PLANNING AN ACCESSIBLE EVENT

A COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY RESOURCE FOR STUDENTS, FACULTY AND STAFF

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT LIFE

Multicultural Affairs

1754

INTRODUCTION

Many of us are taught from a young age that disabilities of all kinds are "problems" to be "overcome." This idea reflects the medical model of disability, which suggests that people are disabled by physical, emotional or psychological differences. In contrast, the social model of disability proposes that it is our society which disables people, rather than their physical, emotional or psychological differences themselves and that there is nothing inherently "wrong" with those who live with disabilities.

Many people with disabilities are deeply proud of their identity, may not wish to live without their disabilities and have for years formed communities around shared experiences. Over time, the disability rights and disability justice movements have been fighting to improve the accessibility of all facets of society – from physical spaces, to our communication styles, to larger institutions of daily life. Disabled activists continue to educate the general public on the social model of disability and combat the stigma against those who live with a variety of disabilities.

In this resource, you will learn how to create events that are accessible to people with a variety of disabilities, including those who live with developmental disabilities, emotional disabilities, health disabilities (or chronic illnesses), visible/invisible disabilities, learning or cognitive disabilities, physical disabilities and sensory disabilities. This list is incomplete, and these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Remember that the commitment to providing equal access to opportunities to all students, faculty and staff starts at the very beginning of the event-planning process. Strive to create event spaces that are universally accessible from the outset, so that the onus is not on the individual participant to advocate for their access needs. Getting an early start is also important because some accessible measures take time to arrange and implement, such as securing ASL interpretation or live captioning. We suggest that you read through this guide before your planning begins and spend a few minutes during each planning session to ensure you account for each applicable item on the list. Thank you for helping to make Columbia University a better and more accessible place for people of all abilities.

OTHER DIMENSIONS OF ACCESSIBILITY

While this guide will focus on planning accessible events for folks with a variety of disabilities, it's important to keep in mind that "accessibility" can refer to all dimensions of identity, including race, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, socioeconomic status, religion, age, size and many more.

In planning your event, examine which identities and experiences you may be inadvertently centering or erasing. We encourage you to consider the following questions:

- When I imagine who will attend this event, what identities do I assume those people hold?
- What would this event be like for those who do not hold the identities of my assumed audience?
- Does my event center around certain mainstream/privileged cultural traditions or activities? What would this participation in these activities feel like for people outside of the mainstream/privileged culture?
- Does the setup of my event divide participants into categories based on gender identity, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion/spirituality or (dis)ability? If so, is there a meaningful purpose to this division, and does the event leave room for folks who may not have a category within which they identify?
- Does it cost money to participate in the event? If so, are there systems in place and advertised that help alleviate the burden of this cost for lower-income students?
- Is my event scheduled on a major religious holiday or festival? (Visit the Interfaith calendar used by Columbia College: interfaith-calendar.org)
- Do I include time during my event (depending on event size) for participants to share their pronouns, if they are comfortable?

Forthcoming resources will address event planning as it relates to these critical forms of accessibility.

ADVERTISING & MEDIA

Ensure that all advertising materials are readable by folks with low vision and learning disabilities.

- Use a sans serif font that is no smaller than size 14. If funds allow, consider using the Dyslexie font, which was designed specifically for those with dyslexia.
- Include closed captions in all videos.
- Make flyers screen-reader compatible, with a text-only version in the body of emails and social media posts.
- Visit Columbia University's web accessibility site for more information: cuit.columbia.edu/web-accessibility

Include an access statement with multiple forms of contact in all advertising, invitations and social media posts.

- Access statement: "Columbia University makes every effort to accommodate individuals with disabilities. If you require disability accommodations to attend an event at Columbia University, please contact Disability Services (disability@columbia.edu or 212-854-2388) at least 10 days in advance of the event."
- List accommodations that have been taken into consideration in the event space; when you have completed this checklist, take note of which adjustments you made and advertise them in your event announcements.
- Also note the location of all-gender and wheelchair-accessible restrooms, along with the location of ramps and/or elevators into the event space.
- If applicable, list food options that will be available at the event.
- If applicable, note that volunteers and/or staff will be on site to assist with accessibility needs.

