American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA) Accessibility Taskforce Report

IMAGE OF 1993 DISABILITY INDEPENDENCE PARADE CHOSEN IN HONOR OF JUDY HEUMANN, WHO PASSED AWAY ON MARCH 4, 2023.
HTTPS://JUDITHHEUMANN.COM

Conference

Accessibility

Guidelines

About the Guidelines

These guidelines are a working draft of organizational and developmental strategies to confront ableism and demonstrate conference accessibility for disabled people. The intent is to promote a culture of access that is a dynamic and relational process that happens among people, over and over.

Ableism is a way to rationalize who is valuable and worthy in society and thus deeply rooted in the types of problematic belief systems underpinning anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism (https://www.talilalewis.com/blog). To be clear, a person does not have to have a disability to experience ableism. This conclusion is possible because ableism is not based on actual ability. Rather, ableism is the misrepresentation of disability; like false representations of race and gender are rooted in racism and sexism. (https://rcej.scholasticahq.com/article/38192)

These guidelines were created to begin planning for the **ACA 2024 Conference in New Orleans, LA (April 11-14, 2024).** However, rather than a quick fix, these guidelines are intended to be a "living document" to inspire disability inclusion within the counseling profession. With this in mind, we highlight the thought process required to create a more welcoming conference environment for disabled counselors, educators, and students. Our hope is ARCA, ACA, and other membership associations will consult these resources as they plan conference events.

Although APA style conventions and professional discourse support the use of person-first language in academic writing about disability, we intentionally used identity-first language throughout this paper. This choice is consistent with preferred language for recognizing disability as a social construct. Several of the authors identify as disabled, and we chose to use identity-first out of respect for the disability community. While there are many resources listed in this document, we believe a good starting place is the **Universal Design of Professional Organization** by the University of Washington DO IT – (https://www.washington.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-professional-organizations).

Taskforce Members
(Listed Alphabetically)

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Dr. Pierce is an Assistant Professor of Counseling at Truman State University. As a disabled academic, her advocacy work focuses on improving access in the counseling profession for clients and for counselors and counselor educators in training. She has previously consulted on access for face-to-face and virtual programming for NBCC and CSI, developed accessibility considerations for the CSI initiation guide, and chairs the NARACES Accessibility committee.

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What is Access?

Access is not an obligation or chore, but a genuine expression of care. It is about disabled people's voices and lived experiences adding value to the counseling profession. Rather than charity, access is that elusive state of being that occurs when someone else "gets" your access needs (https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com).

Rather than a rigid checklist, access is best viewed as "a freeing, light, loving feeling. It brings the people who are a part of it closer; it builds and deepens connection. Sometimes access intimacy doesn't even mean that everything is 100% accessible. Sometimes it looks like both of you trying to create access as hard as you can with no avail in an ableist world. Sometimes it is someone just sitting and holding your hand while you both stare back at an inaccessible world."
(https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/02/12/changing-the-framework-disability-justice/)

There are many resources for building a cultural of access within the counseling profession (https://www.lead4inclusion.com/). Beyond legal compliance with legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, there is a need for counselors to engage in deep reflection regarding how disabled people are viewed and treated within their counseling associations. This means designing professional associations and conferences that are welcoming by

- Affirming disability culture and identity,
- Combating ableism and ableist practices,
- Engaging language as action,
- Centering the voices of disabled people, and
- Committing to accessibility.

(https://rcej.scholasticahq.com/article/38192)

Accessibility as a Continuum

Inaccessible design excludes people.

Accommodations give access to whoever is there at the moment. They often require extra work.

