

accessibility in higher education

Accessibility in Higher Education: Paving the Path to Inclusion

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Abstract: This article explores the crucial need for improved accessibility in higher education, examining the challenges faced by students with disabilities and the strategies institutions are employing to foster a more inclusive learning environment. Through personal anecdotes and case studies, we highlight the transformative impact of accessible practices and the ongoing work required to achieve true equity in higher education.

The Urgent Need for Accessibility in Higher Education

Higher education institutions frequently boast of their commitment to diversity and inclusion. However, a true commitment to inclusivity requires a fundamental shift in how we approach accessibility in higher education. For too long, students with disabilities have faced significant barriers to accessing a quality education. These barriers aren't merely inconveniences; they are systemic obstacles that can profoundly impact a student's academic success, well-being, and future opportunities. Accessibility in higher education is not just a matter of compliance; it's a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for creating vibrant, intellectually stimulating learning environments.

My own journey as a special education professor has profoundly shaped my understanding of the complexities surrounding accessibility in higher education. I've witnessed firsthand the resilience and determination of students with disabilities, yet also the disheartening obstacles they encounter. I remember one student, Maria, who was legally blind. While the university provided her with screen-reading software, the online course materials weren't formatted in a way that the software could properly read. The lack of digital accessibility in higher education resulted in Maria struggling to keep up with her coursework, ultimately affecting her academic performance. This is just one example of the systemic issues that hinder progress towards true accessibility in higher education.

Case Study 1: Navigating the Labyrinth of Disability Services

John, a student with ADHD, faced significant challenges navigating the disability services office at his university. While the office existed, the process for obtaining accommodations felt bureaucratic and impersonal. He was required to provide extensive documentation, undergo lengthy evaluations, and wait weeks for a response. The delay in receiving accommodations directly impacted his ability to manage his coursework and participate fully in class. This experience underscores the need for streamlined and user-friendly disability services, ones that prioritize the student's needs and provide timely support. Improving accessibility in higher education requires not only offering services but also ensuring they are easily accessible and effective.

Case Study 2: The Power of Universal Design

Sarah, a student with a mobility impairment, found that her university had proactively embraced universal design principles in the construction of its new academic building. Ramps, wide doorways, accessible restrooms, and adjustable desks were seamlessly integrated into the design, making the building welcoming and usable for everyone, regardless of their abilities. This case exemplifies how accessibility in higher education can be proactively built into the infrastructure and environment, eliminating the need for ad-hoc accommodations and fostering a sense of belonging for all students. Implementing universal design principles is a key aspect of ensuring accessibility in higher education from the outset.

Digital Accessibility: Bridging the Gap in Online Learning

The increasing reliance on online learning has further highlighted the importance of digital accessibility in higher education. Many online learning platforms and course materials lack basic accessibility features such as alt text for images, closed captions for videos, and keyboard navigation. This digital divide exacerbates existing inequalities, particularly for students with visual, auditory, or cognitive disabilities. Institutions must prioritize the development and implementation of accessible digital learning environments. This includes training faculty on creating accessible online materials, employing universal design principles in the creation of online courses, and adopting accessible technologies.

Beyond Compliance: Cultivating a Culture of Inclusion

True accessibility in higher education extends beyond simply meeting minimum legal requirements. It requires cultivating a culture of inclusion where all students feel valued, respected, and supported. This involves ongoing training for faculty and staff on disability awareness and inclusive teaching practices, promoting peer support networks for students with disabilities, and fostering open communication between students, faculty, and disability services. Accessibility in higher education demands a holistic approach that embraces diversity and challenges discriminatory attitudes.

The Role of Assistive Technology

Assistive technology plays a crucial role in ensuring accessibility in higher education. From screen readers and speech-to-text software to adaptive keyboards and alternative input devices, these technologies empower students with disabilities to participate fully in the learning process. However,

access to these technologies is often insufficient. Institutions need to provide comprehensive support for assistive technology, including access to equipment, training, and technical assistance. Accessibility in higher education cannot be achieved without providing students with the tools they need to succeed.

