



DO-IT

Equal Access: Universal Design of Advising

A checklist for making advising services welcoming and accessible to everyone
by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

As increasing numbers of people with disabilities pursue educational opportunities at all levels, accessibility to student services, including advising, is of increasing importance. The goal is simply equal access; everyone who needs to use student services should have access to them.

Advising services are an important aspect of most students' educational experiences. There are many different kinds of advisors—faculty advisors, advisors in a specific academic department, general advisors—and they should all be aware of unique issues of people with disabilities and other groups so that they can communicate effectively and provide sound advice as students plan their studies. Considering how their disabilities might impact academic and career plans is essential to the success of students with disabilities.

Legal Issues

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments of 2008 prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities. According to these laws, no otherwise qualified person with a disability shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity of a public entity. This means that student services as well as academic programs must be accessible to qualified students with disabilities.

Physical Distance and Length of Time Between Classes

Physical distance and time between classes should be considered when planning a course schedule with a student who has a disability. Many campuses are large and, for a student with a mobility impairment or a student who is blind, it can be difficult to get from one class to the next promptly if there is too little time between them.

Length of time between classes can also be a concern for a person with a learning disability. A student who is receiving extended exam time as an accommodation in one class should not schedule another class immediately following. Otherwise, the student will be late to the second class on days when there are tests in the first class. Having sufficient time between classes also facilitates learning by allowing a student to review the content presented and organize notes immediately after each class session.

Format and Time of Classes

An issue to consider for all students, but particularly for students with learning disabilities, Attention-Deficit Disorder (ADD), or Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), is class format. It may be difficult for some students to succeed in several lecture classes in the same quarter.

Students with health or other impairments may need to avoid classes where attendance at every class session is essential; online courses should be considered. These students may also have trouble attending classes that



take place at certain times of the day, such as very early in the morning or in the evening. Their advisors can help them develop appropriate schedules.

Universal Design

To make advising services accessible to everyone, employ principles of universal design. Universal design means that rather than designing your facility and services for the average user, you design them for people with a broad range of abilities, disabilities, and other characteristics such as age, reading ability, learning style, native language, culture, and so on. Keep in mind that students and visitors may have learning disabilities or visual, speech, hearing, and mobility impairments. Preparing your program to be accessible to them will make it more usable by everyone and minimize the need for special accommodations for those who use your services and for future employees as well.

Ensure that everyone feels welcome, and can

- get to the facility and maneuver within it,
- communicate effectively with support staff,
- access printed materials and electronic resources, and
- fully participate in events and other activities.

Train staff to support people with disabilities, by responding to specific requests for accommodations in a timely manner and knowing whom they can contact if disability-related questions arise.

Guidelines and Examples

The following questions can guide you in making advising services more accessible. This content does not provide legal advice. To help clarify legal issues, consult your campus legal counsel or ADA/504 compliance officer or call your regional Office for Civil Rights (OCR).

Planning, Policies, and Evaluation

Consider diversity issues as you plan and evaluate services.

- Are people with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, men and women, young and old students, and other groups represented on your staff in numbers proportional to those of the whole campus or community?
- Do you have policies and procedures that ensure access to facilities, printed materials, computers, and electronic resources for people with disabilities?
- Is accessibility considered in the procurement process?
- Do you have a procedure to ensure a timely response to requests for disability-related accommodations?
- Are disability-related access issues addressed in your evaluation methods?



Physical Environments and Products

Ensure physical access, comfort, and safety within an environment that is inclusive of people with a variety of abilities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, and ages.

- Are there parking areas, pathways, and entrances to the building that are wheelchair-accessible and clearly identified?



- Are all levels of the facility connected via an accessible route of travel?
- Are there ample high-contrast, large-print directional signs to and throughout the office?
- Do elevators have auditory, visual, and tactile signals and are elevator controls accessible from a seated position?
- Are wheelchair-accessible restrooms with well-marked signs available in or near the office?
- Is at least part of a service counter or desk at a height accessible from a seated position?
- Are aisles kept wide and clear of obstructions for the safety of users who have mobility or visual impairments?
- Are there private meeting areas where students can discuss disability-related needs confidentially?
- Is adequate light available?
- Are there quiet work or meeting areas where noise and other distractions are minimized and/or facility rules in place (e.g., no cell phone use) to minimize noise?

Consult the *ADA Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removal* at www.ada.gov/checkweb.htm for more suggestions.

Staff

Make sure staff are prepared to work with all students.

- Are all staff members familiar with the availability and use of the Telecommunications Relay Service, and alternate document formats?
- Do staff members know how to respond to requests for disability-related accommodations, such as sign language interpreters?
- Do staff members have ready access to a list of on-or off-campus resources for students with disabilities?

- Are all staff members aware of issues related to communicating with students with different characteristics regarding race and ethnicity, age, and disability?

Information Resources and Technology

Ensure that publications and websites welcome a diverse group, are accessible to all visitors, and technology within the service area is accessible to everyone.

