APPLYING A UNIVERSAL DESIGN OF INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Synopsis:

Universal Design of Inclusion (UDI) creates an environment that enables all students to succeed across all curricular experiences. This paper presents the argument that the application of UDI as a deliberative process of policy development will inform and impact practice in the areas of student affairs, professional development, instructional practices and sustainability. This will ensure access and improved outcomes for all students including students with exceptionalities in higher education.

Applying A Universal Design of Inclusion In Higher Education

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Abstract

The purpose of higher education is not just for knowledge, but also for universal utility. In meeting its purpose, institutions of higher education need to ensure that all students have equal access and engagement in their college educational experiences. Despite existing efforts, persons of difference invariably face challenges of inclusion in their college experience that can be mitigated with appropriate policies and practices.

The premise of this paper is based on the principles of universal design, universal design of learning (UDL), and inclusion - access for all while incorporating equal opportunity for all students to succeed in the classroom. Higher education typically addresses inclusion as an add-on, rather than an intentional element of planning. A *Universal Design of Inclusion* creates an environment of intentionality that enables all students to succeed both academically and across co-curricular experiences. It focuses on implementing strategies that impact: student affairs, professional development for faculty, and instructional practices.

The assertion of universal design of inclusion (UDI) is that inclusion is a deliberative process of policy development that then informs practice. This paper discusses the following:

- Student affairs—examining how practitioners should frame their work through the UDI lens. This includes housing and residence life, programming, academic advising, and general student development.
- Faculty professional development and instructional practice—how faculty training in the implementation of UDI across all disciplines as a matter of policy impacts student outcomes. Training focuses on instructional design and coordinating and collaborating across all student services through the prism of inclusion.

These authors posit that as a matter of advocacy for persons of difference, realizing full inclusion in institutions of higher education through UDI-informed practices and policies will ensure full access for all students leading to more positive experiences and improved outcomes overall.

Introduction/Background

What is the purpose of institutions of higher education? The response to this question would depend on to whom the question was posed. According to Chan (2016), the expectation of undergraduate students in engaging in higher education and obtaining a degree is "instrumental and personal' while the perspective of the education providers 'tends towards highly ideal life- and society- changing consequences" (p.1). There may be a consensus that the purpose of higher education is not just for knowledge, but also for universal utility. In meeting its purpose, institutions of higher education need to ensure that all students and their differences be acknowledged and that they all are afforded equal access and engagement in their college educational experiences. This is even more important when the layer of disability is added. As such the concept of inclusion must be central to the ethos of the institution and be a driving factor that informs policy and practice.

Frameworks to Support Universal Design of Inclusion in Higher Education

Universal Design of Inclusion (UDI), builds on the frameworks of the principle of universal design (UD) - access for all - while incorporating universal design of learning (UDL) - equal opportunity for all students to succeed in the classroom. Both UD and UDL consider how traditional ways of operating result in barriers to the physical, academic, social, and emotional experiences for non-traditional students or students of difference. These barriers are entrenched in the physical plant, the climate of the institution, instructional methodologies, materials and assessment, lack of representation of varying identities, and institutional policies to name a few. Universal design and UDL encourage institutions and stakeholders to proactively consider systemic and educational approaches that would lead to improved student outputs in an environment of inclusion, acceptance, and empowerment.

Universal Design

Universal design was born from the world of architecture. The term was coined by famed architect Ronald Mace, a devoted advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. His advocacy was reflected in his work as he saw the concept of UD as designing the built environment and all products to not only be usable by everyone to the greatest extent possible but also be aesthetically appealing. It intends to design and construct equal access to facilities and products considering the needs of the broadest possible range of users. According to the Center for Excellence in Universal Design (2020)

> Universal Design...is not a special requirement, for the benefit of only a minority of the population. It is a fundamental condition of good design. If an environment is accessible, usable, convenient and a pleasure to use everyone benefits. By considering the diverse needs and abilities throughout the design process, universal design creates products, services, and environments that meet peoples' needs. Simply put, universal design is good design (para. 1).

The UD principles put forward that full access is designed from the outset - it is not an afterthought. It is more cost-effective than retrofitting and more elegant and easy to use while increasing access opportunities for all.

Universal Design of Learning

The National Center on UDL (2013) described UDL as "a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone - not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs (para. 1)." UDL reduces barriers to instruction, provides appropriate accommodations and supports as needed, and maintains high achievement expectations. It facilitates the design and implementation of a flexible and responsive curriculum offering options for how information is presented, how students are engaged in the learning process, and

how students respond or demonstrate their knowledge and skills. UDL requires an examination of the potential barriers to success and designing the instructional experience to meet the needs of the learners at their respective levels.

