Universal Design for Learning: University Faculty Stages of Concerns and Levels of Use; A Faculty Action-Research Project

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Increasingly, students with disabilities are attending postsecondary schools. As with any form of diversity, there are also pedagogical challenges and opportunities that go beyond accommodation and support the goal of learning for all. This paper describes the results of the data collection phase of a faculty action-research project that grew from a core group of university faculty members’ concerns about how best to support students with disabilities on campus. A researcher-developed survey was used to identify faculty members’ stages of concern about and use of nine Universal Design for Learning guidelines in their classes. Findings reveal that the 46 respondents were at the stage of being largely concerned with learning more about the nine guidelines. The results provide a snapshot of initial stages of concern. Recommendations for action are provided.

Keywords: students with disabilities, universal design, faculty concerns, level of use

Background
Federal laws, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004) and the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), have affirmed the rights of persons with disabilities to equal protection and access to the U.S. educational system. These policies are exemplars of a shift in society’s attitude toward and acceptance of “disability as a natural and normal part of the human experience” (Silverstein, 2000, p. 1695). Over time, the number of students with disabilities in higher education has trended upward, at least in part, because of federal policies and the changing zeitgeist. Recent data indicate that “eleven percent of undergraduates reported having a disability in 2007-2008” (Snyder & Dillow, 2011, p. 282). While these students were similar to their peers in terms of race, gender, age, and schools attended, they reported having a wide range of disabilities (U.S. GAO, 2009).

The challenges faced by postsecondary institutions in supporting students with disabilities cover a broad range of issues, among them helping students and faculty to understand students’ legal rights and providing accommodations and specialized services that cover a multitude of disability related challenges that students might face. The significance of the challenges faced has been described in a U.S. GAO (2009) report with one outcome being a federal workgroup that undertook the task of developing and implementing coordinated technical assistance for schools. As with any form of diversity, there are also pedagogical challenges and opportunities that go beyond accommodation and support the goal of learning for all.

Local Context and Purpose of the Study
So too, anecdotal information from the first author’s University faculty, staff, and students underline significant challenges faced by several undergraduate students with disabilities on campus as well as the faculty members who teach them. The identified issues—both large and small—including barriers to physical mobility, use of various educational technologies, and adapting instruction. This study grew from concern, on the part of a core group of five faculty members in one of the