Include the appropriate international access logos at the bottom right-hand corner of your advertisements.

- If your event is accessible for people with limited mobility, including people who use wheelchairs (and we hope it is!), use the updated wheelchair accessibility symbol (see below), which features a more active and humanized figure.
- Be mindful that the wheelchair accessibility symbol does not represent all forms of accessibility; not all disabilities are physical or visible. Instead, be thoughtful about which forms of physical, intellectual and emotional diversity your event is prepared to accommodate and include the appropriate access symbols.
- Visit Graphic Artists Guild's website (graphicartistsguild.org/downloadable-disability-access-symbols) for more examples of symbols that indicate access around:
  - People who are B/blind or who have low vision
  - American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation
  - Audio descriptions
  - Telephone typewriter (TTY)
  - Volume control telephone
  - Assistive listening systems
  - Accessible print
  - Closed or open captioning
  - Braille

Request that participants help to create an accessible environment.

- In emails to participants, request that they refrain from wearing strong fragrances like perfumes or colognes, to be mindful of those with allergies or environmental sensitivities.
- Unless necessary, request that participants refrain from flash photography.
- Remind participants of your request(s) a few days prior to the event.

Be as clear as possible with participants about what they will experience on the day of the event.

- For participants who may experience anxiety or who have certain developmental or cognitive disabilities, it can be helpful to provide the group with details as to where to go for the event, what signage to look for, what they will see/feel/smell/hear in the space and whether there will be loud noises or bright/flashing lights. Make note of the use of smoke/fog machines and whether or not there will be flash photography.
- If PowerPoint slides will be used, consider sending those out to participants in advance or have several printed copies on hand.
- If possible, share images of past versions of the event via email or social media to prepare participants.

If you have a registration form for your event, make sure that there is space included for participants to indicate accessibility needs.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Ensure that your event is in an accessible location (this means that all areas of the event can be accessed by those with a wide variety of physical disabilities), with appropriate signage to event locations.

- Ensure elevators are available if the event is on an upper floor.

- At least one of the primary entrances should be accessible and located on an accessible route of travel. Non-accessible entrances should have directional signage to accessible entrances. Routes to and from the main entrance/any outdoor space that will be used should be paved and flat.
- Take note of construction work that may be going on near the event space, as it might block routes that are typically accessible. If entrances will be blocked in any way, mention this in promotional materials for the event, so that people with disabilities can find an alternative route to the space in advance.
- Keep in mind that the 116 Street Subway Stop (1 Train) does not have an elevator, which may impact those who are commuting to an event on campus. If you are expecting attendees from outside of campus, make a note of this in advertising materials and provide an email address so prospective attendees can reach out for assistance with directions.
- For more information, visit the Columbia University accessibility campus map: bit.ly/columbiauniversityaccessmap

Ensure that the space is adequate for wheelchair accessibility and service animal use.
- Paths should be three to five feet wide throughout the space.
- Include easy access to restrooms for folks who use wheelchairs, canes, or walkers or who cannot climb stairs.

Provide American Sign Language (ASL) services by request or based on attendee numbers.
- Visit the Disability Services website to submit a request for an ASL interpreter at least two weeks prior to the event: bit.ly/columbiaaslrequest

- When a presenter is speaking, they should speak directly to the audience as they would typically, rather than to the interpreter.

Provide a 36-inch high counter for any registration or food areas.

If a participant has requested an assistive listening device (whether through your event's registration page or via an email to event organizers), contact Disability Services to collect these prior to the event: health.columbia.edu/content/disability-services

Ensure that at least some seating is near electrical outlets to accommodate those who use electronic adaptive devices.

Train staff to provide on-site assistance to make the physical environment accessible.

Use adequate lighting for persons with low vision or if an ASL interpreter will be used.