Advocacy and Systemic Change

While individual efforts are crucial, achieving true accessibility in higher education requires systemic change. Students with disabilities, their families, and disability advocacy groups must continue to advocate for policies and practices that promote inclusion and equity. This includes lobbying for increased funding for disability services, pushing for the adoption of universal design principles in campus infrastructure and online learning, and holding institutions accountable for their commitment to accessibility. Accessibility in higher education is an ongoing struggle demanding continuous advocacy and vigilance.

Conclusion

Accessibility in higher education is not merely a matter of compliance; it is a fundamental aspect of creating an equitable and inclusive learning environment. By embracing universal design principles, providing comprehensive disability services, promoting digital accessibility, and fostering a culture of inclusion, higher education institutions can empower students with disabilities to reach their full potential. The journey towards achieving true accessibility requires sustained effort, collaboration, and a unwavering commitment to creating a learning environment where everyone belongs.

FAQs:

1. What is universal design in higher education? Universal design refers to the creation of environments, products, and programs that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.
1. How can faculty members create more accessible course materials? Faculty can use alternative text for images, closed captions for videos, provide transcripts for audio recordings, use clear and concise language, and utilize accessible online platforms.
1. What are some common barriers to accessibility in higher education? Barriers include inaccessible physical spaces, lack of accessible technology, inadequate disability services, and a lack of awareness and training among faculty and staff.

1. What is the role of assistive technology in higher education? Assistive technology empowers students with disabilities by providing them with tools to overcome learning barriers and participate fully in academic life.
1. How can students advocate for their own accessibility needs? Students should proactively contact their disability services office, clearly communicate their needs, and actively participate in discussions about accessibility.
1. What are the legal obligations of higher education institutions regarding accessibility? Higher education institutions must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other relevant legislation, ensuring reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities.
1. How can institutions measure their success in improving accessibility? Institutions can use various methods, such as conducting accessibility audits, collecting student feedback, and tracking the usage of disability services.
1. What is the difference between accommodation and modification? Accommodations are changes that allow a student with a disability to access the same curriculum as their peers. Modifications change the curriculum itself.
1. How can institutions foster a more inclusive campus culture surrounding disability? They can implement diversity and inclusion training, create peer support groups, and promote awareness campaigns that highlight the contributions of students with disabilities.

Related Articles:

1. "Designing Inclusive Online Learning Environments: A Guide for Faculty": This article provides practical strategies for creating accessible online courses.
1. "The Role of Assistive Technology in Supporting Students with Disabilities": This article explores the different types of assistive technology and how they can be used effectively in higher

education.

1. "Accessibility Audits: A Practical Guide for Higher Education Institutions": This article provides a step-by-step guide for conducting thorough accessibility audits of campus facilities and online learning platforms.
1. "Overcoming Barriers to Accessibility in Higher Education: A Case Study Approach": This article examines case studies of successful accessibility initiatives in different higher education institutions.
1. "The Impact of Universal Design on Student Success": This article investigates the positive impact of universal design principles on the academic performance and overall well-being of all students.
1. "Legal Compliance and Accessibility in Higher Education: Navigating the ADA": This article provides a detailed overview of the legal obligations of higher education institutions related to disability accessibility.
1. "Cultivating Inclusive Teaching Practices: A Guide for Faculty": This article focuses on effective teaching strategies that create inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities.
1. "Student Voices: Perspectives on Accessibility in Higher Education": This article gathers student perspectives on accessibility challenges and successes in higher education settings.
1. "The Future of Accessibility in Higher Education: Emerging Technologies and Best Practices": This article explores emerging technologies and innovative strategies for improving accessibility in higher education.

accessibility in higher education: Disability and Equity in Higher Education

Accessibility Alphin, Jr., Henry C., Lavine, Jennie, Chan, Roy Y., 2017-03-24 Education is the foundation to almost all successful lives. It is vital that learning opportunities are available on a global scale, regardless of individual disabilities or differences, and to create more inclusive educational practices. Disability and Equity in Higher Education Accessibility is a comprehensive reference source for the latest scholarly material on emerging methods and trends in disseminating knowledge in higher education, despite traditional hindrances. Featuring extensive coverage on relevant topics such as higher education policies, electronic resources, and inclusion barriers, this publication is ideally designed for educators, academics, students, and researchers interested in expanding their knowledge of disability-inclusive global education.

