

Universal Design for Instruction Project University of Connecticut

Project Abstract

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General Project Description

As the twentieth century ends, postsecondary education for students with disabilities is at a crossroads. Although increasing numbers of students with disabilities are accessing postsecondary education, there are escalating challenges relating to the provision of modifications and accommodations. This is particularly true for students with "hidden disabilities" (e.g., learning disabilities, ADHD, traumatic brain injury) as it relates to the academic requirements of many postsecondary institutions.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) first require the identification of a disability and then ensure eligible students accommodations and supports as a protected class. Despite statutory regulations, it has often been difficult for faculty to embrace academic accommodations and program modifications for students with disabilities. Postsecondary institutions have had more success providing physical access for most students but academic access, particularly for students with mild cognitive disabilities, raises substantial challenges.

This project will apply the principles of Universal Design to instruction to promote academic access for all students including those with learning disabilities (LD). Universal Design was proposed in the late 1970's in response to a conceptual need of advocates for barrier-free, physical environments. It is defined as "an approach to creating environments and products that are usable by all people to the greatest extent possible" without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Its "inclusivity . . . makes it cost effective; universal design increases the number of people whose needs are being addressed and it encourages an integrative approach rather than multiple separate solutions"

(Welch, 1995, p. 1). As a concept most often associated with the design of buildings, products and public space, its relevance became more dramatic with the passage of the ADA with its emphasis on civil rights and equal access for persons with disabilities. Although the concept of Universal Design originated to address physical and structural barriers, the instructional environment also lends itself to this concept, an approach termed Universal Instructional Design (UID) (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 1999; Orkwis & McLane, 1998; Silver, Bourke, & Stehorn, 1998).

The application of Universal Instructional Design to postsecondary education, the lynchpin of this proposal, represents an innovative, creative, and provocative approach to enhancing the instructional milieu in higher education settings and assuring programmatic access. Its universality is its allure: all students will benefit from the integration of effective and efficient teaching methods and strategies to ensure students with LD a quality higher education. Other chronic health conditions or neurological disorders (e.g., cerebral palsy, advanced Lyme disease, fibromyalgia) frequently are accompanied by cognitive impairments. Diversity among student learners, a goal of higher education, includes diversity of learning styles. By focusing on methods and strategies that promote learning, this proposal embraces an inclusionary approach to a quality education regardless of the cause of cognitive/learning difficulties.

The project will identify barriers to equal access to instruction so that approaches and products to overcome those barriers can be developed. It will also identify the components of effective instruction especially as they relate to students with learning and cognitive disabilities.

Products will be field-tested, evaluated, revised, and packaged. State-of-the-art distance learning technologies will be used to make the products easily accessible to faculty and administrators at colleges throughout the country. Collaboration with Undergraduate Deans and college Teaching and Learning Centers and Faculty/Instructional Resource Labs will be the primary conduits for dissemination and use on a national scale.

Major Project Goals

1. To identify barriers/bridges to the assurance of academic access as perceived by students with LD, faculty, and administrators.
2. To establish Instructional Excellence Administrative Teams for the purpose of implementing Universal Instructional Design across all elements of the academic milieu.

3.To apply the concept of Universal Design to the instructional environment to develop approaches and products that will ensure students with LD a quality higher education program using exemplary college instructors, classes, and materials across the spectrum of academic environments (e.g., large lecture class, seminar, lab) and academic departments.

4.To field-test, evaluate, and revise the products and materials.

5.To package the products and materials using high quality and easy to access state-of-the-art distance learning technologies.

6.To distribute and evaluate the products and materials through collaboration with Undergraduate Deans, Teaching and Learning Centers, Faculty/Instructional Resource Labs, and higher education organizations nationally, as well as through voice, print, and electronic media.

Major Project Activities

1.Based on information from an extensive review of the literature on Universal Design, its application to instruction, validated teaching methods and strategies for students with LD, and approaches to professional development for faculty and administration, focus groups and interviews of faculty, administrators, and students with LD will be conducted to identify their perceptions of barriers and bridges to equal academic access.

2.Instructional Excellence Administrative Teams will be established and trained to implement Universal Instructional Design across all academic programs including ways to promote faculty development relating to empirically validated effective teaching methods and strategies for students with LD.

3.Professors from different settings (i.e., two- and four-year colleges and universities) who incorporate innovative and effective teaching methods and strategies in their classes will be identified and recruited to model and demonstrate examples of Universal Instructional Design. Examples of effective instructional planning (e.g., identifying essential course components, technical standards, and outcomes/competencies; constructing syllabi); delivery of instruction (e.g., multi-media presentations; cooperative learning; concept mapping; use of technology; scaffolding), and evaluation of learning (e.g., test format and item construction; alternative modes of demonstrating mastery) will be gathered across the spectrum of academic environments (large lecture classes, seminars, labs) and academic disciplines. Demonstrations, interviews, and materials will be organized, edited, and packaged. Strategies and materials

will also be developed by Instructional Excellence Administrative Teams for use by administrators to implement Universal Instructional Design to enhance instruction for all students.

4. The products and materials will be field-tested with faculty from various postsecondary institutions resulting in evaluation feedback for revision of products.

5. The products and materials will be packaged in high quality state-of-the-art distance learning formats (e.g., the University of Connecticut Instructional Excellence Web Site, CD-ROM, Web-based instruction), which the literature on professional development and feedback from faculty and administrators indicate would be most effectively accessed by faculty.

6. Products and materials initially will be distributed to colleges across the country through collaboration with Undergraduate Deans, Teaching and Learning Centers, Faculty/Instructional Resource Labs, professional organizations, etc., based upon their willingness to provide electronically transmitted evaluative feedback. Information on the products and their efficacy will also be disseminated through national presentations, publications, and linkages on Web sites (e.g., HEATH, RRTC) to the repository of electronic resources at the University of Connecticut.