



National Disability Center
for Student Success

Campus Accessibility Spotlight Series

Centering Accessibility in Faculty Development

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Oregon State
University

Introduction: The Institutional Challenge

This Campus Accessibility Spotlight examines how Oregon State University faculty members are integrating disability and accessibility considerations into both their curriculum and departmental culture.

Focusing on both formal and informal approaches, these actions add person-centered perspectives that are aligned with the overall campus initiatives. When faculty prioritize accessibility as a shared value rather than an individual accommodation, they create learning environments where all students can participate fully from the start—shifting the culture from reactive compliance to proactive inclusion.

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“Universal design is not about buildings. It is about building—building community, building better pedagogy, building opportunities for agency.”

Jay Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, page 118.

Why Focus on Faculty Development?

Focusing on faculty development is a strategic leverage point for advancing campus accessibility. Because most faculty arrive on campus as content area experts rather than pedagogical ones, ongoing professional learning is essential for effective, inclusive teaching. As technology continuously reshapes what’s possible in accessible course design, from captioning tools to AI to adaptive learning platforms, faculty need regular opportunities to build and refresh their accessibility competencies.

Perhaps most importantly, faculty are often among the longest-standing members of campus communities, giving them both the institutional knowledge and social capital to shape departmental culture and influence campus-wide conversations about access and inclusion. When accommodation systems have extended gaps, whether through processing delays, limited resources, or bureaucratic complexity, faculty are positioned to use their voice and standing to advocate for students whose needs fall through administrative cracks, ensuring that access remains a lived priority rather than simply policy compliance.

The Pain Points

- Faculty typically design courses first and then scramble to make them accessible when accommodation letters arrive, **rather than building in flexibility and access from the start.**
- **Most faculty receive little to no preparation in accessible pedagogy during graduate training or onboarding,** leaving them to figure out best practices on their own through trial and error.
- **Faculty may address accommodations but fail to integrate disability perspectives** into course readings, discussions, and frameworks, missing opportunities to enrich learning for all students.
- **Faculty often work alone to address accessibility challenges rather than having departmental cultures** where colleagues share strategies, resources, and expertise collectively.
- Campus leaders need to seek effective ways to help faculty and staff understand how **accessibility principles benefit students across all backgrounds and circumstances, not just those with documented disabilities.**
- **Resources for low-incidence disabilities, especially for blind and low vision students, are often hard to come by** or only available as one-off accommodations rather than integrated into course design from the beginning.

Meet the People

Students and leaders involved in various campus resources at Oregon State University were extensively interviewed by the National Disability Center about their work to support faculty development. Those leaders interviewed were:



Sara Schley, EdD

Chair and Professor, Department of Educational Practice and Research

Role: A learning scientist who partners with students to build more inclusive educational spaces for those with and without disabilities.



Logan McDermott, PhD

Assistant Professor, College of Education

Role: A former educator who examines factors that impact special education services students receive in the classroom.



Kathryn MacIntosh, PhD

Associate Professor, ESOL/Dual Language and Language Equity in Education

Role: Multilingual/Multicultural Educator with a focus on Social Justice and Critical/Transformative Methodologies.



Kaleb Horman

Undergraduate in integrated Biology with a minor in chemistry and a focus in science education.

Role: A non-traditional disabled student looking to bring disability access forward into science education.



Susan Gardner, PhD

Dean, College of Education and Professor of Adult and Higher Education

Role: A career leader who focuses on the intersections of individual success within higher education institutions.

By The Numbers

15%

Students who are blind or who have low vision have a college degree

26%

Faculty cite lack of training in accessible course design

10%

Faculty believe their college provides adequate support for students with disabilities

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey (2017); Anthology. Faculty Survey on Digital Accessibility (2024); Nietzel, M. T. Faculty Survey Shows Need for Digital Accessibility Support (2025); Inside Higher Ed. Faculty Survey Shows Need for Digital Accessibility Support (2025).

Fresh Insights

It takes time to make a pivot when disabilities change over time. You not only have to learn about the disability itself, but also now to navigate new systems and what you need.

Kaleb Horman,
Undergraduate



Ask how we can embed disability into the curriculum to position disability as intellectual content, not just accommodation logistics.



Sara Schley, PhD

We've been working at increasing access and inclusion for all of our students across all of our programs, and the focus on accessibility has been a game changer.



Susan Gardner, PhD

Design flexible and multimodal pedagogies for teaching that build on students' assets and are accessible to students of varying (dis)abilities and positionalities so that students can be successful.



Kathryn MacIntosh, PhD

Unexpected Revelations



Students are keenly aware not only of the need to advocate for one's access, but the far reaching consequences of not doing so. The "defeat default" describes a learned pattern where students with disabilities, after repeatedly encountering systemic barriers to access, begin to unconsciously narrow their expectations and definition of what is possible or available to them.



The defeat default creates an adaptive survival strategy, while protecting students from disappointment and conflict, reshapes approaches to problem-solving and critical thinking far beyond the classroom. What begins as a reasonable response to educational barriers becomes a lifelong pattern of diminished expectations, limiting willingness to imagine alternatives, advocate in professional settings, or push back against inequitable systems, representing one of the most damaging long-term consequences of inaccessible higher education.

What a Scholar Says



“The responsibility for change should not be placed on disabled students but on the education system to reform.”

Len Barton

What a Student Says



Local chapters of national disability organizations can be a good source of support for students at a local level, while still leveraging national resources.”

Kaleb Horman, OSU Undergraduate



Strategies for Success on Your Campus

1. Embed Accessibility Learning

Integrate disability perspectives and accessibility topics into degree planning and course curriculum.

2. Build Faculty Communities.

Create regular opportunities for sharing strategies and troubleshooting challenges, such as in a workshop or book club.

3. Prioritize Proactive Design.

Build flexibility into courses from start, reducing accommodation time lags for students.

4. Leverage Faculty Longevity

Tap institutional knowledge and social capital to champion accessibility initiatives, especially across departments.

5. Address Low-Incidence Needs.

Collaborate to build sustainable systems for students with low-incidence disabilities.

6. Connect Across Contexts.

Position accessibility and universal design as foundational to inclusion for all students through teaching, research, and community partnerships.



Continuing the Work



Amplify Accessibility Champions

- Recognize faculty already embedding accessibility into teaching and research.
- Establish cross-departmental networks to share strategies and coordinate initiatives.
- Invite champions to present at meetings, orientation, and departmental retreats.



Shrink the Time Lag

- Incorporate universal design elements that eliminate the wait for access.
- Develop streamlined processes for early identification of evolving student needs.
- Create discipline-specific accessibility toolkits that faculty can implement immediately.



Create Systemic Supports

- Build connections between faculty, disability services, and community partnerships
- Engage in conversations between compliance offices and faculty development
- Invite disabled students, alumni, and faculty to share their experiences

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