DESIGNING FOR INCLUSION

Universal Design for Learning at George Brown College
George Brown College is embracing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as a framework that will transform the learning landscape by increasing access, engagement, inclusion, and effectiveness of our learning environments for all.

George Brown College recognizes the diversity of our community as our great strength. With a long history of promoting access to education for all, George Brown welcomes UDL as an extension of this commitment and as a tool for fostering learners’ diverse strengths, abilities, and interests.

UDL encourages us to intentionally build flexibility, options, and appropriate supports into our institutional systems so that all students have the opportunity to demonstrate the required curriculum learning outcomes while becoming “motivated, resourceful, and strategic” expert learners (CAST.org).

By intentionally designing our academic programs and services for learner variability, UDL implementation helps us advance our college-wide strategic priorities, including access to education, academic excellence, student satisfaction and retention, employee satisfaction and retention as well as operational and financial sustainability.
WHY now?

The college landscape is changing, with an increasing diversity and complexity of student needs emerging as many students who traditionally lacked access to post-secondary education enter the system. How we design our institutions to promote access for people of all abilities and equitable opportunities for historically marginalized groups is fundamental to the success of our students and to the academic quality mandate of our college sector.

Recent advocacy and legal directives in Ontario’s post-secondary education system have emphasized the urgency of addressing complex student needs on campus by proactively eliminating barriers to success and nurturing inclusive and supportive learning environments. Recent calls to action include the Coordinating Committee of Vice Presidents Students’ (CCVPS) White Paper on Post-Secondary Student Mental Health (2014), the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s Medical Documentation Guidelines and Accommodation directive (2016), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action (2015), and OHRC’s e(RACE)r Summit on Race and Racism on Canadian University Campuses (2016), to name just a few.

Universal Design for Learning directly addresses these calls to action, making this the right time for UDL adoption.
Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that enables college administrators, faculty, and staff to proactively design college curriculum and services in a way that lessens barriers to participation, reducing the need for individualized arrangements and increasing access, inclusion, engagement, and success for the broadest range of learners from the outset.

UDL is grounded in neuroscience research that tells us there are predictable patterns of learning differences among learners in every post-secondary education environment, regardless of age or other life factors or circumstances. (see footnote1)

Resting on this, UDL is premised on the fact that we can be proactive in designing flexible and supportive learning environments to meet these diverse learning needs.

Whereas a process of negotiating individualized arrangements conceptually locates learning barriers within individual students and tries to improve access by modifying established content and processes to meet the needs of each individual, a Universal Design for Learning framework shifts our thinking to locate learning barriers within our institutional environments. Rather than needing to know each individual learner and retrofit curriculum and services to ensure equity of opportunity, UDL involves intentional pre-planning to design learning objectives, course materials, assessment methods, teaching methods, service models, policies and procedures, and physical and virtual spaces from the outset to promote maximum inclusion.

(Footnote 1) CAST. http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html
WHAT are UDL’s core assumptions?

There are 4 core tenets underpinning CAST’s Universal Design for Learning framework. (see footnote 2)

1. Learner Variability
Recognizing that there is no ‘average’ or ‘mainstream’ learner or service user, UDL begins with the core understanding that learner variability is the rule, not the exception. Not only are all learners different from one another, but the strengths and challenges of each individual learner are themselves dynamic and ever-changing.

2. Clear Goals, Flexible Means
Conscious of people’s diverse skills, knowledge, interests, and life experiences, UDL encourages us to be very clear in the fixed learning outcomes we set, while being flexible in the means by which these learning outcomes can be achieved.

3. Context Matters
UDL reminds us that context influences learning. A person’s physical, cognitive, and emotional skills and ability to engage in learning at any given moment varies with changing demands and circumstances. Individuals’ life circumstances include caregiving responsibilities at home, paid work commitments, financial and non-financial resources, fluctuations in physical and mental health, and lived experiences of racism, ableism, sexism and other forms of systemic oppression, to name just a few. Among other factors, college context includes curriculum, teaching delivery, course materials, policies and procedures, and physical and virtual spaces.

