Accessibility

The "Circle of Friends" is one of my favorite spots on our campus. Its ring of dancing animals just outside the Reese Center is a whimsical, even quirky, addition to a college campus. But my favorite part of the sculpture is what is <u>not</u> there—the opening in the circle that invites anyone and everyone to join their hands to the paws and flippers of the friends already gathered—to join the dance with whatever they've got, however they can. This is one way to think of our ongoing efforts to create a campus and a curriculum that are accessible to all students. If our promotion of accessibility means merely fulfilling mandates to accommodate disability, then our focus is only negative, on what students "lack." This issue of the newsletter offers resources and advice to help us consider instead how to keep our teaching open so that all students can join in. This will be especially challenging—and so especially important—as we increase our online presence. But the Circle of Friends reminds us that we're a richer campus when our environment—in person or online—enables all of us to dance, regardless of what we use to do so.

NEW: See back issues of Teaching @ Newark for campus resources and campus colleagues' work on topics from retention to technology to inclusion at https://u.osu.edu/newarkUITL

M E Weiser

newark.osu.edu

Rethinking disability

According to the OSU office of disability services, *disability* "includes, but is not limited to, mental health conditions, chronic health conditions, temporary injuries, physical/learning disabilities, and ADHD."

Amrita Dhar, Newark assistant professor in the Department of English, is part of the Ohio State interdisciplinary faculty cohort working in the field of disability studies. Her view of disability is broader: she looks beyond individuals to the scene in which they find themselves.

"Disability is what happens when environments limit access for any kind of non-normative body or mind in a given context," she notes. "For instance, if all our books were in Braille and everyone could read Braille, a blind person would never not be able to read because they weren't sighted. It's only because we don't have non-visual reading commonly available that the lack of vision becomes a disabling condition."

For Dhar, therefore, the whole idea of *accessibility* needs to be expanded: "I hear a somewhat limited and compliance-oriented word, unfortunately—perhaps because so much accessibility…is around legal compliance with ADA or such. Access should be a default and everyday part of all our thinking."

We often approach disability/accessibility from a deficit model, I noted. What is a better approach?

"This brings me back maybe to my first response, where I actually named the environments themselves as being disabling. It is the environments, and I should stress that I mean built or otherwise engineered environments, that actively do the work of disabling. And what is a not-built but still engineered environment, you might ask? A racist society would be one example."

Dhar's work as a scholar unites disability studies with early modern literature (1500-1700) —a surprising combination perhaps but one in which Dhar is a rising leader. "I am currently doing work on two projects," she notes, "and disability is central to them both. The first, on the blind poetic language of the seventeenth-century poet and polemic John Milton, reads some of our most landmark poetry—including *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*—as blind creations. The second is on early modern English conceptions, negotiations, and perceptions of sight and blindness, and reads a host of fascinating and underexamined texts—such as recipes, sermons, letters, marginalia—as testimonies of premodern disability discourse."

Dhar's scholarship means that she considers access in her classroom, as well. "I ask students about their learning needs and respect those needs to the best of my ability, even while I know that I have limitations on what I can do or honor. (And I am straightforward about my own limitations, as well.)"

Her approach applies her view that is the environment, not the individual, that disables. "I don't ever ask for paperwork regarding 'documented disabilities' because that again…makes a disability the problem of an individual. I genuinely believe that disability happens not because of individual lack or deviance or deficit or what have you, but because of failure of systemic access. I doubly don't ask for…documentations of disability because that means that undiagnosed disabilities are not respected. And no one should have to 'out' themselves in our ableist world in order to seek accommodations they need."

Disability Services

At Ohio State

The university's Student Life Disability Services (SLDS) provides academic accommodations for students with documented disabilities. But as it emphasizes on its website (https://slds.osu.edu), it works in collaboration with faculty and staff—**everyone** is responsible for "create[ing] accessible educational environments for students with disabilities."

It is a long way from the day in 1966 when Julie Cockran Rogers received a letter from the Department of Speech & Hearing informing her that "Although they would be most happy to have her as a student…physical limitations prohibit any possibility of your being one at Ohio State" because there was "no way, shape, or form" that she would be able to access the building that houses the classes. "We have to be realistic," they told her. Instead of that "realism," she enrolled at the Mansfield campus and worked to open up the university.

Today, the National Center for Education Statistics reports that nearly 1 in 5 college students report having a disability. Ohio State's SLDS works with students whose situations include (partial list):
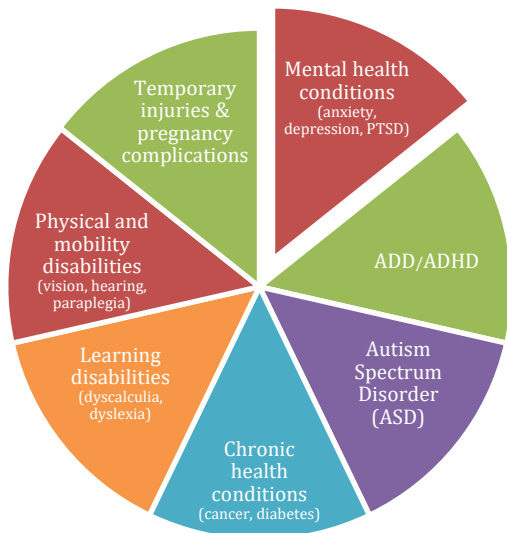
The office encourages students to make an appointment, talk with them, get the required documentation and the assistance that can best promote their learning.