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Education: Theoretical perspectives and contemporary challenges seeks to update thinking on these questions, combining new voices and emerging perspectives with established writers in the field. This pioneering text highlights the contribution of social theory to issues of access to education, with chapters introducing and drawing on the works of key interdisciplinary thinkers including Pierre Bourdieu, Margaret Archer, Amartya Sen and Herbert Simon. It then moves to examine how theoretical perspectives can be applied to the contemporary challenges of forging more equal access, with examples drawn from a wide range of contexts, including the UK, the US, Australia, South Africa and Japan. Global in scope, this book documents the shared nature of the access challenge in a period when higher education is growing rapidly, but inequalities continue to be stark. It concludes by proposing a new direction for research and a reassertion of the role of the researcher as a social activist for disconnected and disadvantaged groups, equipped with the thinking tools needed to move the agenda forward. Access to Higher Education is a rigorous text for the global research community, with relevance to policymakers, practitioners and postgraduate students interested in social justice and social policy. It provides those with an academic interest in access and a commitment to enhancing policy with theoretical and practical ideas for moving the access agenda forward in their institutional, regional or national contexts.

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accessibility in higher education: Handbook of Research on Lessons Learned From Transitioning to Virtual Classrooms During a Pandemic Thornburg, Amy W., Ceglie, Robert J., Abernathy, Dixie F., 2021-05-14 Online instruction is rapidly expanding the way administrators and educators think about and plan instruction. In addition, due to a pandemic, online instructional practices and learning in a virtual environment are being implemented with very little training or support. Educators are learning new tools and strategies at a quick pace, and often on their own, even through resistance. It is important to explore lessons learned through the pandemic but also of importance is sharing the virtual classroom options and instruction that align to best practices when transitioning to online instruction. Sharing these will allow educators to understand and learn that virtual instruction can benefit all, even when not used out of need, and can enhance face-to-face courses in many ways. The Handbook of Research on Lessons Learned From Transitioning to Virtual Classrooms During a Pandemic is a critical reference that presents lessons instructors have learned throughout the COVID-19 pandemic including what programs and tools were found to be the most impactful and useful and how to effectively embed virtual teaching into face-to-face teaching. With difficult choices to be made and implemented, this topic and collection of writings demonstrates the learning curve in a state of survival and also lessons and resources learned that will be useful when moving back to face-to-face instruction as a tool to continue to use. Highlighted topics include the frustrations faced during the transition, lessons learned from a variety of viewpoints, resources found and used to support instruction, online learner perspectives and thoughts, online course content, and best practices in transitioning to online instruction. This book is ideal for teachers,

principals, school leaders, instructional designers, curriculum developers, higher education professors, pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, practitioners, researchers, and anyone interested in developing more effective virtual and in-classroom teaching methods.

accessibility in higher education: Accessibility and Diversity in the 21st Century University Berg, Gary A., Venis, Linda, 2020-05-01 In higher education institutions across the world, rapid changes are occurring as the socio-economic composition of these universities is shifting. The participation of females, ethnic minority groups, and low-income students has increased exponentially, leading to major changes in student activities, curriculum, and overall campus culture. Significant research is a necessity for understanding the need of broader educational access and promoting a newly empowered diverse population of students in today's universities. *Accessibility and Diversity in the 21st Century University* is a pivotal reference source that provides vital research on the provision of higher educational access to a more diverse population with a specific focus on the growing population of women in the university, key intersections with race and sexual preference, and the experiences of low-income students, mid-career and reentry students, and special needs populations. While highlighting topics such as adult learning, race-based achievement gaps, and women's studies, this publication is ideally designed for educators, higher education faculty, deans, provosts, chancellors, policymakers, sociologists, anthropologists, researchers, scholars, and students seeking current research on modern advancements of diversity in higher education systems.