4. Essential for Some, Useful for All
UDL encourages us to proactively build flexibility, options, and appropriate supports and scaffolds into our academic programs and services, knowing these will be essential for the success of some learners, while being useful for all.

HOW does UDL work?

UDL implementation is not a checklist. (see footnote 3) It is a continual practice whereby we solicit input from learners and service users about their diverse needs, reflect on redesign options for any given program or college service, take action to implement improvements, gather feedback from learners/service users, then repeat this cycle to meet the ever-changing needs of the populations we serve.

To design academic curriculum and college services for greatest access, engagement, and inclusion, as college administrators, faculty, and staff we can use the 3 UDL principles from CAST’s framework to guide our reflection and planning:

1. Provide multiple means of Engagement
   Have we built options, pathways, and flexibility into our academic programs and college services to motivate diverse learners/service users and help them persist and stay engaged in their learning?

2. Provide multiple means of Representation
   Have we designed options, pathways, and flexibility into the way our academic programs and college services share information and ideas with learners/service users in a way that is accessible to them, builds on their background knowledge, and maximizes their understanding?

3. Provide multiple means of Action & Expression
   Have we built options, pathways, and flexibility into our academic programs and college services to allow learners/service users to demonstrate their learning and to plan and monitor their learning goals, strategies, and progress?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has its origins in the field of architecture, where the concept of 'Universal Design' (UD) emerged as a way of intentionally constructing buildings and other public spaces to be usable by the greatest possible range of people. UD was subsequently applied to the design of new consumer products, to make devices usable to the broadest possible range of people, regardless of age, ability, or circumstance.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emerged when CAST, a U.S.-based organization, applied the concept of UD to learning environments, as a way of making education accessible and effective for the greatest possible range of learners. Grounded in the neuroscience of human learning, CAST developed a framework geared to addressing three types of differences that we know with certainty will exist in every learning environment at every age. These include differences in the way learners:

1. Are motivated to learn and stay engaged in their learning experiences
2. Take in and make sense of information and ideas
3. Communicate and express their learning

CAST created its UDL framework along these three dimensions of difference with a goal of promoting "education without limits" (CAST.org). It is this CAST UDL framework that we have adopted at George Brown and extended to the realm of college services. Recognizing that learning takes place not only in classrooms but also through supportive college services, George Brown promotes designing for increased access, engagement, and inclusion in its service areas as well as academic programs.

Implementing UDL across academic and service areas is an effective response to an unsustainable model of retrofitting and individualized arrangements currently used at George Brown College and across the post-secondary education sector to meet the increasing diversity and complexity of student needs.

- By dramatically reducing barriers in the learning environment, UDL relieves students of the burden and stigma of having to request individual tailored solutions in order to access their program and engage with college services.
- By spending time upfront on course design, UDL relieves faculty of countless hours of negotiation, retrofitting, and individualized arrangements throughout the academic year.
- By potentially reducing the number of student disability-related academic accommodations coordinated through Accessible Learning services, UDL relieves the challenge of unsustainable service demand.
WHAT is our UDL Strategy?

George Brown’s college-wide UDL implementation strategy involves three strategic priorities:

Building UDL capacity across the college for sustainable change

Enabling wide adoption by addressing both academic and service areas

Encouraging broad engagement by communicating our UDL successes

OUR Path So Far

1. Proactive Leadership
2. Readiness Assessment
3. Integrated Vision & Coordination
4. Capacity-Building
5. Service Baseline
6. Curriculum Baseline
7. Academic Pilot
8. Communication of Best Practices and Lessons

See descriptions on page 16
1. **Proactive Leadership**
Recognizing the enormous value and potential of UDL, GBC’s senior administrative team made a proactive commitment to Universal Design for Learning by embedding UDL in their Academic Plan and supporting the development and delivery of a multi-year college-wide UDL strategy. This leadership at the College level sends a strong message of support to people working at all levels that UDL is an important priority.

