Universal Design in Intergenerational Programming

Empowering Inclusive Intergenerational Connections through Universal Design

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About this Toolkit

LinkAGES Connects is proud to present this toolkit, *Universal Design in Intergenerational Programming*, in collaboration with Danielle Schulz and Heather Pressman of Achieving Access Museum Access Consulting. This toolkit was made possible by funding from the CommonSpirit Health Equity and Advancement Fund. We created this toolkit to help identify and address accessibility barriers when ageism and ableism create disabling environments that cause people to feel unwelcome in intergenerational programs and can limit their ability to connect with the content and others. Misguided beliefs about aging and disability can cause people to disengage with others, deprioritize their health, and harbor ageist beliefs against themselves and others, all of which can lead to social isolation and loneliness which has a myriad of negative health effects.[1]

The content of this toolkit can be used in various intergenerational program approaches and multiple program settings, from art and music to nature and outdoors to mentorship programs. We designed this guide as a flexible resource, knowing that program designers and facilitators have a lot on their metaphorical plates and therefore need practical and actionable information at their fingertips. We encourage and invite you to modify and adapt the content to suit your organization's own needs, goals, and audiences. Our intention is to inspire a new way of thinking through program design: to encourage using Universal Design as a lens to maximize inclusivity and accessibility.

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[1] https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

Using This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to:
- build a foundational understanding of the seven principles of Universal Design
- review how the Americans with Disability Act relates to public-facing organizations
- see concrete examples of what the principles look like in action in intergenerational programs.

Read through the text with an existing program in mind or to help build a new program. With existing programs, compare how well current program elements align with certain Universal Design principles and what principles are not as well represented. Reference the examples in the text to explore potential alterations that could be made to increase accessibility. When developing a new program, utilize the principles as guidelines and checkpoints when designing elements, materials and spaces. Revisit the list each time you make a decision to check that the principles are still showing up.

We invite you to approach this toolkit with the understanding that, as program designers and facilitators, we have the power and responsibility to create programs and environments that are inclusive of many different experiences and needs.

About LinkAGES Connects

LinkAGES Connects believes that healthy, resilient, and vibrant communities are only possible when all ages are thriving and meaningfully engaged with one another. By making intergenerational programs easier to facilitate and sustain, we help address loneliness and social isolation experienced by youth and older adults, and the resources we create focus on combating ageism and promoting connection. LinkAGES provides tools, educational resources, coaching, evaluation, and more to entities and people seeking to facilitate high-quality programs across the country in a variety of formats.

LinkAGES is an educational initiative of Aging Dynamics, serving as a resource to support intergenerational connections.

About Achieving Access Museum Access Consulting

Achieving Access is consulting with a purpose. Co-founders Heather Pressman and Danielle Schulz have over twenty-five years of experience making arts and culture experiences accessible. We believe everyone has the right to access and enjoy cultural experiences regardless of their abilities or disabilities. We leverage our expertise to support and inspire people and organizations to celebrate accessibility by cultivating disability-inclusive spaces.

What is Universal Design?

During the disability rights movement of the 1970s, growing momentum focused on barrier-free design and removing obstacles in the built environment for people with disabilities. For the first time, design was recognized as a condition for achieving civil rights. The term "Accessible design" was used to describe a new design movement that prioritized providing equal opportunities for people with disabilities to engage with facilities and environments. For too long, architects and designers overlooked the needs of disabled and older adult users when creating their designs, which regularly led to expensive retrofitting and specialized adaptations after the fact. In the 1980s, architect and wheelchair user Ron Mace, coined the term "Universal Design" to explain the idea that people with and without disabilities can benefit from an accessible environment.

With a team of fellow architects at North Carolina State University, Mace crafted the seven principles of Universal Design. The seven principles are:

Inclusive	**Can be used by everyone easily, safely, and with dignity.**
Flexible	**The design provides choice and can be used in different ways by different people.**
Simple and Intuitive (Understandable)	**Easy for everyone to understand and use.**
Convenient	**Requires little effort to use and engage with.**
Accommodating	**Designed regardless of age, gender, mobility, or other circumstances.**
Welcoming	**Removes barriers that might exclude some.**
Responsive	**Considers what people say they need and want.**

Universal Design is the design of spaces and products that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without adaptation or specialized design.[2] Let's explore the three main areas of this concept more in-depth to bring these principles to light.

