

ISSUE BRIEF

Are We There Yet? Universal Design of Assessments

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Introduction

Annual statewide assessments are a cornerstone of federal accountability systems and have been for the last 20 years. Love them or hate them, statewide assessments are the most consistent measurement tool we have to determine whether all students are meeting grade-level standards. Annually administering, scoring, and reporting the results of statewide assessments is a challenge for states. What was once a challenge, however, is now a cloud of uncertainty.

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Some question the relevance of business-as-usual assessments when the last 2 school years are anything but business as usual. While the COVID-19 pandemic is indeed an unwelcome disruption, it has spurred innovations in technology, digital platforms for instructional delivery, and engagement strategies for remote learning. If learning has radically changed in the last 2 years, why can't assessments? They can. We already have a tool to create personalized, flexible assessments to measure learning: universal design. We just need to sharpen this tool and build a better assessment.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that aims to remove barriers and provide multiple pathways for students to meaningfully participate in learning and assessment. While the framework of UDL is commonly thought of as a model for the inclusion of students with disabilities, UDL has always been about including all students. In this issue brief,

Key highlights

- Universal design for assessment removes barriers and provides multiple pathways for students to meaningfully participate in assessments.
- Universally designed assessments provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression.
- Universally designed assessments that increase student engagement lead to a more valid and equitable assessment system.

we aim to take a step back and examine how far we have come with UDL in K-12 education policy and practice. We provide a brief discussion to address the following questions: Where have we been? Where are we now? Where are we going?

Where have we been?

UDL in K-12 federal education legislation is not new. The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) illustrates the basic tenets of UDL. IDEA authorized grants for technology development, demonstration, and utilization, which included “supporting research, development, and dissemination of technology with universal design features, so that the technology is accessible to students with disabilities without further modification or adaptation.”¹ Later, in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, universal design had a broader application to the participation of students with disabilities in assessments. Since that time, IDEA and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) have both required the use of UDL principles in the design of all statewide assessments.

¹P.L. 105-117, §687.

Where are we now?

The 2015 reauthorization of ESEA as the Every Student Succeeds Act was the first time that universal design was enacted into general K-12 education legislation. ESEA requires statewide assessments to be designed “to the extent practicable” using the principles of UDL. The ESEA uses the definition of universal design in the Higher Education Act of 2008: a scientifically valid framework for guiding educational practice that (1) provides flexibility in the ways information is presented, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged; and (2) reduces barriers in instruction, provides appropriate accommodations, supports, and challenges, and maintains high achievement expectations for all students, including students with disabilities and students who are English learners. The emphasis on the high achievement expectations for all students is important because UDL is sometimes confused with giving students choices that make learning goals easier; however, UDL has always focused on maintaining high expectations and giving choices within the constraints of the specific standards being taught.

Over the last 20 years, several UDL frameworks have emerged. The most well known, a framework presented by CAST, outlines UDL Guidelines based on 3 principles:

- 1) Multiple means of engagement
- 2) Multiple means of representation
- 3) Multiple means of action and expression

The use of UDL in assessment has been focused on providing *multiple means of representation*. For example, many assessments are designed to reduce barriers to understanding the content. This includes adding dozens of universal design tools and supports to testing platforms with the purpose of removing barriers for all learners (e.g., text to speech, translations of directions, glossaries, and color contrast). Some assessments have also focused on providing *multiple means of action and expression*.² Rubric-scored portfolio and performance-based assessments, for example, allow for multiple ways to demonstrate mastery.

²Examples include the New Hampshire PACE assessment and the AP Studio art.

³Mislevy, R., et al. (2013). A “conditional” sense of fairness in assessment. *Educational Research and Evaluation*. 19(2-3), 121-140. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13803611.2013.767614?journalCode=nere20&https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13803611.2013.767614?journalCode=nere20>

Where are we going?

The next step in universal design for assessment is exploring the principle that has not yet been addressed: *multiple means of engagement*. Developing statewide assessments that allow *multiple means of engagement* may create not only a more externally valid assessment system but also a more equitable assessment system. We need assessments that increase academic engagement. Increasing academic engagement may lead to buy-in from students and teachers, allowing for a more positive assessment experience rather than negatively labeling perceived failures. When given the opportunity to choose a topic of interest or an assessment prompt, for example, students may be more motivated to demonstrate the depth and breadth of their knowledge. Increased engagement may promote authentic, valid measurement of student achievement and shift our thinking from rigidity to flexibility in student assessment. In the past we may have leaned too much on standardization and avoided elements of engagement due to lack of evidence that student choice improved test scores.

If annual statewide assessments remain a cornerstone of federal accountability for the next 20 years, what do we want them to look like? Moving forward we should consider what a *conditional sense of fairness*³ means for all learners and how the UDL principle of *multiple means of engagement* can increase academic engagement before, during, and after statewide testing.

About the authors

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