

## **Ensuring conference accessibility**

Suggestions, insights and ideas from the German Association for American Studies' Diversity Roundtable Symposium "Moving Towards Collective Action: Activism and Academia," held in Kiel in May 2022.

These suggestions may feel overwhelming at first glance, but you'll likely find that many of the ways that organizers and participants can work together to create accessible conferences are relatively easy and low cost.

### **Some questions to consider when planning your conference:**

-Is the building wheelchair-accessible? Is there a working elevator; are there automatic doors; are there accessible toilets? Can the building be accessed by vehicles that can accommodate wheelchairs? Is it low effort to get to the building via public transportation?

-Do the rooms/lecture halls have an audio system (for microphones) and a T-coil for people using hearing aids/cochlear implants? Make sure that speakers use microphones at all times to avoid forcing others to disclose that they have hearing impairments and must ask that microphones be used.

-Does your funding permit you to hire translators to provide translation to sign language or speech-to-text translation? If not, can you secure additional funding for these efforts? If your conference is hybrid: Zoom offers Closed Captions (in English) that pick up spoken English very well (though with some room for improvement). This option is called "Live Transcription." Closed captioning can be helpful not only to people with hearing loss but also to people with, e.g., speech processing disorders. Projecting the speaker's face—and the closed captions—for participants in the room is also tremendously helpful.

-Do you request that speakers provide access copies of their talks and make these access copies available to participants? Both paper copies and digital copies ("access copies") of the talks and lectures allow participants to read along while listening, prepare for the talks by reading the texts beforehand, or access the talks at a later point.

-Can you provide an additional "quiet room" for participants who need to take a break and who struggle with noise or large groups of people?

-What is the seating arrangement like in the rooms you're using? Seats in lecture halls can be a serious obstacle for people who are dealing with chronic pain or the like. Can you provide beanbags, a cot, or other forms of alternative seating?

-Can you provide fruit, especially bananas, during breaks? Disabled and chronically ill people often take medicine that requires more or inhibits magnesium and potassium intake, and bananas are an excellent source of these minerals. Fruit is also a good fix for people who experience sudden changes in blood sugar.

-Are you providing other types of food? Make sure to request ingredient lists from your caterers so people with allergies and other dietary restrictions can make sure that food is safe for them to eat.

-Is it possible to formulate a formal registration form? Doing so will allow you to ask participants if they have special needs, including allergies (like perfume) and dietary restrictions. Meet the needs that are mentioned (i.e. provide plant-based milk at coffee breaks, gluten-free cookies, etc.) and communicate needs to participants (should someone mention that they are allergic to perfume, for instance, one can ask that participants keep this in mind. The National Women's Studies Association, based in the US, has been doing this for years).

-Do your breaks provide sufficient time for disabled people to travel to and use the bathroom, take medicine, etc., and also take a break? Fifteen minutes is rarely sufficient. Providing longer breaks

also helps organizers and participants alike stick to the conference schedule, which is a tremendous help to individuals who need to plan their days thoroughly for medical needs, etc.

-Is it possible to start the conference after 9 am? 10 am is actually even better. Many disabled people take longer to get ready in the morning because tasks like getting dressed, eating, and using public transportation require more time and energy, and an early beginning is simply not feasible for them.

-Is your conference taking place during an ongoing pandemic? If yes, request that all participants wear masks indoors, regardless of institutional or governmental procedure, in order to protect immunocompromised participants. Provide hand sanitizer and extra masks. If food is provided, set it up in close proximity to building exits, so that people can easily eat and drink outside. Enforce the mask policy.

-Is there a gender-neutral bathroom available on site? If not, consider creating new signs for at least one set of bathrooms, indicating that they are gender-neutral. An ideal way to do this is to describe the space, rather than the bodies that inhabit it, i.e. “Bathroom with stalls and open urinals” / “bathroom with stalls for toilets and for urinals” / “bathroom with stalls.”

-Is your program and are other informational documents screen-reader compatible? If not, consider developing a second program that simply provides text in a linear format by using any word processor. Avoid separate text boxes and use only horizontally formatted text (as in this document, for instance). There are many other ways to help people with visual impairments experience conferences and talks more fully. Ask, for instance, keynote speakers and panelists to describe themselves for individuals who are blind or do not see well (“I am a white woman with short brown hair and am wearing a black shirt,” for instance; speakers should feel free to describe themselves in any way they wish to). Ask all individuals, including people asking questions of keynote speakers to identify themselves when they speak into the microphone (“this is [name] speaking”), including on hybrid or fully online meetings, as not everyone can read the name on the online screen. For the same reason, ask speakers to describe the images that they show during their presentations. If they pause to take a drink of water or pause for any other reason, ask them to announce this briefly (“I will now take a drink of water”).

-Can speakers provide content notes for their talks? This is especially helpful if they are discussing violences that occur due to structural inequalities, such as gendered and sexual violence, racial and colonial violence, etc.

**Finally:** It can have a wonderful impact on the conference atmosphere if speakers and organizers signal care and kindness towards participants and acknowledge publicly that speakers have bodyminds with different needs. For example, Margaret Price provides accessibility statements like the following to audiences at the beginning of talks or speeches:

As I discuss this very difficult subject matter, please do what you need [...] to take care of yourself. You may need to take up a different position, engage in some manual activity—knitters, feel free to take out your work—or you may simply need to leave. This is an accessible presentation, which means I’ll be doing things such as describing visual images and offering copies of the talk. Having a copy is useful not only for those who may have difficulty hearing the talk in the mode I’m using, which is primarily oral; it may also be useful for those who need to receive the information in a different time and place, for reasons ranging from physical barriers to this location to experiencing traumatic flashbacks.” (Price, qtd. in Kafer 2016: 2)

Ensuring that participants know that the organizers are interested in providing an accessible space can be a tremendous help for participants. During the symposium, an audience member approached us and asked whether we could ask that instead of clapping, people could use “deaf applause” or snap their fingers, to avoid the loud noise of applause. If it is clear from the beginning who is responsible (and approachable) for these kinds of requests, adjustments that help ensure the accessibility of the conference can always be made.