"Spaces and products that are usable by all people…" Spaces can be physical meeting rooms, virtual meeting spaces, assembly spaces, entryways and exits, etc. All associated areas where a program takes place. Products is also an encompassing term and can be program supplies, art materials, printed handouts and labels, presentations, performances, artistic products, etc.

Take curb cuts for example, the solid ramps from sidewalks to the street level. These products were first installed in the 1940s at the behest of disabled veterans returning from World War II who wanted to support wheelchair access to downtown areas.[3] Eighty years later, these products are ubiquitous and used by far more people than just wheelchair users: families using strollers, delivery drivers, cyclists, the list goes on.

"…to the greatest extent possible…" By nature, spaces and products (i.e. program activities) are designed to be used in particular ways to meet certain goals.

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[2] https://web.stanford.edu/class/engr110/2007/PUD.pdf

[3] Smashing barriers to access: Disability activism and curb cuts. National Museum of American History. (2015a, June 30). https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/smashing-barriers-access-disability-activism-and-curb-cuts

A storytelling program may use writing prompts and paired conversation to encourage sharing stories; a current events lecture series depends on people viewing a speaker with a visual presentation; a music program may involve singing and playing musical instruments.

Universal Design begs the question of how well people can engage with these program activities and spaces considering their physical, cognitive, and sensory abilities and disabilities. Can they see, hear, understand, and access all of the program elements and spaces?

"…without adaptation or specialized design." When a program activity or space is rigid, and designed for one particular means of engagement, people must adapt. Adaptation occurs when someone must change or modify the way they would typically engage with a space or program in order to participate. For example, a person with chronic pain, who needs to sit frequently, must adapt and stand during a program if there are no seats provided in the space. Specialized design is adapting the space or program activity after the fact. For example, a special large print edition of choral sheet music is printed by request because the font size of the original music program is too small for someone with limited vision to read.

Universal Design embeds people's needs and choices at the center of the developmental design process, and as much as possible, it avoids the need for adaptation or retrofitting later on. *Design for Accessibility: A Cultural Administrators Handbook* (1994), one of the primary accessible design guides, notes that "[i]n the best of all possible worlds, the concept of universal design would guide the creation of all facilities and programs. Universal design benefits people of all ages and abilities because what is an accommodation for one person may be a convenience for many." Next, we'll explore the myriad ages, abilities, and audiences who can benefit from Universal Design principles.

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[4] Design for Accessibility: A Cultural Administrators Handbook (Washington, DC: National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 1994), 55.