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accessibility in higher education: A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education Dilly Fung, 2017-06-07 Is it possible to bring university research and student education into a more connected, more symbiotic relationship? If so, can we develop programmes of study that enable faculty, students and 'real world' communities to connect in new ways? In this accessible book, Dilly Fung argues that it is not only possible but also potentially transformational to develop new forms of research-based education. Presenting the Connected Curriculum framework already adopted by UCL, she opens windows onto new initiatives related to, for example, research-based education, internationalisation, the global classroom, interdisciplinarity and public engagement. *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education* is, however, not just about developing engaging programmes of study. Drawing on the field of philosophical hermeneutics, Fung argues how the Connected Curriculum framework can help to create spaces for critical dialogue about educational values, both within and across existing research groups, teaching departments and learning communities. Drawing on vignettes of practice from around the world, she argues that developing the synergies between research and education can empower faculty members and students from all backgrounds to contribute to the global common good.

accessibility in higher education: Disability in Higher Education Nancy J. Evans, Ellen M. Broido, Kirsten R. Brown, Autumn K. Wilke, 2017-03-06 Create campuses inclusive and supportive of disabled students, staff, and faculty *Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach*

examines how disability is conceptualized in higher education and ways in which students, faculty, and staff with disabilities are viewed and served on college campuses. Drawing on multiple theoretical frameworks, research, and experience creating inclusive campuses, this text offers a new framework for understanding disability using a social justice lens. Many institutions focus solely on legal access and accommodation, enabling a system of exclusion and oppression. However, using principles of universal design, social justice, and other inclusive practices, campus environments can be transformed into more inclusive and equitable settings for all constituents. The authors consider the experiences of students, faculty, and staff with disabilities and offer strategies for addressing ableism within a variety of settings, including classrooms, residence halls, admissions and orientation, student organizations, career development, and counseling. They also expand traditional student affairs understandings of disability issues by including chapters on technology, law, theory, and disability services. Using social justice principles, the discussion spans the entire college experience of individuals with disabilities, and avoids any single-issue focus such as physical accessibility or classroom accommodations. The book will help readers: Consider issues in addition to access and accommodation Use principles of universal design to benefit students and employees in academic, cocurricular, and employment settings Understand how disability interacts with multiple aspects of identity and experience. Despite their best intentions, college personnel frequently approach disability from the singular perspective of access to the exclusion of other important issues. This book provides strategies for addressing ableism in the assumptions, policies and practices, organizational structures, attitudes, and physical structures of higher education.

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accessibility in higher education: UXD and UCD Approaches for Accessible Education Mendoza-González, Ricardo, Luna-García, Huizilopoztli, Mendoza-González, Alfredo, 2020-01-03 It is widely agreed throughout the world that education and access to education are human rights. In order to accommodate the educational needs of people globally, technology will be required that supports inclusion and promotes equity for both learning processes and governance in educational institutions. In order to achieve this, technological resources must be designed to be accessible and usable for all individuals by implementing user-centered design (UCD) and user experience design (UXD) processes. UXD and UCD Approaches for Accessible Education is an academic research

publication that explores thoughts and experiences on accessible and equitable education from perspectives on human-computer interaction, user research, and design thinking. It seeks to improve the understanding on how technology should be designed to truly contribute to and support accessibility and equity in education. Featuring a wide range of topics such as online courses, inclusive education, and virtual reality, this publication is essential for academicians, curriculum designers, researchers, instructional designers, educational software developers, IT consultants, policymakers, administrators, and students.

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complex state policies and offers the tools to examine how policies affect students' access and success in college. Rather than arguing for a single approach, the authors examine how policymakers and higher education administrators can work to inform and influence change within systems of higher education using research-based evidence along with consideration of political and historical values and beliefs. Special Features: Case Studies—allow readers to examine strategies used by different types of colleges to improve access and retention. Reflective Exercises—encourage readers to discuss state and campus context for policy decisions and to think about the strategies used in a state or institution. Approachable Explanations—unpack complex public policies and financial strategies for readers who seek understanding of public policy in higher education. Research-Based Recommendations—explore how policymakers, higher education administrators and faculty can work together to improve quality, diversity, and financial stewardship. This textbook is an invaluable resource for graduate students, administrators, policymakers, and researchers who seek to learn more about the crucial contexts underlying policy decisions and college access.

