

Doing the “Extra Work:” Faculty Training in Universal Design and Accessibility (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

In the context of the Title II revision requiring digital accessibility at publicly funded institutions, faculty are expected to design accessible courses but may not have sufficient training about online learning. This article describes a faculty digital accessibility training course and the implementation of course concepts following participation. Intended outcomes were improvement in faculty confidence and inclusion of universal design and digital accessibility in course design. Qualitative data were collected through faculty interviews to evaluate program effectiveness. Changes faculty made include utilizing accessibility checkers, creating accessible recordings of lectures with captions, consulting with technology staff, and changing assignment types and instructions. Barriers to implementing content were perceived lack of knowledge, time, and administrative support. Recommendations for institutions wanting to implement similar programs include considerations about timing, academic discipline, ongoing mentorship and institutional support.

Keywords: digital accessibility, faculty preparation, online learning, Title II

In 2024, the United States Department of Justice updated the Title II regulations pertaining to digital accessibility, requiring all public and public-contracted entities to ensure that their online digital content is accessible (United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2024). Many universities encourage or require faculty to meet minimum accessibility standards for online or hybrid classes, such as those used by Quality Matters (Eastern Washington University, 2024; Oregon State University, 2024; Stanford University, 2023; The Ohio State University, 2024), although accessibility training is not currently mandatory for faculty at some institutions (Frankel et al., 2020). Faculty without proper training may not know how to create digitally accessible materials or to align them with learner needs (Frankel et al., 2020) and the standard process for accommodating a student with disabilities involves faculty receiving notifications about the accommodation at or after the start of the term. As many students request the same accommodations, a more proactive approach to course

design could eliminate the need for last-minute student-by-student accommodations.

According to the National Center for College Students with Disabilities ([NCCSD]; 2024) the most common types of disabilities disclosed by college students are attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (84%), psychiatric and disabilities related to mental and emotional health (82%), and specific learning disabilities (78%). The most frequently requested accommodations are related to test-taking (92%), alternate formats for books or other materials (60%), online format options (60%), and assistive technology (54%). These disabilities affect how students receive information and/or demonstrate understanding, which can be addressed through accessible course design, rather than individual accommodations. Considering that there are also students with disabilities who do not report their disability at all (22%) and up to 40% of students with disabilities who do not utilize campus disability support services (NCCSD, n.d.), faculty’s role in accessible course design is par-

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amount. Disability resource offices (DROs) assist students with registered disabilities, but these offices can be understaffed (National Center for College Students with Disabilities, 2024) and generally only assist faculty with specific student accommodations. When students are registered, the student-staff ratio may range from 94:1 to 159:1, depending on campus size (Scott, 2019).

Research about faculty knowledge and attitudes about disability indicates that participation in accessibility training improves confidence and ability to support students with disabilities (Guilbaud et al., 2021; Lombardi et al., 2013; Roth et al., 2018). Disability training has also been demonstrated to improve campus climate and academic outcomes (Roth et al., 2018) and positively influence faculty attitudes toward disability (Murray et al., 2011). One project at a midsize public institution involved training over 350 faculty, staff, and administrators about disability, after which faculty became more engaged with the issue, requesting disability syllabus statements, evening training sessions, and more visibility about disability on the university website (Roth et al., 2018).

The project described in this paper, a Canvas accessibility course for faculty, aimed to prepare faculty to make their materials accessible in advance, lessening the need to rely on DROs or modify materials to accommodate specific students.

Setting and Participants Demographics

The setting for this project was a regional comprehensive state university in Washington State with an average enrollment of approximately 11,000 students. The university is considered a teaching institution, where 80% of the workload for an average faculty member is related to teaching, although there is no dedicated teaching and learning center. The university has semesters, quarters, and multiple campuses, so faculty are not all in the same location or on the same schedule, necessitating asynchronous faculty development programming. The DRO works one-on-one with students to provide student accommodations and communicate with instructors about individual student needs.

The Canvas course described herein was developed by the author and another faculty member who received an internal diversity grant for digital accessibility training through the Texas Digital Learning Association (TxDLA) and course creation. The course was launched during the last month of classes for the quarterly faculty (June) and advertised to all faculty (approximately 400); 42 faculty members initially registered, with 27 completing all course activities.

Registered faculty members were from 24 academic disciplines across campus. Faculty developers later received two internal grants to review course outcomes and interview course participants one academic year later to provide qualitative data about program effectiveness. Participation in the initial course and subsequent interviews was voluntary and no incentives were provided.