Supporting the Whole Person

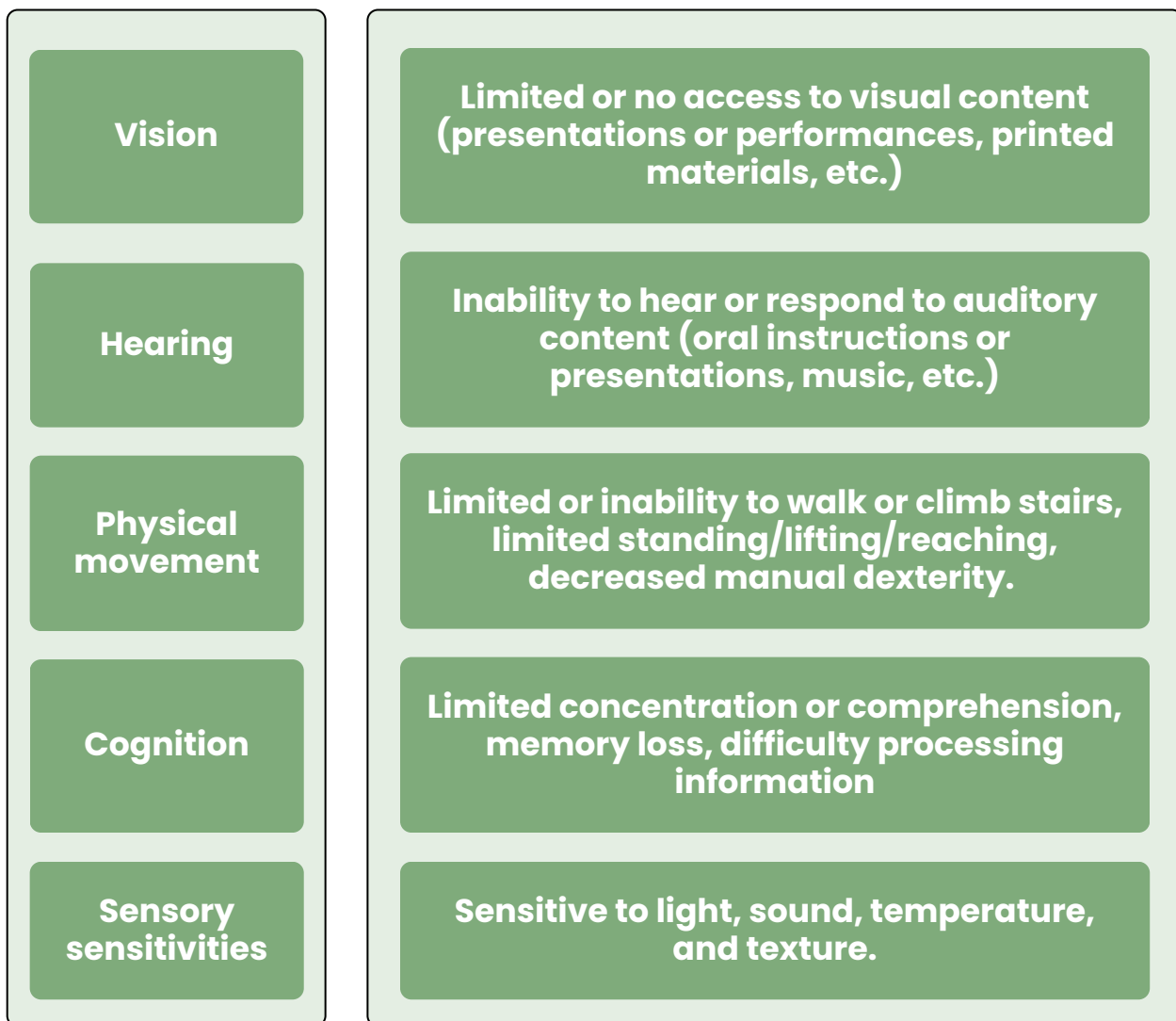The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as someone who,

> "has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a history or record of such an impairment (such as cancer that is in remission), or is perceived by others as having such an impairment (such as a person who has scars from a severe burn)."[5]

Disability advocate and author, Emily Ladau defines disability as, "a natural part of the human experience."[6] It is important to recognize that disability is something that all of us will encounter at some point in our lives–either temporary or permanent, from birth or later in life, as part of our own individual experiences–or to a friend or loved one.

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[5]https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/

[6]Ladau, E. (2021). Demystifying disability: What to know, what to say, and how to be an ally. Ten Speed Press, pg. 5.

There are many different kinds of disabilities. As mentioned in the above ADA definition, something is considered a disability when it limits a life activity. Some examples of limitations may include:

Vision	**Limited or no access to visual content (presentations or performances, printed materials, etc.)**
Hearing	**Inability to hear or respond to auditory content (oral instructions or presentations, music, etc.)**
Physical movement	**Limited or inability to walk or climb stairs, limited standing/lifting/reaching, decreased manual dexterity.**
Cognition	**Limited concentration or comprehension, memory loss, difficulty processing information**
Sensory sensitivities	**Sensitive to light, sound, temperature, and texture.**

In addition to physical, sensory, and cognitive impacts, disability can also include emotional, social, and educational challenges. Society has projected an assumption of what disability looks like or acts like, usually depicted as someone using a wheelchair or a cane. This stereotype that disability is always physical and always visible leaves out of consideration disabilities that impact cognitive functions (like thinking and concentrating), impact sensory functions (like seeing and hearing), and disabilities that are more unapparent or not readily visible. People with chronic pain, mental health challenges, hearing or vision loss, sensory-processing disorders and more may not be easily visible but are no less important.

