# **The LaGuardia Designing for All Project (D4A) Summary**

## Project Overview

From June 2017–June 2018, the *Designing for All (D4A)* project brought together a team of LaGuardia Community College students, staff, and faculty to support and educate our faculty about Universal Design for Learning and its significance for making learning materials available for students with disabilities. Designed as a pedagogy and classroom practice project, we adopted two overarching goals:

1. Ensure that every student has access to the learning materials they need, and
2. Provide a welcoming learning environment for every student at LaGuardia Community College.

### I. An Evolving Culture: Linking Universal and Inclusive Design

Using UDL and Inclusive Learning Design in the Classroom**:** During the *D4A* academic year, four full-time and one part-time faculty worked extensively with the project. They represented English, Social Science, Health Science, Human Services, and Theater. Their collegiality and willingness to experiment was essential to the project. We invited each faculty member to engage with the project over summer 2017 by researching topics that interested them that would be relevant for their work with their students. The list of those research questions and topics follows:

* How can collaborative learning increase accessibility to learning and students’ engagement?
* How can dis/ability be integrated into curriculum and teaching?
* Exploring the potentially productive tensions between collaborative learning as a supportive environment and collaborative learning as a deeply anxiety-filled environment, how can consent-based collaborative learning promote UDL principles without reifying the problematics of a lot of UDL assumptions?
* What are UDL best practices for composition and literature classes?
* How may [our] best practices be successfully implemented for writing-intensive courses that are equally content-driven and highly interdisciplinary?
* How can UDL and its principles be implemented within a clinical fieldwork or internship? What are the best practices for clinical practice using UDL to measure competency for students with disabilities?
* How can hybrid course design take intersectionality into consideration? How can hybrid course instruction be inclusive of multi-modality?

Each faculty member developed a low-stakes activity implemented during Fall 2017 and a high-stakes activity implemented during Spring 2018.

Some *D4A* faculty use Universal Design for Learning as a guiding framework for developing learning activities. Others objected to UDL as a framework that assumes “universality” in a way that marginalizes people of color. In response to this critique, the *D4A* project **shifted from focusing on UDL to encompassing Inclusive Design practices** so that all learners would be considered and welcomed in the learning environment. Individual faculty members selected the approach they wanted to take. Clearly all shared the strong commitment to an accessible, equitable classroom that welcomes all their students.

The following describes a selection of learning activities developed by *D4A* Faculty in conjunction with their work in the project:

* Professor Podlucka, Social Science
In the Social Self activities in her “Social Psychology “courses Professor Podlucka designed with several goals in mind, including that the project would a) be relevant to students’ lived experiences; b) position them as authors of scientific knowledge; c) engage students in collaborative activities; and d) promote accessibility and engagement of learning. Integrating students’ lived experience and ability to build knowledge, recognizing their work as central and valuable (especially in terms of disability and forms of marginalization), and using that to promote research-based social science inquiry were the central tenets of the course. Studying disability as a topic for inquiry, engagement, and critique also furthered collaborative learning as an anti-ableist and inclusive teaching practice.
* Professor Battle, Health Sciences/Human Services (Recreational Therapy)Struggling to integrate the demands of federal, state and local regulatory accreditation and licensing requirements adds another layer to instructional design. While factoring in these parameters, Professor Battle intentionally used UDL’s three concepts (engagement, representation, and action/expression) in her “Professional Issues in Therapeutic Recreation” course and connected it to the capstone and fieldwork courses for LaGuardia’s new Health and Human Services Recreational Therapy Program. UDL was used both 1) to facilitate students reflecting on and building from their own personal experience to connect with their learning, and 2) to actively teach students about UDL as a framework they could use to develop their own work in the clinical setting, which prepares them for work in the field.
* Professor Polish, English and Theater
Sparked by a student’s comment early in the class that “we should all try to get comfortable being uncomfortable” in their “Art of Theater” class, Professor Polish developed Personal Traffic Lights that students – and the professor – selected to wear for each class, signaling to themselves and each other their participation level for the day. Green – ready to participate physically and readily; yellow – maybe feeling tired or unsure but perhaps willing to try something new; red – “not feeling up to engaging in a more direct way than simply being there.” Despite being cautioned by colleagues that students would game the system and never participate, Professor Polish found the opposite to be true; in fact, students felt less pressured in class and more respected as individuals by being offered this choice, while being able to learn about and support each other.
* Professor Parris, EnglishProfessor Parris developed scaffolded activities in English 101 where students delve into readings on the history of the civil rights movement, segregation, institutionalized racism, white supremacy, internalized racism, and the more complex facets of activism and organizing around race and class. Using UDL principles like engagement, representation, and action/expression, Professor Parris invited students paired as mentors/mentees to find, cite, and paraphrase quotes from the readings. This enabled students to engage with each other and with the course content as a way of building towards their research-based writing.
* Professor Brown, Health Science (Public Health)Intentionally using multiple forms of engaging students with varied learning needs in his hybrid/partially-online “Drugs, Society, and Behavior” course, Professor Brown designed a series of scaffolded assignments encouraging students to gather and use evidence to develop a position on drug reclassification and the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970. Activities and assignments included watching relevant films, doing research, discussions, video-recording themselves describing their positions on the issue, writing a series of reaction posts, and writing a paper.

Student Engagement: Learning and Leading: The D4A project intentionally cultivated leadership, connection, and community among our five D4A students. Facilitated by Project Assistant Jenn Polish, our Student Leaders helped to create a space where they were listened to–whether as students with disabilities and/or advocates of those with disabilities. In addition to developing the space where they could respect and learn from each other, we supported their learning about disability studies research; and survey development, implementation, and analysis, which supported their final projects. We also addressed presentation skills 1) for conferences and meetings with faculty and administrators at LaGuardia and CUNY, and 2) for their fellow LaGuardia students at their panel presentation and discussion at the Social Science conference, where they presented their final projects to an audience comprised of LaGuardia students who were eager to learn from the *D4A* Student Leaders.

