Universal Design for Learning – Addressing Equity, Opportunity and Challenge for All Students

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As education professionals, our charge is to ready and prepare all children and youth in K-12 schools for successful and engaged citizenship in post-school living, learning, and work environments. As faculty, administrators, and staff in an institution of higher learning, this mission continues. Our knowledge base of information, development of technological and digital tools, and capability to network, share and advocate for educational ideas, practices, and strategies supporting equitable, challenging and quality learning is greater than ever. Yet, many students have not yet received meaningful benefits from these advancements. Efforts to augment equitable instruction for vulnerable children, youth, and young adults are diffuse. Allocation of resources, access and application of best-practice information, and competing professional, institutional and public priorities complicate these efforts.

A host of potentially negative social and school outcomes are associated with inflexible or unresponsive school and education practices such as school failure, school drop-out, unemployment, long term poverty, and disproportionate representation in special education placements of minority children and youth (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010; Hosp & Reschly, 2004). Success at middle school and especially at the ninth grade is highly predictive of high school graduation (Monrad, 2007). “While public schools are not responsible for the host of social ills that threatens the healthy development of children, these institutions can ameliorate or exacerbate the vulnerability of children to these negative outcomes” (Leone, et al., 2003, p. 1). For example, African American youth are up to three times more likely to experience school suspension and expulsion than peers (Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). The Alliance for Excellent Education reports that annually, approximately 1.3 million students fail to graduate from high school, with more than half of these individuals are students of color. Additionally, youth with learning and behavior disabilities drop out of school at a rate twice greater than their peers (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011). Some barriers to graduation include influences such as difficult school transitions, insufficient engagement, earlier grade retention, and inadequate basic skills (Alliance; American Psychological Association 2012).
In Iowa, school and post-school outcomes of students with disabilities continue to indicate a critical need to close an achievement gap and to ensure successful and meaningful school and post-secondary learning, living, and work opportunities. Approximately 13% of the student population in Iowa is eligible for special education services at this time (Iowa Department of Education, 2011). The majority of these students receive most of their education within general education classrooms, with special education services and other supports provided to address individualized needs. Data from the 2009-2010 academic year indicates that 62% of all students with disabilities in Iowa spend 80% of their school day within general education classrooms. Yet, achievement data for reading, mathematics, and science for Iowa students with disabilities continues to indicate significant disparities for this population, along with a drop-out and on-time graduation rates that are significantly higher than students in the general population (Iowa Department of Education, 2011). For example, when examining the percentage of Iowa’s eighth grade students demonstrating proficiency on ITBS assessments, students with disabilities assessed on these tests demonstrated the following during the 2009-2011 biennium period: Mathematics: 31.2% (vs. 83.3% grade level peers); Reading Comprehension: 27.0% (vs. 81.1% grade level peers); Science: 47.1% (vs. 87.6% grade level peers) (Iowa Department of Education).

In spite of these factors, there are growing numbers of students with disabilities, international students, and students from diverse ethnic, and racial minority groups, entering colleges and universities. Approximately 25% of youth with disabilities enroll in postsecondary education (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza & Levine, 2005). The undergraduate enrollment of racial and ethnic minority students has grown to approximately 38%, and the number of international students accounts for 12% of overall college enrollments in this country (Asselin, 2012). But once in college, outcomes can be differential. There is a gap in the graduation and retention rates of these groups of students in comparison to their peers (Gonzalez, 2010). For example, fifty-seven percent of all students who enroll in four-year, nonprofit colleges earn their diplomas within six years. Yet, only 49 percent of Hispanic students and 40 percent of African American students do (Gonzalez). Approximately 11% of undergraduate students have a disability (Snyder & Dillow, 2011). Degree completion rates for students with disabilities may also be decreased (deFur, Getzel, & Trossi cited in Wessel, Jones, Markle & Westfall, 2009). The need for responsive and flexible instructional and environmental practices throughout elementary, secondary and college classrooms, is critical if higher education is to be accessible, equitable and appropriately challenging for all those enter these doors.
Universal design for learning (UDL) has been described as a best practice and a framework to address learning barriers in order to provide challenging, relevant, and accessible access to content for all learners - including those with varied strengths, talents, abilities, linguistic needs and interests (CAST, 2011). UDL supports the legal mandates of the No Child Left Behind Education Act of 2001 for accountability of the learning of all K-12 students. Flexible curricular design and instruction that is built on the multiple strengths and needs of all learners within the classroom is a signature feature of UDL. UDL provides avenues for student success through multiple means of representation of the information to be learned, multiple means of student expression of content, and multiple means of student engagement in the initial design of instruction so that all can appropriately engage and succeed in learning (CAST, 2011; Meyer & Rose, 2005). Digital and other technologies play a prominent role in UDL. UDL is legally recognized and defined in the Assistive Technology Act of 1998 and in further expanded in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 to provide guidance and support to faculty in designing courses that are universally designed.

UDL involves the use of appropriate technology, including assistive technology, within curriculum design and instruction that provides challenging, supportive curriculum (CAST, 2011). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 further strengthens the necessity of assistive technology as a means of providing a free appropriate public education to students with disabilities, addressing unique learning needs that result from a child’s disability. These mandates, coupled with the achievement disparities for students with disabilities, necessitate the adequate knowledge, training, and experience of general and special educators in UDL and assistive technology. Research has supported improved achievement and outcomes for students with special needs who use assistive technology in accessing the general education curriculum and in meeting individual needs (Bouck & Okolo, 2007; Marino, Sameshima, & Beecher, 2009; Rose, Hasselbring, Stahl & Zabala, , 2005).

Despite an acknowledgement that UDL and Assistive Technology (AT) are necessary practices to improve education outcomes for students with disabilities (and others), many roadblocks continue to exist. Edyburn (2004) notes that educators have little to no training in UDL and AT. Within teacher education, due to constraints, preservice teachers receive limited exposure to AT and UDL in required educational technology coursework. For many, this may be the only exposure they have to assistive technology. Judge and Simms (2009) note that the appropriate knowledge, skill, and/or willingness of preservice and inservice educators to implement the use of assistive technology is also a significant barrier.
The critical knowledge and skill in AT and UDL cannot reach the level of expertise and experience needed by educators, unless content and experience in these areas are systematically incorporated and sustained within teacher preparation programs. Research supports the positive impact of inclusion of UDL and AT within teacher preparation programs in the improved knowledge and skill of novice teachers (Marino, et al., 2009). University instructors may also require supports, training, and resources so that college learning is designed for the vast array of learners and is attuned to individual differences, representative of the vast diversity of students enrolled in higher education today.

Together then, faculty and administrators across professional preparation programs and college campuses have an opportunity and responsibility to collaborate in preparing highly qualified teachers. This dialogue must include opportunities to enhance and redesign curricula, carry out research, and conduct professional development centered around a community of practice that moves beyond the “buzz” of UDL. Educators must inculcate UDL as part of their daily culture, practice, and business of education in order to ensure access, equity and opportunity for all students. This type of dialogue is promising for improving teachers’ ability to impact the academic success, graduation, and long term success of their current and future students.

References


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