# MTN Ep 16 Transcript

01;00;00;01 - 01;00;25;16
Erin Hagar
Welcome to Moving the Needle. Casual conversations about ways big and small to impact student learning. Brought to you by the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. I'm Erin Hager. Let's move the needle. Hi, everyone. Welcome back to Moving the Needle. As we record this today, we are on the cusp of a new academic year.

01;00;26;07 - 01;00;53;27
Erin Hagar
College students across the country, my own daughter included, are loading up and moving to campus. You can almost smell the pencils getting sharpened and here the printers chugging out, revised syllabi and new assignments. To me, this time of year always feels more energizing and invigorating than January 1st. And as we all gear up for the new semester, it's a great time to reflect and ask ourselves what we are doing in our courses to make them as accessible as possible to all of our students.

01;00;54;11 - 01;01;26;00
Erin Hagar
Our guest today is Deborah Levy, the director of Educational Support and Disability Services at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. Deborah has worked in higher education for over 20 years here at UNB. She developed the ESD office, which provides students with disabilities three primary services, academic accommodations, educational programing and advocacy. She is a strong supporter of universal design for learning principles, which offer accessible education for all students.

01;01;26;21 - 01;01;42;20
Erin Hagar
Her background includes a master's in social work, a master's in adult learning and leadership, and a coaching certification from Columbia University. Ms.. Levy is also a past President of the Association of Higher Education and Disability for the State of Maryland. Deborah, welcome.

01;01;43;01 - 01;01;44;18
Deborah Levi
Oh, thank you so much for having me.

01;01;45;03 - 01;02;01;14
Erin Hagar
Well, let's just dove right in and start by clarifying a few of these terms. Can you tell us what you mean when you say disability and accommodation? What do these terms mean for students and faculty, and how does this process of requesting accommodations typically work?

01;02;01;23 - 01;02;36;06
Deborah Levi
Sure. So when we talk about disability, it's really coming from the ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act from 1990 as well as 2008. They define it as a condition that substantially limits one or more life activity. So this may include sensory and motor conditions, but also it includes an individual's concentration, information processing and attention. So, in fact, in the CDC says there's 26% of students in the U.S. with a disability.

01;02;36;13 - 01;03;06;22
Deborah Levi
Now in higher education, 12% of all students in posts bachelor programs are living with the disability. So that means 12 out of 100 students on campus are living with a disability and it does impact their education. So the goal of academic accommodations is, is to provide equity to those with disabilities. Accommodations ideally reduces or removes barriers for students with disabilities so that they have the same educational opportunities.

01;03;06;22 - 01;03;44;29
Deborah Levi
And others accommodations may be in the form of, for example, notes or specific formatting, extra time on assignments or exams, the ability to leave the classroom, even to take care of themselves, medicine or or taking a break. Just to give a little bit more information in order for students to receive these accommodations. They work with our office and we do have a formal process where students have to self-disclose their needs using an online form, providing us only with the medical and psychological documentation that would substantiate their condition.

01;03;45;20 - 01;03;55;11
Deborah Levi
And most importantly, ESDS meets with every single student individually so that we can collectively best determine a reasonable accommodation for each student.

01;03;56;03 - 01;04;08;04
Erin Hagar
So then the process would be that the faculty member is notified that there is this this particular student has these particular accommodations. Is that is that the next step in that process?

01;04;08;10 - 01;04;21;15
Deborah Levi
That is correct. Once it is completed, the student receives a formal accommodation letter for that semester and it's up to them to send it to the instructor to help with the coordination of those accommodations.

01;04;21;24 - 01;04;40;24
Erin Hagar
So thinking about this from the faculty members point of view, so let's say I'm a faculty member and I just received this letter from the student acknowledging that these accommodations are necessary. What kind of questions do faculty members typically have at this point? And and how would you respond?

01;04;41;25 - 01;05;16;02
Deborah Levi
So I think they are a little nervous to make sure that they are doing what they're supposed to do. The majority of the accommodation ones may not be related to the instructor. That could include no taking or location of minimal distraction for exams. The majority of the students utilize our testing center. You hear things. You see things on the letter, including assistive technologies such as a screen reader that is provided to the student by our office.

01;05;16;11 - 01;05;52;13
Deborah Levi
The elements regarding the student could be more in the classroom, particular seating preferences, the ability to record. There may be students who are in need of transcribers, and so there might be other individuals in the rooms, whether they're transcribers or ASL interpreters. That's American Sign

Language interpreters. So those are things that the instructors may be aware of. More specifically, accommodations around extensions on assignments really involve the faculty member as well.