2. **Readiness Assessment**
George Brown conducted a scan of its organizational structure, programs, and policies to determine our readiness for UDL adoption. Consulting with key stakeholders from across the college as well as with an international UDL expert, we assessed what was needed for college-wide UDL implementation, including winning conditions already in place at the College, gaps requiring attention, and tools and alliances needed to make UDL sustainable at GBC.

3. **Integrated Vision & Coordination**
George Brown created a college-wide cross-disciplinary steering group bringing together key academic and service area stakeholders in an integrated way to coordinate and guide a comprehensive UDL strategy across academic departments and college services. This steering group includes members from Student Affairs, eLearning, Diversity & Equity Office, Staff Development, Academic Excellence, Accessible Learning Services, Library Learning Commons, and academic program areas.

4. **Capacity-Building**
George Brown is investing in extensive UDL capacity-building for employees to fuel lasting transformations across academic programs and service areas. Among other forms of capacity-building, this has included:

- **Community of Practice** - Sponsored by multiple academic and service areas, a group of George Brown faculty and staff attended a UDL conference and proceeded to form a Community of Practice to deepen their knowledge. This group met regularly for over a year to share promising practices, create and deliver collaborative UDL workshops, advocate for wider UDL awareness, generate momentum, and plan the College’s first UDL conference.
- **UDL Conference** - George Brown hosted a full-day UDL conference with employees from across academic departments and employee groups learning about UDL and sharing current best practices to inspire collective action for positive change.
- **‘Train the Trainer’** – George Brown developed a team of in-house UDL faculty trainers to build UDL awareness, knowledge, and skills internally at the College, tailored to our institutional needs.
- **Faculty Leader Training** – A large group of Academic Chairs, managers, program coordinators and other faculty leaders at the College received UDL training and others will continue to do so. Engaging faculty leaders increases active participation as well as the likelihood that ongoing development opportunities, resource allocations, and peer support for UDL will be prioritized.
- **Service Leader Training** – A group of academic service managers received UDL training as part of a UDL service review pilot project in the division of Academic & Student Affairs (ASA) to support staff adoption of UDL across ASA service areas.
- **UDL 101 Training** – A large group of faculty, program coordinators, service staff, and administrators received UDL 101 training, connecting employees across critical areas and supporting them through a common framework, language, and approach to UDL education. UDL 101 training will continue to be provided on a regular basis throughout the academic year, with all interested staff being encouraged to attend.

5. **Service Baseline**
George Brown developed a review of student-facing and faculty-facing academic services through a UDL lens to assess barriers and identify opportunities to increase access, engagement and inclusion. The baseline report from this service pilot project will inform quality improvements in service processes, intentionally redesigning these with the expected variability of clients in mind to better meet their diverse needs.

6. **Curriculum Baseline**
George Brown carried out a baseline UDL analysis of recent academic program reviews to assess the extent to which programs are providing flexibility, variety, and choice in how students engage with a course, take in and process information, and express what they know and learn. This curriculum snapshot identifies where the College is excelling as well as areas that require attention to move toward a more inclusive design approach to teaching and learning.

7. **Academic Pilot**
Four academic divisions across the College are participating in a UDL pilot project involving UDL training, faculty mentorship, resources and supports, and course redesign workshops. This academic pilot is being evaluated for its effectiveness, with UDL interventions being tracked and assessed for both the process of program and faculty development, as well as best practices in UDL course design, student satisfaction, and student learning outcomes.

8. **Communication of Best Practices and Lessons**
George Brown is communicating best practices and lessons learned through its UDL capacity-building and academic and service pilots, helping employees at all levels of the College to perceive UDL as a feasible and practical solution to increase student engagement and success.
George Brown welcomes Universal Design for Learning as a lens for reflection and action that furthers our goal of creating accessible, engaging, inclusive, high-quality academic experiences for all students. It is a framework through which we are proactively assessing and sustainably adjusting our current college systems, processes, services and programs to reduce barriers and be increasingly responsive to the diverse and complex needs of those we serve.

UDL is highly supportive of students’ learning and success, and George Brown College is highly supportive UDL. Whether you work at George Brown or are a partner in the sector, we invite you to join us on this exciting UDL journey.