

Secret Boss Training: Engage Online Leaders to Adopt UDL

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Abstract

Only about ten percent of K-12, college, and university courses utilize any form of inclusive design (Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2011, p. 255). Campus leaders often see Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a) benefitting only a small segment of learners; b) requiring a significant outlay of time, people, and work; and c) having a limited impact on learner outcomes. This white paper from the author of Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: UDL in Higher Education (2018) provides use-them-tomorrow strategies to get buy-in, advocacy, and support for UDL adoption from your president, provost, principal, school board, and other institutional leaders.

TALKING TO ADMINISTRATORS LIKE ADMINISTRATORS

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) advocates can take advantage of their positions within the political hierarchy of their colleges and universities. Often, the people pushing for inclusive-design techniques like UDL have one foot metaphorically in their institution's daily operations and the other foot in the strategic planning for broader and longer-term outcomes. Such people often have titles like coordinator, director, and technologist, and they are used to working directly with faculty members and support staffers in order to effect programmatic changes. There are a number of excellent articles and resources that offer suggestions about how to get those primary audiences—faculty members and support staff—to buy into and apply best practices that fall within the UDL framework.

However, when we talk with senior leaders at colleges and universities—chancellors, presidents, provosts, and deans—we speak very differently. At the level of courses and faculty interactions, we should always prefer to listen to the instructors' and designers' own experiences and work on plus-one techniques that help to reduce workload for instructors and learners alike. At the level of program and curriculum development, we should adopt the language of senior campus leaders and talk in terms of student retention, persistence, and satisfaction.

Mathew Ouellett of Cornell University, Sara Kacin of Wayne State University, and Shaun Longstreet of Marquette University presented a model for “Accessible Campuses: Partnering with Teaching Centers” at the 2016 Professional and Organizational Development (POD)

Network conference. Their framework for organizational development is a model for how to frame and conduct UDL-adoption conversations with campus leaders. Many such leaders often adopt a crisis-driven approach, moving from one possible lawsuit to another, with a focus on individual behavior change: the institution asks one instructor to create one accommodation for one student with a barrier to learning. Appealing to legal compliance and a sense of compliance is perhaps the least effective way to adopt accessibility as a college- or university-wide practice.

Instead, Ouellett and his colleagues adopted a narrative in which they talked about UDL as a component of multicultural organizational development (MCO), weaving a social-justice argument together with a vision-driven set of goals that could be championed by senior campus leaders who would agree to partner across all executive areas in order to infuse accessibility into the mission, vision, strategic plan, curriculum, and faculty-reward structures. The goal is to change policies, practices, and the culture of the institution by moving through three distinct phases of multicultural organizational development (Jackson, 2005):

1. **Monocultural:** marked by exclusion and an in-club atmosphere: “you can join us if you become us.”
2. **Non-Discriminating:** marked by compliance and affirmative reaction, desire to change the social diversity profile by openness to token non-majority people.
3. **Multicultural:** marked by redefinition of cultural norms, not satisfied with being merely socially just or non-oppressive.

Ouellett cited Wayne State University in 2014 as an example of an institution moving along the MCO process. The university was generally, at the time, at the non-discriminating stage, where students would make specific accommodation requests and individual faculty members would respond. As might be anticipated, some faculty members were still in the in-club mindset where compliance with accessibility laws might still be seen as coddling or providing an unfair advantage to learners with barriers. Ouellett and his colleagues in the Office for Teaching and Learning (OTL) were invited to facilitate the strategic conversation to help the leadership task force to define a good means of demonstrating accessibility legal

compliance, especially in response to the rising awareness of recent lawsuits brought against other universities.

In their POD Network workshop, they mapped out a four-square depiction of selected campus-wide efforts that were or could be undertaken (see Henderson, Beach, & Finkelstein, 2012 for more about four-squares). I re-create the model in Figure 1, below.

