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### An Overview of UDL Theory and Scholarship in Higher Education

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## CHAPTER 1

# An Overview of UDL Theory and Scholarship in Higher Education

*Rachel M. McMullin and Danielle Skaggs*

This short chapter is intended for those newer to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) or those who wish to dig deeper into existing UDL scholarship. In it, we provide a brief introduction to Universal Design (UD) and other models based on UD for anyone unfamiliar with them, followed by a broad overview of the state of scholarship based on UDL and focused on its application to higher education.

## Universal Design

UD started as a design concept, with the aim of creating buildings and products that were designed to be usable by all. The heart of UD is to consider the needs of all users, including those with disabilities in the initial design process instead of creating after-the-fact accommodations for individual users. Developed by Ron Mace and the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University, UD relies on seven main principles that each have four to five guidelines to help designers and architects in implementation.\*

The seven principles of Universal Design are:

1. Equitable use
2. Flexibility in use

\* <https://design.ncsu.edu/research/center-for-universal-design/>



3. Simple and intuitive use
4. Perceptible information
5. Tolerance for error
6. Low physical effort
7. Size and space for approach and use

## *Universal Design and Higher Education*

Those applying UD most often consider physical disabilities—designing for wheelchair access or making a building or website navigable for the blind, for example. As educators began to apply UD to their field, however, the importance of designing for learning disabilities and other “invisible” disabilities led to the creation of education-specific UD models. One model, Universal Design for Instruction (UDI), incorporates UD’s original seven principles (with definitions in the educational context) and adds two more: a community of learners and instructional climate.<sup>1</sup> The UDI model has undergone study through three rounds of grant funding and has been adapted for use with foreign language instruction.<sup>2</sup>

Two other models followed the spirit of UD but did not directly incorporate its seven principles. Universal Instructional Design (UID) was designed for higher education and provides eight concrete guiding principles for designing instruction.<sup>3</sup> This model is perhaps the least popular in the literature. Confusingly, authors also sometimes use UID as a general term to mean designing instruction with universal design principles in mind, without referring to UID’s specific guiding principles.

### The eight guiding principles of Universal Instructional Design:

1. Create a respectful and welcoming climate for learning.
2. Determine essential course components.
3. Communicate clear expectations.
4. Use diverse teaching methods.
5. Provide natural supports.
6. Create multiple means for demonstrating knowledge.
7. Provide constructive feedback.
8. Promote interaction.

The second model, UDL,<sup>\*</sup> involves three main principles (provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression) further divided into nine guidelines. While this model was initially developed for K-12 education and widely used in that context, it has also been adopted in higher education and can be considered the dominant model there. The overview of scholarship below includes work that applies all three models, but UDL is the framework of choice in a majority of recent work.

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<sup>\*</sup> <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

## UDL and Accessibility

UD and UDL both incorporate guidelines to make their outputs (buildings, products, and instruction) accessible and are defined by a focus on designing for users with varying abilities. While UDL focuses on how designing for a variety of users benefits all users, the legal mandate to accommodate users with disabilities comes from the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act.<sup>†</sup> There are also technical specifications for accessibility, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG).<sup>‡</sup> UDL's accessibility guidelines work with these specifications and present them in a user-friendly way for instructors and librarians. However, if you want or need to delve more deeply into online accessibility, you can use WCAG for further guidance.

## Overview of Scholarship on UDL and Higher Education

The scholarship on UDL and academia has grown to the point where an exhaustive review is no longer possible. This section will instead attempt to provide a brief overview of major trends in the scholarship from the emergence of UDL and other models for applying UD to education until present day. Those seeking additional bibliography on the topic would do well to check out the one provided by The Center for Universal Design in Higher Education (University of Washington).<sup>§</sup>

Calls to apply UD to higher education begin to appear around the same time as the development of the various frameworks. Much of the earliest work (early 2000s) specifically focused on how UDL (or one of the other frameworks) could benefit students with disabilities and/or was published in journals or collections with a disability studies scope. These articles tended to be broad calls to incorporate UDL at the postsecondary level. For instance, as early as 1999, Price-Ellingstad argued the need for universal design to be applied across higher education to allow more access and improve outcomes for individuals with disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Another article highlighted UD and UDL as a means for improving retention of college students with disabilities.<sup>5</sup> Early on, there was also scholarship that specifically tied UDL to the use of assistive technology or educational technology more broadly. One example is an article by Sheryl Burgstahler, who is now one of the most prominent advocates of and scholar on the use of UD and UDL in higher education.<sup>6</sup> To an extent, this connection between UDL and disability studies remains. If you conduct a search in a discovery tool or multi-disciplinary database for scholarship on UDL and higher education from the last five years, you will find many results specific to supporting students with disabilities.