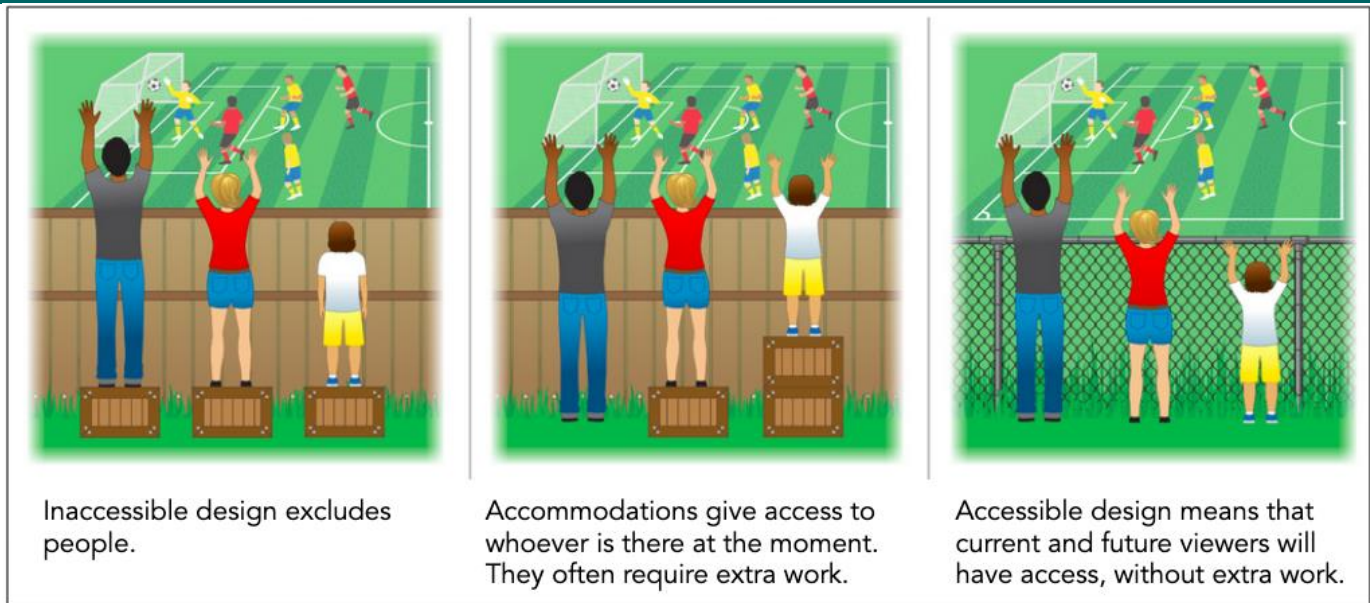Accessible design means that current and future viewers will have access, without extra work.

Image retrieved from https://accessibility.umn.edu/importance-accessibility/accessibility-vs-accommodation

Accessible design would mean there is no need for individualized accommodation. Instead, environments would be proactively designed with options and flexibility, thus affirming disability as a natural part of life. The problem is that universal design is rarely considered when designing conference environments. This means that last-minute accommodations often require additional work, time, and resources for both the conference planners as well as disabled people.

Principles of Universal Design (https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design/the-7-principles/)

1. Equitable Use
2. Flexibility in Use
3. Simple and Intuitive Use
4. Perceptible Information
5. Tolerance for Error
6. Low Physical Effort
7. Size and Space for Approach and Use

Access as a Mindset

An essential component of conference planning is the understanding that each person has individual and specific needs. Succinctly, there is no one-size-fit-all approach for individuals with disabilities. It is essential when planning an event to include participants (e.g. counselors, professors) with disabilities on your planning committee and consult with staff at local disability resources centers to enhance an inclusive and quality conference experience. Thus, a successful accessible conference requires pre-planning, input from attendees, dialogue, and consideration.

Examples include:

1. A paid staff member knowledgeable in disability and ADA requirements responsible for accessibility and disability equity. Beginning with conference planning, the designated staff should consult with various disability advocates around best practices for accessibility and inclusion.
2. Conference design should not assume all presenters and attendees are able-bodied. Instead, conference rooms are arranged for users of wheelchairs and other assistive devices, including multiple, moveable microphones. It is important to value all bodies.
3. Messaging and language convey a desire for accessibility and inclusion with individual accommodation provided when needed. If inquiring about individual accommodation, the focus should be on functioning and necessary supports, rather than on medical diagnoses and categories, which vary significantly.
4. Nondiscrimination statements on professional websites and other position statements should explicitly include disabled people and the counseling community's responsibility to disabled people.
5. Access is never 100% and there will always be challenges. It is important to admit when access can be better from a civil rights perspective without adopting a charity/pity model steeped in negative stereotypes of disability as a burden.

