# The Designing for All (D4A) Student Survey

 *“When I walked into my class on the first day, the teacher came over and told me I was in the wrong place. She said she wasn’t prepared to teach me, and that if I knew what was good for me, I would find another class.”*
 – a LaGuardia student with limited vision

The student who described this classroom experience did so in the hopes that no other LaGuardia student would face a similar situation. Yet in the professor’s reaction is a raw cry of honesty: they were unprepared to teach this student, and needed to know more about how to work with him.

To address accessibility issues in the classroom, *Designing for All* (D4A) was formed to support LaGuardia faculty with creating and implementing course materials and activities for all students, including those with visible or invisible disabilities, so students would not be hindered by barriers to learning. The D4A 2017-18 project goals were to ensure that all LaGuardia students 1) have full access to the learning materials they need, and 2) feel welcome in LaGuardia’s learning environment.

The D4A approach to accessibility is broad: the project team is committed to inclusive pedagogy and design that supports equity for students with disabilities, as well as students who feel uncomfortable or marginalized in an educational institution.

## About the Survey

The *Designing for All* team is a group of LaGuardia faculty, staff, and students who met regularly in 2017-18 to assess, reflect on, and recommend strategies for improving LaGuardia’s learning environment. The team quickly realized how important it is to hear directly from students about their challenges so that professional development might address any issues directly. To this end, the D4A team collectively developed the student survey. We asked students what affects their ability to get to campus, attend, and participate in class, including work and home responsibilities, transportation, accessibility, and emotional issues. It also asked what students find most helpful from faculty, which services students utilize at the college, and what would best provide support for them. Appendix 1 contains the complete list of the D4A Student Survey questions and responses.

The survey was administered from May 4–June 4, 2018.[[1]](#footnote-1) Results were gathered from tabling in the E and M buildings; campus events (e.g., Asian Heritage Celebration, Black Lives Matter Summit, the Social Science Student and Faculty Conference); making surveys available at the Office for Student with Disabilities and the Wellness Center; encouragement from CTL Peer Mentor programs, and several College-wide email blasts.

We refer to the following groups of students in this report:

* 564 students who completed the survey as “all participants”;
* 88 students who used Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) or Project REACH services, referred to in this report as “OSD/REACH students” (15.6% of all participants); and
* 476 students who did not report using services of OSD or Project REACH, referred to as “non-OSD/REACH students” (84.4% of participants).

The reported race, ethnicity and gender of all participants corresponds closely with LaGuardia’s student population.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Findings

OSD/REACH students experience every factor affecting their ability to get to campus or participate in their classes at higher rates than non-OSD/REACH students (Figure 1). More than half of OSD/REACH students (51.1%) report finances are a factor for getting to campus, compared with 39.1% of non-OSD/REACH students. Emotional health (42.0%), physical health (31.8%), and accessibility (19.3%) all have a greater impact for OSD/REACH students compared with non-OSD/REACH students (24.0%, 16.4%, 10.7%, respectively). Work interferes with both groups of students somewhat comparably—47.7% OSD/REACH vs. 43.5% non-OSD/REACH students—as does transportation (42.0% vs. 36.1%).

All surveyed factors impact OSD/REACH students’ class participation more strongly than non-OSD/REACH students, with a response rate above 40% for every option (Figure 2). More than half of OSD/REACH participants report “Instructors’ policies” impact their class participation the most (54.5%), with “Class structure,” ”Amount of classwork,” and “Work (e.g. not enough time to prepare, lack of sleep, schedule change) represented equally (51.1%).” For non-OSD/REACH students, only “Other students’ attitudes or behaviors” and “Instructor’s attitude or behavior” fell within ten percentage points of OSD/REACH responses (32.1% and 39.3%, respectively). More than twenty percentage points separated OSD/REACH and non-OSD/REACH students reporting “Learning issues,” “Instructor policies,” “Availability of needed services,” and “Amount of classwork.”

Asked about specific conditions around learning typically associated with disability, OSD/REACH students cited difficulty writing (27.3%) and reading (27.3%), and the need for a note-taker (17.1%), at a much higher rate than their counterparts (15.1%, 8.6%, and 5.9%, respectively, Figure 3). Difficulty concentrating and sadness affected all participants somewhat similarly, with anxiety the only factor reported higher for non-OSD/REACH students: 34.7% vs. 33.0% for OSD/REACH.