Tienda (2013) defines inclusion as "organizational strategies and practices that promote meaningful social and academic interactions among persons and groups who differ in their experiences, their views, and their traits" (p. 467). The principles of UD and UDL when applied to this concept of inclusion, provides a framework for identifying potential barriers that may affect students of difference, and informs the design and implementation of policies and practices that can mitigate the adverse impacts resulting in a more positive experience for all students. This framework is the *Universal Design of Inclusion* (UDI). See Figure 1.

What is Universal Design of Inclusion?

Universal Design of Inclusion is the deliberate creation, restructuring, and maintenance of policies, programming, and education to create an environment of acceptance, celebration, and empowerment of individuals, as they are while respecting the diversity of individual identities, exceptionalities, and other characteristics. It builds on the principles of full access for all students of difference as designed from the outset, increasing opportunities for access by removal of barriers or providing accommodations to ensure full engagement. To appreciate the need for UDI, it is helpful to have an understanding of the history of exclusion/inclusion in educational settings.
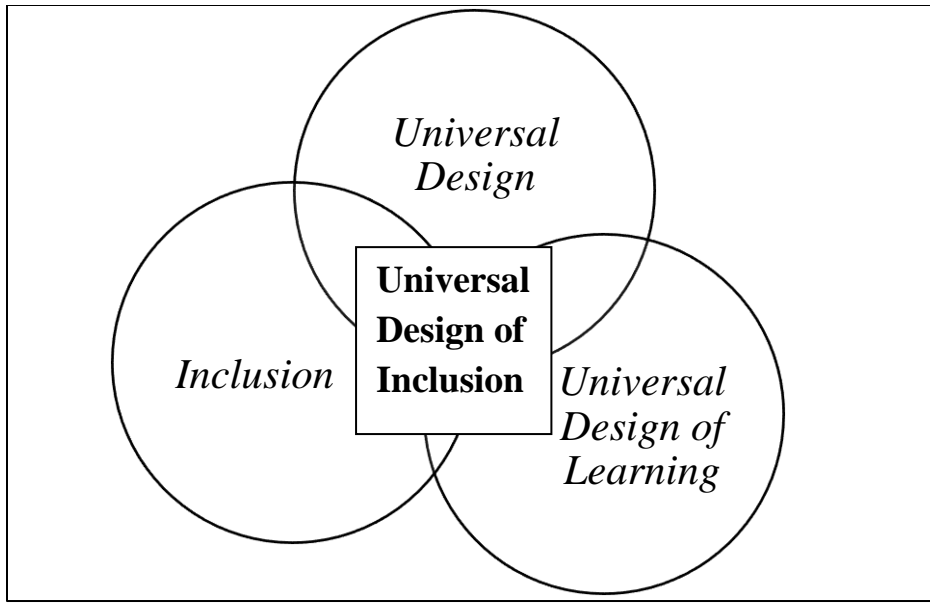
Figure 1 Universal Design of Inclusion Framework

A Brief History of Exclusion/Inclusion

Historically, the conversation and practices around inclusion or exclusion had their origins in how persons with disabilities were perceived and treated. Persons with disabilities or persons who were in any way perceived as different or deviating from society's norm, were actively and invariably excluded from activities and spaces that others freely and readily were able to access. In fact, persons with disabilities were forced into isolation and exclusion. In the United States, with the advent of the civil rights era from the mid-1960s and leading up to the 1980s, there was a push for advocating for the rights of persons with disabilities and persons of difference to be included and have access to the same spaces and experiences as other members of society (Wizner, 1993). Landmark cases were presented and significant laws were passed. Of great significance was *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 which impacted the treatment of all students in education as segregation based on characteristics such as race or disability was outlawed. Public Law (P.L.) 93-112, the Rehabilitation Act, commonly referred to as Section 504, was passed in 1973 which stated that agencies or activities receiving federal funding could

neither deny benefits to nor discriminate against individuals with disabilities. Increased access to, and greater visibility within the school system for persons with disabilities, as well as their successes in academic spaces, brought a shift in the perspective of society in terms of inclusion of this population.