Remind volunteers and organizers staffing the event that service animals are allowed anywhere a member of the public would be. Event staff are legally allowed to ask only the following two questions of an individual with a service animal:

- "Is your animal a service dog required because of your disability?"
- "What work or tasks has your dog been trained to perform?"
- For more information, visit Columbia's website on service and assistance animals: health.columbia.edu/services/service-and-assistance-animals

Provide accessible transportation for any off-campus trips.

Provide diverse seating options to participants.
- All events should provide at least some seating.
- Some seating (throughout the space) should be movable to accommodate wheelchair use, attendees of size and attendees with service animals.
- Provide comfortable (i.e. soft, wide) seating without handles for folks of size.
- Seating should be reserved near an ASL interpreter for those with low hearing.
- Seating should also be reserved near the presenter for those who will need to lip-read.

Work with event staff prior to the event to create an emergency evacuation plan for people with mobility disabilities.
- Ensure that all exits in the space are clearly marked and that any emergency alarms have audio and visual cues.

Ensure there is a range of food and drink options for those who follow certain diets or who have allergies.
- Diets to consider include: Halal, Kosher, gluten-free, dairy-free, vegetarian, vegan, nut-free, etc.

Depending on the length of your event, consider incorporating breaks for participants to stretch, get fresh air, eat or drink.

FACILITATING PRESENTATIONS

Determine language protocol and train all presenters on how to talk about disability and accessibility and to support those in need of accommodations.

- Inform staff of accessible features of the program.
- Refer to a disabled person as either "disabled" or "a person with a disability," rather than "handicapped" or as having "special needs." If a participant self-identifies with these terms, however, staff should mirror the participant's preferred language (see below).
- Refer to those who use wheelchairs as "wheelchair-users," rather than "wheelchair-bound."
- Refer to accessible features as "disability-related access," rather than "handicapped" or "special."
- If a disabled participant does not want assistance, respect their decision; do not continue to offer.
- Notice when nondisabled/able-bodied persons occupy an accessible spot and discreetly ask if they would consider relocating.
  - Keep in mind that many people have "invisible" disabilities, or disabilities that we cannot see by looking at them. Be respectful and not accusatory when addressing someone using an accessible spot who you suspect may not need it.

Invite all individuals to identify themselves, and mirror their language.

- See the attached glossary for more information on "people-first" language and "identity-first" language.

- If audience members are participating, make sure the presenter repeats and summarizes the audience member's point over the microphone, so it can be heard and interpreted by the ASL interpreter.
  - In the case of a large event with a Q&A session, consider having event volunteers with roaming microphones to hand out to audience members, rather than asking audience members to line up behind a microphone stand.
  - For more information, read this article from Think Inclusive: bit.ly/thinklanguage

Present a content warning or trigger warnings (see attached glossary for distinction) before any content that includes sensitive information.

Provide enlarged print copies of event programs, handouts, etc.
- For additional guidelines on drafting large-print documents, visit the American Council of the Blind's website: acb.org/large-print-guidelines

Ensure your PowerPoint presentation, if applicable, is accessible.
- Use a sans serif font, and consider using the Dyslexie font.
- Use a large font size (at least 22-point).
- Ensure there is sufficient contrast between the font and the background colors (for example, black text on a white background), and ensure your color combination in text and graphics is colorblind-friendly: bit.ly/colorblindppt
- Provide "alternative text" descriptions for all images, graphics, and tables, etc. These descriptions should be as detailed as possible (for instance, avoid descriptions such as "Table of Data Results").
- Text on a slide should have nothing behind it that obstructs viewing (no watermarks or complex images).
- For more information visit WebAIM's PowerPoint Accessibility Guide: webaim.org/techniques/powerpoint

Ensure that all videos have closed or open captions.

Include a statement in all presentation materials informing participants of how to obtain alternative format versions.

- Ensure that all facilitation materials state they are available in alternate formats upon request, with contact information on how to obtain them.
  - e.g: "Please contact [Name, Phone Number, Email Address] to obtain alternate formats of this material."

Review and apply best practices for accessible individual presentation style.