Disability is quite complex, and every disabled person is unique; no two people who identify as having the same disability will have completely the same life experiences. Misunderstandings about the experiences of people with disabilities frequently stem from deep-seated and widespread assumptions and prejudices about how a disability can impact or hinder someone's experience. When age is layered into this understanding, the misunderstandings multiply.

Aging can bring on changes to vision, hearing, physical and cognitive abilities – because remember, disability is a natural part of the human experience. Sometimes these changes are visible because of a health occurrence– someone now wears a hearing aid after noticing a limitation or uses a mobility device

after an accident or illness. Sometimes these changes are not as visible to others, such as changes in eyesight or perception, changes in cognition (memory, concentration, processing), changes to balance or energy levels/stamina. While disability should not be assumed just because someone is older it is something that people working with older adult audiences must be aware of and prepared to support.

How can ableism show up in your programming?

Ableism is discrimination against people with disabilities, whether intentional or not. It is based on the belief that people who are non-disabled are somehow superior. This can look like believing that something is "wrong" with people who have disabilities or viewing disabled people as unable to hold a job, career or family (and alternatively, viewing them as inspirational if they have these everyday things.) Ableism perpetuates a negative view of disability as a flaw or abnormality, rather than just another aspect of humanity, and therefore marginalizes people who have a disability.

When designing programs, ableism can show up in a variety of ways: language (using words or phrases in program descriptions or prompts that inadvertently devalue people with disabilities, like crazy, dumb, turn a blind eye to, etc.); inaccessible spaces (not using a wireless microphone or amplification device in large group settings to support communication either seated or standing); and unsupportive engagement formats (movement activities that require people to stand or walk around, or conversely, requiring people to only remain seated rather than offering opportunities to get up and move around as needed).

How can ageism show up in your programming?

Ageism is a combination of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination directed towards people based on age, and is particularly common against older people. Ageism affects both young and older individuals, arising from assumptions that certain abilities or limitations are inherently linked to age. These stereotypes can result in biased treatment, discrimination, and reduced opportunities. For young people, ageism often means their ideas and skills are undervalued due to perceptions of inexperience. Older adults, on the other hand, frequently face marginalization, both socially and personally, with discrimination affecting areas like employment, healthcare, and housing.

Internalized ageism, however, is when we discriminate against ourselves, based on our age. We may dismiss trying something new, saying, "Oh, I'm too old for that," or adhere to social assumptions like older people are not tech savvy.

When designing programs, ageism can show up in a variety of ways: language (avoid using words with negative connotations or stereotypes, use "older adults" not seniors when recruiting attendees); inaccessible spaces (meeting spaces only accessible by stairs, programs only available in person); and unsupportive engagement formats (spaces with bright lights or loud noises, program materials only available in a single format (only written, only visual, only audio)).

Multiple generations may present multiple disabilities. This is true of any program, as people are not a monolith. One cannot expect that just because a program is accessible to people with limited mobility (i.e. presence of a ramp or elevator access, ample room for a device to maneuver around) means that the program is 100 percent accessible. In our programs, we may need to support one attendee with limited mobility, one with hearing loss, and another with cognitive limitations.

To prevent discrimination against people with disabilities, the ADA created three general requirements for businesses and nonprofits serving the public to "provide people with disabilities an equal opportunity to access the goods or services that they offer."[7] Complying with the ADA means providing access to relevant content and spaces, and providing a superior user experience for all visitors.

[7]Introduction to the Americans with disabilities act.
https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/

1. **Complying with physical requirements related to architectural standards for new and altered buildings**. Are there curbs or stairs that must be climbed to enter? Narrow doorways or pathways to traverse? Auditoriums with no wheelchair seating? Tables with little to no knee clearance? The ADA outlines three priority areas for barrier removal that organizations should take measures to provide:
   a. Access from public sidewalks, parking, or public transportation.
   b. Access to restroom facilities.
   c. Access to spaces where the public may access services (to view installations, attend programs, meet with staff, etc.).