Despite this shift, there was still resistance to inclusion, especially in educational institutions. Reasons cited were lack of funding, teacher training, or the physical environment to address the needs of these students. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted at the end of the 1980s and afforded anti-discrimination protection for all persons with disabilities. In the 1990s, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L.) 101-476 (IDEA) was enacted providing for free, appropriate public education, appropriate, non-discriminatory evaluation, an individualized education plan, receipt of education in the least restrictive environment, provisions for parental participation in all processes, and procedural safeguards for parents and students to enforce their rights under federal law. IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 and its most recent amendment is through P.L. 114-95, the Every Student Succeeds Act of December 2015. As a result of these laws and others like it, education as a right, inclusion for all, and the mandate of accountability lead to greater empowerment of persons with disabilities.

As previously stated, discussions around inclusion, or the lack thereof, are often addressed within the context of persons with disabilities. In higher education, especially over the past decades, race and ethnicity have been the major focus. Historically, the efforts of people of color and persons with disabilities have laid the foundation for change and inclusion for other persons of difference. Despite existing efforts, persons of difference invariably continue to face challenges of inclusion in their college experience. Taking into account the growing diversity in the population of students in higher education, the definition of inclusion needs to more

appropriately reflect that reality as presented by Tienda's (2013) definition. On this premise, the challenges of inclusion in the college experience can be mitigated through appropriate policies and practices as informed by UDI.

<div align="center">**Why a Universal Design of Inclusion**</div>

Higher education typically addresses inclusion as an add-on, rather than an intentional element of planning. UDI creates an environment that enables all students to succeed both academically and across co-curricular experiences. It focuses on policy development which impacts: student affairs, professional development for faculty, instructional practices, and education for sustainability. In turn, creating an environment based on inclusion instead of an environment needing an abundance of accommodations after individuals decide to partake in the experiences. Creating an environment with UDI at its core will allow for the immediate inclusion of any individual.

Universal Design of Inclusion increases access for all students. The inclusion would be introduced at the forefront of development rather than an afterthought. This would increase the immediacy of accessibility and inclusion rather than a student needing to express their need for accommodation and wait for accommodations to be developed and implemented. Immediate access would increase the inclusivity of the environment by allowing any individual to enter the environment without any stipulations; expressing needs for accommodations. Decreasing the stipulations of entering an environment would in turn increase the quality of diverse interactions by removing the potential for conflict or delay in providing accommodations and creating a truly inclusive environment. Increasing the quality of diverse interactions would likely in turn lead to higher retention within the environment by creating communities for individuals to gather and share more diverse views that can currently be found in many environments where inclusivity is

the afterthought. When creating an environment, putting a focus on inclusivity rather than on assimilation at the forefront can lead to an increase in individuality which better enables persons to feel more like a member of the group without experiencing a loss of identity. The individual will have the opportunity to continue to own their culture, background, and world views instead of abandoning said characteristics in an attempt to be a contributing member of the community. When environments are built upon UDI, participating individuals will not only be able to further their learning through their peers but also through their participation in the UDI-based environment. Participation in a UDI environment would begin to standardize the utilization of UDI when attempting to create future environments.

Challenges to/for UDI

Historically higher education institutions have strived to provide a high-quality education for students who attend through challenging environments. In attempts to create an environment that fosters student development, policies were created, traditions were formed, and unconscious biases were developed based upon those who did not meet the preconceived ideology of the ideal student. While higher education has acknowledged and overcame many of these policies, traditions, and unconscious biases, as students' needs continue to develop and evolve, policies, traditions, and unconscious biases will need to be continually challenged and adjusted or removed. Without the adjustment or removal of policies, traditions, or unconscious biases, an environment that was initially developed with the concept of UDI will become stagnant and regress to one based upon assimilation to the dominant ideology.

While an environment that was developed with the concept of UDI at the forefront will become stagnant or regress without checking unconscious biases, policies, and traditions it will also not be possible to truly create an environment based upon UDI if these barriers are not

adjusted and reviewed frequently. Policies that are outdated or limiting can prevent a UDI environment from beginning to develop. Traditions can inherently go against a UDI environment. If the environment is based upon UDI but has traditions that are not truly inclusive, the environment is destined for failure. If unconscious biases are not addressed while in the UDI environment, they will pose a risk to the environment's overall health. While unconscious biases are a risk to the health of the environment, they will be present along with limiting policies and disruptive traditions. Unconscious biases, if left unaddressed, can lead to a slow desecration of the UDI environment as it will not allow for all members to achieve their individuality and lead to individuals beginning to assimilate to meet the expectations of the biases.