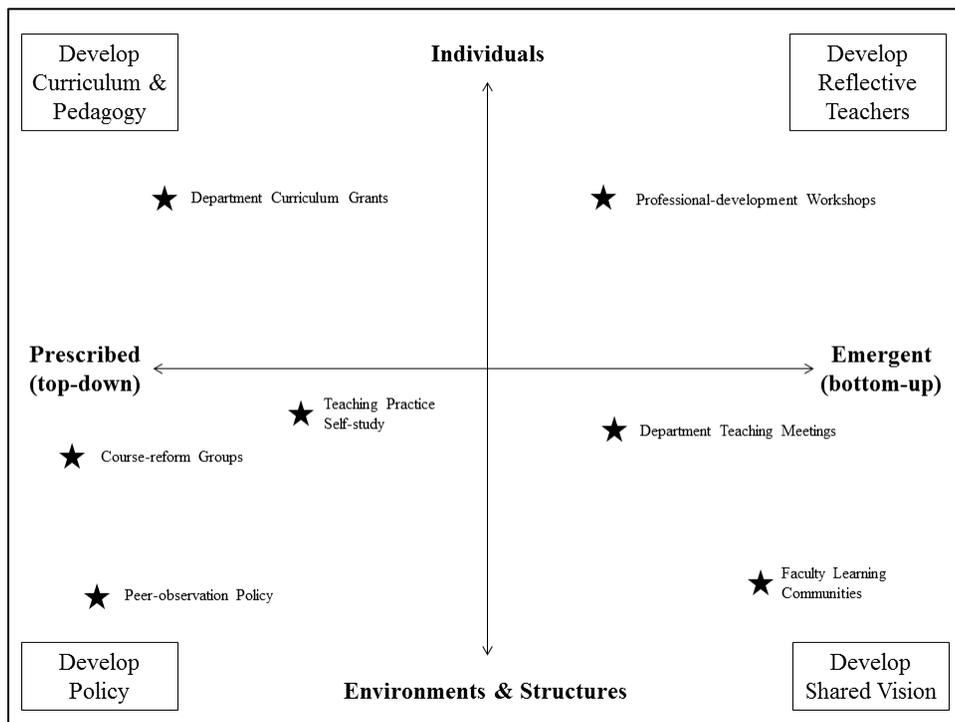


Figure 1: Four-Square Model for Institutional Impact

The four-square chart has two axes: the vertical axis represents at one end changes that apply to individuals and at the other changes that apply to environments and structures. The horizontal axis moves from changes that are prescribed (top down) to changes that are emergent (bottom up). This creates four squares: changes that are emergent and that apply to individuals help to develop reflective teachers; emergent changes to the environment help develop shared vision; prescribed changes to the environment help to develop policy, and prescribed changes for individuals help to develop curriculum. The various inclusivity projects that the campus wanted to enact are placed on the four-square matrix, and the team strived to ensure that projects would help with change in all four of the quadrants of the chart.

By focusing on the larger campus goals and outcomes, the Wayne State University OTL and Student Disabilities Services Office were able to get better buy-in and support from their senior academic leaders to create the campus-wide Provost’s Committee on Accessibility, divide up responsibility for UDL and accessibility training, and

expand on existing efforts, such as an inclusive procurement process for all areas of the university (e.g., athletics, general purchasing, web services) that requires vendors to meet accessibility requirements. With the support of senior leadership, the OTL “overlaid UDL into everything that we do: faculty consultations, templates, speakers we invite to campus, the OTL web-site re-design, and workshops on syllabus and document accessibility.”

Both in my own experiences and in those of colleagues across North America, I have found that UDL adoption at the level of the curriculum is founded on three key areas of college or university programming: faculty-development programming, staff-development programming, and visibility during major technological changes. I will share strategies for holding UDL conversations with people in specific leadership roles, but I first want to encourage readers to use one concept in every UDL conversation with campus higher-ups: retention.

