

**Interview with Sheila Fesko
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[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the NTAR Leadership Center, helping state leaders help adults with disabilities through employment and better economic opportunities through collaboration, innovation, and transformation.

[Laurie Harrington] Welcome to “Research in Brief,” a feature podcast of the NTAR Leadership Center. I’m your host, Laurie Harrington. Universal design is the design of products, services, and environments to be usable by all people to the greatest success possible without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Universal design has important implications for individuals as well as broad service delivery systems, particularly the workforce development system. Dr. Sheila Fesko has worked at ICI for 17 years, with the last 10 being focused on employment and educational research. Her areas of research have included national research on job search strategies for individuals with disabilities, the conversion of segregated employment services to community-based services, and disclosure decisions for individuals who are HIV positive and individuals who have cancer. Sheila was a project director for a Department of Education project concerning SSI and SSDI issues for students transitioning from high school. As a member of the National Center on Workforce and Disability team, she has conducted research and training around issues concerning inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the workforce development system, ensuring access to services at One-Stop Career Centers. Sheila has also worked at the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission and as a program manager for a community-based employment program, and is a certified rehabilitation counselor. She has her doctorate in special education and rehabilitation from Boston College. Welcome to our podcast, Sheila. Please describe the key principles of universal design, both in terms of everyday life as well as in the world of workforce development.

[Sheila Fesko] The concept of universal design was originally created at the North Carolina State University. They had looked at this relative to physical access; things like curb cuts and closed captioning that allow individuals with disabilities to access the same services as anyone else. What we found in the nature of universal design is while those curb cuts intended to allow a wheelchair user access to the sidewalk, it’s also beneficial to people with strollers, and bikes, and skateboards, a variety of different resources, so the nature of the way the environment is designed makes it useful for everybody, the universal element to that. Part of this we experience every day in our lives without really thinking about it. All of us take in information in a variety of different ways. So, for example, if you’re ever at a parking garage at an airport, typically they’ll have numbers on it to indicate the floor as well as a color. And, in Boston, they have different logos or icons that you can use so that you could park on the Paul Revere floor if you wanted to. And part of that is useful because people remember things. Someone’s going to remember it by the color. Another person would remember the number. Another person’s going to remember Paul Revere. So that all of us take in information in different ways and process information, remember things in different ways. So the concept about universal design is to think broadly about how do we communicate information, how do we share and engage with people so

that no matter what their disability is, their learning style, their experiences prior to becoming engaged with us, they're going to be able to benefit from the information. Well, the concept of universal design with in the workforce development system builds on that idea. As I said, originally the creation of universal design was more around physical elements of our environment. And what universal design for workforce development does is take that concept and apply it to the broader workforce development system. How do we think about our partnerships more broadly? So rather than thinking about services specifically around disability, thinking about the broad range of needs that individuals may have. An individual may, rather than just needing the services of one agency, they may be a person with a disability who also has a veteran experience and would utilize those services, might need Adult Basic Education to get support around a GED, and so we need to look broadly at people, not specifically or exclusively on their disability perspective.

[Laurie Harrington] How does the concept of universal design work in terms of service delivery of programs that people participate in?

[Sheila Fesko] Well, one of the things that we had originally were working with a group of workforce boards and we were thinking about this concept and one of the people we were working with said the challenge that we face is that all of the different special interests that are reflected within the One-Stop environments are all looking for different kinds of services. So they're talking with the disability folks and then the next person through the door is somebody representing ex-offenders and they feel that they have a different set of needs. The challenge for them is responding to that wide variety of needs that they're going to see within the One-Stop environment versus trying looking at individual silos of activities. So that's where we kind of came to think about how do we think about this universally? How do we think about resume development that is going to address issues for a person who is a job seeker who might have interruptions in their resume because of disability issues, that they've had hospitalizations that need to be reflected? Some of those challenges may be the same that an ex-offender is going to experience. They've got gaps in their work history that they need to explain. Rather than thinking about these things as different initiatives how do we support and think broadly about how to we work with job seekers who have interruptions in their work histories, who need to be able to create a resume that reflects their skills, can communicate with a potential employer about their abilities, and potentially disclose information that may be challenging or create some issues for them in the workplace. Reading might be a challenge for them and they may have a cognitive disability that impacts their ability to read or they may have limited English proficiency and not be able to read in English. They may have literacy issues. Making some information available on the resources of the One-Stops through an audio presentation that could describe to someone so someone could follow it through a audio lead may be helpful to them. Helping to present information using color, using icons, using different visual locations to help people to be able to find the information that they need to be. All of those would be examples about how to make the One-Stop environment more accessible to people so that they can access the information that they need.