While these unconscious biases, policies, and traditions may be identifiable in the current time, it will take a continual reassessment of the environment to be able to identify the upcoming and timeliness of revision needed of the policies and traditions. Policies and traditions may be fitting at one given point in time, but as students' needs develop, as will the need to revisit specific policies and traditions. Without the consistent revision of policies and traditions, an environment based upon UDI will consistently encounter new barriers that will eventually lead to the dilution and eventual dismissal of the UDI environment.

How to Implement UDI

UDI asserts that inclusion is a deliberative process of policy development that then informs practice. Its implementation will be addressed here through the lens of student affairs, faculty, and sustainability.

Student Affairs

As previously discussed, a universal design of learning framework can transform the inclusiveness of curriculum design, as well as can expand physical and emotional access to a

learning environment. Missing from the discussion, though, has been how these principles can be applied to the co-curricular learning experiences, often referred to as student affairs, within higher education. For the purposes of this literature, student affairs will be used to describe the co-curricular experiences that perform in tandem with the educational mission of an institution. Functional areas within student affairs might include, but are not limited to, housing and residential life, student clubs and organizations, athletics, career services, health and wellness initiatives, off-campus and commuter services, dining, student activities and involvement, student conduct, identity-based resources, and orientation and first-year experience.

Like other organizations, historically, student affairs practices have tended to center mostly able-bodied, neurologically typical, extroverted, and privileged identities (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). We can observe this bias in the ubiquity of scenarios such as, carb-loaded pizza parties that may disenfranchise diabetics or gluten-intolerant students despite the knowledge that colleges can be impactful in instilling healthy food choices for all demographics (Scourboutakos, et al., 2017; Sogari, et al., 2018); in the lack of captioning or interpreting during a movie or auditory events despite knowing captioning has been shown to positively affect comprehension for all viewers (Morris, et al., 2016; Gernsbacher, 2015); and finally, at popular campus events that do not include areas for students who are equally enthusiastic about their school, but who wish to demonstrate their school spirit in an environment sans a crowded stadium, marching bands, pyrotechnics, and bright lights. Darcy (2012) illuminated the overwhelming lack of accessibility at traditional large events, noting circumstances such as unequal access in staging, seating, toileting, and spectator technology. In these, and many other scenarios, as student affairs attempts to provide fun, engaging, attractive events for all students,

by ignoring UDI, the opposite can occur, which is the blatant exclusion of the very students the campus is attempting to include.

Students experiencing inclusion, engagement, and a sense of belonging are paramount goals of the work of student affairs. In fact, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (naspa.org) and the American College Personnel Association (myacpa.org), the two overarching professional organizations for the student affairs field, have jointly authored priorities for the student affairs profession. These standards include themes emphasizing a sense of belonging, inclusion, access, and campus engagement (Blimling & Whitt, 1998). With that in mind, identifying concrete strategies that proactively originate from a perspective of UDI for all, rather than stemming reactively from a practice of compliance-based accommodations for a few, is critical for the overall campus and cultural climate and the sustainability of student affairs and higher education. Further, numerous scholars (Blumenfeld, et al., 2016; Leake & Stodden, 2014; Sax, et. al, 2018) have concluded that students with marginalized identities are inherently more likely to persist on campuses where they perceive their identities are included and supported within the institution.

To the point of strategy, higher education can benefit from a UDI approach from as early as a student's first interaction with the institution. By ensuring print and web materials are inclusive and accessible, institutions can widen the reach of the campus's marketing and recruitment messages, as well as the diversity of the audience likely to resonate with the message since nondisabled users have been shown to perceive and engage with a website more positively when accessibility features are integrated (Schmutz, et al., 2019; Henry, et al., 2014)). Next, as students navigate the college search process, providing accessible admissions events, making assistive technology available, delivering information using multiple platforms, and normalizing

inclusive language throughout all engagement opportunities can also demonstrate UDI-oriented behaviors. Examples might include ensuring information about accommodations and identity-based resources are embedded throughout messaging that reaches the entire audience, rather than tailoring it to only a select few. Additionally, rather than individuals having to request certain modifications, habits such as providing all guests with information about the campus's structural accessibility, enlarging the font of printed materials, and ensuring all media are captioned, can normalize the inherent ability-diversity within the community.

