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Provost's Task Force on Disability Accommodations in the Learning Environment

Report and Recommendations

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Task Force Membership

- Benjamin Munson (Task Force Chair), Senate Disabilities Issues Committee Past Chair; Professor and Chair, College of Liberal Arts-UMN Twin Cities
- Donna Johnson (Task Force Co-Chair), Director, Disability Resource Center-UMN Twin Cities
- Tammy Berberi, Associate Professor, Humanities Division-UMN Morris
- Phil Buhlmann, FCC Past Chair, Professor, College of Science & Engineering-UMN Twin Cities
- Anna Counihan, University Senate Representative, Undergraduate Student-UMN Duluth
- Brian Follette, Education Program Specialist, Disability Resource Center-UMN Crookston
- Jennifer Goodnough, Associate Professor, Science & Math Division-UMN Morris, FCC Member
- Tabitha Grier-Reed, Professor, College of Education & Human Development-UMN Twin Cities
- David Johnson, Senate Disabilities Issues Committee Chair, Birkmaier Professor of Educational Leadership, College of Education & Human Development-UMN Twin Cities
- Michael Kyba, Professor, Medical School-UMN Twin Cities, FCC Member
- Ryan Machtmes, University Senate Representative, Graduate Student, College of Education & Human Development-UMN Twin Cities
- Steve Matthews, Associate Professor, College of Liberal Arts-UMN Duluth
- Molly Ubbesen, Assistant Professor & Director of Writing-UMN Rochester
- Sue Wick, Professor Emerita, College of Biological Sciences-UMN Twin Cities
- Ilene Alexander, Education Program Specialist, Center for Educational Innovation
- Khaled Musa, Academic Technologist, Academic Technology Support Services, Office of Information Technology
- Erin Slattengren (Senior Staff), Assistant to the Provost

Introduction

The University is founded in the belief that all people are enriched by understanding. It also is dedicated to the advancement of learning, the search for truth, and the sharing of this knowledge through education for a diverse community. People with disabilities add to the richness of the University of Minnesota.

Disability intersects with every facet of the campus experience, yet the impact of ableism on a campus community is rarely acknowledged. One way that ableism is reflected in our community is in the design of learning experiences that are accessible only to a narrow section of the potential learners in the course. A *social justice* approach to disability turns the focus to access and inclusion for all learners. When this approach has a strong foothold on a campus, access and inclusion become campus-wide choices to act, and not something the Disability Resources/Center (DR/C) does to ensure inclusion and compliance for disabled members of our community.

An approach relying solely on our campuses' DR/Cs requires much time to be spent educating and empowering others on how to reduce barriers for students, faculty, staff and guests with disabilities by modifying the physical environment, creating accessible websites and digital materials, recognizing where policies create barriers, and/or maintaining an open-minded attitude about implementing accessible teaching and learning practices. This process is time- and resource-intensive—and more so as demand for DR/C services increases. **Ideally, over time the entire University community will become more aware of the disabling barriers in existence and how to remove those barriers through better design.**

Background

In Spring 2019, the Disabilities Issues Committee of the University Senate passed a resolution recommending the implementation of professional development on accommodated instruction, testing, and effective practices for supporting students with disabilities for University faculty, instructors, and student services staff system-wide. The resolution was supported by the University Senate and Faculty Senate in November 2019, and in Fall 2020, the Executive Vice President and Provost convened a task force to examine effective practices for training in this area, including the consideration of required professional development for faculty and instructors. This report summarizes the discussions of the task force and system-wide consultation with faculty, staff and students in submitting its recommendations for further action.

Several factors are impacting colleges and universities nationwide to take actions to create a campus culture of access and inclusion for students with disabilities. Like other colleges and universities, the University of Minnesota is experiencing significant increases in the numbers of students with disabilities enrolling in our courses and programs, which has increased the demand for student accommodations and support. More than 50% of students registered with the UMTC Disability Resource Center (DRC) have a documented mental health condition. In 2016, 2,768 undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students registered with the UMTC DRC seeking support; by 2021 this number increased to 4,585 students, a dramatic increase of 66%. The UMM Disability Resource Center (DRC) has also experienced similar increases in the numbers of students seeking accommodations. In 2009, 8.7% of enrolled UMM students were registered with the DRC. In 2021, 17.1% of enrolled UMM students were registered with

the DRC. UMR and UMC have not experienced similar increases in the numbers of students seeking disability accommodations as UMTC and UMM.