RETENTION, RETENTION, RETENTION

Student retention numbers drive university officials, boards of trustees, and admission officers every day. Especially at the level of senior college and university leader, the business aspect of higher education weighs in campus-wide decision-making at least as much as its societal and knowledge-promotion missions. Institutions thrive when greater numbers of students come back to continue their educations. A truism in admissions offices is that it costs far less to keep students than to find and recruit new ones. Because retention rates also closely parallel graduation rates, increases in student retention translate later into more alumni, more donations, and a greater network of connections on which colleges and universities rely in order to find new students and to leverage the social and financial capital of their alumni networks.

Retention (students come back for more courses) and persistence (students in courses on Day 1 are still there at the end of the term) are equally important to faculty members. Supporting students through their courses in a manner that helps to greatest number of students to demonstrate mastery of the course concepts reflects positively on faculty. High student-persistence rates in courses and high retention rates from term to term correlate strongly to higher faculty evaluation scores when they are

observed by administrators and higher student rating values at the end of the term, as well (Braxton, et al., 2013).

Retention is a value-positive topic through which to engage faculty members and staff into campus-wide conversations about UDL, especially in terms of increasing access for the broadest range of learners. When we build learner choice and ease of access into course content, teaching interactions, skill assessment, support interactions, and the technology used across the institution, such actions contribute measurably and directly to student retention and persistence rates (Braxton, et al., 2013, pp. 87-88). The positive frames that I am suggesting—mobile friendly learning, advantages for faculty workload—are especially useful for those readers who work in environments where colleagues are resistant or seem unready to be open to UDL as a concept.

FACULTY-DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

Most colleges and universities have a program for faculty development, ranging from new-faculty orientation efforts to ongoing efforts such as teaching workshops, faculty learning communities, and professional-development book-study groups. Whether or not your institution has a formal teaching and learning center, adopting UDL principles should move beyond the realm of the disability-services office.

For example, at Northeastern Illinois University, I worked with my team in the Center for Teaching and Learning to incorporate UDL principles in all of the programming offered by the CTL. Workshop materials were provided in multiple formats, and assignments in the how-to-teach-hybrid-classes and how-to-teach-online-classes courses asked faculty participants to create their deliverables in the formats that matched best with their needs and preferences. Individual and departmental consultations always contained plus-one options for finding information and demonstrating skills.

The breakthrough usually comes when other faculty-support areas adopt UDL practices, as well. Beyond the teaching center's programming, when the IT area does training for faculty members, plus-one design thinking ensures that, curriculum-wide, the assumption is that's just the way we do business at your college or university. CAST recently tweeted that the "[e]xpectation at @TowsonU [Towson University in Maryland] is that if you are faculty at the College of Education, you are implementing #UDL" (CAST, 2017). It's just the way they do things.

Faculty-development conferences are a leading indicator of the next big topics in the field, and for a few years, accessibility and UDL presentations, workshops, and keynote speeches have become increasingly common at the Distance Teaching and Learning, Online Learning Consortium, EDUCAUSE, Professional & Organizational Development (POD) Network, and other major conferences in the field. Initially, interest in accessible design was fed

by lawsuits about accessibility, and faculty-development centers are leading the push to move the narrative away from a narrow focus on legal compliance and into a broader narrative about reaching learners where they are—an extension of this desire to adopt good teaching and design practices across our institutions.

STAFF-DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMING

UDL is sometimes viewed through a teaching-only lens. In fact, any interactions in which people learn new skills or encounter new information is fertile ground for UDL application. This has two benefits, one for faculty members and a second for students. When faculty-facing support areas offer support for faculty members, using plus-one inclusive design provides a consistent message and structure for faculty colleagues, and the likelihood that faculty-produced materials and interactions across the curriculum will follow best UDL practices goes up in direct proportion to the number of support areas that model inclusive design in their interactions with faculty members.

Likewise, student-facing areas of the college or university can benefit from UDL principles when they think about the desired outcomes of student interactions with their areas. If we think of the curriculum as extending beyond the courses that students take—out into the advising, registration, and student-support processes—then, the more we apply plus-one design thinking to those interactions, the more we are able to lower barriers to entry or continuation.