For all participants, the three most-cited ways for faculty to best support learning were “to provide clear expectations and guidelines for assignments,” “to make all course materials available and easily accessible to students,” and “to provide more time to complete assignments” (Figure 4). “Provide clear guidelines for assignments” was the highest priority for OSD/REACH students (72.7%); whereas, non-OSD/REACH students cited “make all course materials available and easily accessible to students” (63.7%), although we question their interpretation of the use of “accessible” in this context.

Responding to an open-ended question about what helps support their success in class, more than a third of all participants said *“*Instructors’/professors’ availability, approachability (including office hours)” was the top factor (34.5%). Social support (family, friends, classmates, or extra-curriculars) helps 18.3%, followed by tutoring (16.1%) and wellness/relaxation activities (9%).

## Discussion

While the impact of almost every item was indicated at a greater extent by OSD/REACH students, non-OSD/REACH students also conveyed notable rates of challenges and obstacles, especially when emotional health and learning issues were considered. This finding suggests not only that some non-OSD students, especially those with invisible disabilities such as emotional health and learning issues,[[3]](#footnote-3) are not adequately diagnosed and consequently do not receive suitable support, but also that learning issues referred to by non-OSD students might stem from a lack of academic preparation due to under-resourced, ineffective educational environments.

Socio-economic factors including financial and family pressures exert a strong effect on most LaGuardia students. This is not surprising given that, according to the College’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, the majority of LaGuardia’s 2017-18 full time students qualified for financial aid (72%). The family incomes of 57% of students receiving financial aid were less than $25,000 per year. OSD/REACH students are impacted even more, reporting they find it “very hard” or “somewhat hard” to pay for the basics (70.5%), with 64.7% of non-OSD/REACH students similarly struggling. Recognizing this, the remainder of our discussion here focuses on survey items related to obstacles students encounter in relation to the learning environment.

### Emotional Health

Emotional health is a pressing factor for students in several ways. It affects the ability to get to campus for nearly one in four non-OSD/REACH students and 42% of OSD/REACH students. One of the top two factors affecting class participation and attendance for all participants is “difficulty concentrating and feeling anxious”; and one fifth of OSD/REACH students’ attendance or class participation was influenced by “feeling sad,” a factor also affecting 16.7 % of non-OSD/REACH students. (Administering the survey just before finals may have played a role in students’ anxiety levels.) It is important to understand these conditions because students’ grade point average and their intent to remain in college can be closely connected with emotional health (Pritchard & Wilson, “Using emotional and social factors to predict students’ success,” 2003). Academic probation can lead to depression, decreased emotional and behavioral skills, social isolation, conflict, and inadequate finances (Megivern et al, “Barriers to higher education for individuals with psychiatric disabilities,” 2003).

### Learning Issues

Learning Disabilities are “…the most common type of disability reported by postsecondary students in the United States (American Youth Policy Forum and Center on Education Policy, 2001). At the postsecondary level, 31 percent of all students with disabilities have LD (Raue & Lewis, 2011)” (Mcgregor, K. K. et al., “The University Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities,” 2016). Struggling with reading, writing, and concentration present fundamental challenges for OSD/REACH students that may cause them frustration, inhibit their ability to learn, and interfere with their academic success. More than 25% selected “difficulty reading” and “writing” as factors affecting attendance or participation. The need for a note-taker, without which some students face tremendous obstacles in their ability to study class materials, is shared by 17.1% of OSD/REACH students.

More than one in five (21.8%) non-OSD/REACH students also identified “Learning issues (difficulty reading, writing or concentrating)” as a strong factor in their class participation. This points to needs of LaGuardia students who do not identify, are not recognized, or choose not to divulge their status of having a disability, and those not using OSD/REACH services. Whether or not they have a disability, these students must be considered when educators are designing learning materials and activities. These students would benefit from teaching practices based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a pedagogical framework developed to engage and benefit all learners, and other inclusive pedagogies.