The numbers provided by UMTC and UMM, however, represent only students who actually sought out services and support from these DRCs and do not represent all students with disabilities on campus, who constitute a far greater, yet unknown fraction of our students who are potentially in need of accommodations and support.

The challenge that must be met is to create a common understanding and shared responsiveness among all faculty and instructional staff with the UMN system Disability Resources/Centers (DR/C) to support disabled students in the learning environment. DR/C works with students, faculty, and staff with documented disabilities to facilitate access on an individualized case-by-case basis, as required by law. As each student with a disability is impacted differently by their condition, and each course has its own unique essential components and course requirements, the interactive process is complex. This process takes time and requires the committed engagement of students and their instructors. **The accommodation process is reactive** and requires retrofitting courses and programs through the individualized determination and implementation of reasonable accommodations. Conversely, **when teaching with access and inclusion is fully practiced as a universal goal and practice within the university learning environment, fewer individual accommodations may be required.** Adopting principles and practices of universal design for learning (UDL) is highly advocated as a means for accomplishing this goal. UDL is integral in fostering inclusive learning environments for all students to the greatest extent possible before having to accommodate specific needs of individual students. UDL may also include reviewing courses and programs to determine what is essential to learning outcomes. It may also include examining how policies may unintentionally be exclusionary or disabling to otherwise qualified students.

Purpose

The task force's charge was to provide recommendations for professional development and effective practices in implementing accommodations in the learning environment. This charge was intended to substantiate the University of Minnesota's system-wide commitment to ensure that all students have equitable access to and fully receive the benefits of their educational experience. These recommendations will be delivered to the Senate Disabilities Committee, Faculty Senate, and Executive Vice President and Provost for further consideration during the 2021-2022 academic year.

Scope of Work

The task force was established and convened in December 2020 with the goal of completing its work by summer 2021. In the first six months, the task force established guiding principles and work scope to address its charge. The task force requested an extension of its activities through December 31, 2021 to permit wider consultation with key faculty, staff, and students from UMN committees, colleges and professional schools, and student groups system-wide. The task force engaged in the following process to develop preliminary recommendations:

1. Identify and review current UMN resources (i.e., websites, online professional development options, guides) on effective practices in instructional design, disability accommodations, and testing.
2. Identify and review external websites, disability focused professional development programs, and related resources to inform task force discussions.
3. Identify gaps in resources and supports for faculty and instructional staff focused on effective practices on accommodations (i.e., universal design for learning).
4. Develop preliminary recommendations to address the needs of disabled students and the instructors who teach them.
5. Seek consultation with University Senate, Faculty Senate Committees, academic departments and student groups.
6. Establish procedures and a plan for system-wide faculty, staff, and student consultations on the professional development needs on student disability accommodations, including the consideration of a required professional development program for faculty and instructional staff.

System-wide Consultation Process and Common Themes

Task force members consulted with an estimated 300 instructors and students in total representing 22+ committees and academic departments across the University system to identify current disability accommodation practices, misunderstandings and challenges experienced by faculty and instructional staff, and assess whether broad support existed for a required professional development program. The task force developed a consultation process for obtaining input from faculty, instructional staff and students including a Disability Access and Accommodations Recommendations Summary, and consultation protocol and interview questions. The process entailed:

- Developing a consultation protocol that included questions focused on obtaining information concerning: challenges in accommodating and supporting students with disabilities, gaps in resources available to support students in courses, information or resources that would be useful in making accommodations, and whether they would support a required professional development option and, if so, how much time would be reasonable to commit to such professional development.
- Consultations were conducted from September - November 2021.
- Task force meetings were conducted to consolidate and synthesize information to identify common themes.
- This information was used, in part, to develop the task force recommendations.

