

## **Libraries and Universal Design**

Libraries of all sizes and types serve diverse populations of patrons. Patrons may have disabilities, may not speak English as their first language, may be elderly, may have limited experience in a library setting, or may have other traits or characteristics that impact the way that they interact with library spaces and services. Staff at many libraries have come to understand the importance of accessibility for individuals with disabilities, both due to legal requirements and because of the growing number of students with disabilities at their institutions.<sup>1</sup> However, this approach often results in accommodations that only address the needs of a narrow subset of patrons and do not create an inclusive community. Universal Design offers an alternative approach for creating a welcoming and usable environment for all patrons. Adopting Universal Design principles can help to address the issues many theological libraries face due to aging facilities and spaces, while also opening religious and theological content to the widest possible audience.

### **Universal Design**

Developed as an architectural concept by Ronald L. Mace,<sup>2</sup> Universal Design offers a way of thinking about all types of design that focuses on ensuring ease of access for every user no matter their circumstance. In 1997, seven principles were developed to guide those interested in applying Universal Design to their own work:

- Equitable Use
- Flexibility in Use
- Simple and Intuitive Use
- Perceptible Information
- Tolerance for Error
- Low Physical Effort
- Size and Space for Approach and Use<sup>3</sup>

Each of these principles centers the user in the decision-making process and acknowledges the fact that every library patron is unique in a myriad of ways.

At their heart, these principles help to ensure that flexibility, simplicity, intuitiveness, and usability are considered at each step during the design process. Examples of design choices that adhere to these principles abound. One example is the curb cuts seen at many sidewalk intersections, which provide easy access for those who use wheelchairs, parents pushing strollers, and people pushing carts. Buildings that offer ramps at the main entrance, rather than stairs at the main entrance and a completely separate route for those with mobility disabilities, are another similar example. Fixtures can also be designed with these principles in mind, such as lever doorknobs, which require less manual dexterity and strength than doorknobs that require users to grip and twist the knob and panel light switches.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of 2011-2012, 11.1 percent of students at postsecondary institutions stated that they had a disability. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016). *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2014 (2016-006), Table 311.10, accessed June 29, 2017, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14\\_311.10.asp?referrer=report](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_311.10.asp?referrer=report).

<sup>2</sup> "Ronald L. Mace," The Center for Universal Design, accessed June 29, 2017, [https://www.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about\\_us/usronmace.htm](https://www.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_us/usronmace.htm).

<sup>3</sup> "The 7 Principles," National Disability Authority, accessed June 29, 2017, <http://universaldesign.ie/What-is-Universal-Design/The-7-Principles/>.

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Though Universal Design offers a helpful guide for design projects, it is important to acknowledge its limitations as well. As the Institute for Human Centered Design notes,

[i]t could be interpreted to promise an impossible standard. No matter how committed the designer and how attentive to anticipating all users, there would always be a small number of people for whom an individual design just wouldn't work. More accurately, Universal Design is an orientation to design in which designers strive to incorporate features that make each design more universally usable. Universal Design is broad and not tailored to the individual.<sup>4</sup>

To ensure that the best results are achieved, it is key to involve users with disabilities in the design process and to carefully manage the competing priorities to ensure that the final product is useable for the broadest possible group of users. In addition, it is vital to acknowledge that Universal Design will often be part of an overall approach that incorporates individual accommodations as well. In libraries, this means ensuring that the library has policies pertaining to accessibility, accommodation, and the role of Universal Design in projects. However, as part of a coordinated effort, Universal Design can lead to solutions that are more seamlessly usable and inclusive for the widest possible range of patrons.

### **Bringing Universal Design to Libraries**

There are many ways that Universal Design principles can be applied in library projects of all sizes. The seven principles of Universal Design can provide a framework for evaluating or changing any spaces, programs, or services at any library. Though the most obvious time to apply Universal Design principles may be during large-scale renovation projects, the principles can be applied in many other settings by explicitly considering the diverse needs of all patrons.

For example, when purchasing furniture and fixtures, these principles can offer a framework for evaluation with a focus on flexibility and accessibility. This can have a real impact on decisions. Perhaps an adjustable table offers more options for a wider range of users than a standard table while also being useful for a broader range of programs and activities. Shelves can be evaluated as to whether they meet the needs of elderly patrons who can't easily bend down to reach low shelves, and those who use wheelchairs and may not be able to reach high shelves.

In the case of signage, the integration of symbols alongside text might be more easily perceived by a number of groups: those with visual disabilities, those for whom English is not their first language, and those who are simply distracted. Similar approaches can be applied to web design projects to ensure that library websites are accessible, readable by those with low vision, and comprehensible for patrons at various reading and attention levels. Even small changes to the way that library services and workspaces are configured can help to make sure that they allow for flexible and equitable use by all users when considered from a Universal Design perspective.

### **Universal Design for Learning**

The concept of Universal Design has also been very influential in the field of education. In the 1990s, Anne Meyer and David Rose developed the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which “drew upon neuroscience and education research, and leveraged the flexibility of digital technology to design learning environments that from the outset offered options for diverse learner needs.”<sup>5</sup> This framework offers principles for bringing Universal Design to the classroom. Specifically, Meyer and Rose set forth three central principles:

- Provide multiple means of engagement (the “why” of learning)
- Provide multiple means of representation (the “what” of learning)
- Provide multiple means of action and expression (the “how” of learning)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “History of Universal Design,” Institute for Human Centered Design, accessed June 29, 2017, <https://www.humancentereddesign.org/universal-design/history-universal-design>.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Meyer, David Howard Rose, and David T. Gordon, *Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice* (Wakefield, MA: CAST Professional Publishing, 2014), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Meyer, Rose, and Gordon, *Universal Design for Learning*, 51.

UDL offers interesting possibilities for both formal and informal educational settings, making it particularly relevant to libraries, which often offer both formal and informal instruction. As with Universal Design, each of these principles is focused on offering flexibility so that all students can equitably and meaningfully participate in all learning opportunities. Moreover, as with Universal Design, implementing this framework can benefit everyone, not just students with disabilities.

Each of these principles emphasizes autonomy and empowers students to learn in the way that is best suited to their specific needs. When offered multiple means of engagement, students have an opportunity to find their own personal motivation and develop a more genuine relationship to the materials. When offered multiple means of representation, students can determine how they learn best (for example, by choosing between audio, video, or printed content) and can learn strategies for processing information that will serve them well beyond the classroom. When offered multiple means of action and expression, students can develop their own goals and strategies for demonstrating their knowledge in a way that is meaningful to them and fulfills their needs.

These principles can be equally applicable in developing a semester-long information literacy course and an online tutorial. For each of the principles, the National Center on Universal Design for Learning offers guidelines that provide more details for educators interested in applying this framework to their own work,<sup>7</sup> and this resource demonstrates the many ways that the principles can be applied in varied educational settings. Taken together, the application of these principles can lead to more accessible, meaningful, and engaging curricula.

## Conclusion

Universal Design, and the related Universal Design for Learning framework, offer a new way to develop and further improve library spaces, services, and programs to become more inclusive and welcoming to the broadest community of patrons by going beyond a focus on accommodating the needs of individuals with specific disabilities. The principles can be applied to virtually all of the work done throughout a library and offer a consistent way of ensuring that diverse patron and student needs continue to be at the forefront of decision-making in the library.

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<sup>7</sup> “UDL Guidelines - Version 2.0,” National Center on Universal Design for Learning, accessed June 29, 2017, <http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines>.