

Chapter 9

Expanding Notions of Access: Opportunities and Future Directions for Universal Design

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on disability access in higher education and the role that Universal Design has played in improving meaningful participation and inclusion of students with disabilities. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of several frameworks of Universal Design that are specific to the context of instruction and learning, as well as the scholarship and theory related to implementation of these frameworks in postsecondary classroom environments. Scholarship on how current Universal Design frameworks might be expanded to address a broader set of access and equity issues, as well as the limitation of the current research about its application and effectiveness are also discussed. The chapter closes with a synthesis of opportunities and future directions for research, scholarship, and practice related to the development and implementation of Universal Design frameworks in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape and number of students with disabilities participating in higher education in the United States has changed dramatically over the past several decades. Students with disabilities comprised about 11% of the national undergraduate population as of the 2011-2012 academic year (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016), compared to just 6% in 1995-1996 (Horn & Berktold, 1999). Despite gains in access to postsecondary education, students with disabilities are still less likely to go to college, and those who do are less likely to persist to their degree than their peers without disabilities (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2014; Newman, Wagner, Knokey, Marder, Nagle, Shaver, & Wei, 2011). Additionally, many students who are identified as having a disability in primary and secondary education choose not to disclose their disability when they go on to college. Nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Transitional Study-2 (NLTS2) has revealed that nearly two-thirds of students who were

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identified as having a disability in high school did not disclose their disability once they transitioned to college (Newman et al., 2011).

Students previously diagnosed with a disability may choose not to disclose to their postsecondary institutions for a variety of reasons, including misunderstanding their responsibility to disclose in college, lack of knowledge about how to access services (Getzel, 2008), fear of stigma, or desire to shed or disassociate with their disability identity (Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010). While some students may no longer need services related to their disability, data regarding persistence of students who do disclose still indicate that this population is experiencing disparate postsecondary outcomes in comparison to their peers. Legal mandates to prevent discrimination and provide accommodations have improved postsecondary access for students with disabilities. Still, the data on educational outcomes and disclosure continue to raise important questions about what institutions can do to more broadly support students with disabilities.

Frameworks of Universal Design (UD) have been proposed as mechanisms to enhance access and inclusion by designing educational environments, courses, and programs to meet the needs of diverse student populations, including those with disabilities (Burgstahler, 2008b). While originally focused on designing environments to reduce physical barriers for individuals with disabilities (e.g. through curb cuts and manual doors), UD eventually gave rise to several other frameworks that are specific to teaching and learning (Schelly, Davies, & Spooner, 2011). These UD frameworks focus on improving flexibility and variation in curriculum, pedagogy, and support resources to enhance cognitive, as well as physical, access for students with disabilities and other diverse learners (Rao, Ok, & Bryant, 2014). The intention of UD is to consider access needs from the design process through implementation. Thus, the use of UD in postsecondary environments may be particularly vital for those students who choose not to disclose or seek out individual accommodations (Silver, Bourke, & Strehorn, 1998).

This chapter will explore the role that Universal Design has played in enhancing meaningful access in postsecondary environments for a wide range of student populations, including students who do not identify, have not disclosed, or have not been diagnosed with a disability. While issues related to disability access and the use of UD in higher education are not unique to the United States, this chapter will focus primarily on the U.S. to provide a more focused context for this topic. This chapter will begin with an overview of the legal landscape of disability access and representation in higher education. The rise and development of UD frameworks will then be discussed with an overview of several models and corresponding principles as well as the limitations of UD documented in scholarly literature. The chapter will close with a discussion of opportunities and new directions for UD in continuing to meet the promise of broader accessibility and inclusion for students with disabilities and other historically underserved populations.

CONTEXT OF DISABILITY ACCESS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), as amended in 2008 (ADAAA), defines a person with a disability as having “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (ADAAA: Definition of Disability, 2008, p. 7). Major life activities include “caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, standing,

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