Example List of Access Guidelines

There are many resources available online for creating accessible professional conferences and events, such as the following examples:

1. **Universal Design of Professional Organization** – University of Washington DO IT – https://www.washington.edu/doit/equal-access-universal-design-professional-organizations

2. **Planning Guide for Making Temporary Events Accessible to People With Disabilities** – ADA Network – https://adata.org/guide/planning-guide-making-temporary-events-accessible-people-disabilities

3. **Toolkit for Planning Accessible Meetings and Events** - American Bar Association – https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/diversity-inclusion-center/accessible-meetings-toolkit.pdf

4. **Disability Inclusion Planning Guide –** Serve DC - https://dhcd.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/serve/publication/attachments/servedcinlcusionmanual_web.pdf

5. **Conference Accessibility Guidelines** – The Zero Project Network and Escola de Gente - https://accessibilitycanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Zero-Project-Conference-Accessibility-Guidelines-2019.pdf

6. **A Planning Guide for Accessible Conferences** – Metro Toronto Convention Center - http://www.accessiblecampus.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A-Planning-Guide-for-Accessible-Conferences-1.pdf

7. **Planning Access Meetings and Conferences** - The University of Maine CCIDS, UCEDD, & SUFU – https://ccids.umaine.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2020/12/Planning_Accessible_Meetings_Guide_November_2020.pdf

8. **Guidelines for Accessible Conferences** - British Philosophical Association and the Society for Women in Philosophy UK – https://bpa.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/BPA_SWIP-Guidelines-for-Accessible-Conferences.pdf

9. **Accessibility Guidelines for Speakers –** American Psychological Association – https://www.apa.org/pi/disability/resources/convention

10. **Digital Accessibility Guides** – New York City Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities – https://www.nyc.gov/site/mopd/resources/digital-accessibility-guides.page

11. **Accessibility Guide for Digital Events, Presentations and Meetings** – City and County of San Francisco, Mayor's Office on Disability https://sfgov.org/mod/sites/default/files/Documents/2022%20%20Online%20Events%20Accessibility%20Guide_0.pdf

12. **Accessible Meeting and Event Checklist –** Cornell University – https://accessibility.cornell.edu/event-planning/accessible-meeting-and-event-checklist/

13. **Accessible Meetings, Events & Conferences Guide –** Disability and Hospitality – https://www.adainfo.org/hospitality/accessible-meetings-events-conferences-guide/

14. **Making Meetings Accessible** – CDC https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/transcripts/Making-Meetings-Accessible.pdf

Example Organizations and Conferences

Pac Rim Conference
https://pacrim.coe.hawaii.edu/registration-2023/

Association on Higher Education and Disability
https://www.ahead.org/home

Association of American Medical Colleges
https://sds.ucsf.edu/sites/g/files/tkssra2986/f/aamc-ucsf-disability-special-report-accessible.pdf

Disability In
https://disabilityin.org/

Respectability
https://www.respectability.org/inclusive-philanthropy/how-to-include-people-with-disabilities/

National Organization on Disability
https://www.nod.org/

Disability Inclusion and Access
https://disabilityinclusionpgh.org/

Example of Accessibility for

Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Approximately 48 million, or 15% of Americans, experience some hearing loss. Around 90% of D/HH are born to parents with no deafness or hearing loss. The Center for Disease and Prevention state hearing loss is the third major physical disability in the United States. By 2050, 1 out of 10 people will have hearing loss (WHO). Most people who have hearing loss have some hearing and are oral. Thus, the D/HH community is not a one-size-fit-all and have unique needs. It is important for people to remember for D/HH that long conversations with individuals who lip-read can be tiresome. Therefore, accommodations or assistive devices such as hearing loops, personal Fm system, closed captioning can reduce fatigue. If an FM system is used, attendees must have a preferential seat close to the stage or presenter. Thus, preferential seating can help attendees to have access to lip reading.

Registration
-Have individuals with disabilities on your planning committee. Ensure they review your registration forms. Remember, they are the experts in their lives and can give input on what may have been left off the conference registration.
-Have inclusive language on your registration. If unsure if the registration is inclusive, enlist a professional with disability to review.
-Talks about universal design and uses ADA language
-Registration does not leave off any disability. Has a space for others or a place to define needs
-For D/HH, have a check box for 1. designated seating: Will bring FM system/assistive device. Need preferential seating (close to the speaker); 2. Have t-coil in cochlear implant/hearing aids. Need Hearing Loops and preferential seating; 3. Need ASL interpreter and preferential seating; 4. Need a C-Print Captionist; Other: Space to explain needs.
-Put an option for note-takers. Not only can the Deaf and Hard of Hearing use this, but other disabilities (e.g. Blind, Chronic Pain)
-Other options: Email slides or have attendees bring a USB memory stick to get the PowerPoint.

Barriers of Hearing in Conferences:
-Speakers and attendees often do not use microphones. This makes it hard for attendees with hearing loss.
-Conference design of room is not universal. In most conferences you are unable to read lips. Chairs are in rows. This is an awkward seating arrangement as sound travels behind you versus in front of you. Most hearing people lipread even if they don't think they do.
-Room is dim, making it difficult for D/HH individuals to read lips or see the interpreter.