For example, offering tutoring services face-to-face, via telephone, and via online synchronous meeting, during as many hours of the day and week as possible, allows learners to choose their preferred method for reaching out for assistance. Likewise, expanding student choice for receiving advising help beyond in-person real-time sessions to things like e-mail and text-message asynchronous sessions allows learners with non-traditional schedules to receive good advice for planning their next steps for study. The more students we bring in the front door, so to speak, the more we can work with course-based curricular access to keep them with us.

In order to effect campus-wide UDL adoption, we need to re-frame our conversations, pitching them differently to audiences at the strategic and operational levels of our colleges and universities. What follow are several scripts and stories about how best to conduct UDL conversations with your colleagues.

The Technology Experts

The director of your campus technology group or the Chief Information Officer (CIO) is often a strong advocate for UDL, although he or she might use a completely different vocabulary to describe it. Those in the technology realm support a wide variety of products: the learning management system, the college or university web site, online communication platforms, and academic technology

used in the classroom. In their world, inclusive design is measured in terms of usability, a concept that pre-dates UDL and partially overlaps with it.

Usable software, interfaces, and tools are designed to allow the greatest number of people to be successful in using the broadest set of the product's features. Interfaces and interactions are designed for maximum usability and then tested with the most variable group of user testers that can be found. In the tech world, products are deemed worthy of adoption only after people try to break them (through many cycles of testing), identify flaws, and subsequently design the flaws out of the products.

This suggests strongly that your CIO is an advocate for inclusively-designed software, hardware, and tools. A good crosswalk conversation often helps, in which you share how UDL is about designing interactions to be more accessible, to offer learner choice and control, and to keep learners engaged. Show your tech leaders how UDL does for interactions what usability testing does for tools. This is especially useful because usability is seldom a top-of-mind issue for technology leaders on campus. Often, just demonstrating how tools are not usable for everyone can lead to UDL support and advocacy from your technology-support colleagues.

When Kirsten Behling was a disability professional and then Director of Disability Services at Suffolk University, she took part in a conversation that helped the university to lay the groundwork for UDL by adopting a more-accessible set of technology tools, all through the lens of usability. After the university unveiled its brand-new web site, a prospective student called the admissions office because he could not get access to the online application. The director of the admissions office called both the director of the web-site team and the disability-services office, seeking an immediate solution from the disability-services office and a long-term solution for the web site itself.

The director of the web site support team argued that the web site and all of its forms must already be usable, because the vendor with whom the university contracted to build the web site had assured the university that the web site and forms met accessibility guidelines. Based on this feedback, the admissions-office director assumed that the prospective student was just struggling and ultimately assigned his complaint back to the operations-level staff in the admissions office.

Two weeks later, however, they got another call with the same issue. This time, the admissions director set up a meeting with Kirsten to review the web site. Kirsten approached the meeting from a usability standpoint, and acted like a typical beta tester who is trying to uncover flaws in a product that is almost ready to be released. Using a screen reader, they found that the web site and admission forms were indeed not accessible at all. Further, the forms did not scale down when viewed on mobile devices. The interactions that the web site and forms were supposed to

facilitate were prevented by the single-stream design of the content and materials.

They called the web-site vendor again, who told them again that the site and forms were accessible, and that if students were "still stuck, just ask them to use paper forms." This was hardly UDL. Kirsten and the admissions director decided to take the issue to the CIO, whom they knew had dealt with web-site access concerns at her previous institution.

The university team set up a meeting with the web-site vendor and invited the university's legal counsel to join them. They began that meeting by demonstrating the inaccessibility of the web site. The vendor continued to argue that it was fine and that students could just apply to the university in a different way. The lawyer put his foot down and said that it was a compliance issue and needed to be fixed immediately. The CIO agreed, and the vendor was tasked with fixing the web site and adding a layer of usability access checks to any new pages before they would be published. This institutional change was due in large part to being able to demonstrate the issue and back it up with legal arguments, all in the service of usability.

