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## Universal Design for Learning After COVID-19

Submitted by Joshua Kim on January 13, 2021 - 9:00pm

**Blog:** [Learning Innovation](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

We don't know what higher education will look like [after COVID-19](#) <sup>[2]</sup>.

However, we do know that there is no going back to pre-pandemic academic business as usual.

COVID-19 has accelerated the postsecondary trends that were already well underway pre-pandemic. These accelerated trends include:

- The shift from residential to online degree (and increasingly nondegree) programs.
- The digitization and hybridization of residential learning.
- Challenging financial circumstances (growing costs and diminishing revenues).

One trend that I hope COVID-19 accelerates is the shift toward universal design for learning (UDL). (See Tobin and Behling *[Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education](#)* <sup>[3]</sup>, 2018.)

Post-pandemic, all aspects of higher education -- and particularly areas of teaching and learning -- will be digitally mediated. Even instructional activities that we think of as primarily face-to-face interactions, such as residential lecture courses, will include substantial digital components.

This post-COVID-19 residential education shift to digital will take the form of a continuation of some students learning remotely, some classes taught remotely and most course materials (lectures, readings, assignments) being created and delivered digitally.

This digitization of residential instruction can provide -- given the right resources and incentives -- the opportunity to make institutionwide (and systemwide) progress in the adoption of UDL.

Crucially, UDL is not about developing and teaching courses that only work well for students that require accommodations. Instead, UDL <sup>[4]</sup> is an approach that benefits all students by creating flexible learning paths and multiple means of student engagement, representation, action, and expression.

As Romy Ruukel writes <sup>[5]</sup>,

*“[UDL] means using varied formats (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, numerical, narrative, etc.) for delivering content; individual and social engagement options; and choices of modalities through which students can demonstrate learning comprehension.”*

The institutional window to support universal design for learning will be most open when faculty are making the transition away from remote and toward residential learning. This transition point will be an opportunity in which the best parts of the pandemic-necessitated pivot to remote learning can be preserved.

This is not to say that every, or even most, remote courses were designed to align to the core principles of UDL. Some were, but the speed and breadth of moving to remote learning made it impossible for every course to follow best practices in universal design.

Instead, what we do have in place at our colleges and universities is a pandemic-catalyzed history of broad constituencies of faculty collaborating with nonfaculty educators (instructional designers, educational developers, etc.) on teaching and learning issues.

When COVID-19 hit and face-to-face classes were canceled, large proportions of faculty sought out and received assistance with course design and delivery. With intentional commitment and concerted institutionwide action (and resources), we can build on that history to diffuse universal design for learning throughout the curriculum.

An institutionwide commitment to UDL will require a similar emphasis on course continuity that academic leaders displayed during the pandemic. Just as the effort to keep students learning by remote means was prioritized at

every level of institutions during the pandemic (today at its most virulent), a similar commitment should be made to universalizing UDL.

The timing, when the pandemic finally ends with widespread vaccination, will be good for making nonlinear advances in diffusing UDL.

Post-pandemic, faculty will be developing and teaching their courses with remote teaching experience under their belts. Professors will be looking to retain what worked in remote instruction and return to those teaching practices and methods that work best when everyone is together in a room.

In this space, where professors are thinking about the move back to face-to-face teaching, schools can offer robust levels of assistance and support. We should all be ready to center that collaboration around the principles of UDL.

The immediate post-COVID-19 opportunity to prioritize UDL on an institutional level is an opportunity not likely to come again.

We should be planning now -- even at the depths of the pandemic crisis -- to a future where universal design for learning is as standard and expected as a course syllabus.

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/universal-design-learning-after-covid-19>

#### **Links**

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/learning-innovation/11-post-covid-19-higher-ed-questions>

[3] <https://www.amazon.com/Reach-Everyone-Teach-Universal-Education/dp/1946684600>

[4] <https://udlguidelines.cast.org/>

[5] <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/higher-ed-gamma/case-accessible-usable-and-universal-design-learning>