Facilitating Accessibility Reviews of Informal Science Education Facilities and Programs

A Promising Practice

AccessSTEM team members, who are high school and college students with a wide variety of disabilities, had the opportunity to review a science program or facility and earn a stipend plus the cost of the visit, if they submitted an accessibility review form. A grand prize was awarded to the team member who submitted the best accessibility report. Additionally, some of the suggestions in the reviews were shared with facilities to guide them in making changes toward activities that are more accessible to everyone in the community, including people with disabilities. Thus, this promising practice increased knowledge of science and accessibility of the evaluators and increased the awareness of accessibility issues on the part of informal science program staff.

Other programs that are interested in improving the accessibility of local science education programs can use the model developed in the *AccessSTEM* project at the University of Washington. Guidelines that can be adopted are described below. The worksheet to be filled out by participants follows.

Host Your Own Accessibility Review Competition

The following guidelines can be given to potential participants in this activity:

1. Choose an Informal Science Education (ISE) facility / program to visit and request approval from [project providing funding].
2. Upon approval, contact the ISE program to confirm exhibits are open and request any necessary accommodations (such as a sign language interpreter). Report progress or concerns to [project providing funding].
3. Read the publication *Universal Design: Process, Principles, and Applications* (*www.uw.edu/doit/ Brochures/Programs/ud.html*) to learn about accessibility and universal design.
4. Visit the facility / program and learn something new! At large facilities, you may choose to limit your review to one exhibit area. Collect a brochure about the exhibit(s) while you are there. As you tour the facility, fill out the accessibility review.
5. Keep your receipts for expenses such as admission and parking.
6. By [deadline], submit your accessibility review report, along with expense receipts and the brochure to [name of the host organization].
7. Once you turn in an acceptable accessibility review, you may submit a request to do another.

[Project providing funding] will pay for your admission fee plus the admission fee(s) for up to two people accompanying you and for the cost of parking at the facility. Other travel reimbursement will be considered on a case-by-case basis; request approval before you go if you would like to request reimbursement for other travel costs.

Informal Science Education Accessibility Review

Facility/ISE program visited:

About you:
Name:

School: _____ Year in school:

Major or academic interest(s):

Gender: _____

Ethnicity (select one):
__Hispanic or Latino
__Not Hispanic or Latino

Race (select one or more):
__American Indian or Alaska Native   __Asian
__Black or African American   __Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
__White

Academic value of your visit
Describe one thing you learned by visiting this facility or program:

Indicate below if this activity increased your interest in any of the following:
__ accessibility/universal design   __ science   __ engineering   __ technology   __ mathematics
__ computer science   __ other:

Accommodations and universal design
There are two approaches to making academic activities accessible to students with disabilities—accommodations and universal design. An accommodation is an alternate format, assistive technology, or other adjustment for a specific student with a disability. Universal design aspires to create products and environments that are usable by everyone (including people with disabilities), to the greatest extent possible, thereby minimizing the need for accommodations for individuals in the future. For example, if a science facility contains an adjustable-height work surface or work surfaces of different heights, an accommodation will not be needed for a visitor who uses a wheelchair that is too high for standard-height workstations. This workstation may also be comfortable for a student who needs to remain seated because of a health impairment or someone who is very tall or short in stature. Making accommodations is reactive, whereas universal design is proactive. It is likely that some universal design strategies are already in place in the facility/program you visit and that others could be implemented with little effort.

Accessibility review instructions
For the accessibility review you will need to think about what it might be like to have various types of disabilities. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, record both your (1) observations and (2) recommendations for making the facility/program you visit more welcoming and accessible to people with disabilities using the following questions. If an item does not apply to the facility/program write "N/A" (not applicable). If an item applies to the facility/program, but you cannot answer the question, indicate that you do not know.

Website

Does the website say how you can request disability-related accommodations?

Do any of the pictures include someone with an obvious disability? Does it otherwise make the program seem welcoming to people with diverse abilities?

If you turn off the graphics-loading feature of your web browser can you still access the most important content on the website? (If you are aware of web accessibility issues, comment on how accessible the website is to people who are blind and using screen readers or people with other types of disabilities.)

What other characteristics of the website might impact its usability by someone with a disability?

Publications

Can publications in the facility be reached by individuals of varying heights and by wheelchair users?

Does the facility/program brochure(s) include procedures for requesting disability-related accommodations such as sign language interpreters?

Do pictures in publication(s) include people with obvious disabilities? Does it otherwise make the program seem welcoming to people with diverse abilities?

Are brochure(s) available in any alternative formats such as large print, Braille, or electronic file? (Ask a staff member about this.)

Physical Environment

Are parking areas, pathways, and entrances to the building wheelchair accessible and clearly marked?

Are all levels of the facility connected via a wheelchair accessible route of travel?

Is at least part of a service counter at a height accessible from a seated position?

Are aisles wide and clear of obstructions?

Are there ample high-contrast, large-print directional signs to and throughout the lab?

What other aspects of the physical facility might impact its use by people with various types of disabilities?

Exhibits/Activities

Are equipment/exhibit labels in large print with high contrast?

Can buttons and other controls be reached by individuals who stand at a wide range of heights, including those who use wheelchairs?

Are videos captioned?

Are audio directions and content transcribed?

What aspects of the exhibits/activities affect the way people with a variety of disabilities use them?

Staff

Are staff members familiar with how a person with a disability can request an accommodation? (Ask a staff member about this.)

What other staff issues might impact the experience of a person with a disability?

Other Issues (List at least one)

Accessibility by Disability

For each of the following disabilities, answer the following questions:

1. How accessible is this facility/program? Explain your responses.
2. Are there any parts of the facility/program that are not accessible? If so, explain the issue(s).
3. Summarize the most important recommendations for making the facility/program more welcoming and accessible.

- Blind or with low vision

- Deaf or hard of hearing

- Mobility impairment

- Learning or other "invisible" disability

- Other disability

Overall Perception
Please provide other comments about this checklist, this facility/program, and/or your overall experience.

About DO-IT

DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking and Technology) serves to increase the successful participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers, such as those in science, engineering, mathematics, and technology. Primary funding for DO-IT is provided by the National Science Foundation, the State of Washington, and the U.S. Department of Education. For further information, to be placed on the DO-IT mailing list, request materials in an alternate format, or to make comments or suggestions about DO-IT publications or web pages, contact:

DO-IT
University of Washington
Box 354842
Seattle, WA 98195-4842
doit@uw.edu
www.uw.edu/doit/
206-221-4171 (fax)
206-685-DOIT (3648) (voice/TTY)
888-972-DOIT (3648) (toll free voice/TTY)
509-328-9331 (voice/TTY) Spokane
Founder and Director: Sheryl Burgstahler, Ph.D.

University of Washington
College of Engineering
UW Information Technology
College of Education

DO·IT

1/15/13