

# Re-envisioning the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University as an *Inclusive Design Collaborative*

July 2024

## Research Brief

### Purpose

The aim of the public-facing convening held on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024, was to collaborate with like-minded peers and colleagues to lay the foundational roadmap for the future Center for Universal Design (CUD). Discussions centered on 1) understanding the historical successes and challenges of the CUD, 2) outlining strategies to incorporate emerging efforts related to inclusive design and building equity with traditional models of universal design, 3) exploring future funding opportunities, and 4) developing a collective vision for the re-envisioned center.

### Key Findings

- Diversified funding sources, including strong industry partnerships, will help ensure stability for the future center.
- The revered 7 Principles of Universal Design are due for an update.
- Collaborations among a vast array of experts, including communities and end-users, are integral to success.
- Marketing and dissemination will be essential for reception and growth.

**In Pursuit of Equity:  
A Symposium to Re-  
envision the Center  
for Universal Design**

### How We Did This Study

Exploratory interviews with former key members of the CUD, researchers and professional practitioners guided the planning process for the public symposium. The event was organized into a keynote and two expert panels, the first focusing on the history of the CUD and the second on the future of universal design, inclusion and equity. Panel questions were collaboratively shaped by the convened experts during preparatory meetings, ensuring various perspectives were represented and discussed. Throughout the event, symposium participants were encouraged to ask additional questions. An exit survey offered a further opportunity for anonymous suggestions. Analysis of the symposium transcript and survey identified key factors for the re-envisioned center's strategic plan.

## What We Found

### FUNDING

Historically, the CUD heavily relied on government grants from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) and the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation which were never sufficient. Sustainability of the future center will require diversification. “Who supports this work is not obvious (Molly, panelist),” yet many possibilities were proposed throughout the symposium. AARP was the most common suggestion, alongside the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and Office(s) of Inclusion and Diversity (OID). Approaching universal and inclusive design as a transdisciplinary link in large scale collaborative efforts, particularly efforts aligned with health and wellness, sustainability and social justice, will be a promising strategy when targeting funding organizations that may otherwise overlook the impacts of the built environment. Additionally, annual fees collected through industry partnerships could stabilize budgets between grants.

### NEW PATHS

Simple, intuitive, easy to apply, and meaningful, the 7 Principles facilitated national and international adoption of universal design. The symposium showed broad agreement that a refreshed and synthesized inclusive lens will only further their reach. Panelists and participants considered this expanded scope to encompass invisible disabilities (e.g., migraine), neurodiversity (cognitive, sensory), health conditions (e.g., altered immunity, allergies), intersectionality, localized, contextual and cultural perspectives, belonging and trauma informed care. It was emphasized that the lived experience of end-users should be prioritized.

*“It’s great to see this re-energizing of a place that is so important, has been so important, can be more important than ever in the future.”*

– **Molly Story,**

Panelist and former CUD leader

### DISSEMINATION & MARKETING

The dissemination efforts of the former CUD were foundational to its success, but they were also a burden. A toll-free line rang multiple times a day. Staff answered questions, provided advice and resources, and shipped publications. This same service, which is still very much needed today, could be accomplished much more efficiently with technology. In terms of publications, while practice focused guidelines dominated center outputs of the past, panelists suggested splitting future efforts toward peer reviewed journal articles, which are more easily searchable. Marketing, panelists and participants agreed, is desperately needed to generate awareness in both public and professional spheres. Once consumers understand the possibilities, they will demand inclusively designed environments and products. In parallel, once practitioners understand it not only assures ADA compliance, but attracts and retains diverse clients, customers, and employees, it will become an obvious business advantage. “When you know better, you do better (Jordana, panelist).”

**EDUCATION**

Though there was much faculty involvement in the center over the years, a missing piece that is highly recommended moving forward are tenure track and adjunct faculty members for whom inclusive design is their life’s work – preferably in more than one design discipline. In order to train the next generation of inclusive design leaders, faculty should lead interdisciplinary and collaborative industry sponsored studios. Professional training and post secondary curriculum is needed for export outside of NC State as well.

**What These Findings Mean for the New Re-Envisioned Center**

There remain many barriers in the built environment, and our awareness of these barriers will only continue to grow. In order to continue dismantling ableist design, the new Center for Universal Design must broaden its scope and shift from the term ‘Universal Design’ to ‘Inclusive Design.’ Inclusive Design is rooted in disability inclusion as a central goal. However, over time, Inclusive Design has evolved to also include more targeted approaches that better respond to the real and diverse needs of end-users in the built environment.

Areas of future work include research, academic curriculum, professional training, consulting, marketing, dissemination, policy, advocacy, and evaluation. The new center cannot do this work alone. A vast array of experts, preferably with lived experience, will be needed as advisors. Alongside, communities and end-users will be integral to research and design practices. It will be essential to share, collaborate and leverage inclusive design work across disciplines, academic institutions and industries. This collectively built knowledge will refine best practices for Inclusive Design in the built environment as it grows into new contexts.

Potential initiatives for the new re-envisioned center include the following:

- Updating and expanding the 7 Principles of Universal Design with an inclusive lens, yet maintaining its simplicity and ease of use.
- Exploring the adoption of emerging practitioner resources, such as BEST, the Building Equity Standard.
- Reinstating the CUD ‘call center’ as an evolving resource hub using an updated technology-centered approach. Serving researchers, practitioners and the public, these resources will include historical archives, toolkits, literature, educational materials, etc.



Graphic: Community by ProSymbols, from thehourproject.com

The full strategic plan can be found in another document titled *Re-envisioning the Center for Universal Design - PROPOSED Strategic Directive*.