

Chapter 4

Supporting Diverse Students Through UDL in Online Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of literature on challenges commonly faced by diverse student populations (including first generation college students, adult learners, military-affiliated students, historically marginalized groups, and students with disabilities) in higher education, an overview of the advantages of universal design for learning (UDL) as it relates to the aforementioned diverse student populations, and a framework with actionable strategies for supporting these student populations through of the three principles of UDL related to online instruction. The framework presents a toolbox of practical, sustainable strategies for teachers and higher education faculty to support diverse learners in a way that embeds proactive layers of support within the existing teaching and learning structure.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a framework for both access and accessibility holds significant promise for increasing the achievement and independence of diverse student populations. The three principles of UDL—multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement—put into practice in online education serve to both proactively and reactively support diverse learners, including adult learners, military-affiliated students, students with disabilities, neurodivergent students, first generation college students, and historically marginalized students. This chapter will explore challenges related to educational attainment and retention in higher

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education, explain the advantages of UDL in supporting diverse learners, and present a framework of strategies to bring UDL to life in online courses to support diverse students. Guided by the philosophy of adapting the environment to meet the needs of the student rather than pushing the student to adapt to an unfamiliar environment, this chapter will present a toolbox for UDL in online instruction to benefit every learner.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

Historically, students with diverse learning needs face barriers to educational attainment and retention, including lack of financial resources, lack of social support, less academic preparedness, and feelings of isolation. They also often face logistical challenges, including balancing work schedules, caring for children or aging family members, and lack of knowledge of navigating online education and the involved bureaucratic processes. The following section presents an overview of common barriers faced by student groups based on diverse identity markers; however, most of the challenges that present barriers to educational attainment and success are systemic in nature and reflect oppressive, ableist societal structures and policies.

First-generation College Students

First-generation students are often characterized as being older (as compared to traditional undergraduate students), identifying as female, having children, and identifying as a racial and/or socioeconomic minority (Kim et al., 2020). Furthermore, this group of students is more likely to continue with external employment and need remedial coursework, which puts them at risk for dropping out of college or course failure (Engle, 2007; Kim et al., 2020). It is also common for first-generation college students to experience financial stress, especially those who come from low-income backgrounds, and subsequently require support in navigating financial aid services (Ko et al., 2023).

Academic. Based on several related factors with systemic roots, first-generation college students are often less academically prepared for college, based on the rigor of high school courses (Engle, 2007) and lower grade-point averages (Kim et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2023). Having less experience navigating college can contribute to perceived lack of skills and abilities needed to succeed in the academic rigor of the university environment (Toyokawa & DeWald, 2020). Furthermore, the cultural differences between interdependent expectations associated with working class families (many of whom represent first-generation college students) and independent college coursework also present challenges to academic success, especially for

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