2. **Ensuring effective communication with people with hearing, vision, or speech disabilities.** People with certain disabilities might communicate in different ways. For example, people who are blind or have low vision cannot read a printed sign and people who are D/deaf cannot (usually) understand spoken language. Effective communication means making whatever is written or spoken as clear and understandable to people with disabilities as it is for people who do not have disabilities. There are creative solutions to addressing diverse needs and supporting effective communication based on your[8] unique situation. There are great resources available at ada.gov.

3. **Providing reasonable modifications to policies, practices, and procedures that may pose barriers.** Are program attendees able to safely and effectively engage with exhibitions, interactives, and programs in the way they were meant to be used? Universal and inclusive design embeds choice and people's needs at the center of the developmental design process.

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[8] Communicating effectively with people with disabilities, https://www.ada.gov/topics/effective-communication/

Our job, as program designers and facilitators, is to acknowledge and celebrate disability as a normal part of the human experience for all ages and to design environments and programs that support intergenerational audiences to engage with our programs to the greatest extent possible. As you are designing programs and events, keep in mind the variety of experiences and limitations that people may encounter, and determine how to design for these from the very beginning. Following the seven principles of Universal Design is a great way to create environments that are inclusive of many different experiences.

Universal Design in Action

PRINCIPLE 1: INCLUSIVE

Can be used by everyone easily and safely, and with dignity.

Physical: The room can be accessed via a ramp or elevator, and tables have ample space for mobility devices to fit under and around.

Cognition: A variety of materials (specific to the activity type) are provided that enable people to engage in the activity easily. For example, a variety of art supplies (paint, collage, stamps), musical instruments (shakers, drums), writing implements (wide markers, pencils, tablets) that people can choose from based on their needs.

Vision and hearing: Any instructions the group needs to hear are amplified, through a personal microphone and speaker or assistive listening devices. American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation is offered.

Sensory: Provide noise-reducing headphones or a quiet space adjacent to the activity so that participants who need a break from the activity can do so whenever they need to.

Universal Design in Action

PRINCIPLE 2: FLEXIBLE

The design provides choice, and can be used in different ways by different people.

Vision and hearing: People can engage in the activity orally, in writing, and in any language they choose. This means being ready to offer translation and interpretation services.

Cognition: For creative activities, focus on the process over the final product (roll and manipulate clay as a medium vs. producing a pinch pot). Use activity prompts that are simple and open-ended (for example, pick a paint color that represents how you feel). Provide premade examples that participants can utilize or add onto (stamps or stickers, pre-cut words or phrases).

Physical: People can engage in the program/project seated or standing, virtually or in-person, and there is ample space (at tables, in an auditorium, etc.) for mobility devices and service animals to use as well as move around.

Sensory: Ensure that you have the ability to control and lower loud sounds and bright lights and in virtual programs people are asked to remain muted when not actively talking.

Universal Design in Action

PRINCIPLE 3: SIMPLE AND INTUITIVE

Easy for everyone to understand and use.

Cognition: Use symbols or photographs to represent concepts in instructions or presentations.

Vision and hearing: Include multiple languages, such as Spanish, braille, ASL, etc.

Physical: Ensure the layout of the room is open and clear of anything on the floor.

Sensory: At the beginning of the program (and ideally, even in pre-program communication) explain the flow of events verbally and written down, and in virtual environments, copy and paste into the chat.

