









Climate Case Study #8 - A Climate Supportive of Disability

How to foster respect and inclusion in your unit when...

Recent survey results show that 20-30% of faculty and staff in your unit identify as having a disability*. As a department chair, how do you create a climate where those with disabilities feel respected and supported?

The Climate Case Studies are organized around RISE's [Eight Levers to Shift Climate for Respect and Inclusion](#) framework. RISE uses the eight levers above to think about the ways in which more inclusive, respectful, and civil climates might be intentionally cultivated in the higher education workplace context.

LEVER	APPROACH	WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE
<div></div> <div>ENVIRONMENT</div>	Consider how the ENVIRONMENT in your unit welcomes or excludes people with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connect with an expert to review physical spaces in the department to maximize usability. Consider desk and counter heights, hallway hazards, automatic doors, seating options, podium heights, lighting, and more.• Encourage employees in your unit to request ergonomic consultations from Environment, Health & Safety so they can learn what adjustments to their personal work environment might better suit their body's needs.
<div></div> <div>EXPECTATIONS</div>	Create EXPECTATIONS that people will make more accessible choices in communication and gatherings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Remind those in your community that not all disabilities are visible, and the degree to which a disability impacts everyday life can be very different than what is observable.• Set meeting norms that make the social navigation of the space more transparent and accessible (e.g., clear agendas, turn-taking guidelines, breaks, offering multiple modes for contributing).
<div></div> <div>INTERACTIONS</div>	Be thoughtful about INTERACTIONS involving disabilities or access needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do not ask faculty and staff to disclose their disabilities. Disclosure carries risks which individuals must weigh against potential benefits.• Treat requests for accommodations with respect. Seek expert guidance, especially when trying to manage conflicting accommodation needs.
<div></div> <div>LANGUAGE</div>	Attend to the LANGUAGE you use and the ways you present information	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoid terms such as "crazy", "insane", "nuts," "lame," or "blind spots." Also do not casually reference diagnoses that you do not have (e.g., "I'm having an OCD moment").• In communications, use simple sentences and formatting to make important information clear. This is more accessible for everyone, including people with disabilities such as anxiety, dyslexia, and autism..
<div></div> <div>MODELING</div>	Consider the ways you and other unit leaders MODEL attitudes toward accessibility through your words, actions, and decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Educate yourself about universal design principles, and work as a department to put the principles into regular practice in meetings, classrooms, seminar spaces, etc. Signal that you value this work, because those who need accommodations belong.• If you feel comfortable, share openly about the access challenges you experience and the accommodations that allow you to fully engage in your professional life.
<div></div> <div>OPPORTUNITIES</div>	Create OPPORTUNITIES to learn more about, and seek to grow, disability resources on campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invite an expert on disabilities or the LSA Disability Navigators to speak at a departmental event, or work with other units to host a workshop on the topic.• Become familiar with the people and units on campus that can help you accommodate the needs of your faculty and staff. If the resources are missing, work with others to develop them.
<div></div> <div>ROUTINES & STRUCTURES</div>	Gather information to create more inclusive ROUTINES and STRUCTURES.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arrange web accessibility training for those who administer websites in your unit. Regularly review sites for accessibility, and make sure all new additions comply with standards.• Anonymously survey the faculty and staff for ideas to make the workplace more accessible (e.g., circulating meeting materials ahead of time, changing meeting rooms, using a microphone, providing online meeting options). Incorporate these ideas into the unit's processes from then on.
<div></div> <div>TIME</div>	Be sensitive to the TIME commitment that unit activities entail and encourage flexibility, breaks, and rest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Build in time and flexibility so that members of your community can travel to, prepare for, and reflect before meetings and classes.• Consider how the academic culture of overwork and being 'always on' takes a disproportionate toll on some members of the community. Take time off yourself, and don't send or respond to emails outside of work hours unless it is an emergency.• Acknowledge the logistical and emotional burdens on those who seek, or help others obtain, the accommodations they need to participate in the unit's activities. Recognize the time that this labor involves.

Additional Resources:

- [7 Principles of Universal Design](#). (University of California, Berkeley).
- [Creating Accessible Lectures](#). (Council of Ontario Universities, 2017).
- [Designing for Accessibility](#). (Home Office Digital, Data and Technology, 2016).
- [Faculty and Staff Experiences in LSA with Disabilities & Accommodations](#). (U-M ADVANCE Program, 2022).
- [The Problems of Ableist Language](#). (MelodyS, 2020, Medium).
- [Promoting Supportive Academic Environments for Faculty with Mental Illnesses](#). (Margaret Price & Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, 2017).

*We define disability broadly and inclusively, regardless of whether or not respondents have any official diagnosis or documentation, to encompass physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, chronic illnesses, neurodivergence, mental health conditions, learning disabilities, and more that can at times make job-relevant tasks difficult.

Prepared by the U-M ADVANCE Program Respect in Striving for Excellence (RISE) Committee: advance.umich.edu/RISE, September 2021.