Committees/Departments Consulted

Crookston Faculty Senate

Duluth Faculty Senate

Duluth Student Association

Morris Campus Assembly

Morris Consultative Committee - Campus Governance Committee

Morris Equity and Diversity - Campus Governance Committee

Morris Faculty and P&A Affairs - Campus Governance Committee

Rochester Faculty and Staff
Twin Cities Agricultural Education, Communication and Marketing Department
Twin Cities Disabled Student Cultural Center
Twin Cities Educational Psychology Department
Twin Cities Family Social Science Department Leadership Team
Twin Cities Forest Resources Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee
Twin Cities Kinesiology Department
Twin Cities OLPD Department
Twin Cities Program Area Coordinators in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Twin Cities Social Work Department
Twin Cities Youth Studies Department
Academy of Distinguished Teachers
Faculty Advisory Council of the Medical School
Faculty Consultative Committee
President's Initiative on Student Mental Health
University Senate on Disabilities Issues

Common Themes

Common themes identified from the consultations included:

1. Overall consensus supporting a required professional development program was attained.
2. Opinions on the length of the professional development program varied, but 30-45 minutes was viewed as optimal.
3. Clear themes were identified to serve as a foundation for the professional development program, emphasizing universal design principles and practices as a guiding framework. There was a desire for some of these to be in person, and to be locally relevant to the system campuses.
4. The development of supplemental professional development modules covering additional topics not covered in the required professional development was highly supported, with some instructors requesting face-to-face professional development options.
5. The faculty groups and the student groups advocated for the development of an informational module on their rights and responsibilities, use of DR/C services and supports, and productive ways of communication with instructors regarding their accommodation needs.
6. While it is outside of the scope of this report, discussions on the need for a systemic, consistent, University-wide approach to address media captioning and other forms of digital accessibility were noted.
7. Also outside of the scope of this report but discussed in many of the consultations was the need for separate professional development and deeper processes for graduate and professional school student accommodations, including accommodations for orals, written prelims, and dissertation defenses.

The following recommendations are based on a careful, intentional, deliberative process that engaged members of the task force who represent a broad spectrum of members of the system-wide University community. These recommendations have also been vetted by a representative sample of faculty, instructional staff, and students.

Recommendations

The task force recommends the following:

Recommendation #1: Required Professional Development Module(s)

All University faculty, instructors, and instructional-support staff, including graduate teaching assistants who are instructors of record, will be required to complete an accessible, foundational, online professional development program/module for supporting access and inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom. For currently employed individuals, this will be within three months of the release of the professional development modules. For newly hired individuals, these modules will be required within three months of their start date.

This required professional development must represent and reflect the needs, processes, and resources of all UMN campuses. The task force recommends that this professional development consist of three modules of approximately 15-20 minutes each. These modules will include case studies and scenario-based problem-solving and reflection opportunities and direct faculty and instructors to additional resources. The modules will be administered through an accessible learning management system. Modules will be developed in-house for use on our existing online learning management systems (e.g. Canvas). The online learning management system used to deliver the modules, as well as the modules themselves, will be accessible to all learners. These required online professional development modules will need to be reviewed centrally at least every two years to address emerging paradigms and practices. Collegiate/Campus leaders will be notified of any significant content changes following each review.

Based on the task force discussions and consultation with the UMN community system-wide, we recommend the following focused topics for the three proposed modules:

- **Module #1: Foundations of Disability, Access, and Inclusion:** Create an accessible, foundational online professional development module on topics such as the role of disability legislation in accommodating disabled students in higher education, the disability accommodation/interactive process, the roles of students, instructors, and the DR/C in the interactive process, and the roles of privacy and confidentiality in the disability accommodation process. Links will be provided to address specific processes and resources on each UMN campus.
- **Module #2: Accommodation Basics for Faculty and Instructors:** Create an accessible, foundational online professional development module on topics such as the interactive process, the role of the letter of accommodation in communicating the impacts of a student's disability, the barriers in the learning environment, and accommodations that have been determined to be reasonable given the impacts and barriers described in the letter as well as roles and responsibilities for implementing each disability accommodation.
- **Module #3: Accessibility and Universal Design for All Students:** Create an accessible, foundational online professional development module on topics such as universal design for learning, strategies for creating more welcoming and inclusive learning environments, and strategies for choosing accessible and inclusive course materials. This module will also include

links to existing resources such as Accessible U, the Digital Accessibility Badging courses, Teaching with Access and Inclusion, and Center for Educational Innovation programming and courses, and other UMN specific campus resources that will be embedded in this module for instructors who wish to learn more about these topics.