- Facilitators and presenters should always introduce themselves to attendees and face the audience when speaking.
- Facilitators and presenters should use microphones whenever possible (yes, even if they think they talk loudly!).
- Verbally describe visual materials to the audience, including tables or charts.
- Ensure that attendees are not required to stand for long periods of time, or provide attendees with the option to personalize space while participating in the program.
- Use more than one modality (i.e. visual, auditory, kinesthetic/tactile) when presenting to accommodate a variety of learning styles. For more information visit: bit.ly/learningdisabilityaccessibility
- Limit distracting patterns, backlighting and other background materials that limit accessibility.

ZOOM ACCESSIBILITY

Using Zoom in a Post-Pandemic World to Enhance Access for Live Events

Though attending classes, work, and events via Zoom for the last year may have created access barriers for some, for others, the option to participate remotely in live programming can significantly expand access. Accessibility means more than sharing a link, though - remote participants should be full participants, and should have their individual access needs met within a Zoom context. When you've incorporated Zoom access into your event, consider what the experience will look like for remote participants: Will it be comparable to that of folks who attend in person?

Zoom Accessibility Best Practices:

- Whenever possible, offer the option for remote participation in events via Zoom.
- During event registration, ask those who select remote participation to indicate any access needs, such as captioning and ASL interpretation. Ideally, both will be available during all events, but there may be financial or institutional barriers to this.
- Zoom now has an auto-captioning feature; however, it is not always accurate, and this can be particularly ineffective when captioning events in which the speaker is not close to the microphone. When possible, reach out to Disability Services in advance to secure live captioning, and connect with the assigned captioners before the event to provide a run-down of the program.

- At the beginning of the program, let remote participants know about the access features of the event. Note how they can enable captioning, and make sure any ASL interpreters' videos are "pinned," so they remain visible on the screen. Note also the ways in which remote participants can ask questions or make comments (unmuting, raising hand, etc.).
- Offer self-descriptions: For event hosts or speakers, describe yourself visually (for example: "I am a white, 25-year-old non-binary person who presents androgynously. I have short, brown hair, and I am wearing a plain grey t-shirt.")
- Always aim to communicate messages to participants through multiple means (for example, anything sent via the chat feature should be communicated verbally as well).
- If using break-out rooms, manually place ASL interpreters into rooms with participants who use their services.
- Verbally describe any important visuals (for example, if showing images on a slide).
- When possible, record the Zoom session to allow access for those who are unable to attend live.

IMAGE DESCRIPTIONS

Why Should I Include an Image Description?
For people who are B/blind, those with low vision, or those who may have low internet speeds, image descriptions allow screen readers to describe images to content consumers.

Curious about best practices for writing image descriptions? Take a look at the following guidance, and consider implementing it the next time you share content that includes photographs, other images, videos, or GIFs!

Image Description Best Practices:

- Label the image description before you start it: "Image Description:" This allows people with screen readers to identify that there is an image being described, rather than a continuation of the rest of the text.
- Place the full image description in brackets.
- If possible, place the image description in bold text, and use italics if including quoted words that appear in the image.
- Make sure you're describing the image sufficiently, but keep it concise (ideally, about 280 characters or fewer, or about the length of a tweet).
- Be as objective as possible in your description; avoid sharing your analysis or opinion of what you see.
- Include the three main components of the image (object, action, and context), but give consideration too to details that might not initially seem most relevant to you, including:
  - Placement of objects in the image
  - Image style (painting vs. photograph, etc.)
  - Colors
  - Names of people
  - Clothes
  - Animals
  - Placement of text, and exactly what it says
  - Indications of emotion, such as a smile
  - Surroundings
- Avoid typing image descriptions in all caps. Some screen readers pronounce those words one letter at a time, rather than as a full word.

Example 1

[Image Description: A graphic showing outlined images of a microphone on a stand, a speech bubble, a cane, another speech bubble, and a person actively using a wheelchair, leaning forward with their arms behind them. The outlines are dark blue, and the background is light blue.]

