# Equal Access: Universal Design of Recruitment and Undergraduate Admissions

**A checklist for making recruitment and admissions activities welcoming and accessible to everyone**
by Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

The admissions office is the gateway to two-year colleges, vocational technical institutes, and universities, and it plays a central role in informing students and parents about campus programs and services. People with disabilities represent a significant and visible portion of those seeking information and admission. This publication identifies
- key access issues for recruitment and admissions offices,
- disability-related issues with respect to admission policies and activities, and
- resources for additional information.

## 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 civil rights laws and corresponding regulations, no otherwise qualified person with a disability shall, solely by reason of his/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. Program participants, as defined in the ADA and Section 504, include not only current and prospective students but also parents or other individuals with disabilities who seek information or participate in recruitment- or admissions-sponsored activities.

Prospective and current students as well as visitors may have learning disabilities and visual, speech, hearing, and mobility impairments. Keep in mind that most students with disabilities have nonvisible disabilities such as learning disabilities, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), depression, and health impairments. With respect to recruitment and admissions office policies and procedures, ADA and Section 504 prohibit preadmission inquiries about disabling conditions, and prohibit limiting the number or proportion of students with disabilities admitted or using tests or criteria for admission that have a disproportionate adverse effect on applicants with disabilities.

## Universal Design

To make your admissions or recruitment office accessible and useful to everyone, employ principles of universal design (UD). Universal design 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, ages, reading levels, learning styles, native languages, cultures, and other characteristics. Keep in mind that students and other visitors may have learning disabilities or visual, speech, hearing, and mobility impairments. Preparing your program to be 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. Make sure everyone feels welcome, and can
- get to the 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 campus service unit more inclusive. This content does not provide legal advice. To help clarify legal issues, consult your campus legal counsel or ADA/504 compliance officer or call your regional Office for Civil Rights (OCR).

### 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?

— Do you have policies and procedures that ensure access to facilities, printed materials, computers, and electronic resources for people with disabilities?

— Is accessibility considered in the procurement process?

— Do you have a procedure to ensure a timely response to requests for disability-related accommodations?

— 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 admissions office that are wheelchair-accessible and clearly identified?

— Are there ample high-contrast large print directional signs to and throughout the office?

— Do elevators have auditory, visual, and tactile signals and are elevator controls accessible from a seated position?

— Is adequate light available?

— Are wheelchair-accessible restrooms with well marked signs available in or near the admissions office?

— Is at least part of a service desk or counter in the admissions office at a height accessible from a seated position?

— Are there private meeting areas where students can discuss disability-related needs confidentially?

— Are all levels of the facility connected via an accessible route of travel?

Consult the *ADA Checklist for Readily Achievable Barrier Removal* at *www.ada.gov/checkweb.htm* for more suggestions. For computing facilities, consult the *Equal Access: Universal Design of Computer Labs* video and publication at *www. uw.edu/doit/Video/equal.html*.

### Staff

Make sure staff are prepared to work with current and potential students.

— Do all staff know how to respond to requests for disability-related accommodations, such as sign language interpreters, large-print publications, or sighted guide assistance for a visitor who is blind?

— Are staff members greeting the public in person or by telephone aware of issues related to communicating with visitors and students who have disabilities? (See Communication Hints for suggestions.)

— Do staff have basic knowledge of accessible travel routes to effectively direct visitors with disabilities to the office and to other key locations on campus?

— Do staff have access to a current list of key campus offices or programs that offer disability-related assistance in order to respond to telephone, email, or visitor requests for information or assistance? This list might include contacts for disabled student services, wheelchair-accessible transportation, assistive technology, accessible housing, and special types of financial aid.
— Is the office webmaster knowledgeable about accessible web design? Consult the video and publication *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* (*www.uw.edu/doit/Video/www.html)* for further information.

**Information Resources and Technology**
Ensure that publications and websites welcome a diverse group that the content is accessible to everyone.
— Do pictures in your publications and website include people with diverse characteristics with respect to race, gender, age, and disability?
— Is an adjustable-height table available for each type of workstation to assist students who use wheelchairs or are small or large in stature?
— 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, you could include the following statement, "Our goal is to make all materials and services accessible. Please inform staff of accessibility barriers you encounter and request accommodations that will make activities and information resources accessible to you."
— Are staff members aware of accessibility options (e.g., enlarge text feature) included in computer operating systems and of assistive technology available in the facility?

