



# Equal Access: Universal Design of Libraries

A checklist for making libraries welcoming, accessible, and usable  
by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

Libraries play an important role in ensuring that everyone has access to information in printed and electronic forms. In making these resources accessible and useful to everyone, principles of universal design (UD) can be employed.

## 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. "Person with a disability" means "any person who has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities including walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working, has a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment."

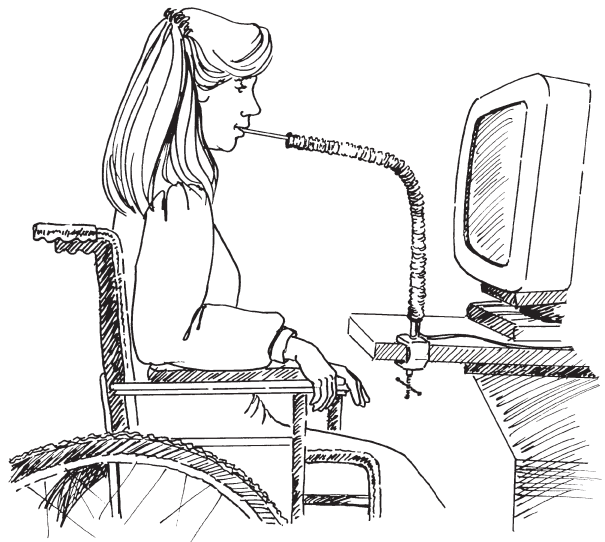
## Universal Design

Universal design (UD) 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, language, culture, and others. Keep in mind that students and other visitors may have learning disabilities or visual, speech, hearing, and mobility impairments. Making your library 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 library 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, respond to specific requests for accommodations in a timely manner, and know whom they can contact if they have disability-related questions.



## Guidelines and Examples

The following questions can guide you in making your library accessible to everyone. This content does not provide legal advice. To help clarify issues, consult your institution's legal counsel or ADA/504 compliance officer or call the regional Office for Civil Rights (OCR) can also help clarify issues.



## 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?
- Does the library have a written policy and description of services for patrons with disabilities, including information on how to request accommodations?
- Is accessibility included in the procurement of library holdings?
- Does the library have a procedure in place that ensures timely response to requests for disability-related accommodations and other special assistance?
- 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 library that are wheelchair-accessible and clearly identified?
- Are all levels of the library connected via an accessible route of travel, or are there procedures to assist patrons with mobility impairments in retrieving materials from inaccessible locations?



- 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 library?
- Are information desks and facilities such as book returns wheelchair accessible?
- Are aisles kept wide and clear of obstructions for the safety of users who have mobility or visual impairments?
- Are there ample high-contrast, large print directional signs throughout the library? Are shelf and stack identifiers provided in large print and Braille formats? Are call numbers on book spines printed in large type? Is equipment marked with large print and Braille labels?
- Is adequate light available?
- Are private study areas available for patrons with disabilities who need to bring personal equipment, who need the assistance of a reader, or who are distracted by noise and movement around them?

## Library Staff

Make sure staff are prepared to work with all patrons.

- Are all staff members aware of issues related to communicating with patrons of different races and ethnicities, ages, and abilities? (See Communication Hints at the end of this publication for suggestions.)
- Are staff trained in the use of the Telecommunications Relay Service, as well as assistive computer technology provided in the library?
- Are staff trained in policies and procedures for providing accommodations to patrons with disabilities?
- Do staff members have ready access to a list of resources for patrons with disabilities?



- Are staff knowledgeable about federally-funded Talking Book and Braille Libraries and other organizations that provide relevant services to patrons with disabilities?
- Do service staff wear large-print name badges?
- If there are staff members with sign language skills, are they identified to other staff members so that, when available, they can assist patrons who are deaf?

### **Information Resources and Technology**

Ensure that publications and websites welcome a diverse group and content is accessible to everyone.

- Can the library's electronic and information resources, including web pages, online catalogs, indexes, and full-text databases and CD-ROMs, be accessed with a variety of adaptive computer technologies such as screen readers?
- Are librarians prepared to assist patrons with inaccessible electronic resources by providing consultations or materials in other formats?
- Are reader and research assistants available to patrons with visual impairments?
- Are reference and circulation services available by both phone and email?
- Are resource delivery services available for patrons unable to leave their homes, retirement facilities, or hospitals?
- Are applications for the nationwide network of Talking Book and Braille Libraries available for patrons with print-related disabilities?
- 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, "Our library's goal is to make all materials and activities accessible. Please inform project staff of accessibility barriers you encounter and of accommodations that will make information resources accessible to you."
- Are all printed library publications available (immediately or in a timely manner) in alternate formats such as Braille, large print, and electronic text?
- Are key documents provided in languages other than English?
- Do electronic resources, including web pages, adhere to accessibility guidelines adopted by your institution or library? *Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology* ([www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/](http://www.access-board.gov/sec508/guide/)) and *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines* (WCAG) ([www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag.php](http://www.w3.org/WAI/intro/wcag.php)) are most commonly used. For general information about making your website accessible to everyone, consult *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* video and publication at [www.uw.edu/doit/Video/www.html](http://www.uw.edu/doit/Video/www.html).
- Do you include a statement on your website affirming your commitment to accessible design? For example, "We strive to make our website universally accessible. We provide text descriptions of graphics and photos. Video clips are open-captioned and audio-described, providing access to users who can't hear the audio or see the video, respectively. Suggestions for increasing the accessibility of these pages are welcome."
- Do videos developed or used in the library have captions? For more information, consult *Creating Video and Multimedia Products That Are Accessible to People with Sensory Impairments* at [www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Technology/vid\\_sensory.html](http://www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Technology/vid_sensory.html).
- 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 wrist and forearm rests available to assist some people with mobility impairments?
- 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 feels welcome and can participate in events sponsored by the organization.

- 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](http://www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/admin.html)). 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](mailto: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/](http://www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/). A 10-minute video, *Equal Access: Campus Libraries*, demonstrates key points summarized in this publication. It may be freely viewed online and purchased in DVD format from DO-IT. Consult [www.uw.edu/doit/Video/](http://www.uw.edu/doit/Video/) for access to this and other videos that may be of interest. Permission is granted to reproduce DO-IT videos and publications for educational, noncommercial purposes provided the source is acknowledged.

For more information about making your library accessible to everyone, consult *The Student Services Conference Room* at [www.uw.edu/doit/Conf/](http://www.uw.edu/doit/Conf/). It includes 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](http://www.uw.edu/doit/Resources/udesign.html) or *The Center for Universal Design in Education* at [www.uw.edu/doit/CUDE/](http://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](http://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 U.S. Department of Education, and the State of Washington.

For further information, to be placed on the DO-IT mailing list, request materials in an alternate format, or to make comments or suggestions about DO-IT publications or web pages, contact:

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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.