Example 2

[Image Description: A photograph of people marching on a bridge in a protest, wearing face masks. Four signs are raised in the center of the image; one reads "BLM," and the other three are paintings of George Floyd's face with bright reds and oranges behind him. In the bottom left corner, a person holds a video camera and aims it at the crowd of people.]
(Photo Credit: Ira L. Black)

Example 3

[Image Description: A light- and dark-blue striped graphic which reads "*Take Care of You, Fight Flu*," with a circle to the right of it which reads "*#stayhealthy COVID19.columbia.edu*" with an outline of a face mask within the circle. Underneath, the graphic reads: "*Lerner Hall Monday – Friday 9:00 a m. - 5:00 p.m. Appointments Necessary, For more information and to schedule your appointment visit: health.columbia.edu/flu.*"]

Captions vs. Image Descriptions: What's the Difference?

Think about it this way: image descriptions simply take the place of visual perception for B/blind folks and those with low vision, and captions are often used to contextualize the image and explain its relevance for all readers. This is why we recommend that image descriptions are as objective as possible, and don't include an analysis of the image's content. Unlike image descriptions, captions don't have to closely mirror what the image actually shows. Here's an example of how these might look different:
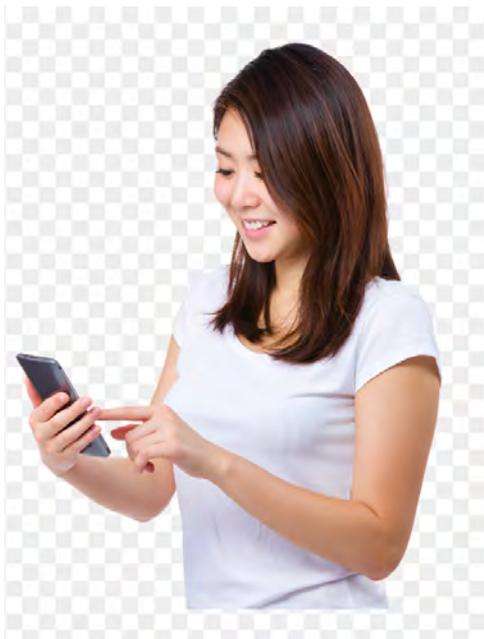
[Image Description: A person holds a cell phone in their right hand and points to the screen with their left hand. They have long, brown hair, they are wearing a white t-shirt, and they are smiling while looking at the phone.]

Caption: A woman plays a game on her cellphone. Many of us find it difficult to remember a time before we were glued to our technology; however, the first smartphone was not invented until 1992 (Andrew, 2018). Now, approximately 2.71 billion people worldwide use smartphones (Metev, 2020).

A NOTE ON COST

While it is critical for event planners to consider and implement all aspects of accessibility mentioned in this guide, some adjustments may be cost-prohibitive, depending on your team's resources. Still, we strongly recommend prioritizing an investment in these accommodations, to allow participation from as diverse a population as possible. Event planners should be transparent in their advertising if certain elements of accessibility cannot be implemented due to cost.

A NOTE ON FEEDBACK

Many events are followed by the gathering of feedback, either in person or through an online form. We strongly recommend gathering feedback, even if you do not intend to repeat a particular event in the future. Whenever possible, use this opportunity to check in with participants about their experience with the accessibility of the event — and, most importantly, **read and follow up on this feedback**. Keep in mind that if your event was not constructed to be accessible to all, you may be missing some critical voices in your feedback as well. The same is true of the evaluation itself.

GLOSSARY

- **Able-Bodied or Nondisabled:** Refers to people who are not affected by a disability and who are thus enabled by the structures in society to navigate daily life with more ease.

- **Ableism:** Discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities.

- **Accessible:** In the context of this guide, describes something that can be used for its intended purpose by people with a wide variety of physical, emotional and psychological (dis)abilities.

- **Access Barrier:** An element of physical space, communication style or logistics that prevents people with disabilities from entering the space or conversation.