At Ohio State Newark

We all recognize the accommodations sheets from the campus SLDS explaining exam accommodations or notetaking assistance. Other services provided by the SLDS range from sign language interpretation, assistive technology, and accessible media to lab assistance, attendance and deadline modifications, even help with course substitutions. Dining, housing, and parking accommodations are also part of accessibility. But perhaps consultation & advocacy are SLDS's most important functions—starting with the students themselves.

"I tell students that being able to advocate for yourself is a strength," said Newark SLDS Director **Connie Zang.** "Documentation from our office is required for official accommodations, but it's best when it's a proactive, not a reactive, move. The student doesn't have to use the accommodation, but they've got it if they need it."

Zang estimates that her office sees some five percent of the students on both campuses. Hidden disabilities, particularly stress and anxiety conditions, are now the most common issues they deal with.

"Faculty will tell me, 'I've taught for years and never had a student with a disability,'" she said, "and that's just not the case. There are so many hidden disabilities." Chronic health conditions, for instance, may mean students need regular breaks, a restroom, or food and drink. Chronic pain may mean students can't sit for hours, or always make it to class.

"So many things interact, and stress makes so many things worse." Accommodations do not mean that students don't do the work or don't need to follow the code of conduct—they mean students don't fail when they could have succeeded. Not surprisingly, SLDS works closely with the offices of Retention, Student Support, and Counseling.

"Don't judge the student," Zang asked. "Instead refer them if they're struggling. Tell them 'We've got some good support people here, will you talk with them?'" Their website is https://newark.osu.edu/students/student-life/disability-services.html

Considering access in online instruction

Margaret Price & SLDS all recommend **Explore Access** at the University of Arkansas. Their **Tools for Designing an Accessible Online Course** is available at the website https://exploreaccess.org/accessible-online-course/

As Ohio State moved to online instruction this spring, the University Institute for Teaching and Learning offered advice from doctoral candidate Jessie Male and their advisor. Margaret Price, director of OSU's Graduate Interdisciplinary Program in disability studies. Their full recommendations are at Support Disabled Students Online Teaching Practices--highlights include the following. As they note, flexibility is key.

Teach asynchronously. Our students may not all be able to gather at the same time from their homes. Additionally, asynchronous responses allow students more time for reflection and encourage diverse participants. Asynchronous written responses also accommodate students who may feel uncomfortable verbally discussing classroom topics in front of their family members.

Record Zoom meetings. Shared recordings not only help students who couldn't attend, they allow for more thoughtful review. Zoom transcripts, though not perfect, provide written backup for both meetings and lectures. Rotating student notetakers is another option.

Check in on students. Can they access the technology you're using? Male and Price suggest a simple anonymous survey--"What do you need in order to learn successfully for the rest of the semester?" "What do you hope our class will include--or not include--as we continue working together?"

Accommodations still matter. Checking in can also enable you to see if students who need a quiet place for an exam still have access to a space, if online quizzes are properly set to give the required extra time, if students can toggle captions on films and Zoom discussions (see full article for how-to links).

Consider screen readers. Use titles, not URLs. Be aware that screenshots and some PDFs aren't read by screen readers.

Think multimodal. Add a picture to your text or lecture—even holding a book up to the screen. Zoom allows you to talk through Powerpoint slides via Screen Share. Carmen makes it easy to add images.

But describe what's there. All video content should be captioned. All images should be described either verbally or in text. Carmen prompts you for this when you upload media. Word includes an "Alt-Text" button to add descriptions for screen readers. The AAA's Guidelines for Creating Image Desriptions is a helpful webpage.

Can students access your digital coursework? The law says it matters

Under law, all universities that receive federal financial aid are required to ensure that their digital learning materials are accessible to all students or provide reasonable alternatives in a timely manner.

But according to a recent article in *Inside Higher Education,* that doesn't always happen. "While many colleges and universities have introduced stringent accessibility checks for software purchased for use across the institution, these checks rarely extend to digital courseware -- which is often selected by individual faculty members without coordination from IT accessibility staff," reports Lindsay McKenzie in the article The Digital Courseware Accessibility Problem.

This has led to lawsuits from students with accommodations trying to learn with inaccessible texts, videos, simulations, quizzes, or homework assignments—and while universities want publishers to guarantee their products, the courts have recognized that it is the universities themselves that are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their students have access to the education they were promised.