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accessibility in higher education: *Developing the Higher Education Curriculum* Brent Carnell, Dilly Fung, 2017-11-13 A complementary volume to Dilly Fung's *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education* (2017), this book explores 'research-based education' as applied in practice within the higher education sector. A collection of 15 chapters followed by illustrative vignettes, it showcases approaches to engaging students actively with research and enquiry across disciplines. It begins with one institution's creative approach to research-based education – UCL's *Connected Curriculum*, a conceptual framework for integrating research-based education into all taught programmes of study – and branches out to show how aspects of the framework can apply to practice across a variety of institutions in a range of national settings. The 15 chapters are provided by a diverse range of authors who all explore research-based education in their own way. Some chapters are firmly based in a subject-discipline – including art history, biochemistry, education, engineering, fashion and design, healthcare, and veterinary sciences – while others reach across geopolitical regions, such as Australia, Canada, China, England, Scotland and South Africa. The final chapter offers 12 short vignettes of practice to highlight how engaging students with research and enquiry can enrich their learning experiences, preparing them not only for more advanced academic learning, but also for professional roles in complex, rapidly changing social contexts.

accessibility in higher education: *Shaping Higher Education with Students* Vincent C. H. Tong, Alex Standen, Mina Sotiriou, 2018-03-06 Forging closer links between university research and teaching has become an important way to enhance the quality of higher education across the world. As student engagement takes centre stage in academic life, how can academics and university leaders engage with their students to connect research and teaching more effectively? In this highly accessible book, the contributors show how students and academics can work in partnership to shape research-based education. Featuring student perspectives, it offers academics and university leaders practical suggestions and inspiring ideas on higher education pedagogy, including principles of working with students as partners in higher education, connecting students with real-world outputs, transcending disciplinary boundaries in student research activities, connecting students with the workplace, and innovative assessment and teaching practices. Written and edited in full

collaboration with students and leading educator-researchers from a wide spectrum of academic disciplines, this book poses fundamental questions about learning and learning communities in contemporary higher education.

accessibility in higher education: Refugees and Higher Education Lisa Unangst, Hakan Ergin, Araz Khajarian, Tessa DeLaquil, Hans de Wit, 2020-07-13 Refugees and Higher Education provides a cross-disciplinary lens on one American university's approach to studying the policies, practices, and experiences associated with the higher education of refugee background students. The focus is not only on refugee education as an issue of access and equity, but also on this phenomenon as seen through the lens of internationalization. What competencies are called for among university faculty and staff welcoming refugee-background students to their institutional contexts? How might "distance learning" be considered anew? These challenges and opportunities for institutional growth will be closely considered by this group of authors from educational leadership, social work, curriculum development, and higher education itself. They address key world regions, and sub-topics ranging from online education in refugee camps to the Brazilian and Colombian responses to the emerging crisis in Venezuela. Scholars researching refugee education cross-nationally often find that refugee education literature is parsed by disciplinary field. This book, in contrast, offers a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary overview of refugee education issues around the world. These perspectives also provide key insights for faculty and staff at higher education institutions that currently enroll asylees or refugees, as well as those that may do so in the future.