- **Accommodation:** An adjustment made to some event, process or expectation to allow for the needs of people with disabilities. These are typically offered on an individual basis and retroactively (for example, after an individual has requested it), as opposed to something that is intentionally and proactively constructed to be accessible.

- **Adaptive Device:** Any device used by a person with a disability allowing them to participate in daily life. Adaptive devices can include wheelchairs or walkers, voice recognition programs, screen readers, hearing aids, etc.

- **ASL Interpreter**: Typically a hearing person who is hired to translate spoken word into American Sign Language for those with low hearing and Deaf people.

- **Assistance Animal:** An animal that provides emotional support and companionship, rather than one which performs particular tasks to assist a person with a disability. Columbia generally allows assistance animals only in an approved student's apartment or room in University Housing, and not in other areas of the University.

- **Assistive Listening Device:** A device typically used by people with low hearing that amplifies sound to increase hearing ability. This typically does not refer to hearing aids.

- **Closed Captioning:** A means of displaying text at the bottom of a screen while film is playing; this allows audio/visual materials to be accessible to people with low hearing. Keep in mind that open caption is different that closed captioning.

- **Content Warning:** Written or verbal notices to indicate that the material to come will include sensitive content, to allow participants to prepare themselves or opt out of the activity. These can be helpful for all people, regardless of the presence of emotional disabilities.

- **Developmental Disability:** Any disability (including physical, behavioral, learning, etc.) that manifests before the age of 22, continues over the course of a person's life and inhibits their ability to participate in some part of daily life.

- **Emotional Disability:** A disability that inhibits a person's ability to express, control, or interpret some aspect of their emotions.

- **Health Disability or Chronic Illness:** Any illness that persists for longer than three months and which may inhibit a person's ability to participate in some part of daily life.

- **Identity-First Language:** Language which centers a person's disability as a major part of their identity. For example, many people in the Deaf community describe themselves as "a Deaf person," rather than "a person with deafness/low hearing." Disabled communities are increasingly advocating for identity-first language as standard.

- **Invisible Disability:** Any disability which is not apparent to another person unless it is mentioned. Many people with invisible disabilities face discrimination because they are not taken seriously or because they are seen as exaggerating their accommodation needs.

- **Learning Disability or Cognitive Disability:** Any disability that may make it more difficult for a person to learn or complete mental tasks in a way that is supported/expected by conventional educational methods.

- **Neurodiverse or Non-Neurotypical:** Refers to people who experience some kind of intellectual or developmental disability.

- **Neurotypical:** Refers to people who do not experience intellectual or developmental disabilities. Neurotypical people are privileged in their access to learning and communication styles that work for them.

- **Orthopedic Disability:** Any bone-, joint- or muscle-related disability that significantly impacts a person's ability to participate in aspects of daily life, due to the way in which society is currently constructed.

- **People-First Language:** Language which centers the person and subsequently acknowledges their disability ("a person who uses a wheelchair"). Although identity-first language is increasingly being understood as best practice, some disabled people may prefer to be referred to using people-first language.

- **Person of Size:** A person whose larger physical size impedes their ability to participate in certain activities because of how they are structured. People of size often experience discrimination in the form of fatphobia. Like other examples in this glossary, being of size is not inherently a "problem;" when considered in terms of the social model of disability, it is clear that people of size are restricted from various aspects of daily life (in other words, "disabled") based on society's current limitations and biases.

- **Physical Disability:** Any disability which impedes upon a person's ability to function physically in society as it is currently structured.

- **Sensory Disability:** Any disability related to the senses, including hearing, sight, smell, touch or taste.

- **Service Animal:** An animal trained to perform particular tasks to assist a person with a disability. Columbia generally allows service animals in its buildings, classrooms, residence halls, meeting spaces, dining areas, recreation facilities, activities and events.

- **Social Model of Disability:** Acknowledges that society creates barriers to access for people with physical, emotional and psychological differences, thus disabling them. This model places emphasis on the exclusivity of society, as opposed to the Medical Model, which pathologizes disabilities and the people who have them.