-Questions are not paraphrased. Hearing loss individuals often are lost about what is said because they missed the first part of what is said.
-Attitudinal barriers presented from dominant society: a) Thoughts that individuals with disabilities can't understand you. b) Assuming an individual with a disability is less than. Remember, thoughts become actions. For example, if you think someone with hearing loss is less than you, your mannerism will treat them like a child and not like a professional.

What a Good Conference Experience Like?
-Online registration, including correct terminology for D/HH. Have a check box for needs—for example, put option for 1. preferential seating, 2. Attendees will bring FM system, 3. Attendee needs an interpreter, 4. Attendee needs a CART provider.
-Resource list of closest audiologists to conference, Hearing Loss of America local chapter, or veterinarians for hearing service dog.
-Good lighting to be able to read lips
-When the Presenter is presenting, have lights on so those with hearing loss can read lips.
-No background noise or poor acoustics. This is distracting for the deaf and hard of hearing.
-Speakers with clear speech.
-Speakers and attendees speak one at a time. When speaking, attendees speaking say their names and speak into the microphone. This will benefit those with hearing loss and give them room to see where the speaker is. This allows them to read lips or move their head to hear sound effectively.
-Conference site has induction loops for those who are deaf or have hearing loss. Induction loops or hearing loops can enable those with hearing loss to participate fully.

Accommodation:
- Captioning in Real time (CART), Projector for close captioning, American sign language interpreters.
-Some who are deaf and hard of hearing are not fluent in sign language and may need the close captioning over a projector to understand speakers.
-Seating- allow those who are deaf and hard of hearing to sit by speaker. Have reserved seats for them. Away from air conditioner units, hallways, and noisy areas. (NAD, HLAA, Spellman 2014)
-Arrange for qualified interpreters and/or CART Providers. For example, when arranging for interpreters choose interpreters familiar with counseling vocabulary and terms. Similarly CART providers need to have the counseling vocabulary and terms programmed into their computer.
-For an event there needs to be at least two interpreters or CART provider for any meeting longer than two hours. Have an interpreter available at conference registration. Check the window covering to make sure there are no glares. Glares can make it hard to read lip read.
Visuals for individuals with Hearing Loss are particularly helpful. It helps to be able to follow a conversation to be able to see a powerpoint, flip board, or whiteboard. Conversations where attendees cannot lipread or have access to understanding conference is stressful and increase attendees' anxiety.

-Conference and hotel staff are familiar with accessibility request and needs. Make sure staff knows that deaf and attendees with hearing loss may communicate differently. Some speak, write, or use an interpreter.
-Few seats in front and back rows are reserved for individuals with disabilities and pregnant women. Sign language interpreters available for social events. If there is a budget constraint, see if you can enlist local universities who may have a sign language interpreting program to see if they have volunteers or interpreter working towards licensure hours who can interpret.
*A quiet room or place reserved where people can gather for social conversation. This can benefit those who are deaf and have hearing loss to have a main space or area where it is not overstimulating. In addition, this can also help those living with Autism, ADHD, ADD.

Technology Consideration for CART:
-Ensure Deaf and Hard of Hearing have access to the close captioning link prior to the event. For example, at ADARA the MC of the event ensured we had the link. Not only did we see the captioning on the projector screen, but we could view it on our computer, tablet, or phone.
-Ensure good contrast for captions and background. Use Black/white for attendees. Ensure that CART provider can hear. Microphones help the remote or live captionist to hear what is going on in the room.
-Ensure presentation is visible in all parts of room.
Prior to the event, test equipment and troubleshoot. Like a wedding it is good practice to have a dress rehearsal to work out the kinks.

What Does Access Look Like
-Decreasing the sound and acoustic issues at conferences at hotels and hospitality-assistive listening systems installed in multipurpose room or partitioned conference hall carpets in room to keep sound concentrated in conference areas.
-Hearing loops installed or provide a headset microphone to speaker. Headset microphones give the best result because voices do not get lost when the speaker's head moves. If headset microphone is looped and there is a soundboard the headset microphone can go directly into participant hearing aid or cochlear implant with a loop system.
-Lapel microphone: good option but have to make sure it stays on speakers' clothing. Have multiple microphones especially in big venues
In venues, even in small rooms people use microphones. Have attendees raise their hands. Conference volunteers can hand microphones to those who want to speak. Not only does this benefit those with hearing loss, but others in the room may have difficulty hearing what someone said. Remind attendees to wait for mic and turn to speak
**National Association of the Deaf outlines three types of listening devices for conferences: audio loop system, infrared system, and Fm Systems Deaffriendly conducted a training at Hyatt Regency New Orleans for a group predominantly deaf and hard of hearing. The Hyatt arranged for an ADA trainer to work with staff.