One prominent exception to the early scholarly focus on UDL and disabilities was an entire issue of *Equity & Excellence in Education* (37.2, 2004) dedicated to applying what it called Universal Instructional Design to academia. Several of the articles in the issue

<sup>†</sup> <https://webaim.org/articles/laws/usa/>

<sup>‡</sup> <https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/>

<sup>§</sup> <https://www.washington.edu/doit/programs/center-universal-design-education/resources/published-books-and-articles-about-universal>

focused on how universal design can support diversity more broadly, including two articles that focus on social justice implications. While this special issue came out in 2004, there was then a bit of a gap before we see the true shift from a focus on disability to one on diversity, but by the late aughts we start to see more scholarship that highlights UDL's ability to support a wide variety of students.<sup>7</sup> This time period also brought the first book on UDL in the postsecondary environment, the first edition of Burgstahler's *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice*.<sup>8</sup>

As we move from the late 2000s into the 2010s, we see an increase in the amount of scholarship being produced as well as more diversity in the types of work that appear. Early adopters of UDL in higher education seemed eager to publish what they had done and learned. But even as the amount of scholarship has expanded, a majority of it falls into a relatively small number of categories. The most common types of articles are those that are meant to educate college faculty about UDL and encourage its adoption, articles offering general strategies for implementing UDL into courses, and case studies describing implementation of UDL into a particular course. Many articles combine two or more of these aspects, advocating for UDL adoption in higher education while also offering a case study or list of UDL strategies to help faculty get started.

Some of these articles are broad calls to action<sup>9</sup> or encourage adoption in certain types of classes, like online classes or large lecture courses.<sup>10</sup> But a large amount of disciplinary-specific scholarship also began to appear, with faculty arguing that UDL can be used as a way to support students in specific programs. While the majority of the early scholarship had appeared in either disability-focused or general higher education journals, this second wave of scholarship shifted to more frequent publication in journals with a disciplinary focus.

A review of the literature reveals that UDL as a theory has seen more uptake in some disciplines than others. For instance, there is a substantial body of articles centered around using UDL in teacher education—unsurprising since students in these programs will be expected to implement UDL themselves as future teachers.<sup>11</sup> Another pocket of research appears in the health sciences and medicine,<sup>12</sup> with multiple articles specifically dedicated to UDL in nursing education.<sup>13</sup> A third area with multiple publications is the STEM disciplines, including both articles addressing STEM fields as a whole<sup>14</sup> and articles focused on applying UDL to classes in physics,<sup>15</sup> ecology,<sup>16</sup> and chemistry.<sup>17</sup> There are fewer articles from social sciences disciplines, but there are examples from social work,<sup>18</sup> rehabilitation counseling,<sup>19</sup> and occupational therapy.<sup>20</sup> To date, the arts, humanities, and business are poorly represented in the literature, though there are a handful of offerings.<sup>21</sup>

Another segment of the UDL scholarship since 2010 focuses on supporting the implementation of UDL in higher education. Many articles have focused on faculty familiarity with or perceptions of UDL, often discussing the barriers/factors that might make faculty more or less inclined to adopt UDL strategies.<sup>22</sup> There is also a body of work on providing training for faculty in how to implement UDL, some of which include studies of whether or not the training actually led to an increase in faculty adopting UDL strategies in their classes.<sup>23</sup> The general consensus of these studies has been that even a relatively small amount of training is effective in helping faculty begin to incorporate UDL into their own teaching.

One criticism of UDL is that adoption has moved forward without much assessment of whether it works. In a 2013 chapter titled *Critical Silences Surrounding Universal Design*, Jane K. Seale concludes that “there is little or no evidence for the effectiveness of universal design in higher education and e-learning.”<sup>24</sup> Some progress has been made since then; however, the most common type of study to date has been on student perceptions of UDL in the classroom. These include studies both on whether students perceived the UDL strategies employed as helpful and/or engaging and whether students made use of the UDL-inspired materials.<sup>25</sup> However, even as recently as 2020, there was still a dearth of empirical studies that analyze whether incorporating UDL into postsecondary courses leads to improved student learning outcomes.<sup>26</sup> The few studies that have been conducted have shown mixed results.<sup>27</sup>