### Students’ Suggested Strategies for Success

As demonstrated previously, “Instructors’ policies” affect class participation significantly for OSD/REACH participants. For non-OSD/REACH students, “Instructor's attitude or behavior”—the primary factor influencing class participation—can be interpreted as either encouraging or hindering students’ participation. In a subsequent open-ended question asking students what helps support their success in class, professors’ approachability received the most responses (34.5%). Educators need to know the important role their approachability plays in students’ success. Availability can take many forms, including, but not limited to: office hours, syllabus design, consideration of how one converses with students individually and as a group, and more.

Both groups selected “Welcome and recognize students with all abilities” as a way professors could better support their learning at high rates: 45.5% of OSD/Reach students and 42.9% of non-OSD/REACH students. This points to the need for educators to understand and use inclusive learning design and pedagogical practices to design courses and learning materials with students of all abilities in mind. This approach will increase the accessibility and clarity of course materials and assignments, benefiting all LaGuardia students.

Non-OSD/REACH students’ top recommendation to faculty is “Make all course materials available and easily accessible to students” (63.7%), higher than OSD/REACH students (56.8%). The two groups may have a different sense of the word “accessible”. For non-OSD/REACH students, “accessible” might mean the availability of learning materials, such as clear labeling and instructions by professors, or possibly that ”accessible” materials don’t present students with financial barriers, i.e., that they are affordable or free for students.

## Recommendations[[4]](#endnote-1)

Based on the survey’s findings, we urge the entire College community to commit ourselves to becoming a more inclusive, fully accessible institution for all of our students. Beyond providing “reasonable accommodations” for individual learners with a documented disability, the discourse of diversity in higher education must include dis/ability and an examination of ableism—the prejudicial favoring of able-bodiedness—into our pedagogical practices and our awareness on both institutional and individual levels. To contribute to the success of all LaGuardia students on an institutional level, we recommend:

* **Attending to students’ suggestions** for supporting their success **and providing relevant professional development for faculty,** including part-time faculty,to: (a) integrate Universal Design concepts into teaching and communications, and (b) explore disability and ableism in learning and development through both disability scholarship and classroom practices;
* **Conducting further research** including focus groups on student, faculty, and staff needs related to accessibility and best practices for pedagogy;
* **Forming a College-wide, permanent AccessAbility Committee** comprised of faculty, students, staff and a designated full-time Coordinator to ensure accessibility of all learning materials used by our students to serve as liaison to the college’s governing bodies; and,
* **Creating the LaGuardia Center for Diversity and Inclusion** addressing the challenges of people who are marginalized for any reason, to be comprised of a group of students, faculty, staff, and administrators who guide the College’s existing and proposed accessibility efforts related to teaching and learning.

The effort to make LaGuardia an inclusive learning environment for all students must come not only from “grassroots” efforts such as the D4A project but also from our values as an institution. Without institutional support, efforts by individuals scattered around the college will not result in lasting, systemic change where it is needed, and unfortunately, experiences such as the one described at the beginning of this report will continue to occur. If our faculty, students, staff and administrators work together, we can learn from and with each other, and ensure that LaGuardia deepens the inclusiveness of its mission.

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1. Student outreach was possible with the help of many, including the D4A team, CTL Peer Mentors, LaGuardia Peer Health Mentors, Student Information and Student Affairs staff, faculty, CTL staff, Communications and Marketing, and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fewer students identify as Black/African American (10.2% in OSD/REACH students vs 17% of all LaGuardia students). However, the D4A survey offered an additional category “Mixed, parents from different ethnicities,” a category not provided by LaGuardia Institutional Research, which was selected by 12.5% of OSD/REACH students. Non-Hispanic White/Caucasian students have more representation in OSD/REACH (11.4%) than the non-OSD/REACH students (6.7%). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “[I]nvisible disabilities include… autism spectrum disorder, mental illness, learning disabilities, physical conditions like asthma and diabetes, and chronic illnesses such as Crohn’s disease and lupus…the most common form of disabilities [among college students] are those with few or no visible characteristics.... Although many of these conditions are legally documented, their invisible nature, along with the stigma sometimes associated with having any disability, keeps many students from requesting the accommodations they need.” (M. Bohanon, “Moving Beyond Stigma to Support Students with Invisible Disabilities,” http://www.insightintodiversity.com/moving‐beyond‐stigmato‐support‐students‐with‐invisible‐disabilities/, May 19, 2017.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a full list of recommendations by the *Designing for All* team, see Appendix 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)