Beyond the initial baseline training requirement, we recommend that the specified audiences re-complete the training minimally every two years following any significant content changes. College and campus leaders in partnership with unit heads will have the discretion to require training more frequently than when the professional development module content is updated. For example, requirements might be triggered by the results of ongoing performance evaluations, or a change in teaching assignment that places an individual in a course that typically enrolls a large number of students receiving DR/C services.

Recommendation #2: Supplemental Professional Development Modules

The University will provide a series of 2-3 supplemental professional development modules that serve as a resource beyond the required modules as identified in recommendation #1. Topics include:

- How to create a welcoming environment for all students, including students who disclose disabilities; how to discuss disabilities, accommodations and student needs;
- How to implement procedures for improving the accessibility of teaching and assessment (both retroactively in existing courses, and prospectively in the design of new courses);
- How to better communicate processes for addressing more complex accommodations such as flexible attendance and flexible assignment deadlines;
- How to make accommodations in active learning;
- How to make courses more accessible to students with vision and hearing disabilities; information on disability conditions such as neurodiversity;
- How to address what is reasonable in non-classroom activities (e.g., experiential learning, teaching practicums, student teaching);
- How to talk to students who are struggling.

These supplemental professional development modules will include exercises and case studies. It is important to note that some instructors suggested in-person opportunities for supplemental professional development. In-person opportunities would need to be carefully considered regarding resources available to provide this type of opportunity system-wide.

Recommendation #3: Recommended Informational Module for Students

All students—both with and without disabilities—will have access to, and will be encouraged to complete, an online informational module. Topics include:

- An overview of the rights and responsibilities that individuals with disabilities and their instructors have for accommodations;
- The role of DR/Cs on their respective campus and students', instructors', and the DR/C's role in the interactive process used to determine and implement reasonable accommodations;
- Tips and tools for self-advocacy;
- Resources available to students on each UMN campus.

The module will be administered through an accessible learning management system. This online professional development module will need to be updated at least every two years to address emerging paradigms and practices.

Recommendation #4: The task force recommends that funding be provided for the development of these professional development modules. If the recommendations are approved, the next step is to develop an implementation action plan (see below) to identify needed content expertise and capacity to develop, administer, and update the professional development modules. There was a desire to formalize participation in the professional development program, so that individuals could receive institutional recognition (i.e., a certificate, a badge, evidence for merit and recognition, etc.) or as evidence of merit and promotion (i.e., inclusion in 7.12 statements) for their work on this topic.

Implementation Actions

The following outlines the basic organizational systems, structures, and resources needed to effectively implement Task Force recommendations #1-4 across all University of Minnesota campuses:

- Determine and charge appropriate UMN systems units (Office of Equity and Diversity, Disability Resources/Center; Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action; Office of the General Counsel; Center for Educational Innovation; and designated student and faculty groups on each campus) with the planning, development, marketing, delivery, and evaluation of the professional development and related tasks outlined in the recommendations;
- Consult subject matter experts on each campus (e.g., Disability Resources/Centers, members of the Senate Disability Issues Committee and Equity, Access and Diversity Committee, other units, and key faculty and staff) to determine the content of the professional development modules;
- Consult with instructional designers, academic technologists, and teaching consultants to ensure that the design of the modules utilizes promising practices and active learning strategies;
- Throughout the design and development phases, consult with faculty/instructors and faculty governance across all campuses to create an atmosphere of collaboration that will create an optimal environment for successful implementation and, ultimately, culture change;
- Establish a budget and timeline to accomplish specific development and implementation milestones;
- Ensure the training can be implemented system-wide, at all campuses;
- Develop a plan for the implementation, evaluation, and sustainability of these activities.