01;05;52;27 - 01;06;22;06
Deborah Levi
We invite faculty members and students to work with this office as well as their liaisons for their school to determine that if they need that. But it is somewhat arbitrary for this office to say, student, you get three more days in a class that I'm not in. Right. So we really need the the instructors by in to determine what is a reasonable extension for specific assignments so that it continues with the flow and the trajectory of the course.

01;06;22;21 - 01;06;29;20
Erin Hagar
Mm hmm. So it really sounds like a three way conversation sometimes between your office, the student and the faculty member.

01;06;30;03 - 01;06;51;16
Deborah Levi
Absolutely. So this office at UMD, we work with over 400 students currently with disabilities. A lot of things we do in-house. But when it comes to the classroom, you're always welcome to reach out to us and have us a part of that conversation. And students are equally offered the same resources.

01;06;52;17 - 01;07;06;24
Erin Hagar
Yeah. And I'll just mention, too, for our listeners who may not be from UMD, that that these kinds of support services exist at every institution of higher ed is a very important part of the culture and work of a university.

01;07;06;26 - 01;07;11;21
Deborah Levi
Absolutely. We are not unique. There is an office such as this at every institution.

01;07;12;19 - 01;07;32;19
Erin Hagar
So one of the interesting things, Deborah, about your world in my world, right, your world of disability support and my world of instructional design is that we hear a term thrown around quite a bit called universal design for learning. Could we could you talk a bit about that, what it means and how it might change the way we think about accommodations?

01;07;33;03 - 01;08;00;11
Deborah Levi
Good question. You can think of universal design as a way to provide multiple modes of access to learning content for the student. It is an idea that you as the instructor provide on the front end of a course so that you can offer all the information and all the modalities ahead of time in a variety of ways so that the student can take control of their own learning and self-determine how to navigate the course best for them.

01;08;01;12 - 01;08;20;24
Deborah Levi
I like to use the analogy of a car and that the student is in the driver's seat needing to get to a destination. Okay. Well, universal design means that you equip as the instructor, you equip the car with all that they might need in order to get there. So one student may prefer utilizing a map. You have a map there.

01;08;21;08 - 01;08;52;28
Deborah Levi
Others perform Google navigation. Others prefer Waze navigation. Others might utilize it on a cell phone. Some students may need to take breaks. That's an example of an accommodation. Some students really need to see the highlighted route, while others like to hear the verbal cues, and some like both. So again, we are building a course so that multiple modes can be ignited when needed by students.

01;08;53;17 - 01;09;20;25
Erin Hagar
Yeah. And the destination is the same for all students. And what I love about this is that it really it really changes our perspective, not just to students who need formal accommodations and who've gone through that formal process, but really recognizing that every learner has a different, different preferred ways of receiving information, processing information, the frequency, repetition and all those kinds of things can vary student to student.

01;09;20;25 - 01;09;30;23
Erin Hagar
And what it sounds like you're describing is a is a proactive way to meet all of those needs, regardless of of a formal ADA accommodation situation.

01;09;31;03 - 01;09;59;16
Deborah Levi
Absolutely. You can make the assumption that we're trying to remove the work. Well, ideally, we're not going to remove the work, but we're proactively trying to build it on the front end so that the instructor and this office can reduce the need of accommodations is actually built for everybody. Another thing to think about is that there's only, like I mentioned before, 12% of students with a diagnostic statement of a disability.

01;09;59;24 - 01;10;43;07
Deborah Levi
That doesn't mean to say that there's not others in your classroom that could utilize these supports and these tools. So this enables the opportunity to capture those students as well and give them various tools such as live closed captioning the recording of the lecture PowerPoint slides ahead of time. PowerPoint slides with your lecture notes connected, just making it a no guessing game for students to capture and receive their content so that they can focus their attention on processing and sense of synthesizing and analyzing the material.

01;10;44;02 - 01;11;08;05
Erin Hagar
Yeah, we talk a lot about that when we're designing online courses that we we don't want students to spend any mental energy hunting for things, figuring out the system of a course, figuring out where to click. We want all of that to feel intuitive and almost disappear so that the content is really what is front and center and occupying the bulk of the student's energy and workload.