According to the 2017 National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) report, once a student is admitted, most universities will offer some sort of new student orientation experience. These experiences are generally held in-person and based on the activities respondents suggested, the events favor those who are comfortable in activities that favor those with extrovert qualities (NODA Databank, 2017), as evidenced by the pervasive use of ice-breaker activities (Toma, 2015). As a result, students who are introverted can feel excluded from, or harmed by orientation programming designed to make them feel welcome as early as their first physical encounter with student affairs. However, instead of eliminating these well-intentioned welcome events, a UDI approach allows student affairs professionals to examine their current offerings through a bio-psycho-social lens, and make any necessary modifications resulting in a more inclusive experience for all. One strategy to this approach could include assessing the environmental stimuli influencing an event.

For example, the American Psychiatric Association (2013) describes environmental stimuli as including, noise level and source, visual clutter, light intensity, sense of touch and comfort, the strength of odors, pace and predictability of the environment, and crowd size. According to Kanakri et al, (2017) and Aron et al., (2012) each of these variables can represent a

triggering event that is positively, neutrally, or negatively experienced, depending on the individual. Under certain conditions, reducing environmental stimuli has been shown to have beneficial effects for those with, and without sensory dysfunctions (Schreuder et al., 2016), which is an especially noteworthy finding since our modern, digital society complicates one's ability to avoid engaging with sensory-input overload (Robson, 2016). Therefore, by designing events that automatically integrate stimuli reduction opportunities, student affairs can contribute to the well-being and positive experience of all students.

St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, PA, USA, engages in a similar practice at their athletic events. St. Joseph's offers a relief space where individuals who may need a break from the stimuli of the event can visit to experience comfort (https://www.sju.edu/news/sju-unveils-autism-break-room-support-sports-fans-autism). Similarly, Duke University's Cameron Stadium, makes sensory-friendly bags available to guests, which include noise-canceling headphones, fidget tools, verbal cue cards, and weighted lap pads (https://today.duke.edu/2019/12/cameron-indoor-stadium-becomes-sensory-inclusive). These examples underscore that eliminating an entire event is not always what is needed, but rather, imagining how the event is experienced by varying identities, and using that understanding to guide event design, is a benefit for all.

In sum, as the functions of student affairs continue to have significant impacts on the retention (Hoyt, 2021) and sense of belonging (O'Keeffe, 2013) experienced by students, it is important to move beyond viewing inclusion as a task of compliance and evolve into viewing inclusion as the foundation of its work. Without UDI, student affairs systems will continue to promulgate a "mythical average norm, creating barriers that exclude the contributions and participation of millions of people all over the world (Ostroff, 2011, p. 1.9)." Although higher education has been slow to incorporate UDI (Tobin, 2018), the current circumstances

surrounding pandemic learning provide an excellent environment in which to observe, intervene, and evolve in appreciation of the vast diversity of students that exist within the co-curricular campus community.

Faculty

To achieve its purpose of universal utility, institutions of higher education should ensure that their policies reflect the expected standards of engagement for faculty with students in general but more specifically, students of difference as a reflection of their commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity, and access. Faculty professional development and instructional practice, such as faculty training in the implementation of UDI across all disciplines should be a matter of policy. By creating a UDI classroom environment, student outcomes are positively impacted. While not exhaustive, key areas of focus are discussed herein.

The main role and responsibility of faculty is classroom instruction. As such, a key factor to incorporate in training across all disciplines is a thorough understanding of what UDI is and how to incorporate it in teaching pedagogy. With general education, core requirements, and electives, along with major and minor concentrations, students take classes in a multitude of disciplines throughout their collegiate careers. Training and implementation of UDI should focus on instructional design, and coordinating and collaborating across all student services through the prism of inclusion. One element that should not be overlooked is training in the strategies special education educators employ to meet the needs of diverse learners. These strategies can be applied to an entire classroom from the beginning for effective and meaningful learning for all.

Faculty can strive to implement the UDI framework in their classroom by intentionally removing barriers to student success and access from the onset of the class. This can be

accomplished by creating a syllabus utilizing UDI. In regards to representation, faculty can intentionally include clear and concise directions in detailed steps of the components of an assignment, scaffolding of assignments, and providing rubrics for all graded components. With students coming to the table with various academic and skill levels, coupled with intersecting identities, faculty should intentionally design their courses with UDI-supported strategies included.

In the syllabus or on the learning management system (D2L, Brightspace, Canvas, Blackboard, etc), faculty can create links to resources so that content may be accessible via a word document and pdf. Providing notes and study guides assists all students and fosters inclusion. Faculty should utilize consistency in the week-to-week activities and set due dates at similar times. Through UDI, students are provided multiple ways to access the materials, including multiple ways to download content such as videos, PowerPoint, or just the notes page. Additionally if faculty, and staff, consciously provide citations/ copyright for everything (even images) this fosters UDI. Using accessibility features such as text to speech in Microsoft office programs provides an inclusive use of universal design strategies.