Tips and Tools for virtual accessibility

There has been no shortage of advice for how to transition to online instruction this spring, including for how to maintain student access. As we look toward an autumn—and beyond—that may well require more virtual instruction, here are some tips that come up repeatedly. As with inclusive teaching (see *Teaching @ Newark* issue 3), many of these are tips that enhance teaching for all students:

Be consistent. However you set up your Carmen site, use the same schema from week to week.

Be explicit. Students especially need to know exactly what you want from them. Make directions very detailed. Chunk information: bullets, lists. Use visuals.

Be clear. Write in short sentences that begin with key information. Begin your paragraphs with topic sentences. Clarity also means using large, bold fonts on plain, uncluttered pages, including on your slides.

Offer scaffolds. Outlines, frameworks, call-backs to earlier lectures, opportunities to practice—all help students manage the distance learning of large bodies of text.

Work with assistive technology. Caption or insert alt-text in images. Find videos with captions. Use YouTube to caption your own videos. Use captioning/provide transcripts for Zoom lectures. Choose PDFs that are available in a text-searchable format (meaning you can highlight and search the text within the document). Add the **WAVE** extension (Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool) to your Chrome browser—clicking it gives you an immediate assessment of the accessibility of a website.

Work with Carmen. (See the "5 Basic Ways" article at right for much more):

- Avoid creating your own PDFs—instead post original course content directly into a "Page," using titles/subheads. The article describes how to create similarly accessible tables.
- Use descriptive hyperlinks. Do not simply paste a URL into your document, or link "click here"—instead title your link and use the hyperlink tool. If I wanted students to read the first website, for instance, I would say hyperlink the text "How to Implement Accommodations," not simply say "Go to https://----"

Key Websites for Online Accessibility

The Student Life Disability Office and Office of Distance Education and eLearning offer ___ key websites for instructors in the "new normal" of virtual instruction.

How to Implement Accommodations
https://slds.osu.edu/faculty-staff/how-to-implement-accommodations/

Five Basic Ways to Improve Accessibility in Your CarmenCanvas Course
https://resource-center.odee.osu.edu/accessibility/five-basic-ways-improve-accessibility-your-carmen-canvas-course

20 Tips for Teaching an Accessible Online Course
https://www.washington.edu/doit/20-tips-teaching-accessible-online-course

Explore Access Designing an Accessible Online Course (highly recommended!)
https://exploreaccess.org/accessible-online-course/

ODEE Accessibility Resource Center
https://resource-center.odee.osu.edu/accessibility

College2Careers: Accessing life beyond college

Ohio State Newark, in partnership with COTC, is one of 15 colleges in the state to have a counselor dedicated to helping Ohioans with disabilities complete their degree, find internships, and prepare for jobs.

Cyndi Mignone is the vocational rehabilitation counselor who has been working on campus since fall 2019. She might help one student consider career options, help another write a resume and prepare for interviews, and connect another to community partners for an internship experience. She and a student might discuss how to disclose a hidden disability to a new employer, what kinds of assistive technologies would best aid a student in a new career, or how to navigate the difficult terrain between practicality and reaching for the stars.

Kevin Miller, director of Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD), noted that "Working within public colleges and universities means individuals with disabilities have a greater opportunity of success as they transition from academic life to a career."

Mignone is the bridge between the accommodations that made college accessible to students with disabilities and the workplace where they will put that education into practice. She can be reached by any student served by Disability Services at Cyndi.Mignone@ood.ohio.gov.

Syllabi are required to include a disability statement. The SLDS-recommended wording is: "The University strives to make all learning experiences as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience academic barriers based on your disability (including mental health, chronic or temporary medical conditions), please let me know immediately so that we can privately discuss options. To establish reasonable accommodations, I may request that you register with Student Life Disability Services. After registration, make arrangements with me as soon as possible to discuss your accommodations so that they may be implemented in a timely fashion.

SLDS contact information: zang.3@osu.edu, 740-364-9578, https://newark.osu.edu/students/student-life/disability-services.html, Warner Center Room 226."

Disability etiquette

A March workshop by Ron Klonowski of OOD taught faculty and staff some useful courtesies when interacting with students with disabilities.

- Focus on the person, not the disability, not the interpreter, not the assistant, not the guide dog.
- Maintain eye contact, which may mean sitting down.
- Immediately identify yourself to anyone blind, and let them know when you're leaving as well.
- Don't shout! And don't pretend you understand if you don't—ask people to repeat. Ask if you can text.
- Remember that lack of overt excitement may be a result of hidden disability, not lack of interest or motivation.
- Say "would you like assistance" not "do you need help." Use "people-first" language ("person with disability" not "disabled person").
- When in doubt, ASK FIRST.

Teaching @ Newark is produced by Prof. Elizabeth Weiser as Liaison for Teaching & Learning, The Ohio State University at Newark.

newark.osu.edu