01;11;08;05 - 01;11;11;17
Erin Hagar
And it sounds like that's exactly what you're describing as well.

01;11;11;26 - 01;11;12;09
Deborah Levi
Yes.

01;11;13;19 - 01;11;46;03
Erin Hagar
Your your description of the car and the universal design, it makes me think of probably as a result of the ADA when sidewalks started becoming more accessible for people in wheelchairs. But the you know, the dipped part of the concrete, well, suddenly people using baby strollers were benefiting from that as well. And people who temporarily had crutches or, you know, something so something that might have been designed for a particular need really does benefit a much wider group of people.

01;11;46;03 - 01;11;48;17
Erin Hagar
And gives them choices and options for everybody.

01;11;49;01 - 01;12;16;29
Deborah Levi
Correct. So we are taking our world from the 1970s, eighties and nineties, and we have a new world, which is the World Wide Web. And we are trying to make those access points more available to all as well in forms of closed captioning and recordings, making sure that your design is accessible to all aspects like that.

01;12;17;28 - 01;12;33;22
Erin Hagar
So what are what are some practical concrete tips faculty can be thinking about as they're designing either in-person or web supported or or online courses? What can they adopt that would make learning more accessible for all students?

01;12;34;13 - 01;13;09;21
Deborah Levi
So tools may include the utilization and the opportunity to record, so enabling your students to have access to your lecture recordings, having automated closed captions, providing those PowerPoints and lecture notes ahead of time. Of course, having the links available to the readings on Blackboard. And I would say just be mindful of those readings, making sure that they're electronically based, not necessarily scans of Xerox copies, because that impacts students abilities to use assistive technologies.

01;13;10;04 - 01;13;34;05
Deborah Levi
Here at UNB, we utilize Blackboard as our learning management system. We also had recently purchased a tool called Blackboard Ally, which enables a host of accessibility features for students. So if you are a UMD faculty member, I certainly encourage you to implement the utilization of Blackboard Ally within your classes.

01;13;34;19 - 01;13;57;15
Erin Hagar
Yeah, it's very easy and your instructional support team in your school can can help you set that up. That's great. Well, just switching gears a little bit, I wonder if we could talk about etiquette. I wonder if some faculty might have questions about the etiquette of interacting with students who have disabilities. Maybe they're they're worried about doing or saying something insensitive.

01;13;57;24 - 01;14;00;25
Erin Hagar
Are there some best practices around this that you could share with us?

01;14;01;20 - 01;14;31;11
Deborah Levi
Absolutely. First and foremost, especially for the faculty members here at UMD, the majority of your students are graduate students. They want to be here. They made the investment in all the ways to be here. So it is important to consider them as your equal partners in the process of getting them through the course and the content. So they're adult learners.

01;14;31;11 - 01;15;02;20
Deborah Levi
They are here on their own accord. So I think it starts with that collaborative relationship and asking the student. Thank you so much for this accommodation letter. More specifically, how can I assist you? What can I do within my course so that you can learn best? That question alone will really allow a student to feel comfortable with you, feel as though you are an ally in support of their needs.

01;15;03;26 - 01;15;30;10
Deborah Levi
And I think that would be a great first step. Other etiquette things that we can consider include always being mindful of their privacy. So please don't talk about a student's needs and their accommodations in front of other students. Remember to be CC blind copy email. Students who do have disabilities. If it is related to an exam or a location to take their exam because they don't necessarily know each other.

01;15;30;10 - 01;16;05;26
Deborah Levi
So it's important to blind copy emails. And last but not least, stay in the role of educator. Even if you have a background in medicine or or counseling or psychology. So you unfortunately are not the you are not the student's provider. So you have to kind of stay in your lane as educator. So please don't ask them specifics about their condition, but more questions around the coordination and the implementation of the accommodations and the course content.

01;16;06;15 - 01;16;14;18
Erin Hagar
Yeah, it sounds like really keeping the focus on that, on the learner and the learning as opposed to the condition itself.

01;16;15;16 - 01;16;34;25
Deborah Levi
Absolutely. And I know that faculty members have the best thoughts in mind when they reach out and want to connect with students. But I think it's really important, particularly with the relationship of an educator and a student, that they don't blend that based on their own background in their field.

01;16;35;16 - 01;16;58;22
Erin Hagar
So when we were talking about these steps faculty can take to make learning more accessible for all the students, not in response necessarily to a particular accommodation, but things for everybody. How would you respond to a faculty who worries that, you know, for example, providing the lecture notes ahead of time or providing multiple modes of access to information?