- **Trigger Warning:** Written or verbal notices to indicate that the material to come could have an extreme negative impact on people with a variety of emotional disabilities, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and various anxiety disorders.

REFERENCES & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more on creating accessible and inclusive spaces:
- "People First: How to Plan Events Everyone Can Attend" (NYS Department of Health: health.ny.gov/publications/0956
- "Accessible Events: A Good Practice Guide for Staff Organising Events in Higher Education" (TechDis National Disability Team): bit.ly/tcdaccessevents
- "The Principles of Universal Design" (The Center for Universal Design): bit.ly/cudprinciples
- "Guidelines for Use of the Priniciples of Universal Design" (The Center for Universal Design): bit.ly/cudguidelines
- "A Planning Guide for Making Temporary Events Accessible to People With Disabilities" (ADA National Network): bit.ly/adanneventguide

For more on Columbia's policies around accessibility:
- "Accessibility" (Columbia University): eoaa.columbia.edu/content/accessibility

For more on the Disability Justice Movement:
- "The Disability Archive" (University of Leeds): disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/library
- "The Social Model Explained" (Spectrum Centre for Independent Living): bit.ly/socialmodex
- The Accessible Icon Project: accessibleicon.org

For more on size diversity and fat phobia:
- "Size Diversity in Higher Education" (NAAFA): bit.ly/naafasizediv
- "6 Tools for Understanding and Dismantling Weight Stigma and Fatphobia" (The Body is Not an Apology): bit.ly/stigma101

For more on trigger and content warnings:
- "An Introduction to Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings" (University of Michigan): bit.ly/umichcontenttrigger
- "Trigger Warnings 101: A Beginner's Guide" (Medium): bit.ly/mediumtrigger101

For more on neurodiversity:
- Dyslexie Font: dyslexiefont.com/en/typeface
- "Neurodiversity: A Person, A Perspective, A Movement?" (The Art of Autism): bit.ly/aoaneurodiversity
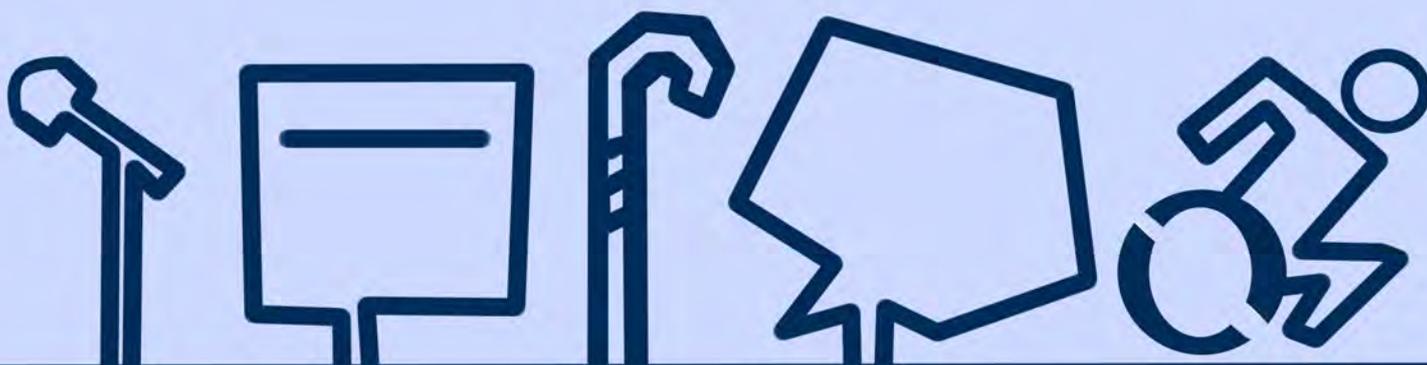
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This document represents best practices from Multicultural Affairs for creating inclusive, accessible and affirming environments for participants with disabilities. It may be updated periodically. To learn about compliance with ADA standards or to discuss accommodations, consult Disability Services or Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action.

CONTACT US

For questions, comments or suggestions related to this guide or to disability justice and access, contact us at:

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