-Providing written materials to attendees before the event. For those with disabilities this helps them. Have Pre-Recorded speeches. Those with hearing loss will benefit from this.
-If whole scripts are not available, please provide attendees with disabilities key words, concepts, dates, and essential information to increase individual with hearing loss listening comprehension. Have presenters put close captioning on their videos. Not only does it help those with hearing loss.

-Sometimes local colleges have interpreters in school or working towards licensure. If money is limited, it is possible to partner with their college and provide hours for interpreters working towards state licensure.

Why Hearing Loops?
According to Hearing Loss of America (2022), it is cost-effective, ADA-compliant, instant access, universally accessible, and meets international standards.

How Hearing Loop System Work:
1. A sound source such as a microphone feeds sound into an amplifier
2. The amplifier sends a current through one or multiple wires embedded in the floor or ceiling of a room.
3. A current generates from a magnetic field, and sound comes from the wire
4. Telecoils built into hearing aids or cochlear implants pick up the magnetic signal.
5. Hearing devices convert the signal from the hearing loop so a person with hearing loss can hear the speaker clearly
Examples of accessible conference National Association of the Deaf (NAD) Conference-Phoenix. ADA training was given to staff at the hotel. Hotels are in the business of complying with the ADA.
When hotel and conference centers have training, staff and even conference coordinators develop empathy for attendees with disabilities. Part of their training is understanding what living with a disability is like when visiting conference facilities.

Speakers
Have speakers use slow and clear speech, for these three purposes:
1. People absorb information at different rates
2. Lip-readers have time to absorb information, especially if they need to look at accommodations such as CART
3. Avoid inaccessible icebreakers, tools, or devices. Refer to ADA REEA or the new ARCA accessible guide (Tell Mike and team to see if we can develop something for anyone in ACA to test this out. Do we need to partner with a university accessibility, IT, or develop an app?) to test apps, devices, and tools prior to engagement.
4. Ensure your slides have enough room for close captioning.
5. Use something like Menti.com to invite all participants, including attendees with disabilities, to have the leisure of writing down their questions. Put the question portion at the end of presentation for universal design. This can decrease anxiety and make sure all voices in the room get their question answered. Additionally, this is organized and for those with disabilities is sensory friendly.
6. AVOID USING MASK. If a mask needs to be used, use a clear mask. Ensure the mask does not fog up. Mask takes 12 decibels away. For those with hearing loss this is anxiety provoking.

7. Depending on the length of a conference, ensure attendees with disabilities have regular breaks. Namely this means after every 90- minutes allow for a break. For those with hearing loss a 15-to-20-minute break is reasonable. This allows for sensory or the brain to rest. Similarly for wheelchair users this allows them time to use the restroom and get a snack.

What are practical approaches to make conferences more accessible
-Icebreakers that exclude individuals with disabilities.
-Signage. For those with disabilities it decreases anxiety to have proper signage. In addition, this can benefit nondisabled people as well.
-Accessible app for conference individual with hearing loss can use. For example, I love whova. It is accessible for those with hearing loss and easy to be able to text or network with others in conference.
-Ask presenters if they have any accessibility needs? Remind them to know their needs as well as all attendees is important. Sometimes as humans we need reminders that not all disabilities are visible. This is ok.
-Have adjustable podium
-Provide schedule, maps, in case of emergency, and resources ahead of time (e.g. website, app, email)

Building:
Location: When choosing a location for a conference make these consideration
1. Does the hotel have accessible rooms for the deaf or those with hearing loss? For example, are there rooms with phones compatible with hearing aids or cochlear implants? Is there an alarm clock that shakes the bed or if there is a fire or emergency, a flashing light letting the attendee know to exit the building?
2. Does the venue have hearing loops?
3. Has the hotel staff or venue had disability awareness training? Are they willing to accommodate special requests?
4. Evaluate the meeting room. For example, if the room is too big, attendees may have difficulties hearing or seeing the speaker. Ask yourself these questions:
1: How is the room's acoustic?
2. What kind of sound system will we need to ensure quality listening experiences?
3. Is this universal design of this conference site accessible to individuals with hearing loss? Why or why not? What can I do to improve this conference experience?