Creating Accessible and Inclusive Campus Environments

Two Approaches can be used to help create inclusive and welcoming learning environments for students at our postsecondary institutions:

- Personal academic accommodations and supports
- Universal Design for Learning

Before outlining these two approaches, it is important to note that, as with supporting students in general, and with supporting other diverse students, we are not considering that there is a 'magic bullet' that will make our campuses completely inclusive places tomorrow or even next year. This is both because each institution and each course is unique, and because each person with a disability is also unique. In addition, we are all on a journey of enhancing our understanding of these issues, so our practices and how we work to move towards inclusive campus communities will always be evolving and changing. This process will be an ongoing one where as campus community members, we will discuss, work, and try things together, and we will of course also learn from these experiences.

This said, we will now provide an introduction to two approaches to creating inclusive classrooms and campuses for our students with disabilities.

1. Academic Accommodations

The first approach works to remove barriers for students with disabilities by modifying the way things are done for a particular individual to address the personal functional impacts of their disability. This is called academic accommodation. This approach is the one many instructors will be familiar with when interacting with the Disability Services Office on your campus. For example, the Disability Service Coordinator may recommend that a student be allowed to complete their diploma over three years instead of two, or they may recommend that a student be permitted to record their lectures which would allow them to re-listen to parts if the information was presented more quickly than they can absorb. Similarly provision of a student note-taker may allow a student with similar difficulties to be able to listen to your lecture instead of dividing their attention between listening and writing, which for them may result in only hearing and understanding a portion of what was said. The Disability Service Coordinator may also recommend that a student with a learning disability who has difficulty producing written work through typing or writing be allowed to use voice dictation software to dictate his answers for your exam. His answers would then still appear in written form when submitted, but would have been produced in a way that allows him to demonstrate his understanding of the concepts you taught.

These changes to the 'normal' practice or setting are provided only to those individuals who can demonstrate, through medical documentation, that their disability has a functional impact that would restrict their ability to do things in the normal way. The college or university then provides these academic accommodations to 'level the playing field' for these students, thus making their educational experience more inclusive and fair.

2. Universal Design for Learning

There is also another approach to creating inclusive learning environments and campus communities. This approach does not focus on doing things differently for a particular student but instead provides a larger variety of options for all students. Given that there is considerable diversity in learning styles and preferences among all students as well, this approach has the potential to not only benefit students with disabilities but also all other students. It is called Universal Design for Learning" or sometimes also "universal design for instruction".

Below are three quick ideas from this concept. These were summarized by Orr (2009) In his literature review of research on the use of UDL:

Backward Design: This approach to course design emphasizes having very explicit essential learning outcomes for a course and using these as the starting point for developing methods of delivery and evaluation. Clear outcomes will both help all students understand exactly what you expect them to achieve, and will help you to see clearly where you can be more flexible to account for different ways of learning or demonstrating knowledge.

Instructor Approachability & Empathy: Finding ways to get to know your students and to invite them to talk with you if they are finding anything in your class challenging, can be very beneficial in creating respectful, safe, and approachable classroom climates and instructor-student relationships. Research has shown that when instructors demonstrate that they are approachable to students, and that they consider supporting diverse students' learning as a regular part of everyday classroom practice, students with disabilities feel more comfortable and ready to learn. Students with disabilities will also know that they can talk with you about their learning and what they have found works well for them. As you learn about your students with disabilities, the Disability Service Coordinator on your campus is also available to talk with you about ideas you have or ones that were put forward by students. Some may be practical and others may not, but the majority of the time, something valuable is learned that will be helpful now or in the future.

Inclusive Teaching Strategies & Learner Supports: A third approach is to use teaching strategies and learner supports that are geared towards meeting the needs of a variety of students. For example,

- providing copies of powerpoint slides ahead of time will allow students with disabilities to preview the lecture content but will also help all other students prepare as well.
- Providing pauses in the lecture for discussion will help both students with learning disabilities and those without a disability with additional time to check their understanding and the opportunity to make the lecture material meaningful for them,
- providingstrategy instruction for the whole class; showing ways to learn the content effectively will help students with disabilities as well as the average student.

Both academic accommodation and strategies that implement ideas consistent with creating universal learning environments are of benefit in enhancing the learning experience of students with disabilities. Instructors and campus staff will likely find using a combination of the two approaches most useful in meeting the needs of students with disabilities in their courses and programs.