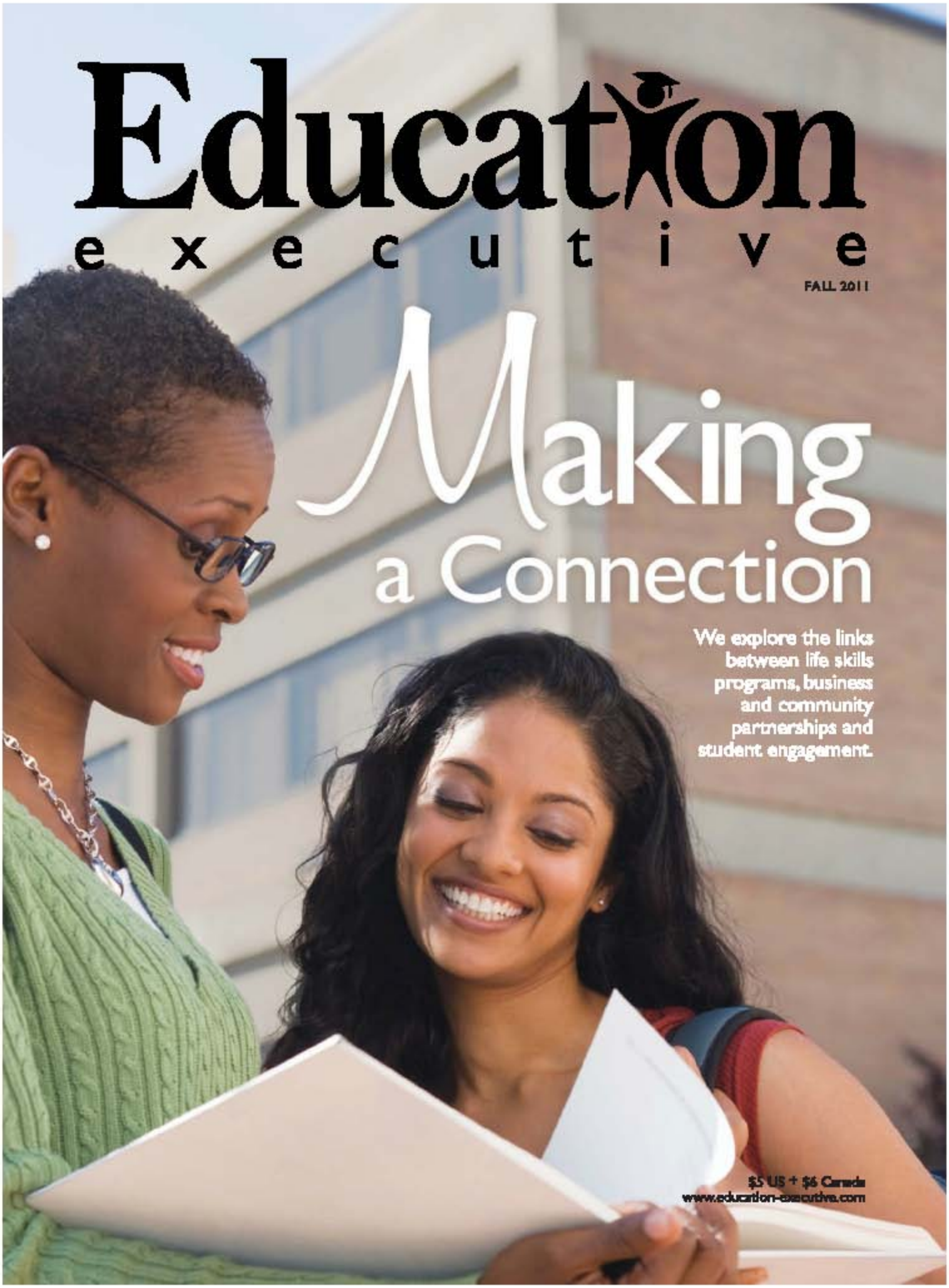

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FALL 2011

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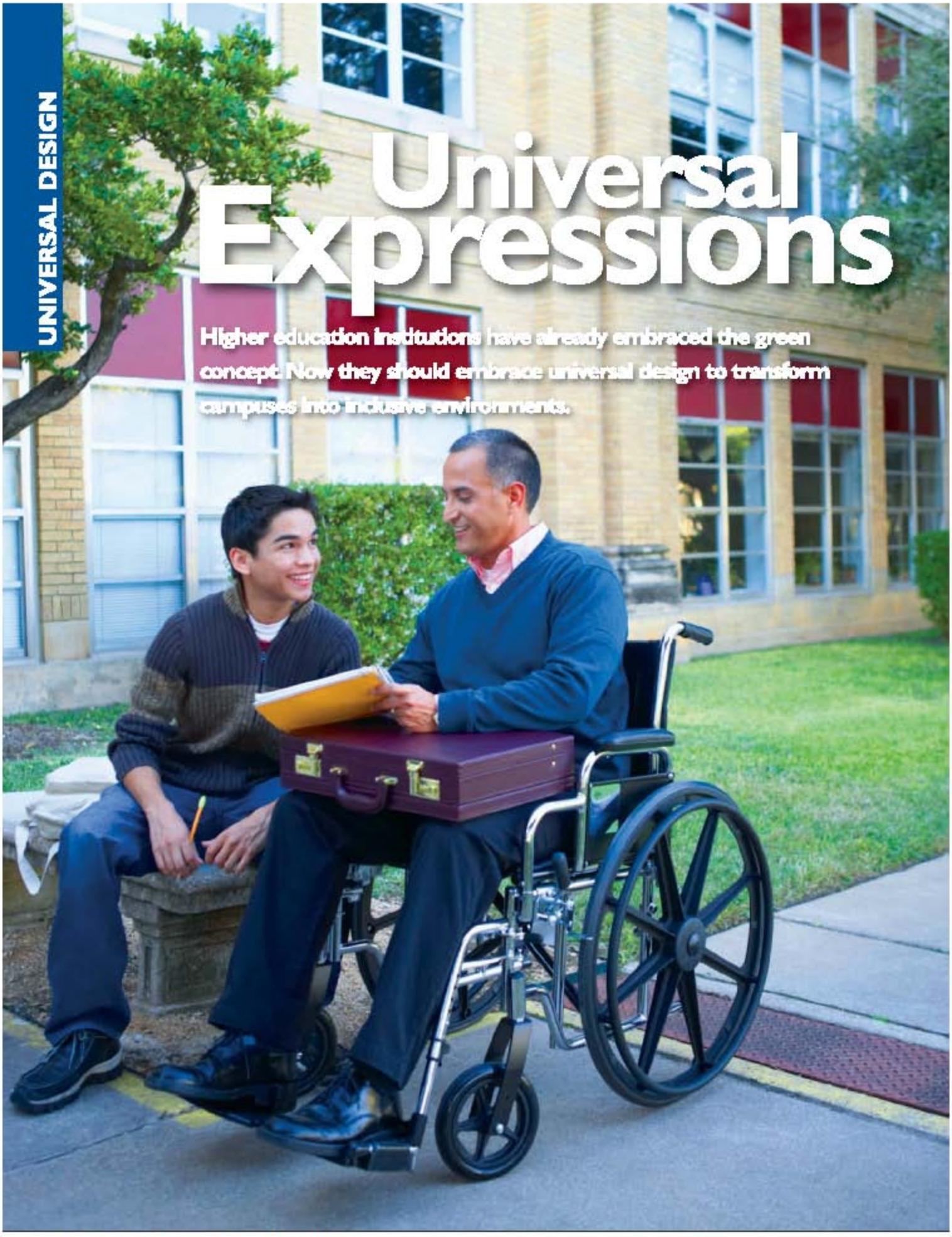
Universal Expressions

Higher education institutions have already embraced the green concept. Now they should embrace universal design to transform campuses into inclusive environments.



There once was a time when the disabled were legally barred from learning alongside their peers and structures were designed without taking accessibility issues into consideration. But for decades now, accessibility and usability have been required thanks to the passage of landmark legislative initiatives like the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

Some wonder, however, if regulations really go far enough toward promoting inclusion. Indeed, the focus of ADA accessibility guidelines has been on eliminating and preventing physical barriers based on an adherence to minimum requirements. For example, the minimum width of a ramp must be 36 inches, stair treads can be no less than 11 inches wide, and doorways must have a minimum opening of 32 inches. The problem is that, all too often, the minimum becomes the maximum.

