Universal Design for Instruction Fact Sheet

FacultyWare
Tools for the
Universal Design
of Instruction

What is Universal Design for Instruction?

Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) is an approach to teaching that consists of the proactive design and use of inclusive instructional strategies that benefit a broad range of learners including students with disabilities. The nine Principles of UDI© provide a framework for college faculty to use when designing or revising instruction to be responsive to diverse student learners and to minimize the need for "special" accommodations and retrofitted changes to the learning environment. UDI operates on the premise that the planning and delivery of instruction as well as the evaluation of learning can incorporate inclusive attributes that embrace diversity in learners without compromising academic standards.

Where did the idea of Universal Design for Instruction originate?

UDI is based on the concept of Universal Design (UD), an idea that originated in the field of architecture to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse public. When a UD approach is applied to the creation of products and environments, consumer access is broadened because inclusive features are incorporated into the design from the outset. By anticipating a variety of needs, ages, abilities and disabilities, planners embrace the notion of diversity as an essential element of their work. Examples of universally designed environments and products are increasingly present in our daily lives: curb cuts on sidewalks, closed caption text on television screens, electronic doors for entryways to buildings. One of the important aspects of UD is that its inclusive elements benefit all users, not just those with disabilities.

Today's college student population is increasingly diverse in educational background, age, gender, culture, ability, disability, and primary language. Faculty who are designing instructional experiences and supportive learning environments have an opportunity to enhance instructional accessibility. Universal Design for Instruction integrates the "usability" features of

Universal Design with research on effective instructional practices. An important feature of Universal Design for Instruction is that its inclusive instructional design elements benefit a broad range of learners.

Why should faculty implement Universal Design for Instruction?

Traditional means of meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities have significant limitations. Classroom accommodations, such as extra time on tests or the provision of a notetaker, are typically changes that are retrofitted to a course in order to minimize the impact of the disability. While nondiscriminatory in intent, accommodations are rarely based on pedagogical decisions by faculty concerning the best way to promote student learning. UDI offers a proactive alternative for ensuring access to higher education for college students with disabilities. By providing faculty with a framework and tools for designing inclusive college instruction, the dialogue surrounding college students with disabilities changes from a focus on compliance, accommodations, and nondiscrimination to an emphasis on teaching and learning. Learning environments can <u>never</u> be entirely accessible to all students' needs since some students will continue to need individualized accommodations. But <u>all</u> learning environments can be made more accessible and inclusive.

How do instructors apply Universal Design for Instruction in their classrooms?

The nine Principles of UDI© (available at www.facultyware.uconn.edu) are based on the literature and research on UD and effective instruction. They provide a framework for faculty reflection that can be used in a number of ways. Depending on faculty needs, the Principles can be applied to the design of a new course or used to reflect upon practices in an existing class. They can inform a variety of teaching issues and approaches ranging from assessing student learning, to broadening learning experiences, to considering how an inclusive classroom climate can be established. All nine principles will not apply to all aspects of instruction.

However, when viewing a classroom as a whole, each of the principles will come into play. Although the Principles of UDI© can serve as a useful reference point for experienced faculty from diverse academic disciplines, they have particular relevance for junior faculty and graduate teaching assistants seeking support and direction as emerging teachers.

Does Universal Design for Instruction mean that there is only one "universal" way to design a learning experience?

No, UDI is not a synonym for "one-size-fits-all" instruction. The Principles of UDI© are designed to support faculty in creating courses that accommodate a wide spectrum of student needs. College classrooms of today are enriched by the presence of students with differing abilities, goals, experiences, and backgrounds. Higher education itself is characterized by diversity. College instruction varies with respect to the format, style, pace, and expectations for learning. Faculty benefit from support for responding to student diversity while maintaining their academic standards and autonomy as the designers of their courses. The word "universal" refers to a flexible design that is specifically created to be used in diverse ways.

Is Universal Design for Instruction another term for using technology in instruction?

Technology can be a critical tool for creating inclusive classrooms. Certainly, digital media provide for great flexibility in instructional format and expand access to resources that benefit many learners. However, UDI focuses on many elements of pedagogy and encourages examination of teaching including the daily tasks of planning and delivering instruction as well as assessing student learning.

How is the construct of Universal Design for Instruction being developed?

As part of a three-year federal grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, the University of Connecticut's Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability began development of the construct of UDI through an extensive review of the literature and research in the areas of effective teaching, universal design, and diversity in higher education. As a result, nine Principles of UDI© have been proposed for informing college instruction. The Principles are undergoing rigorous construct validation through a series of procedures involving students with disabilities, college

faculty recognized as outstanding teachers, and college administrators. Through critical practice, dialogue, and student and faculty feedback, the Principles continue to be refined and validated.

In addition, instructional products and methods are being submitted by faculty from many disciplines across the country for possible publication on the Center's UDI web site located at www.facultyware.uconn.edu. Exemplary instructional products are accepted for publication based upon a two-tiered juried review process. Two distinct Review Boards, one consisting of experts in UDI and one comprised of faculty and administrators from colleges across the country, provide ratings and feedback on each instructional product. Visitors to the Facultyware web site can use these products as examples of how the Principles of Universal Design for Instruction© can be applied to the task of designing inclusive learning environments and experiences for today's diverse college classrooms.

How can I find out more about UDI?

More information about UDI and the UDI Project at the University of Connecticut's Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability is available at: www.facultyware.uconn.edu.

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