As scholarly attention to UDL in higher education increased in the late 2010s, the publication of books on the topic also accelerated. In 2015, Burgstahler published the second edition of *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice*.<sup>28</sup> It was joined in the next few years by several others: Tobin and Behling’s *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education*, Bracken and Novak’s *Transforming Higher Education Through Universal Design for Learning: An International Perspective*, Black and Moore’s *UDL Navigators in Higher Education: A Field Guide*, and *Universal Design for Learning: Teaching to All College Students* by Zaloudek, Chandler, Carlson, and Howarton.<sup>29</sup> Burgstahler then followed with another volume in 2020, *Creating Inclusive Learning Opportunities in Higher Education: A Universal Design Toolkit*.<sup>30</sup>

As of the early 2020s, one notable aspect of the scholarship on UDL in higher education is that it continues to retain a relatively narrow focus on applying the framework to the classroom environment (including training faculty to use it in that environment). This makes sense to an extent, as that is the environment that the creators had in mind. However, it seems time to move beyond that limit. In the introduction to *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone*, Tobin and Behling make a call to expand knowledge of UDL beyond teaching faculty, writing that “Next, we should move the focus away from training only faculty members about UDL. Let’s train the people who support them: information technology (IT) departments, teaching-and-learning centers, media services areas, academic department staff, and the help desk (p.6).”<sup>31</sup> Academic libraries are a key area for expanding on this work, as they straddle the divide between academic affairs and student affairs, offering instruction programs, but also a wide array of services, service points, resources, and spaces that are used by the entire campus community.

## Overview of Scholarship on UDL and Academic Libraries

The first scholarship on UDL and academic libraries began appearing in the late 2000s, the same time as UDL scholarship began to appear across a variety of disciplines. In a short 2007 article, Creamer presented a call to action for all types of libraries to incorporate ideas of Universal Design into library spaces, resources, and instruction.<sup>32</sup> Similar broad calls for academic librarians to adopt UDL have continued to be published in a variety of

library scholarly and professional journals over the years.<sup>33</sup> In 2008, Chodock and Dolinger provided a first indication of what applying UD to academic library instruction might look like.<sup>34</sup> Since the larger body of scholarship at the time had not yet coalesced around UDL, they based their work on the UDI model.

The early 2010s brought a slight increase in the scholarship. Two articles followed Chodock and Dolinger's lead and discussed applying UDL principles to in-person instruction. Zhong illustrated incorporating UDL strategies via a lesson on developing search strategies using Boolean logic.<sup>35</sup> Hoover et al. provided a short case study describing how they developed UDL-infused library components for a larger campus support program for students with disabilities. Their study showed that participants gained confidence in conducting library research.<sup>36</sup> Several other articles from this period focused on online learning. In 2014, Catalano applied UDL to a one-credit online research course, ensuring that all course materials were accessible and providing background information on how to use required technology.<sup>37</sup> In the same year, Clossen published an article on applying both Universal Design and Human-Centered Design to video tutorials.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Kavanaugh, Webb, and Hoover (2015) outlined how they used the ADDIE instructional design process and UDL elements to supplement an existing LibGuide with images, audio, and interactive components, transforming it into an online tutorial.<sup>39</sup>

The output of scholarship then began to accelerate dramatically in the late 2010s, with a total of twenty-one articles and a book published since 2017. Fourteen of those twenty-one articles were published from 2020 through 2022. Instruction, either online or in-person, continued to be a major focus, with numerous articles addressing these contexts as well as Lund's 2020 book, *Creating Accessible Online Learning Instruction Using Universal Design Principles*.<sup>40</sup> The scholarship also showed how librarians were applying UDL more broadly to their work, including articles about incorporating UDL principles to a webpage that houses a library tutorial collection, creating an online training tool to teach other librarians how to apply UDL and accessibility into their digital objects, and teaming up with teaching faculty to use UDL principles to support student reading.<sup>41</sup> Baldwin published a short article with suggestions of UDL-related books, journals, and websites that can be used to support librarian professional development.<sup>42</sup> Finally, we are also starting to see some critique of UDL in the library literature. In a 2021 article, Roth, Singh, and Turnbow argue that inclusivity and diversity are elements missing from the UDL framework and offer their own guidelines for incorporating these aspects into instruction.<sup>43</sup>

The scholarship on UDL and academic libraries may have grown; however, the focus has continued to remain on applying UDL to in-person or online instruction. While some articles urge libraries to apply UDL to other aspects of academic library work such as services, programming, or technical services, only a few articles to date have tackled this, and some of those articles have used the UD framework rather than UDL. These include articles on universal access and metadata, UD applied to library websites, UDL as a strategy for making reference services a "nexus for campus collaborations," and how accessibility and UDL can inform acquisition policies.<sup>44</sup> There is unquestionably quite a bit of room for additional research in these areas. Also, as with the larger body of work



on UDL in higher education, more studies are needed that track the impact of including UDL strategies on student learning outcomes.

## Notes

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