

## **UDI Project Reaches Out to Diverse Professional Audiences**

This spring UDI Project personnel had the opportunity to present the topic of Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) to diverse professional audiences. In addition to numerous sessions with college faculty in New England, project personnel went “on the road” to present and dialogue with two diverse professional groups.

In March, Dr. Sally Scott, Project Coordinator, presented a concurrent session entitled “Universal Design for Instruction: Promoting Equal Access through a New Paradigm” at the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Pacific Rim Conference held in Honolulu, Hawaii. The 2001 Pacific Rim Conference focused on self-determination, independence and inclusion, and was targeted to participants who are interested in all disabilities across the life span. More than 500 people attended the conference, representing many countries of the Pacific Rim world region.

The Pacific Rim conference was a particularly intriguing setting for the topic of UDI given Hawaii’s undeniably diverse population. Demographic information about Hawaii indicates that it is the only state in the nation without a majority group population. The discussion of Universal Design and its application to instruction (UDI) lead to an exciting interchange of ideas and questions among the group of predominantly college professionals, including disability service providers, administrators, and faculty. In addition to dialogue about the implications of the U.D.I. principles, how to support faculty in providing more inclusive instruction, and ramifications for students with disabilities, the question was raised as to whether college instruction can truly be made “universal.” In this setting, so familiar with the issues of a broad range of diversity, there

were many opinions. Dr. Scott observed that Ron Mace, the founder of the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University had been posed the same question about Universal Design in architecture. His reply was that in some respects the choice of the term “universal” is unfortunate, because no environment can be made completely usable by all people. However, he pointed out that **all** environments can be made **more** usable. There appeared to be consensus among session participants that this is a challenging goal for college instruction as well—to make college classrooms more usable by a broad range of diverse college learners.

In April, the UDI project staff collaborated with the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), in an all day strand presentation on the topic of *Universal Design for Learning and Instruction in K-16 Classrooms* at the Council for Exceptional Children annual convention, held in Kansas City, Missouri. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the major professional organization for people who work with students with disabilities. The conference draws an audience of 6,000 people including professionals from the K-12 level of education and teacher preparation program faculty from the postsecondary level. Chuck Hitchcock and Skip Stahl of CAST and Drs. Joan McGuire and Sally Scott of the Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability were co-presenters of the strand. Drs. McGuire and Scott presented two sessions at the conference: *Universal Design for Instruction (UDI): Anticipating and Responding to Student Diversity in the Classroom* followed by a session titled *The Application of Universal Design for Instruction to College Instruction: Creating a Web Site Resource*.

The CEC conference provided a stimulating setting for a discussion of the differences between providing inclusive environments for learning in a K-12 setting as compared to designing inclusive instructional environments in a postsecondary educational setting. Two elements that illustrate differences between the environments are these: accessing the general curriculum and the related selection of text materials.

In the K-12 environment, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a student with special education needs must be provided with access to the general education curriculum to the maximum extent that is possible for the individual student. The curriculum is reflected in part in textbook materials used by a school district. In selecting a text, K-12 school districts typically use a curriculum committee to examine different publishers' curricula and make decisions about which materials the district will purchase. Text materials are often used for several years or more. In contrast, in the postsecondary environment, there is no general education curriculum to which an individual must gain access. Curricular offerings vary substantially depending upon the mission and specialized programs represented in the more than 3,000 colleges and universities nationwide. Faculty, who have the autonomy to choose course materials themselves, make frequent changes in text materials, many of which are continually updated. There is also a different legal framework that is relevant to issues of inclusion in higher education. Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, the legal obligations of a college or university extend to assuring nondiscriminatory treatment and equal educational opportunity for individuals with disabilities, not maximum individual access to a particular curriculum.

These context differences have meant that approaches to implementing Universal Design in these learning environments have varied. The Center for Applied Special Technology promotes the use of digitized materials in the K-12 educational environment to promote access to the curriculum and learning for all students. With the selection of digitized materials that will be used over several years in K-12 classrooms, adaptations can be made to address the individual needs of learners. Digitized text materials in combination with assistive technology devices and software programs can incorporate many useful features that allow for individualization, such as a screen reader for multi-sensory input, changeable fonts, and an underline function for highlighting key concepts in text.

In contrast the Universal Design for Instruction Project is focusing on providing a conceptual framework for college faculty to apply when they consider instruction. As faculty plan and deliver a course, as well as assess student learning, they can make use of the operational principles of UDI as tools to respond to the needs of diverse learners. Selecting inclusive text materials or incorporating the use of technology are examples of the application of UDI that will support postsecondary faculty in their instructional planning to meet the needs of diverse classroom learners.

This joint presentation between CAST and the Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability is viewed as one of what will hopefully be many collaborative ventures in promoting inclusive instruction at all levels of education. The CEC Conference provided an exciting setting in which to begin this collaboration.

At both the PAC Rim and the CEC Conferences, participants responded positively to the concept of Universal Design for Instruction and to having the UDI principles

available as a resource for planning inclusive instruction. There was also interest at both conferences in the emerging UDI Project web site, [facultyware.com](http://facultyware.com)®. Faculty participants with no training or expertise in learning disabilities were particularly enthusiastic about being able to use the web site as an “idea bank” when planning instruction for students with learning disabilities and other diverse learners in their classes. As these conference experiences indicate, interest in providing inclusive educational environments extends across cultures and across educational settings.