The Academic Side of the House

The people involved in the research and teaching at your institution are often the first audience for UDL-campaign conversations. Start with a small targeted group—whether a department, a group of department chairs, or an education committee—in order to keep the scope manageable, initially. If you can convince a department to incorporate UDL strategies into its courses and then measure the effectiveness, you will have data to create greater impact for your later conversation with the provost to broaden the project into a university-wide initiative.

I spoke to an occupational therapy (OT) professor from the University of New Hampshire who expanded her plus-one use of course videos with text-based lecture materials into a full-blown research project. She taught two sections of the same introductory course and changed the method of instruction and studying in only one of them. In the traditionally-designed control course, the instructor showed the class the movements to perform with patients once and then referred students to the pictures and descriptions in their textbook for more information. In the experimental course section, the instructor showed the students the movements once and then asked them to break into groups of three: patient, occupational therapist and videographer.

As the professor had seen with her ad-hoc changes in previous courses, this addition of another choice or channel for studying improved students' overall ability to understand and practice their patient-practice movements, especially in comparison to the single-choice method of looking only at the static images in the textbook. The professor calculated that those who used videos performed, on average, 10% better on their final examinations.

With the professor's data in hand, the department created a video-based plus-one initiative across all OT courses. Within two years, they had substantial data and were writing journal articles about their collective success. The dean of the graduate school was not aware of their work—until she happened to read about it in a scholarly journal. She was so impressed that she asked all of the graduate schools in the University of New Hampshire to begin implementing UDL the following year.

The Policy Makers

Accessibility in the tools that your college or university purchases is a basis for being able to implement UDL practices in the interactions that you have when using those tools. In recent years, institutions have begun to look at usability in much the same way that they look at security. Most institutions have a security policy: no technology tools can be purchased until they have undergone extensive security tests to ensure that sensitive data will be protected.

Colleges and universities rely increasingly on an ever-widening array of digital tools—web sites, online forms, e-mail and calendaring systems, course-registration interfaces, Electronic Information Touchpoints (EITs), and learning management systems. We can now perform usability and accessibility testing to ensure that these purchases, many of them mission-critical and concomitantly expensive, are checked for accessibility, which can save hundreds of thousands of dollars in potential lawsuit settlements.

Institutions of higher education are wrestling with this idea, though, since it appears that a significant portion of the technology that we currently use is not accessible. Vendors are slowly becoming aware of the need for their products to be universally designed, but many are not there yet.

In response, start by creating a procurement policy that allows for exceptions while still requiring follow-ups for vendors not yet in compliance with accessibility requirements. This allows universities to ask questions about accessibility, to push back against vendors whose products aren't accessible, and to demand better services and products.

To draft or update your procurement policy, meet with those on your campus who created your data-security policy and work to understand and mirror their reasoning in your work on procurement. Present it to the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and your college or university counsel. Share any legal requirements, explain how you'd like your institution to be forward thinking, and review the policy details.

The Dean of Student Affairs

At most institutions, the Dean of Student Affairs oversees all those departments that do not directly involve the teaching and research aspect of the school. The dean might oversee the student-activities, athletics, residence-life,

health-services, and diversity-services areas of the college or university. There is a wealth of opportunity to infuse the principles of UDL into the work done by these offices.

Perhaps the easiest entry point is to focus on the number of programming events that these offices put together annually. A large part of many of their jobs is to provide activities in which students participate outside of the classroom. For example, the student-activities office might run a robotics club or sponsor the choir; residence life might offer floor programming around Halloween; health services might provide a flu-shot clinic; diversity services might program events to celebrate Black History Month; and the athletics department might advertising intramural sports for students to participate in. Activities outside of the classroom are opportunities to apply UDL strategies in order to increase awareness and attendance for students with diverse needs.

As you work to make allies in these offices, remember that the resources in many such areas are overextended. Adding UDL, no matter how simply or in how limited a way, may not be a welcome addition. This is why you need the support and advocacy of the Dean of Student Affairs. The dean can mandate that the directors and staff in student-service functional areas attend workshops on how to apply UDL strategies to welcome more students.

