Universalizing Universal Design

Just as proponents of “green” building concepts have seen their construction standards become commonplace, the Burton Blatt Institute (BBI) and key partners are leading an unprecedented effort to build support for the voluntary adoption of universal design (UD). The UD approach advocates that all built environments and products be useable by all people.

In 2008, BBI chairman Peter Blanck, University Trustee Joshua H. Heintz L’69, and his law partner, William J. Gilberti Jr., founded the Global Universal Design Commission (GUDC) to create UD standards, consensus-based, innovative performance guidelines that go beyond minimal compliance with law and provide ease of use to all. The GUDC standards are modeled on the green standards for the built environment, designating a level of accreditation for a project based on its usability, safety, health, and inclusiveness.

GUDC brings together some of the most knowledgeable and influential leaders in UD, including four current and former presidential appointees, architects, and faculty from the University of Buffalo’s Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access. Commission members—including honorary chairman Luis Benigno Gallegos Chiriboga, Ecuador’s ambassador to the United States—are leading efforts to accelerate the adoption of the standards worldwide. “At the ambassador’s initiation, Professor Blanck and I met with Ecuador’s vice president, Lenín Moreno Garcés, and Ecuador became an early GUDC adopter,” Heintz says.

BBI and GUDC are collaborating with many university, corporate, and government leaders to promote adoption of the standards. For instance, Procter & Gamble is partnering with GUDC to focus on implementing the standards in its built environment and workforce policies. The SU College of Law’s new building committee is considering using the GUDC standards. Destiny USA has adopted the standards for its tenants, and the Seneca Nation, located in
Western New York, has agreed to adopt the standards for new construction, according to Blanck. Last fall, at a global conference on technology and innovation for people with disabilities in Sao Paolo, Brazil, Heintz gave the keynote address on “Universalizing Universal Design.” Brazil is considering adoption of the standards to guide development for its 2014 World Cup facilities and its 2016 Olympics and Paralympics. “Brazil’s interest is a very exciting development,” Blanck says, “and we hope it will bring international attention to the importance of GUDC standards.” —Anthony Adornato