Universal Design in Action

PRINCIPLE 4: CONVENIENT
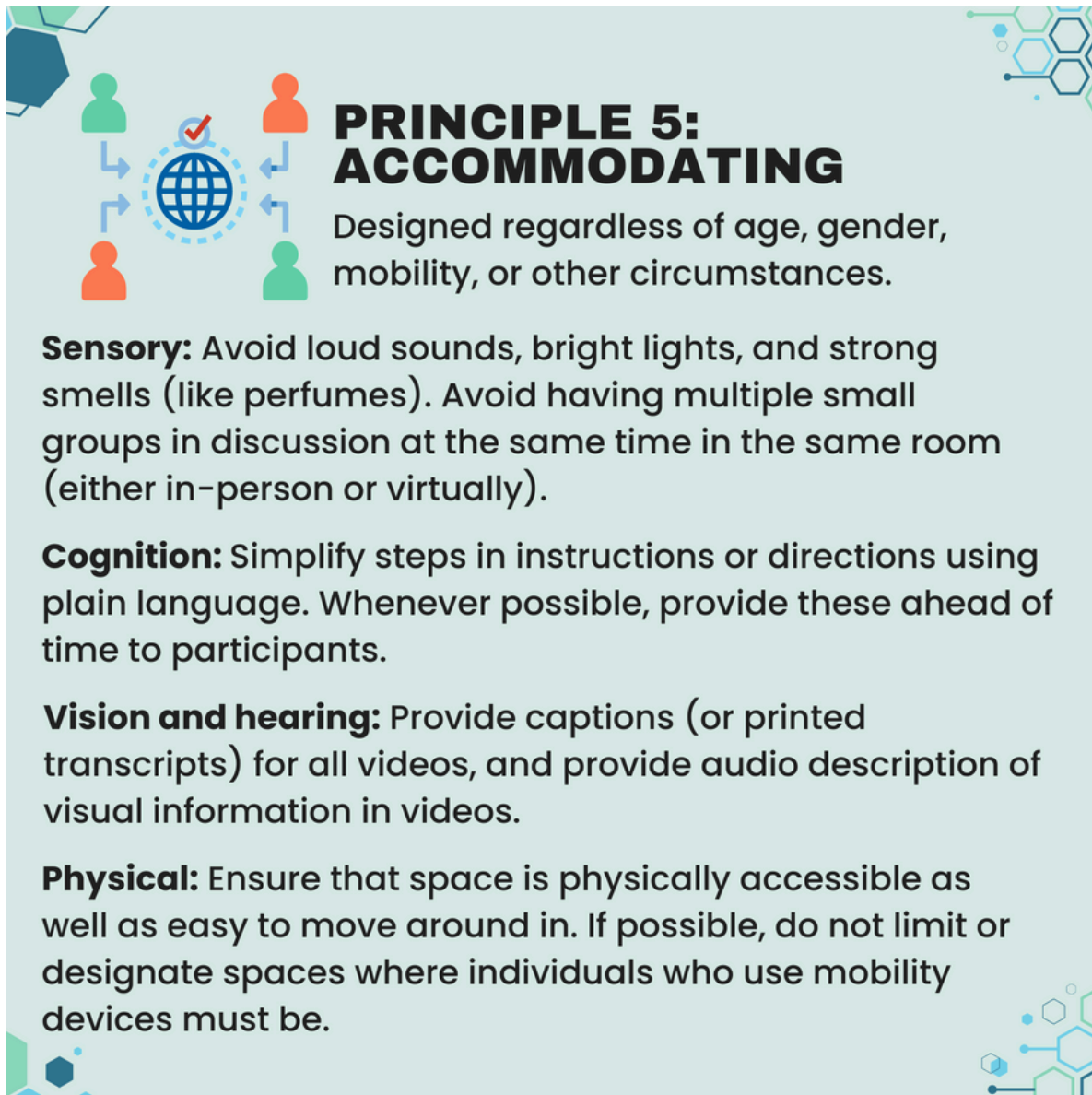
Requires little effort to use and engage.

Physical: Any project materials are prepared ahead of time and laid out on participants' tables or easily moved within reach by staff. For virtual programs, materials are mailed to participants ahead of time, or a simple materials list is provided.

Cognition: There are simple wayfinding signage or directions to in-person program locations, and clear steps for joining a virtual program.

Vision and hearing: The program is offered in a hybrid format so that participants can join online or in person.

Sensory: Limit competing sounds, lights and smells that may interfere with engagement. Have sensory tools easily accessible and available at any point in the program.