**Student Leaders’ Projects**

This is a brief description of each individual project developed by our student leaders:

* Perla analyzed professors’ behaviors in relation to student feelings of safety in class participation (very relevant to preliminary survey data we’ve accumulated which suggests professors’ attitudes are the biggest factor in student participation);
* Christian interviewed employees in the Office for Students with Disabilities to determine holes in services and best practices for getting students what they need;
* Marc interviewed fellow LaGuardia students to uncover emotional impacts on motivation that class requirements have on the student body;
* Tony developed a proposal for integrating high school students in special education programs into college life to ease their transition; and
* Recognizing his privilege as not, himself, identifying with having a dis/ability, Juan documented his fellow leaders’ efforts in a video project as a “*D4A* trailer.”

**II. Recommendations**

The following list compiled from the D4A team of faculty, students and staff provides specific recommendations for the College community to implement an approach to a broader understanding of accessibility through a comprehensive set of policies, supports for faculty and students, and services (Table 5). This approach begins, however, with an important imperative: *we must conduct focus groups and a survey with faculty and staff to learn what they already know about accessibility and what they need to know*. Such information will be useful to help us create professional development seminars and workshops. In addition, we can follow-up on both surveys with student-based and faculty-based focus groups in order to learn more from our constituents.

**Table 5. Recommendations for LaGuardia and CUNY**

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| Admin Policies & Structures | * Create *LaGuardia AccessAbility* (LAA), a cross-divisional collaboration dedicated to ensuring a fully accessible and welcoming learning environment for all students.
* Conduct focus groups and a survey with faculty and staff
* Establish policies and procedures that ensure all classroom materials are accessible
* Hire *LAA* coordinator to work with a student/staff/faculty team to connect OSD and student services, faculty development, IT, the Library, and Facilities. Ground this work in the principles of UDL and recognition of access as a civil right.
* Create the *LaGuardia AccessAbility Committee* of students, staff, faculty, and administrators to determine priorities, goals, and strategies for making course materials fully-accessible for all students and moving the College towards being a fully welcoming learning environment. This entity should work closely with the AccessAbility Coordinator and Team.
* Offer digital conversion of print texts into accessible learning materials; create resource bank of these
* Require some type of diversity training opportunities for students, staff, and faculty
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| Curriculum | * Start a Disability Studies AAS major with degree program, helping students move to bachelor’s degree study and the SPS Disability Studies M.A.
* Students can choose from two possible themes: one preparing students to work in Accessibility Services, another in Disability Studies/Scholarship.
* Integrate accessibility into priority College efforts and projects such as Open Educational Resources (OERs)
* Host student-led pedagogy workshops geared towards workshopping specific assignments, lesson plans, syllabi, etc., to be more accessible and welcoming
* Provide more online as well as hybrid options
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| Resources for the Classroom | * Provide accessibility training for part-time and full-time faculty in order to ensure MS Word docs, Powerpoints, and PDFs shared with students meet accessibility standards
* Support the process for video captioning
* Increase faculty awareness that not all students can access course materials, especially if they are vision or hearing impaired
* Provide students with multiple approaches and formats since learners have a variety of needs
* Conduct a special initiative to educate and involve our adjunct faculty who make up the majority of our faculty
* Develop a website with materials and resources for faculty and staff
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| Student Services | * Locate the Wellness Center in a more prominent location on campus so more students pass by, see it, and are aware of it. Hold more events at the Wellness Center (like the wonderful spring event with games and a variety de-stressing activities.)
* Create another Wellness Center in E, M buildings - it’s good to have Wellness Centers!
* Combine Health Services with the Wellness Center
* Streamline OSD processes so they are less cumbersome for students; ensure that OSD staff are welcoming and friendly to students.
* Provide single study rooms, and/or allow students who aren’t with someone else to use study rooms (this is an option at City College)
* Offer longer library hours for evening students
* Make more mental health sessions available for students through the Wellness Center. Currently, it’s 17 sessions for the entire two years.
* Offer relaxation classes (tai chi, yoga) at different times during the week (once a week, in the morning doesn’t work for most people)

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| Professional Development | * Form partnership between the CTL and Math department focused on accessible teaching practices
* Offer a variety of professional development: an in-depth seminar on disability and inclusive design for learning, training for adjuncts, and monthly drop-in clinics where faculty can get help transforming their PDFs, word docs, etc., into accessible formats
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| Information Sharing  | * Help faculty understand experience of students unable to access assigned materials, and/or to have to wait a long time for services such as note-taking or interpreters that make it difficult if not impossible to participate in class
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| Best Practices | * Use collaborative, open-source note-taking in each class to reduce burden on students
* Allow students to record class lecture if not already available from instructor
* Encourage increased use of Open Educational Resources (OERs) to reduce costs for students, and ensure the OERs are fully accessible
* Syllabi should have scheduled dates for assignments in advance
* Professors need to be available by email for students
* Having the entire course pack available enables students to pre-read and re-read it – very helpful for them
* Make all Powerpoints available in advance & leave them up for entire semester
* Assignments, Powerpoints, and other class materials should be made available on Blackboard a week before the first day of class
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Finally, we recommend that University leaders consider forming a CUNY-wide AccessAbility Pedagogy Council to share skills, resources and best teaching and learning practices among faculty, and to coordinate their work with both COSDI and the CUNY Disability Scholars. Students with a variety of needs must be part of this Council.