

An Interview with Ida Dilwood, Office of Disability Services

As part of ACCESS @ UCCS series



What is Accessibility?

Ida Dilwood, Director of UCCS Disability Services, describes accessibility related to the UCCS campus as when individuals with disabilities are considered when courses, classrooms, and academic environments are designed. Her department, Disability Services, plays an essential role at UCCS in ensuring accessibility for students with disabilities when participating in the UCCS academic environment. Disability Services is a department within the Student Affairs division. Currently, Disability Services has six full-time staff: Rachel Gibson, Assistant Director, Chris Johnson, Lead Accommodation Coordinator, Ryan Achor, Accommodation Coordinator, Kathy Stetler, Administrative Assistant, and works closely with Leyna Bencomo, Assistive Technology Specialist from OIT.

What population of UCCS students are affected by inaccessibility?

Disability Services staff agree - all students are affected by inaccessibility, but students with a disability are at the most disadvantage. Rachel Gibson, Assistant Director, stated this is best explained with an example. All students benefit if you post your PowerPoint slides to Canvas. Still, without this resource, a student with a traumatic brain injury is at a disadvantage without these slides because they cannot retain the information during class like their peers. Disability Services would provide a note-taker accommodation for this access need. All students would have access if these slides were available to all students prior to class.

What are the three top access barriers that you see students with disabilities have in the classroom?

Disability Services describes the three top access barriers seen on campus.

Flexibility: students with unpredictable medical conditions cannot predict when they may have a flare in their condition, meaning an assignment that's due the next day or attending a class session may not be possible because of (i.e., seizure). This can be difficult in a setting with a set 16-week schedule with assignments, projects, exams on set dates, but understanding and allowing reasonable flexibility is essential to providing access to students with disabilities.

Communication with faculty and student: are you available to meet with students (virtually or in-person)? Do you respond promptly to emails from students? Does your tone to students encourage conversation? Communicating or lack of communication between faculty and students requesting accommodations can be a barrier that prevents accessibility. Follow up with the student who submitted an Accommodation Letter, encourages a quick meeting, asks for support from Disability Services when needed.

Providing testing accommodations for quizzes/exams: to ensure students have their approved extended time or other testing accommodations, faculty may need to adjust the time limit in Canvas or provide the digital version of the exam to Disability Services prior to the exam date. To remove the barrier, we encourage faculty to review any accommodation requests prior to their scheduled quizzes/exams and follow testing procedures.

What do you want faculty to know about students with disabilities?

Ida Dilwood explains students with disabilities are a broader population than you may think. They currently make up over 7.5% of the undergraduate population on our campus. At UCCS, over 80% of students registered with Disability Services have a *non-visible* disability, which means it's not apparent they have a disabling condition. Be aware of your assumptions or biases before you make a judgment about a student with a disability. Each student's experience with their disability or condition is unique to them. Our campus community is enhanced by the experiences and participation of students with disabilities. (Diversity statement)

What are the three most used assistive technologies that remove barriers for students with disabilities in the classroom?

Leyna Bencomo, Assistive Technology Specialist, answered,

Smart Pens that record audio and sync it with handwritten notes are very popular. We can loan up to 40 or 50 each fall. Students who are not able to take complete notes now can capture audio and amend their handwritten notes at a later time. In many instances, Smart Pens allow students to improve their notetaking skills. This also gives them the confidence to listen more attentively without worrying about missing something in their notetaking.

Another big assist for students is the presence of captioning in multi-media and video presentations. Captions are, of course, necessary for students who are hard-of-hearing or deaf. But they also help students with audio processing challenges stemming from learning disabilities or brain trauma and students who are non-native English speakers, and those who learn best by reading.

Many students use text-to-speech software to allow them to listen to digital material instead of or in addition to reading it. Students with learning disabilities may struggle to read and comprehend what they read. Listening simultaneously as they read often improves both comprehension and retention. UCCS has an enterprise version of Read & Write software for this purpose.

What advice would you give faculty who want to learn more about accessibility in the classroom? OR If there was one piece of advice you wanted faculty to take away from your experience, what would it be?

Ryan Achor, the Accommodation Coordinator, stated, Disability Services is available to support the faculty! Reach out to the Disability Services staff for support and advising at any point during the semester. We welcome conversations with faculty and the student in navigating the accommodation process.

Advice to faculty: utilize the resources available through the Faculty Resource Center to prepare your course for accessibility *before* the semester begins. Can you answer these questions?

- Do you have videos you can caption ahead of time?
- Are your handouts in a readable format for students who may need assistive technology?
- Are you familiar with accessing and viewing Accommodation Letters or providing your exam documents?

Being familiar with the tools and resources before the semester begins will benefit you and the student. The FRC has courses available to enhance your understanding of Universal Design and accessibility.