Universal Design in Action

PRINCIPLE 5: ACCOMMODATING

Designed regardless of age, gender, mobility, or other circumstances.
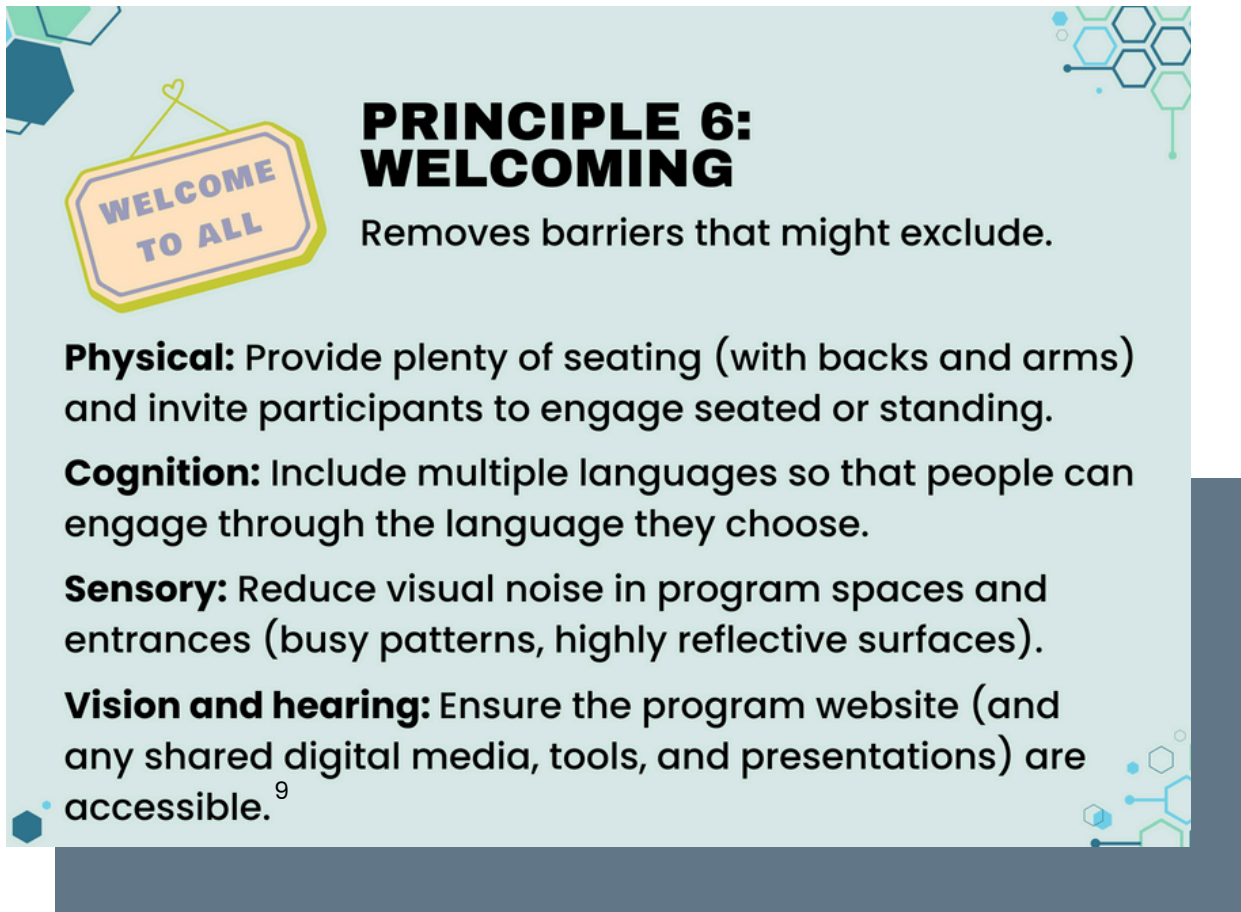
Sensory: Avoid loud sounds, bright lights, and strong smells (like perfumes). Avoid having multiple small groups in discussion at the same time in the same room (either in-person or virtually).

Cognition: Simplify steps in instructions or directions using plain language. Whenever possible, provide these ahead of time to participants.

Vision and hearing: Provide captions (or printed transcripts) for all videos, and provide audio description of visual information in videos.

Physical: Ensure that space is physically accessible as well as easy to move around in. If possible, do not limit or designate spaces where individuals who use mobility devices must be.

Universal Design in Action

PRINCIPLE 6: WELCOMING

Removes barriers that might exclude.

Physical: Provide plenty of seating (with backs and arms) and invite participants to engage seated or standing.

Cognition: Include multiple languages so that people can engage through the language they choose.

Sensory: Reduce visual noise in program spaces and entrances (busy patterns, highly reflective surfaces).

