Universal Design of Learning

The average classroom today consists of students with varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds; students whose first language is not English; students who are older than the traditional college student; and students with an array of learning, attention, psychological, and physical disabilities.

How can faculty meet the needs of an increasingly diverse body of learners?

Many recent principles for designing instruction and instructional environments to address student diversity have been based on the principles of Universal Design (UD). UD represents a cohesive approach to promoting inclusion, one that considers, on an ongoing basis, how curriculum, instruction, and assessment can be designed to meet the learning needs of the greatest number of students without compromising academic rigor. The concept of universal design offers a more comprehensive approach to good teaching.

From a neurological standpoint, people learn in distinct ways regardless of their backgrounds. People recognize, strategize, and affectively process information using many different strategies, and no two people have the same strengths and weaknesses in their learning styles. In short, people do not have one general learning aptitude, but many learning abilities; thus, a disability or challenge in one area may be compensated for by extraordinary abilities in another.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an instructional method that can address the diverse learning needs in today’s classroom. The framework of UDL consists of instructional approaches that provide students with choices and alternatives in the materials, content, tools, context, and supports they use. The three basic principles of UDL are: multiple means of representation and presentation, multiple means of strategic engagement, and multiple means of expression. Multiple means of representation refers to multi-modal teaching, relying on a mixture of mediums (e.g., lecture, video, group discussions) to relay concepts. Multiple means of strategic engagement refers to maximizing student learning through motivation and relevancy so students have opportunities to interact with and learn the content. Lastly, multiple means of expression allows students to demonstrate their learning through multiple assessment opportunities through multiple assessment opportunities (e.g., multimedia projects instead of written papers, or three quizzes and a project instead of one final exam).

The UDL framework challenges educators to rethink the structure of their curriculum and empowers them with the flexibility to serve a diverse population of learners.

Resources: [www.msudenver.edu/access/faculty/universaldesignforlearningudl/](http://www.msudenver.edu/access/faculty/universaldesignforlearningudl/)
Universal Design of Student Services

Diversity (inclusive excellence) has been identified as one of the four distinct pillars of the MSU Denver’s strategic plan. The plan calls on us to embed practices and philosophies that encourage inclusive excellence in every aspect of the organization. UD is a promising practice our institution should consider for helping make our students service units more welcoming, accessible and usable for everyone. UD means that services are intentionally designed to assist a broader range of individuals that include various characteristics including abilities, disabilities, ages, learning styles, cultures and native languages.

A checklist of UD strategies was developed, tested and applied in collaboration with more than 20 postsecondary institutions nationwide as part of a the Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology (DO-IT) Center (Burgstahler, 2007; DO-IT, n.d.a) project to improve the accessibility of student service units. Listed below are categories of UD applications that were developed during the project.

- **Planning, policies and evaluation.** Consider diversity issues as you plan and evaluate services.
- **Physical environments and products.** Ensure physical access, comfort, and safety in an environment that is welcoming to visitors with a variety of abilities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, and ages.
- **Staff.** Make sure staff are prepared to work with all students.
- **Information resources and technology.** Ensure that publications and web sites welcome a diverse group, content is accessible to all visitors, and technology in the service area is accessible to everyone.
- **Events.** Ensure that everyone can participate in events sponsored by the unit.

Employing UD principles can minimize but does not eliminate the need for accommodations. There will always be a need for some accommodations, such as sign language interpreters for students who are deaf. However, applying universal design concepts will help ensure full and equal access to services and information for most students and minimize the need for accommodations. For example, designing and creating web content in an accessible format from the start means that we are practicing inclusive excellence and no retrofitting is necessary if a student with a visual impairment attempts to access the content.