


# Chapter 10

## Applying Universal Design Principles to Support Gender-Expansive Students in Online Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*As higher education professionals work to reduce barriers in curriculum and instruction and cultivate inclusive online educational environments, it is crucial to address the unique challenges faced by gender-expansive students, a population that has received minimal attention in research and practice. This chapter focuses on applying universal design for learning (UDL) principles to address the challenges faced by gender-expansive students in higher education settings, particularly in online learning environments. Gender-expansive students often encounter unique social and academic hurdles that significantly impact their educational outcomes and well-being compared to their cisgender peers. This chapter delves into the alignment between UDL principles and the needs of gender-expansive students, highlighting strategies to identify and mitigate barriers to meaningful access in curriculum and instruction.*

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## ***Applying Universal Design Principles***

As higher education professionals work to reduce barriers in curriculum and instruction and cultivate inclusive online educational environments, it is crucial to address the unique challenges faced by gender-expansive students, a population that has received minimal attention in research and practice. Students with gender-expansive identities face social and academic challenges that impact social, emotional, and educational outcomes as compared to their cisgender peers (Renn, 2020). These students are at a higher risk for experiencing sexual assault, have an increased likelihood of psychological distress, and have an increased risk of poor mental health and academic outcomes (Woodford et al., 2018; Renn, 2020). These experiences impact how gender-expansive students interact with the learning environment and require teaching and learning professionals to examine their approaches to curriculum and instruction. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emphasizes the need to address learner variability and reduce barriers in curriculum and instruction. By proactively identifying and reducing barriers during the design process, UDL provides a more inclusive educational environment for all students (Black, Weinburg, & Brodwin, 2014; Rao, 2021). Applying a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework with the lens of gender-expansive students in mind allows educators to be proactive about creating online learning environments that support the needs of these students and ensure they have the opportunity to learn and thrive in a setting conducive to their needs.

This chapter will begin with a brief discussion of the terminology used and will then highlight research on educational outcomes for gender-expansive students to provide context for the needs of this population. This will be followed by an examination of the parallels between UDL, and approaches based in inclusivity for gender-expansive students. Next, the chapter will discuss the application of specific strategies to identify and reduce barriers to meaningful access to curriculum and instruction in the learning environment for gender-expansive students. Specifically, the chapter will include a more pragmatic exchange examining UDL online instructional strategies aimed at learner variability in the areas of engagement, representation, and action and expression and connect them to how they can be helpful to support gender-expansive students.

## **THE CHANGING NATURE OF TERMINOLOGY**

Before delving into the application of UDL to support gender-expansive students, it is essential to establish a common understanding of the terminology used. This chapter uses the term gender-expansive to describe people who transcend traditional binary views of gender and are not confined to a single gender narrative or experience (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). Gender identity is a fluid concept that falls along

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