tone for this more interactive portion of the session, facilitators show a series of slides with quotes related to social justice and change. Those quotes are provided in *Appendix A*. Facilitators then open the discussion by explaining their roles as facilitators as if they are members of the AnyTown campus community as well. The strategic planning process is driven by a series of questions:

- How will AnyTown University be different when we achieve our vision of universal design?
 - How will we think about “disability?”
 - What will the experience be like for students with disabilities?
 - What will attitudes be like?
 - How will students/staff with disabilities be viewed?
 - Who will be responsible for access?
 - How might the role of the DS office change?
- What are the barriers to change? What might our resistors be saying? How might we respond?

The facilitators then introduce some values for consideration and discuss whether or not these reflect the values of our profession:

- Disability is an aspect of diversity that is an integral part of society.
- Being disabled is, in and of itself, neutral (Gill).
- Disability is a social construct resulting from the present inability of social institutions and designed environments to accommodate individual differences (Schriner & Scotch).
- Access is a matter of social justice.
- Good design means, among other things, that a product, process, or environment is, to the greatest extent possible, usable by everyone.
- An approach requiring retroactive adjustments to be made on an individual, case-by-case basis is not sustainable.
- Creating and advocating for usable, sustainable, and inclusive learning environments is a shared responsibility.
- When a product, process, or environment is not usable, the designer of that process becomes our client—not the person with a disability.
- Group identification is a healthy response to disability.

Typically, participants are able to agree with these values with only minor alterations. Facilitators then move into another level of questioning:

- Are our current practices supporting our vision? Are they consistent with our values?
- What messages do our current practices send to others?
- How can we ensure that our approach and departmental procedures reflect current thinking about disability to affect organizational change?

- What changes can we implement right away?
- What should we do more of? What should we do less of?

Participants often identify several practices as being out of sync with the stated values. Language is often one of the many problem areas identified. Several activities might follow this discussion. One example is to look together at a sample mission statement and consider the language that is problematic. Here is an example of a mission statement that reflects old thinking about disability:

The mission of the Office of Special Student Services is to eliminate physical and academic barriers and to fulfill the concept of assisting students in achieving their educational, career, and personal goals through the full range of institutional and community resources. In addition, the office was established to insure that students with special needs receive support services and accommodations to allow them equal access to all AnyTown University programs, and with our assistance they have the opportunity to realize their potential and succeed in their academic pursuits.

Taking the discussion from the abstract to the tangible seems to be helpful to participants and provides a good transition into the activities that follow. Facilitators end the AnyTown activity and debrief participants about that process, asking what about it was helpful and what about it was frustrating or limiting.

Taking the Vision Home

The authors find it important to provide an opportunity for participants to spend some time beginning to apply the principles and paradigm discussed in an even more tangible way. Depending upon the time available, participants may be asked to work on their own mission statements, syllabus statements, or letters to faculty. At times, facilitators instead provide samples for participants that need to be changed to reflect new thinking about disability. Finally, participants are encouraged to commit to making at least three changes once they return to their own campus.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As stated in the opening remarks, many disability resource providers see the value in the concept of universal design and social model of disability but are uncertain about how to make change happen at their university. The message that the authors want to send is that when professionals focus on implementing changes in their immediate area of influence, those changes send a powerful message across the campus. At the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, initial attempts to implement universal design began with a focus on faculty. We found that approach alone is not sustainable. A more systemic approach was needed. The focus on making changes in the way the Disability Resource Center approaches its work, has provided opportunities to move the campus toward a model of universal design through everyday interactions with faculty, staff and administrators, rather than just an occasional opportunity to engage a small number of faculty in professional development activities.

Finally, we suggest that the AnyTown activity provides a model that can be emulated on individual campuses. This particular activity was developed to bring people together who represent a variety of campuses. One might adapt this activity in order to begin a creative process of dialogue within one's department or among allies on a given campus. When the authors have worked with staff from the same institution or agency, they have instead suggested that staff take on roles of other stakeholders or people who are impacted by what they do. Staff in a Disability Resource office might, for example, take on the perspective of faculty, administrators or students as they consider re-envisioning and reinventing the office culture and structure. Regardless of the approach taken,

the authors challenge professionals in the field to take the time to set aside “business as usual” and consider their language, office culture, structure and practices through the lens of social model of disability and universal design. (For information on how the University of Arkansas at Little Rock has approached this task, see the proceedings from the PEPNet 2008 Conference entitled *Shift Happens.*)

Resources

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Appendix A

Freedom doesn't come with a piece of paper. A piece of paper doesn't end a long history of intentional and purposeful discrimination. Ignorance is our greatest enemy... excluding someone from society simply because of disability is WRONG.

~ Bill Clinton

A law cannot guarantee what a culture will not give.

~ Mary Johnson, Editor of *Ragged Edge Online*

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

~ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Now is the time for all of us to take our power back and become, each of us, Extreme Leaders in our own right. We have to set a new example of what's right ...to be audacious enough to follow the examples we respect and challenge the ones we don't.

~ Steve Farber, *The Radical Leap*

Three different responses to change:

- *Those who let it happen*
- *Those who make it happen*
- *Those who wonder what happened?!*
~ Anonymous

We can do anything we want to if we stick to it long enough.

~ Helen Keller

We must not, in trying to think about how we can make a big difference, ignore the small daily differences we can make.

~ Marian Wright Edelman

If you ever think we are too small to make a difference, try spending the night cooped up with a mosquito.

~ Swahili proverb

There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it.

~ Malcolm Gladwell *The Tipping Point*

... the channel with the greatest influence in America is neither the traditional media of tv, radio, or print advertising nor the new medium of the World Wide Web but the "human" channel of individual, person-to-person, word-of-mouth.

~ Ed Keller and Jon Berry, *The Influentials*

Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

If the shoe doesn't fit, must we change the foot?

~ Gloria Steinem

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

~ Margaret Mead

Be the change you want to see in the world.

~ Mahatma Ghandi

If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place.

~ Margaret Mead

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.

~ Nelson Mandela