[Laurie Harrington] Are there any current states or local municipalities that you are aware of who have adopted the concept of universal design and are practicing it today?

[Sheila Fesko] There are a number of states that have begun the process of in terms of looking at their systems in relation to universal design. The Commonwealth of Virginia was interested. The governor's office had asked us to work with them and provide some technical assistance in their strategic planning process. So as they identified what they were looking for in terms of the creation of their One-Stop environment and their services that were going to be provided within that context, asked us to assist them in that process. Originally they had identified this as a statewide initiative then found they needed to focus it more for the initial startup to be more of a local effort and so have done some work particularly in this area around business development and business services and looking at a more integrated universal approach to that rather than the siloed approach. And this is one example where folks have been doing. There are some career centers within Massachusetts that have really looked at their physical environment as it relates to, by physical, I mean their resource room, their computer systems, their workshops, all the services that are provided within the context of the One-Stop versus services that occur outside of that. So they've looked at issues around how do they do orientation to ensure that information is accessible to everyone that wants to be engaged in that process.

[Laurie Harrington] How can universal design benefit a wide range of workforce development customers, including people with learning and other intellectual disabilities and people who have limited English language skills, and other challenges of people with physical disabilities?

[Sheila Fesko] Well, I think the critical piece here is that when we think about the workforce development system; really think about in relation to functional abilities versus the origin of some of the challenges. So, and if the issue is a learning disability that creates the difficulty for someone in terms of being able to read information, for example, or literacy, the origin of the challenge is not the critical variable for the One-Stop staff. What they need to work at is how do I help this individual from a functional point of view? How do we make sure that they are able to access the information that they need to be able to get information to be able to move on and get into employment if that be the goal? So rather than really be oriented on what's the cause of the person's difficulties — is it a disability issue? Is it other kinds of barriers that get in the way of their accessing the services? — the focus is on making sure that the supports are there and the resources are there so that they are able to use those services no matter what some of the barriers they face.

[Laurie Harrington] Can you give us your thoughts about the challenges that a multi-agency state team faces when they're making the commitment to universal design as a better way to serve people with disabilities, as is the case in the NTAR Center's State Leaders Innovation Institute participating states — Maryland, Minnesota, and Connecticut?

[Sheila Fesko] Well, I think those states have already shown a lot of initiative and innovation in how they're approaching some of their workforce systems. So they're in a good position to be able to take on some of these challenges. I think one of the issues that states need to think about is a way to — sometimes people think it refer to this as taking a bite out of the elephant — it's

such a big system to be able to look at and to look at and look at changing the way partnerships exist and the way services are provided, trying to do all that in one big bite is overwhelming. And so trying to think about: are their targeted places where either there are more challenges that the state is experiencing, that they know they are not satisfied with their services in a particular area and focusing on that area as your starting point and then expanding out from there. I think it's an important piece for states to look at so that they can look at really making some changes versus having more of a theoretical sort of conversational change around thinking about how we talk about services and using terminology around universal design. We really want states to kind of look at a concrete area that they can make some changes in and really change the nature of how they provide services. As is true for all the workforce development partnerships and the challenges within the states, they are very complex systems. They represent a lot of different agencies and priorities and personalities, reflected both in terms of individuals participating in it, but agencies, kind of their own culture and personality. And so having to look at the most effective approach around universal design really looks at bringing together all of those different agencies and priorities and thinking effectively and jointly about how to approach that and all of the different, the nature of the service system and the way it is structured that creates some of the silo effect can be a challenge as they approach some of those elements. But I think the folks, you know, who are innovative and creative about how they think about these approaches can overcome some of those barriers.

[Laurie Harrington] Thank you, Sheila Fesko for speaking with us today. I have been talking today with the Institute for Community Inclusion's Sheila Fesko about the key principles of universal design and its implications for the workforce development system, and for individuals with disabilities. This is Laurie Harrington for "Research in Brief" with the NTAR Leadership Center. For more information about the NTAR Leadership Center and its research activities, visit www.ntarcenter.org.

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