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accessibility in higher education: Shadow Libraries Joe Karaganis, 2018-05-04 How students get the materials they need as opportunities for higher education expand but funding shrinks. From the top down, Shadow Libraries explores the institutions that shape the provision of educational materials, from the formal sector of universities and publishers to the broadly informal ones organized by faculty, copy shops, student unions, and students themselves. It looks at the history of policy battles over access to education in the post-World War II era and at the narrower versions that have played out in relation to research and textbooks, from library policies to book subsidies to, more recently, the several "open" publication models that have emerged in the higher education sector. From the bottom up, Shadow Libraries explores how, simply, students get the materials they need. It maps the ubiquitous practice of photocopying and what are—in many cases—the more marginal ones of buying books, visiting libraries, and downloading from unauthorized sources. It looks at the informal networks that emerge in many contexts to share materials, from face-to-face student networks to Facebook groups, and at the processes that lead to the consolidation of some of those efforts into more organized archives that circulate offline and sometimes online—the shadow libraries of the title. If Alexandra Elbakyan's Sci-Hub is the largest of these efforts to date, the more characteristic part of her story is the prologue: the personal struggle to participate in global scientific and educational communities, and the recourse to a wide array of ad hoc strategies and networks when formal, authorized means are lacking. If Elbakyan's story has struck a chord, it is in part because it brings this contradiction in the academic project into sharp relief—universalist in principle and unequal in practice. Shadow Libraries is a study of that tension in the digital era. Contributors Balázs Bodó, Laura Czerniewicz, Mirosław Filiciak, Mariana Fossatti, Jorge Gemetto, Eve Gray, Evelin Heidel, Joe Karaganis, Lawrence Liang, Pedro Mizukami, Jhessica Reia, Alek Tarkowski

accessibility in higher education: Inclusion, Equity and Access for Individuals with Disabilities Santoshi Halder, Vassilios Argyropoulos, 2019-03-02 The book provides multiple perspectives and insights on the area of Inclusion, Equity and Access for people with disabilities and brings together various inclusive effective practices from 21 countries across the world most comprehensively in one book. The book documents perspectives from educational researchers and teacher educators through first-hand experience using cutting-edge research and conceptual

understandings, thought processes, and reflections. The book brings together various methodologies to expose scientific truths in the area of disability and inclusion. Chapter authors utilize a self-reflective stance, representing state of the art theory and practice for exploring notions of disability. Authors examine cultural relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping cultural members and cultural strangers better understand interdependent factors. Each chapter is an attempt to unravel a thought provoking, comprehensive, and thorough understanding of the challenges and abilities of individuals with disabilities shaped by their own culture, society and country, re-engaging the promise of scientific research as a generative form of inquiry. The book is designed to be of use to a wide range of professionals; researchers, practitioners, advocates, special educators and parents providing information and or discussions on educational needs, health care provisions, and social services irrespective of country and culture.

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Mahadeo A. Sukhai, Chelsea E. Mohler, 2016-11-29 Creating a Culture of Accessibility in the Sciences provides insights and advice on integrating students with disabilities into the STEM fields. Each chapter features research and best practices that are interwoven with experiential narratives. The book is reflective of the diversity of STEM disciplines (life and physical sciences, engineering, and mathematics), and is also reflective of cross-disability perspectives (physical, sensory, learning, mental health, chronic medical and developmental disabilities). It is a useful resource for STEM faculty and university administrators working with students with disabilities, as well as STEM industry professionals interested in accommodating employees with disabilities. - Offers a global perspective on making research or work spaces accessible for students with disabilities in the STEM fields - Discusses best practices on accommodating and supporting students and demonstrates how these practices can be translated across disciplines - Enhances faculty knowledge of inclusive teaching practices, adaptive equipment, accessibility features, and accommodations in science laboratories, which would enable the safe participation of students with disabilities - Provides advice for students with disabilities on disclosure and mentoring

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T. Behling, 2018 Advocates for the rights of people with disabilities have worked hard to make universal design in the built environment just part of what we do. We no longer see curb cuts, for instance, as accommodations for people with disabilities, but perceive their usefulness every time we ride our bikes or push our strollers through crosswalks. This is also a perfect model for Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework grounded in the neuroscience of why, what, and how people learn. Tobin and Behling show that, although it is often associated with students with disabilities, UDL can be profitably broadened toward a larger ease-of-use and general diversity framework. Captioned instructional videos, for example, benefit learners with hearing impairments but also the student who worries about waking her young children at night or those studying on a

noisy team bus. Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone is aimed at faculty members, faculty-service staff, disability support providers, student-service staff, campus leaders, and graduate students who want to strengthen the engagement, interaction, and performance of all college students. It includes resources for readers who want to become UDL experts and advocates: real-world case studies, active-learning techniques, UDL coaching skills, micro- and macro-level UDL-adoption guidance, and use-them-now resources.

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students. (GLR)

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Additional Resources

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