— Are all printed publications available (immediately or in a timely manner) in alternate formats such as Braille, large print, and electronic text? This includes admission applications and instructions, housing applications, and academic program applications as well as the campus catalogue and other key publications such as academic department publications distributed by admissions.
— Are procedures in place for a timely response to requests for assistive technology?
— Are key documents provided in language(s) other than English?
— Does the campus map include sufficient disability access information (e.g., disabled parking locations, accessible building entrances) to assist prospective and newly admitted students and other visitors with disabilities who are unfamiliar with the campus?
— Are videos used by admissions and recruitment staff captioned? This applies to materials used on- or off-campus for exhibits, group presentations, or other events. Additionally, if videos about the campus are sent to prospective students, captioned formats should be available upon request and so noted in admissions publications.
— Do electronic resources, including web pages and online admissions forms, adhere to accessibility guidelines or standards adopted by the institution or your office? *Section 508 Standards for Accessible Electronic and Information Technology* (*www.access-board.gov/508.htm*) and World Wide Web Consortium's *Web Content Accessibility Guidelines* (*www.w3.org/WAI/*) are most commonly used. For general information about making your website accessible to everyone, consult the *World Wide Access: Accessible Web Design* video and publication at *www.uw.edu/doit/Video/www.html*.

— 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?



### Recruitment Events and Campus Tours

Ensure that everyone feels welcome and can participate in all recruitment events and campus tours. If an event or program is sponsored by your office, publicize procedures about and arrange for accommodations for participants with disabilities.

— Does the admissions office have procedures in place to handle requests by visitors with disabilities for a special tour or an additional tour to get more detailed information about campus access features? These requests may best be met in cooperation with the disabled student services office.
— Is information about how to request disability-related accommodations included in publications promoting events?
— Are procedures in place to ensure a timely response to requests for accommodations for on- and off-campus events? Common accommodation requests include sign language interpreters, alternate document formats, and accessible seating.
— Are events that are sponsored by your office located in wheelchair-accessible facilities? Is the accessible entrance and travel route clearly marked?

— Does your listing of recruitment and outreach organizations and schools include organizations for individuals with disabilities? This list could include community independent living programs, state vocational rehabilitation agencies, high school-to-college transition programs, high school-high tech programs, the state agency or commission for the blind, and local chapters of the Learning Disabilities Association. Your campus disabled students services office can assist you in identifying local and state organizations such as these.

### Applications and Disclosure

Review your applications for admission to ensure that disability-related issues are handled properly.

— Are you careful not to ask preadmission questions about disabling conditions or accommodation needs?
— Have you been careful not to impose limitations on the number or proportion of students with disabilities who may be admitted to the university or to an academic department or major?
— In publications and on web pages, do you tell applicants how to request accommodations for admissions tests?
— If an applicant voluntarily discloses disabilities on the application or appends disability-related information with the application, does the admissions office have a procedure to separate it from the applicant's file and place it in a separate, secure location where it can later be forwarded to the disabled student services office?
— Do admissions counselors avoid seeking out disability-related information or accommodation needs when an applicant visits or calls the admissions office?
— Are campus tour staff trained to act as sighted guides for blind individuals? The campus disabled student services office may provide assistance in this area.

## Evaluation of Applications and Appeals

— Have those who evaluate applications received training about disabling conditions, possible educational impacts of disability, and how these may be reflected in prior educational records? This is especially important if personal or educational impacts are discussed by applicants in their essays.

— Do those who evaluate applications understand that some students with disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, brain injuries, sensory impairments) may have received formal approval for course substitutions (e.g., for foreign language)? The admissions office should have an approach for handling these situations and communicate the review policy to admissions staff and prospective students. It may also be advisable to form understandings between two- and four-year campuses in your state, especially if there are existing articulation agreements between institutions.

— If your admissions office accepts or considers appeals from applicants who have been denied admission, do you have procedures in place to give adequate consideration to those appeals where disability-related factors are involved?



## Informing Applicants and New Students about Accommodation Resources

— Do you describe disability-related services in admission materials so that individuals may seek out further information?

— Do the admissions office and the disabled student services office have a procedure to inform applicants and newly admitted students about disability-related services? Some admissions offices include a separate tear-off request form that the applicant can send directly to the disabled student services office to request information. Similar information should be included in new student information packets. Students should be encouraged to contact this office long before their first academic term begins because it takes time to process disability-related documentation, and determine and arrange for accommodations.

## Special Admission and Review Programs

— Do you have special admission programs (such as educational opportunity programs for low-income students, or TRIO student support services), and are they equally available to eligible individuals with disabilities who do not meet regular admission requirements? Reasonable accommodations should be provided.