At best, meeting just the bare minimum standard is a short-term solution. Standards often don't effectively account for the varied needs of people with disabilities, which is one reason why standards are regularly updated. Furthermore, when standards are changed, the previous minimum often no longer meets the new standard. These are some of the factors behind a push toward universal design, which is focused on creating inclusivity.

The inclusion factor

If something is universal, by definition it applies to everybody. Now take a look around any college or university campus. Are its facilities and grounds universal? Are they completely accessible and designed to accommodate anyone and everyone? Probably not, but the wheels of change are turning as more campus planners are embracing the next big thing in campus planning: universal design.

"Universal design involves a complete paradigm shift. It goes beyond compliance and recognizes that this is a discrimination issue. The goal is to create inclusive designs that are useful and welcoming to the broadest population possible," said Fred Tepfer, project planning manager in the University of Oregon's Campus Planning and Real Estate office.

The concept encompass seven principles: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use. In theory and in practice, universal design meshes perfectly with the continuing push toward energy efficiency and green design and construction. At its core, energy efficiency is all about practical use of energy and financial resources. The less energy you use, the better for the environment and the pocketbook in the long run.

Similarly, universal design is all about a practical use of physical space and finances. If buildings and grounds are built to accommodate all people, irrespective of their individual physical needs, it can help foster an all-encompassing and welcoming environment while controlling the eventual costs of upgrading and renovating facilities down the line.

To be sure, this is one area where educational institutions of all shapes and sizes find a common bond. There is no doubt that much of the American higher education infrastructure is aging. Across the country, renovations and new construction projects are needed to provide the kind of learning environment that is critical for today's students and tomorrow's leaders. The universal design approach should ensure that campus learning environments are better prepared to adapt in the future.

"Universal design looks at many features that allow for independence, convenience, comfort, and safety, as well as accessibility. It is not simply about the disabled or frail. It is a human-centered focus for everyone," said Rosemarie Rossetti, PhD. Rossetti is the president of Rossetti Enterprises and an owner/general contractor with the Universal Design Living Laboratory in Columbus, Ohio.

Living labs

But college and university campuses are about much more than what goes on in the classroom. They are living laboratories where people eat, play, and sleep, as well as where they study. Colleges and universities are places where different people live alongside one another and share a myriad of experiences.

In that way, educational settings are places where people encounter situations that mirror what happens on a day-to-day basis in the real world. Colleges and universities can therefore not only take a leadership role in teaching inclusive concepts, they can also create inclusive environments that embed the idea into our residences and workplaces, eventually expanding the idea into the DNA of society as a whole.

"We work in a scholarly environment. It is a world of ideas. College campuses are more willing to embrace this kind of thinking than commercial, and even other public, environments," said Tepfer. "College campuses

are in many ways ideally suited to this kind of thinking. You can't change a campus overnight, but incrementally you can make great progress."

What gives universal design its universal appeal is the fact that inclusive designs that exceed minimum standards benefit more than just the disabled. They take into account much more than just sidewalk grading and door width. They account for factors like lighting, the location of temperature controls, and the inclusion of full-length mirrors. Simply, the standards benefit everyone. Think about it: what average person hasn't thanked their lucky stars at one time or another for the height of a handicap-accessible toilet, or the convenience of a gently graded wheelchair ramp leading to the front entrance of a building?

It is in this way that the inclusive nature of physical environments created with universal design principles can foster greater acceptance of individuals with disabilities. They can serve us whether we are young and virile or old and fragile. Universal design goes well beyond code compliance. It is about accommodating the broadest possible range of needs.

Eventually, regulations may codify universal design concepts into law. For now, colleges and universities should think seriously about the long-term benefits of designing their buildings and grounds in a manner that harmonizes with a curriculum espousing inclusion and acceptance for all.

"We have to educate consumers and builders, and consumers will drive the market," said Rossetti. "The challenge is for the universal design movement to follow the green movement and reach a tipping point where the philosophy becomes mainstream." ◆

—Eric Slack