- Do pictures in your publications and website include people with diverse characteristics with respect to race, gender, age, and disability?
- In key publications and on your website, do you include a statement about your commitment to universal access and procedures for requesting disability-related accommodations? For example, you could include the following statement: “Our goal is to make all of our materials and services accessible. Please inform staff of accessibility barriers you encounter, and request accommodations that will make activities and information resources accessible to you.”
- Are all printed publications available (immediately or in a timely manner) in alternate formats such as Braille, large print, and electronic text?
- Are key documents provided in language(s) other than English?
- Are printed materials within easy reach from a variety of heights and without furniture blocking access?
- Do electronic resources, including web pages, adhere to accessibility guidelines or standards adopted by your institution or your office? *Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology* (www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/) and World Wide Web Consortium’s



Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (www.w3.org/WAI/) are most commonly used. For information about making your website accessible to everyone, consult the *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* video and publication at www.uw.edu/doit/Video/www.html.

- Are videos used by the advising office captioned or audio described?
- Is an adjustable-height table available for each type of workstation to assist students who use wheelchairs or are small or large in stature?
- Do you provide adequate work space for both left- and right-handed users?
- Is software to enlarge screen images and a large monitor available to assist students with low vision and learning disabilities?
- Do you provide a trackball to be used by someone who has difficulty controlling a mouse?
- Are staff members aware of accessibility options (e.g., enlarged text feature) included in computer operating systems and of assistive technology available in the facility?
- Are procedures in place for a timely response to requests for assistive technology?

Events

Ensure that everyone can participate in events sponsored by the advising office.

- Are events located in wheelchair-accessible facilities? Is the accessible entrance clearly marked?
- Is information about how to request disability-related accommodations included in publications promoting events?
- Is accessible transportation available if transportation is arranged for other participants?



Checklist Updates

This checklist was field-tested at more than twenty postsecondary institutions nationwide (see www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/admin.html). The results of a nationwide survey to test face-validity of checklist items led to further refinement of the checklist. To increase the usefulness of this working document, send suggestions to sherylb@uw.edu.

Additional Resources

An electronic copy of the most current version of this publication as well as additional useful brochures can be found at www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/. A 14-minute video, *Equal Access: Student Services*, demonstrates key points summarized in this publication. An online version may be freely viewed at www.uw.edu/doit/Video/ea_student.html or purchased in DVD format.

The Student Services Conference Room at www.uw.edu/doit/Conf/ includes a collection of documents and videos to help you make student services accessible to everyone. They include checklists for career services, distance learning, computer labs, recruitment and admissions, registration, housing and residential



life, financial aid, libraries, tutoring and learning centers, and student organizations. *The Student Services Conference Room* also includes a searchable Knowledge Base of questions and answers, case studies, and promising practices.

For more information about applications of universal design consult www.uw.edu/doit/Resources/udesign.html or *The Center for Universal Design in Education* at www.uw.edu/doit/CUDE/. The book *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice* published by Harvard Education Press shares perspectives of UD leaders nationwide. To receive a 20% discount, visit www.uw.edu/doit/UDHE/coupon.html.



About DO-IT

DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) serves to increase the successful participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers such as those in science, engineering, mathematics, and technology. Primary funding for DO-IT is provided by the National Science Foundation, the State of Washington, and the U.S. Department of Education.

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Communication Hints

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration with which you treat others. There are no strict rules when it comes to relating to people with disabilities. However, here are some helpful hints.

General

- Ask a person with a disability if he or she needs help before providing assistance.
- Talk directly to the person with a disability, not through the person's companion or interpreter.
- Refer to a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation. If so, mention the person first and then the disability. "A man who is blind" is better than "a blind man" because it puts the person first.
- Avoid negative descriptions of a person's disability. For example, "a person who uses a wheelchair" is more appropriate than "a person *confined* to a wheelchair." A wheelchair is not confining— it's liberating!
- Do not interact with a person's guide dog or service dog unless you have received permission to do so.

Blind or Low Vision

- Be descriptive. Say, "The computer is about three feet to your left," rather than "The computer is over there."
- Speak all of the content presented with overhead projections and other visuals.
- When guiding people with visual impairments, offer them your arm rather than grabbing or pushing them.

Learning Disabilities

- Offer directions or instructions both orally and in writing. If asked, read instructions to individuals who have specific learning disabilities.

Mobility Impairments

- Sit or otherwise position yourself at the approximate height of people sitting in wheelchairs when you interact.

Speech Impairments

- Listen carefully. Repeat what you think you understand and then ask the person with a speech impairment to clarify or repeat the portion that you did not understand.

Deaf or Hard of Hearing

- Face people with hearing impairments so they can see your lips. Avoid talking while chewing gum or eating.
- Speak clearly at a normal volume. Speak louder only if requested.
- Use paper and pencil if the person who is deaf does not read lips or if more accurate communication is needed.
- In groups raise hands to be recognized so the person who is deaf knows who is speaking. Repeat questions from audience members.
- When using an interpreter, speak directly to the person who is deaf; when an interpreter voices what a person who is deaf signs, look at the person who is deaf, not the interpreter.

Psychiatric Impairments

- Provide information in clear, calm, respectful tones.
- Allow opportunities for addressing specific questions.