— Do you have special admission programs or review procedures designed only for people with disabilities or for a specific disability group? Numerous campuses have these programs to which 1) applicants who are denied or not eligible for regular admission may apply or 2) individuals may voluntarily opt to apply for a special program and regular admission at the same time. There have been some Office for Civil Rights (OCR) cases involving complaints on the operation and practices of these special programs. Contact your OCR office for findings. Some such programs are acceptable so long as individuals are not denied the opportunity to apply for regular admission, are not required to participate

in the special program in order to receive academic accommodations required under the ADA or Section 504, and are not required to pay additional fees or surcharges for accommodations. These special programs should work closely with admissions and disabled student services offices regarding communication of admission and application procedures, program operation, and provision of accommodations.

### Orientation for New Students

— Are orientation programs (whether operated by or coordinated between admissions, dean of students, or new student orientation programs) for new students accessible to students with disabilities? Consider factors such as accessible housing; accessible transportation if groups of new students are provided with transportation to off-campus orientation activities; and disability accommodations, including alternate format for print documents, interpreters for deaf students, and accessible seating.
— Have peer leaders received training and awareness in disability etiquette and communication?
— Do you have places on registration forms to request disability accommodation?
— Is there a supplemental orientation program for new students with disabilities sponsored by the disability resources office? If so, is it also publicized by the admissions office in the publicity for the larger orientation?

### Readmission Requests or Applications

Some admissions offices and academic departments have a central role in reviewing readmission requests or applications from former students who were suspended or on a leave of absence.

— Do the admissions office and relevant academic departments have procedures in place to review requests or applications in order to appropriately consider disability-related issues presented by applicants?

— In the readmissions process, do you consider the possibility of future accommodations or changes in a student's disability (i.e., new or different medications) that would result in a different outcome for the student's success?

### Checklist Updates

This checklist was field-tested at more than twenty postsecondary institutions nationwide (see *www.uw.edu/doit/Brochures/Academics/admin. html*). The results of a nationwide survey to test face-validity of checklist items led to further refinement of this checklist. To increase the usefulness of this working document, send suggestions to *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/*. A 14-minute video, *Equal Access: Student Services*, demonstrates key points summarized in this publication. An online version may be freely viewed at *www.uw.edu/ doit/Video/ea_student.html* or purchased in DVD format. Permission is granted to reproduce DO-IT videos and publications for educational, noncommercial purposes provided the source is acknowledged.

*The Student Services Conference Room* at *www. uw.edu/doit/Conf/* includes a collection of documents and videos to help you make student services accessible to everyone. They include 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* or *The Center for Universal Design in Education* at *www.uw.edu/doit/CUDE/*. The book *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice, Second Edition* published by Harvard Education Press shares perspectives of UD leaders nationwide. Learn more or order online at *www.uw.edu/doit/universal-design-higher-education-principles-practice-1*.

## 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. Primary funding for DO-IT is provided by the National Science Foundation, the State of Washington, and the U.S. Department of Education.

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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Grants and gifts fund DO-IT publications, videos, and programs to support the academic and career success of people with disabilities. Contribute today by sending a check to DO-IT, Box 354842, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195-4842.

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# Communication Hints

Treat people with disabilities with the same respect and consideration with which you treat others. Here are some helpful hints when it comes to delivering a presentation, hosting an exhibit, and otherwise relating to people with disabilities.

### General
- Ask a person with a disability if that person needs help before providing assistance.
- Talk directly to the person with a disability, not through their companion or interpreter.
- Refer to a person's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation.
- Avoid derogatory slang or 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!
- Provide information in alternate means (e.g., written, spoken, diagrams).
- Do not interact with a person's guide dog or service dog unless you have received permission to do so.
- Do not be afraid to use common terms and phrases, like "see you later" or "let's go for a walk" around people with disabilities.
- Do not touch mobility devices or assistive technology without the owner's consent.
- Do not assume physical contact, like handshakes, high-fives, or hugs are okay.
- Understand that not everyone uses eye contact.

### 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 projected content when presenting and describe the content of charts, graphs, and pictures.
- 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
- Consider carrying on a long conversation with an individual who has a mobility impairment from a seated position.

### 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, and avoid covering your mouth, so they can see your lips. Avoid talking while chewing gum or eating.
- Speak clearly at a normal volume. Speak louder only if requested.
- Repeat questions from audience members.
- Use paper and pencil, or type things out on your cell phone, if the person who is deaf does not read lips or if more accurate communication is needed.
- 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.