



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Accessible by Design: Disability and the Inclusive Campus



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Accessible by Design: Disability and the Inclusive Campus

Key Takeaways From a Virtual Forum
Presented by *The Chronicle* and Siteimprove

HOSTS



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The acceleration of technology, including the growing capability of artificial intelligence, is influencing efforts to make higher education more inclusive of people with disabilities. Compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act — as well as other federal, state, and local laws — is paramount, but many colleges strive to go beyond what's legally required. These institutions seek to create physical and virtual learning spaces that their students, faculty, and staff can navigate with greater ease and convenience, reducing bureaucracy and potential stigma.

To explore how these efforts are evolving, *The Chronicle* held a virtual forum on May 12. The following comments, edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the event. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar [here](#).

Alexander C. Kafka: How do each of you work on disability-and-inclusion issues?

Michelle Deal: I'm at Landmark College, one of the only accredited colleges in the United States designed exclusively for students who learn differently, including those with dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, and executive-function challenges. In my role, I collaborate with student interns and a small staff to explore how emerging technologies may help or hinder students.

Casaundra Maimone: I'm at Howard University, a federally chartered historically black university in Washington, D.C. I advise the institution on legal and policy issues, including disability services and accessibility.

Rivka Molinsky: In my role at Touro University, I enable students to navigate a range of campus services and act as the School of Health Sciences' coordinator for the Office of Student Disability Services.

Donna A. Patterson: At Delaware State, I've worked on accessibility as a faculty member and previously as a department chair.

Kafka: Donna, what are some of the routine types of disability-accommodation requests your department receives, and what are some that are less routine?

Patterson: We receive requests for physical and mental-health accommodations as well as those for students with temporary disabilities as the result of an accident, for example.

Kafka: Casaundra, your office works with undergraduate liberal-arts students as well as those in professional programs. Are there differences in the type of disability issues and controversies that come up for these two groups?

Maimone: Yes. A lot of professional schools have technical standards, which makes determining reasonable accommodations for accessibility more complicated. What's a reasonable accommodation for a medical student in a clinical rotation? We need feedback from the clinical site on that question. We need to work to provide access to students without compromising standards. We've gotten requests for double time on suture exams, and that doesn't work.

Molinsky: There are also clinical requirements in the classroom, not just when students go out to do a clinic placement. Sometimes the need of a patient overrides the need of a student for accommodations. Obviously your CPR skill set can't be tested in double time. We have individualized conversations with students about what they need but also what their program requires of them. This is uniquely challenging in the health sciences.

Kafka: Michelle, your institution has a "social model" of disability. What does that entail?

Deal: The social model asserts that people are disabled by inaccessible environments, inflexible policies, or discriminatory attitudes, which are their biggest barriers, as opposed to their medical conditions. There's a medical model that can sometimes see individuals as needing to be fixed.

Kafka: Right. But if you have a campus that's focused on a certain population of students, that framing can change.

Speaking of change, how is the progression of technology like artificial intelligence affecting students with disabilities and the ways colleges can support them?

Molinsky: There was an enormous need for note-taking tools for a long time. Those tools now improve access to education. It's not about accommodation, where I need to change something for you. It's about establishing a baseline that enables anyone to engage with

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learning. Those tools have gotten much more effective. We orient our students to the value and limits of them and when they may present challenges to academic integrity.

Patterson: Voice-to-text tools are very important. They're more advanced and accessible for use by students and professors. Sometimes all the words don't convert precisely — some AI may not understand regional accents, for instance — but it's gotten much more precise in the last few years. I know people at other institutions where these tools still aren't in place. They're still using student notetakers.

Kafka: Michelle, you've involved students in discussions about what kinds of technology is valuable at Landmark. How is that work going?

Deal: We've been working on building a chatbot for online-course navigation based on focus groups with students. More broadly, students are saying they'd like to develop their own libraries of prompts for AI — things like "Can you change the reading level of this so I can understand it?" "How can I break that into separate tasks?" or "Can you turn these instructions into a checklist?" Our students are still exploring how to use it.