01;17;00;17 - 01;17;14;09
Erin Hagar
How would you respond if they say that, that perhaps that spoon feeding a particular or particular class of students or, you know, is suddenly dumbing down the the experience of learning in in their course.

01;17;14;27 - 01;17;41;06
Deborah Levi
Sure. So while that verbiage is certainly not something I hear often, thankfully, because I do think that is hurtful and troubling. But what I will say is that the student is in your course, deserves to be there. Every one of us have a body, brain and situation that is unique from another's. In other words, our mode and our methodology to synthesize, process and analyze information is unique and individualized.

01;17;42;03 - 01;18;11;21
Deborah Levi
I believe all of us are naturally on a spectrum of ability, skills and talents. So if you give them access to the content in all these various ways, that does not mean going back to the car analogy that they're not going to get there to the destination. But you are providing them the tools so that they can take care of their own learning and manipulate the content in ways that are understanding and digestible for them.

01;18;12;18 - 01;18;36;08
Erin Hagar
Yeah, I think that's so important because again, when we talked about, you know, this idea of trying to make the technology disappear, of really trying to make the the effort to absorb the material equal for everybody but the process of learning it, the process of of, as you said, analyzing, synthesizing, applying that information in new situations, that's really where we want the focus to be.

01;18;36;09 - 01;19;05;19
Erin Hagar
So I guess, you know, from our point of view, as instructional designers in online courses, we we want that effort to be put forth in the actual acquisition of the knowledge as opposed to the finding it, the getting it, the figuring out the technology side of things. And once you remove those barriers or provide different kinds of access points, then all of those goal posts become about the content itself, not the figuring out how to get there.

01;19;05;28 - 01;19;06;12
Erin Hagar
Right.

01;19;06;13 - 01;19;34;16
Deborah Levi
We don't want students to feel lost at any point. If there is a our lecture and you have student A and student B, student A might complete the lecture with you and able to go right into the assignment or go right into the reading. But Student B might not fully have completed their processing of the lecture, and they may need to go back to the recording, or they need to go back to specific areas of the content and take a deeper dove.

01;19;34;22 - 01;20;04;14
Deborah Levi
These are examples of the uniqueness of our classroom. Right. So as the instructor, you can be helpful by providing everything on the front end so that they can utilize their time and energy to figure out how to learn best. And I will say that if you, in fact, do this, you'll probably find less students coming to you, feeling really anxious and overwhelmed and stressed because you have already given them everything they need.

01;20;04;14 - 01;20;16;22
Deborah Levi

And they have seven days a week and a whole semester to really take on the modalities and the process step by step, utilizing a time frame that's best for them.

01;20;17;16 - 01;20;24;08
Erin Hagar
What else would you like us to know, Deborah, about the work you do? The students you serve, and the potential of universal design?

01;20;25;20 - 01;21;04;05
Deborah Levi
So just a little history lesson, at least in our office. Before the pandemic, we were serving around 200 students at the university post-pandemic. I don't know from post-pandemic. But now, in 2022, we are serving upwards of 400 plus students. I think these numbers are going to increase as we continue. Just in the experience of the pandemic period, mental health conditions have skyrocketed as issues, and I just don't think that's going to go away today or tomorrow.

01;21;04;15 - 01;21;35;01
Deborah Levi
So to answer your question, I think if we start to focus on proactively impacting students needs with their learning, utilizing universal design that enables this office and then structure to then focus on things that you can't otherwise provide. So the sign language interpreting or extra time, my exams or talking to a student during office hours. It really is a proactive approach to all of our work.

01;21;35;13 - 01;22;06;00
Erin Hagar
Wow. Those numbers are really startling. You know, you hear that quite a bit. But but to put it in the context of the just the concrete number of students you've served, that's almost a that's a 50% increase just just since the pandemic. We are so grateful for the work that you do for our students here on this campus and for all of your colleagues across the country who are doing this work on behalf of of all students, really, and just making sure that our higher education system is the best it can be for all students.

01;22;06;00 - 01;22;12;17
Erin Hagar
So thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. And just so glad that we could have this conversation.

01;22;12;27 - 01;22;16;01
Deborah Levi
Guys. So much for having there.

01;22;17;03 - 01;22;33;12
Erin Hagar
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