Defining the future through Universal Design:

Universal Design is "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (AHEAD, 2012). Universal design is a design concept that recognizes, respects, values and attempts to accommodate the broadest possible spectrum of human ability in the design of all products, environments and information systems. It requires sensitivity to and knowledge about people of all ages and abilities. Universal design encompasses and goes beyond the accessible, adaptable and barrier-free design concepts of the past. It helps eliminate the need for special features and spaces, which for some people, are often stigmatizing, embarrassing, different looking and usually more expensive.

Bringing theory to Practice:

The past decade has seen a professional shift in postsecondary service provision that challenges us to think not only of the individual’s access but beyond it to more equitable, sustainable and usable postsecondary environments. This shift is informed by progressive views of disability and by the construct of universal design. A universal design approach to service delivery holds the promise of creating more inclusive postsecondary environments, alleviating the need for some individual accommodations and creating a more collaborative, wide-reaching professional role for postsecondary service providers.

Looking forward:
For students with disabilities to be successful in higher education, we have to work together to move beyond accommodations by removing the various barriers to education that still exist after accommodations have been implemented. The context to which universal design is applied must be broadened, ensuring the success of all students. Acknowledgement of the challenges in today’s learning environment is an essential component for the future of higher education. Learning styles are as unique to the individual as fingerprints. The traditional lecture environment no longer lends itself to student success. The acquisition of knowledge through teaching and learning has evolved. Ensuring that our students are provided with support that meets their diverse learning style is at the heart of the future of the Disability Resource Center, and the University of Nevada.

The department of the Disability Resource Center aspires to uphold the just due process of a universally accessible educational community that fosters the full participation and contribution of every member, not focusing on diversity, but rather inclusion.

Measurable Goals

1. Assess and support a steady decrease in the number of students registering with the Disability Resource Center.

   By fostering of a campus culture that respects, understands, supports, and administers the concepts of Universal Design, the Disability Resource Center will be able to facilitate a steady decrease in the number of students that register. Sustainable universal design implementation will impact students by reducing the necessity for disclosure of an array of disabilities.

2. Facilitate a reduction in the need for individualized classroom accommodations through supporting the implementation of universal design throughout the curriculum.
Embracing the unique characteristics of learning, and altering the traditional model of curriculum and instruction to meet individual needs of students in the classroom will facilitate an inclusive environment for all students. Institutional collaboration to support student success means: captioning ALL videos for curricular and institutional purposes, creating web content that is accessible across devices, allowing audio recording of lectures for all students, re-conceptualizing the administration of exams and the way we are testing for competency, working with publishers to provide textbooks in readable-text format, and providing access to technology that enhances a student holistic development.

3. Encourage an increase in accessible entrances to campus buildings, and rooms.

In architecture, universal design means creating spaces that meet the needs of all people, young and old, able and disabled. From the arrangement of the rooms to the choice of colors, many details go into the creation of accessible spaces. Architecture tends to focus on accessibility for people with disabilities, but “Universal Design” is the philosophy behind accessibility. We are still asking students with disabilities to enter our buildings through specific doors, eat at certain locations in the food courts, and navigate campus through a path that we have deemed “accessible”. The Disability Resource Center will continue to collaborate and offer support to all vested stakeholders (e.g. Division of Student Services, Budget, Planning, and Analysis, Facility Services, etc.) to ensure universal design is taken into consideration across campus construction efforts, particularly as our beautiful campus continues to expand and evolve.

4. Engage the campus community in open dialogue that focuses on broadening our contextualization of diversity in higher education, embracing the unique characteristics each student brings to the classroom, and continuously advocate the message that “our learning styles are as individual as our personal experiences and fingerprints” (Burgstahler, 2001).

Fostering a campus culture that guarantees accessibility for ALL students, not as a privilege, but as a civil right, is no easy task. It necessitates collaboration and respect amongst colleagues to overcome the barriers of our traditional learning environment. This large feat can only be accomplished through intentional dialogue and education that reaches all corners of our campus. The Disability Resource Center will continue to work tirelessly to advocate for students, regardless of disability, to ensure our institution’s point of focus remains diversity, accessibility, and inclusion. Implementation will necessitate engaging conversations between all stakeholders (e.g. NSHE Board of Regents, President’s Council, Faculty Senate, faculty, administrators, and student services personnel), and all departments (e.g. Information Technology, Teaching & Learning Technologies, every academic College, EEOC & Title IX, etc.).

5. Enhance the educational experience of the entire student body by providing opportunities in education that are relevant and impactful.
As a civic duty, the Disability Resource Center will preserve the right to equitable access for students across ALL institutional domains. We are living in the age of information and technology. We should be providing our students with the tools and skills that are necessary for success throughout their lives. As an institution, we have to ensure that our students are utilizing technology and software that will be required in their professional lives. We strive for a holistic education in all of our endeavors. Providing hands on experience with such technology should be an institutional requirement, and not one that is only afforded to those that can afford it. As we continue to embrace diversity and access as the foundation for our campus, we must also look beyond our role as an institution. Supporting students’ holistic development necessitates equal access to technology, and all that it offers. The future of our University has the potential to set the standard for participation and inclusion in higher education.