California Community Colleges

SYSTEM WEBINAR SUMMARY (MARCH 2022): UNIVERSAL DESIGN, ACCESSIBILITY & MORE

The primary item on the agenda was ensuring that colleges are providing a student-centered support ecosystem for students with disabilities. While reasonable accommodations are the law and Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPS) is a categorical program aimed at serving students with disabilities, colleges must do more to ensure a truly equitable student experience through structural change, as part of their Guided Pathways and Equity work. The webinar included a panel of students with disabilities, and several college presenters sharing strategies for accessible course design.

What are Some Challenges for Students with Disabilities?

- Accessing learning materials, which may not function adequately with screen readers or other assistive technology.
- Addressing mental health issues, such as anxiety that may interfere with students' ability to focus and meet deadlines.
- Navigating bureaucratic processes like requesting accommodation letters for faculty, which can place additional burden and stress on students.

What Impact did the Pandemic Have on DSPS Students?

- Enrollment of DSPS students declined by 21% from 2019-20 to 2020-21, a much larger drop than the 11% decline in overall systemwide enrollment in that period.
- The decline in DSPS enrollment likely understates the disproportionate impact, as some students do not disclose a disability or seek accommodations.
- The pivot to remote learning increased problems with inaccessible class content, and students with disabilities struggled with basic needs and were sometimes excluded from initial disbursements of emergency funding related to unit load and GPA requirements.

How Can Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Help Students?

- UDL is a teaching approach that accommodates the needs and abilities of all learners and eliminates unnecessary hurdles in the learning process; it is helpful to all learners, not just students with disabilities.
- UDL ensures that all students are able to access and navigate course materials, avoids loss of time to provide accommodations, and ensures an equitable experience.

- [UDL guidelines](#) call for providing students with *multiple means of perceiving, comprehending, and expressing their learning*, which allows them to engage with material in ways that most benefit them while improving in areas where their skills are not as strong.

How Can Faculty Implement UDL in Their Course Design?

- Provide options for:
  - *Perception* – use flexible and multiple ways of presenting information (e.g., using PowerPoint as visual supplement to lectures).
  - *Comprehension* – allow for multiple ways of engaging in course activities (e.g., both individual and group work activities).
  - *Expression* – accept multiple ways of demonstrating learning (e.g., choice among essay, outline or diagram, or between a final exam or final paper).
- Make accommodations that can aid all students, including those with disabilities, such as:
  - Using captions to reinforce auditory information with visual input, which significantly increases content retention.
  - Making syllabi and other materials available in multiple file formats (e.g., both PDF and Word), which allows students to modify fonts, spacing, colors to suit their needs.
  - Adding headings to content, which makes it visually more appealing, easier to follow, and more navigable for students using assistive software.
- To keep content usable and effective, consider the basic principle of **POUR**:
  - **P—**is it perceivable? Use labels and alt text.
  - **O—**is it operable? Use headings, links, and tabbed navigation.
  - **U—**is it understandable? Write clearly, define terms and acronyms.
  - **R—**is it robust? Make it work with multiple types of accessibility technology.
- Use available [resources](#) and [checklists](#) to design accessible courses.

What are Best Practices for Campuswide Implementation?

- Leverage all resources—@One trainings, [Accessibility Center Workshops](#), and funded [software and other tools](#) (e.g., Otter.ai, Canvas Studio, Equidox).
- Conduct frequent outreach and training, especially for adjunct faculty.
- Identify and work with campus champions to increase awareness of UDL.
- Invite DSPS to division meetings to de-mystify accessibility processes and services.
- Build capacity outside of DSPS so all feel empowered in providing access, and embed accessibility supports throughout the institution, not just in DSPS.
- Ensure collaboration between DSPS and campus tutoring.
- Shift the focus from Disability to Accessibility.