It is common for disability-services professionals to be the point people for event-access questions. In her role as a disability-services office director, Kirsten Behling has heard many such questions, such as the orientation-office staffer who wondered how to make a visit to a local museum accessible to a student in a wheelchair; or the residence-life director who wanted to know what food they should offer at floor meetings, since one of their residents had a gluten allergy; or the drama club advisor who called to ask how to make their playbills accessible to a student with a vision disability. All of these examples were reactions to specific situations, and the staff members who raised the questions were still in the make-accommodations mindset.

Kirsten remembers more such calls. The athletics department asked what to do about a transgender student who wanted to use a specific locker room. The debate club called, asking how to help a student whose first language was not English to participate more fully. Again, the questions were reactive, what-do-we-do-now sorts of concerns. Eventually, Kirsten took all of these issues to the Dean of Student Affairs and asked for help in managing them. She proposed a UDL program for the student-affairs division to increase awareness and empower other offices to adopt UDL strategies proactively and broadly. The Dean was thrilled to support the idea, infusing the presentation into her annual departmental retreat. The materials from that workshop were also made available to each director for use later on. Each of these target points and methods of getting the message across about the benefits of UDL for

everyone can be customized to a specific campus, department, or group.

BE A LEADER

Most institutions of higher education want to be recognized for being leaders in their field. Whether it is having the best law school, the highest career-placement rates, the best sports team, the most diverse campus, the largest number of student activists, or the university with the most research-grant dollars, being the best is an attractive vision for administrators.

UDL and “most accessible” are not typically at the top of administrators’ lists of categories in which they want their colleges and universities to be the best. UDL makes good sense, they concede. There is wide support for creating an inclusive environment, but it does not seem to draw in more funding, more research opportunities, or more prospective-student interest like other big-ticket items.

One way to re-frame UDL is to use it as a driver for best-of categories that are on many administrators’ minds: “mobile friendly” and “best fit for time-strapped students.”

Shortly after the voluntary resolution agreement between Pennsylvania State University and the National Federation for the Blind, in which the NFB sued Penn State on behalf of students with disabilities because they were unable to access the online systems of the school, other universities began to take notice (Carlson, 2017).

In 2016, I spoke with Aaron Spector, the Director of Disability Resources and Services at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Spector and his colleagues used the Penn State settlement as an opportunity to examine and rethink their online presence proactively in terms of UDL. An initial conversation between Disability Resources and the instructional technology department led to the establishment of a much larger university-wide Accessible Technology Initiative. Temple University has taken a number of proactive steps in establishing itself as a leader in the field of online access.

They established an Accessible Technology Compliance Committee—made up of a mix of staff, faculty members, and administrators—that looked at how to approach online access to interactions throughout the university from a UDL standpoint.

They began with a university-wide audit of all things online (web sites, the LMS, the e-mail system, online forms), recognizing quickly that they were not in compliance with U.S. law. They then set a list of priorities for how to resolve the issues found in the audit. They established an Accessibility Liaison at each of their schools to make sure that the work of online access did not fall onto just one person.

They created a procurement process that requires any vendor with whom they might do business to provide a Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT), and

adopted policy that gives Temple the right to refuse to work with vendors whose products are inaccessible.

And, perhaps most importantly, Temple is committed to reevaluating their work on a regular basis, understanding that even though they addressed barriers once, development is an iterative process.

Spector notes that the changes they adopted have had the greatest positive impact for one of Temple’s largest group of learners: people who commute into center-city Philadelphia for work and who take courses in addition to their family and work responsibilities.

Since Temple adopted their proactive stance toward online accessibility, many other institutions of higher education across North America have looked to them for guidance about how to engage their own colleagues in the conversation about inclusive design and UDL.

Temple staff members frequently give presentations at national conferences and are often the subject of articles citing their forward thinking. Temple is the example you can use when you approach your administrators with solutions to problems that may not be top of mind for them. Turn your UDL conversations into a race to be the best.

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