Kafka: Casaundra, the law sometimes lags behind technological developments. What issues are you seeing from your legal perspective?

Maimone: There are faculty issues as well as student issues. A lot of our law professors have concerns about how they're being recorded by certain software or how to enforce classroom rules about recording. These might include a requirement that recordings are only for students' personal use and should be destroyed at the end of the semester. There are challenges to implementing these things.

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From a legal perspective, when we look for guidance — decisions from legal agencies on what's reasonable and not reasonable — often that hasn't caught up with us. There's nothing that specifically addresses the use of AI. There are issues related to the "undue burden" legal standard, including how much it costs for universities to buy software, but they haven't been litigated. We're trying to move forward with the information we have.

Kafka: How does the concept of "universal design" [making education inclusive for all learners] factor into the work you do?

Molinsky: It factors into the tools we want on campus. You know, if you shovel snow off steps, the majority of people can get up them. Maybe only a few will need to use a ramp. But if you shovel the ramp, everyone can get up it, so you should shovel the ramp first. The best technology tools can be like that ramp, making education accessible.

For someone who struggles with executive function, good tools are essential. It used to be using pen and paper to write out a calendar, but now there are all these technology tools to schedule time for studying, writing, or going for a walk — and all students can access these kinds of tools.

Patterson: I just had a group discussion about creating a bot for our department to help students with skills we think they need. We're thinking about the ethics of AI use, too.

Closed captions are another valuable tool. Some students need them for accessibility but others just like them. I sometimes use them at home when I'm watching the news. I also use them when I play videos in my classroom. I've had students thank me for that because they find it useful.

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Deal: We talk about universal design all the time at Landmark College, whether for classroom pedagogy or work like what I'm doing now — designing a chatbot for online-course navigation. I've been merging my thinking about universal design for learning with cognitive-accessibility guidelines. Those guidelines say, for example, to "provide feedback and support." The bot is designed to help students optimize choice and autonomy.

Kafka: Casaundra, when considering universal-design issues, some people are going back to the law, to legal statutes, and then thinking about new ways to follow them with new technologies. I assume you're getting calls and emails asking you to review new tech to see if it fits those statutes.

Maimone: Sure. A lot of universal design is just about best practices that should be implemented across the board — providing a detailed syllabus, flexibility, and feedback of exams. These are things that improve the experience of all students and don't diminish academic integrity or compromise content being delivered.

“Universal design does serve a different purpose than an ADA accommodation, though. It doesn't relieve universities or individual faculty members of their obligations under the ADA.”

It does serve a different purpose than an ADA accommodation, though. It doesn't relieve universities or individual faculty members of their obligations under the ADA. Sometimes faculty members will say, “My course is accessible, so I don't have any additional responsibilities to provide ADA accommodations,” and that's just not true. A student may still need an accommodation specific to their condition that isn't provided through universal design.

Kafka: AI might be able to help students with disabilities, but it raises questions about student privacy. How are you thinking about that?

Maimone: I know we ask that students use software that's on our servers, which has built-in privacy protections. When you give them permission to use AI to record lectures or take notes, it's important to define accommodations for academic integrity in testing, for

example. We're still working through those issues and waiting for universities to develop more robust AI policies.

Kafka: What are some tools you don't have, but wish you had, to make colleges more accessible?

Deal: Our ADA-compliance committee has been looking at different vendors of tools for remediation of existing documents, especially complex PDFs. I'd love to wave a magic wand and turn my inaccessible PDFs into accessible PDFs.

Molinsky: We're piloting a lot of tools. We're looking at virtual-reality opportunities for subjects like anatomy, moving away from traditional dissection with cadavers. We're looking at bots. We're not sure yet which of them will meet students' needs.

Patterson: We need funding. Another small, specific need for our department is related to recording events and adding captions. We've been able to do that, but we need better software for it.