Vision and hearing: Ensure the program website (and any shared digital media, tools, and presentations) are accessible.[9]

[9]Introduction to Web Accessibility. https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/accessibility-intro/

Universal Design in Action

PRINCIPLE 7: RESPONSIVE

Designed regardless of age, gender, mobility, or other circumstances.

Vision and hearing: Provide multiple options for participants to access information in a variety of written and oral formats.

Sensory: Offer sensory tools (noise-reducing headphones, fidgets, colored sunglasses, etc.) for participants to use during the program.

Physical: Build-in breaks and rest periods into the program design.

Cognition: Include accommodations language in all event outreach and registration materials, including an email address and phone number for people to contact with requests.

Example accommodations language: [Your organization] is committed to making our events accessible. If you require any accessibility services or accommodations to fully participate, please contact [insert contact information].

Getting Started

The goal of universal design is to eliminate disabling environments through creative, imaginative, and equitable design approaches. These principles are designed to be open-ended and adaptable to your specific program and individual circumstances, meaning you can use more than one depending on your resources. Regardless of staff size and budget, it is important to try and design with these principles in mind. It is equally important to recognize that accessibility is a journey; there is no single destination but rather the adaptation of a new design process that places the experiences of people with disabilities at the center.

First, gather information and assess. These seven principles can be used to guide your program design process from the very beginning–have them in hand when choosing a room and its layout, writing curriculum, purchasing supplies, and more. The principles can also be applied to evaluating existing programs. Pick an element from a program (the meeting space, activity, etc.) and keeping in mind the list of limitations, go down the list and ask yourself, is this element inclusive (used by everyone easily and safely)? Flexible (provides choice and can be used in different ways)? Convenient (requires little effort to use and engage with)? And on down the list.

Next, prepare to allocate resources to implement any necessary changes. In the exercise above. If the answer is no to any of the principles, consider if there are some reasonable changes or modifications you could make to the program elements? Could you move to a new room (if it is too small to spread out)? Perhaps purchase and provide sensory tools (if there are loud noises, bright lights)? Or translate information into more than one language or format?

Finally, evaluate the effectiveness of these design elements. Determine goals for the program, and consider what role universal design principles can play in achieving these goals. To collect data, observe how attendees interact with the elements and ask for feedback in a post-program survey. It is important to hear directly from the participants who have disabilities about their experiences and any ideas they may have for improvements. When the next program comes along, start this process from the beginning.

Approaching program design through the lens of universal design will spotlight your program's strengths and areas of opportunity for future growth, while also building up your own capacity to create impactful programs. The more you use these principles the easier it becomes to identify the elements that create an accessible environment that people of all ages, and both with and without disabilities can enjoy and engage together. There are many resources available to support continued learning around utilizing Universal Design for program design. Dive into these resources to build your program design toolkit.

Resources

Changing The Narrative
https://changingthenarrative.org

Project Unlonely
https://artandhealing.org/unlonely-project/

Centre for Excellence in Universal Design.
https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design

Communicating effectively with people with disabilities. U.S. Department of Justice. https://www.ada.gov/topics/effective-communication/

Design for Accessibility: A Cultural Administrators Handbook. National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Assembly of State Art Agencies, the Kennedy Center and MetLife Foundation Washington, DC. https://www.arts.gov/about/publications/design-accessibility-cultural-administrators-handbook

Institute for Human Centered Design.
https://humancentereddesign.org/

Introduction to the Americans with disabilities act. U.S. Department of Justice. https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/

Introduction to web accessibility. W3 Web Accessibility Initiative. https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/accessibility-intro/

Ladau, E. *Demystifying Disability.* (2021). Ten Speed Press.

Plain language guidelines. U.S. General Services Administration. https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines/

Resources

Joines, S. and Valenziano, S. Removing barriers: Planning meetings that are accessible to all participants. (2005). Center for Universal Design at NC State.
https://www.udinstitute.org/_files/ugd/8e1b5e_28859d71f3ca4af4991cc d81dc63805f.pdf

Smashing barriers to access: Disability activism and curb cuts. National Museum of American History. (2015a, June 30).
https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/smashing-barriers-access-disability-activism-and-curb-cuts

Universal design and accessibility. U.S. General Services Administration.
https://www.section508.gov/develop/universal-design/

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