To create a classroom with equity, access, and inclusion in mind, faculty can utilize multiple assessment forms such as a choice of selection from a variety of project options. By taking best practices from UDL such as the use of multiple means of demonstrating competency (Center or Excellence in Universal Design, 2020), e.g. providing homework or assignment options to represent understanding of the concept or demonstration of a skill through a video, audio file or written text applicable to the content, coupled with incorporating inclusive practices which allow for the reflection of culture and identities, UDI can be used to develop an effective and accessible class. Depending on the discipline, alternative choices in ways to display their

knowledge may be more effective such as allowing students to create an infographic, poster, paper, or concept map. UDI allows for the utilization of a variety of instructional and assessment practices that are inclusive of all students of difference.

Class participation is one component that varies by discipline and faculty members teaching pedagogy. Some examples of strategies that can be employed for increasing classroom engagement through multiple modes can include, standard means such as attendance and verbal sharing, and alternative methods such as clickers, polls, contributing to the chat feature, class blog, reading responses, participation in class activities, or creating exit tickets. The utilization of software such as *flipgrid* for discussions is a unique way to engage students. Additionally, faculty can provide the choice for students to work on their own, with partners, or in groups (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010). It could also include choice in where and how they choose to engage (as appropriate to the instructional goals and objectives). Students may be allowed to work outside of the physical classroom environment or virtually, or utilize low or high tech assistive devices. Faculty should also be mindful of identity or cultural practices and experiences that impact how students engage. For example, students coming from cultural backgrounds where speaking up in class is not a part of their experience, should be encouraged but not forced to speak in class as this could lead to feelings of discomfort or even extreme distress. This could also apply to students with anxiety disorders. The use of small group discussions, think-pair-share or collaboration through group texting could be employed.

In online settings, the UDI framework is even more applicable and must be created through the intentional engagement of all students. In any learning environment, the faculty needs to inspire interest and motivation to learn. In an online environment, creating a community of inclusion becomes even more critical. Whether in person or synchronously online, create an

environment with opportunities where students feel comfortable bantering or hanging out before and after class. One fun strategy faculty can employ is the creation of a class music playlist, even content specific for continued application. To cultivate an environment of intentional engagement that celebrates diversity and promotes inclusion, faculty can gently guide students to make connections with one another. This can be done through intentionally structured heterogeneous groups that work together throughout the semester, or by facilitating informal study groups which allow heterogeneous groups or identity groups to collaborate. This promotion of meaningful social and academic interactions among and across persons and/or groups of difference aligns with Tienda's (2013) definition of inclusion.

In an online class, faculty can create an icebreaker that allows students to express themselves, a favorite picture, "Who am I" PowerPoint slide, or a virtual background that expresses their culture, mood, identity, or viewpoint without judgment. However, students must be made cognizant that while tolerance and acceptance are embraced, hate speech or offensive images, etc. will not be promoted. Faculty may provide parameters for what is appropriate or create opportunities for respectful vetting for display ahead of the class. This can also serve a dual purpose of encouraging students to turn their video on. Additionally, faculty can identify points of connection or talking points, noting their students intersecting identities.

Taken together, professional development should focus on faculty training in multiple areas including but not limited to the use of educational technology, inclusive assessment methodologies, and inclusive and multi-modal culturally and identity relevant teaching pedagogy. As a matter of policy, institutions should facilitate professional development for faculty, along with staff and administration, so that all may work collaboratively to implement and foster an inclusive higher education experience built on the framework of UDI.

Conclusion

The main purpose of higher education is to be a universal utility for the students and ultimately the societies they serve. Institutions of higher education are microcosms of society and the reality is that monolithic societies no longer exist. As such, the policies and practices of any institution should reflect these changes and must be weaved into the ethos of the institutions with no room for ambiguity. Universal Design of Inclusion creates this framework for change and growth and should be applied in higher education. As previously defined by these authors, UDI is the deliberate creation, restructuring, and maintenance of policies, programming, and education to create an environment of acceptance, celebration, and empowerment of individuals, as they are while respecting the diversity of individual identities, exceptionalities, and other characteristics. As a matter of advocacy for persons of difference, realizing full inclusion in institutions of higher education through UDI-informed and supported practices and policies will ensure full access for all students leading to more positive experiences and improved outcomes overall.

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