Depiction of the Problem

Students who need accommodations are responsible for locating the campus DRO, documenting their disability, and initiating the accommodation conversation with their instructor. This system implies that disability is the problem and accommodation is the solution, the process must be formal, and the instructor makes the determination about what is reasonable (Funckes et al., n.d.). Individualized educational plans from high school do not transfer to the university, so students may be navigating the accommodations system independently for the first time. A 2011 longitudinal study of post-high school experiences of students with disabilities found that 87% of students with disabilities in high school had accommodations, while only 19% of those in college received similar disability support (Newman et al., 2011). Lack of knowledge about the system, disability-related challenges with executive functioning, reluctance to talk to professors, and stigma could all be barriers for students seeking assistance.

Once student accommodations are in place, faculty members must provide digitally accessible documents without any required training. Without training, it is possible that faculty do not even know what digitally accessible materials are, much less how to create them. The author's communication with their DRO revealed that the DRO is specifically funded to work with students and not to provide broader faculty programming about best practices for course accessibility, so the office most knowledgeable about student disabilities and needs cannot educate faculty about best practices for accessible course design. Available online/hybrid Canvas course templates, such as those at the author's university, can have numerous accessibility errors when imported into a course. There are also no designated course auditors to identify and remediate inaccessible courses, although the embedded accessibility checker in Canvas (Ally) can generate a list of which courses are inaccessible.

Lack of faculty training about digital accessibility is the problem addressed by the practice described herein. Faculty need to know how to design accessible courses with or without students with registered

disabilities in their classes because support from a DRO may not be available. With proper faculty training, course content can be accessible for most learners from the first day of class, bypassing many of the barriers described above.

Description of Practice

The digital accessibility course (DAC) for faculty was in Canvas and contained a module about disability law requirements, a module about accessible course materials and a module about universal design, all of which were part of the TxDLA training. The asynchronous format addressed an issue reported in Frankel et al. (2020) about synchronous training not meeting faculty schedules and asynchronous content being able to be reviewed again when needed. Providing content on Canvas also gives faculty experience using the system they will be using in their classes, creating a parallel learning process. Faculty were invited to participate through university email and all faculty who indicated an interest by the deadline were enrolled in the course. The intended outcome was for instructors to feel more comfortable with digital accessibility and to begin incorporating it into their courses. The long-term intended outcome was the creation of further faculty programming about digital accessibility to improve accessibility campuswide. Course design did not offer solutions to anticipated barriers, such as a lack of time to modify course materials, as course designers did not know what barriers faculty would identify, and using universal design principles can technically save time overall.

The DAC contained pre- and post-training surveys about faculty confidence and perceived knowledge about accessibility and an overall content knowledge quiz. Each module had a captioned video with topic content, a page with the slides and transcript of the material and external links where relevant, along with an assessment activity, such as a content quiz, discussion board about classroom practices and a course review using the Ally accessibility tool. Faculty participants implemented course content over the following year and implementation progress is summarized below.

Improvements to Accessibility

Many faculty participants reported that they began checking accessibility in digital platforms, such as Microsoft Office, regardless of whether they had a student with a registered disability. Faculty adjusted the spacing/layout of text, enlarged or changed font style, used headers, and used grayscale instead of colors to signify meaning. Faculty checked Optical Character Recognition (OCR) compatibility, modi-

fied documents saved in Portable Document Format (PDF) in Adobe, and gave links to the original PDF sites to students when the document was not modifiable. Recognizing that providing written content in class, such as on PowerPoints (PPTs), might disadvantage students with low vision, some faculty read all content aloud, downloaded and posted audio files of PPTs and other documents, posted assignment instructions on Canvas for screen readers and provided verbal or alt text descriptions of images. Faculty reported paying closer attention to the quality of their videos, such as by adding/reviewing captions or transcripts, re-recording inaccessible videos, speaking more slowly, and investing in recording equipment. Utilizing existing accessibility features on sites like YouTube, some faculty replaced their own lecture videos with accessible online videos.

In terms of universal design, faculty provided various formats of materials for learning, accepted differing assignment types, and gave the option to work individually or in groups. Faculty opened their courses online with all course content in advance, provided handouts and lecture notes before or during class, additional/multiple descriptions of assignment instructions, and allowed students to use study guides during comprehensive exams. Grading changes included removing due dates or accepting “late” work with minimal penalty and allowing revisions. Some faculty did not assign grades to the first several assignments, while others had students submit drafts or portions of assignments each week for feedback. Faculty with flexible due dates provided reminders to students to keep them on track during the term. One faculty member reported providing “B grade” sample assignments to model expectations for students with suggested ideas for improvement.

Barriers to Implementation

A major faculty barrier to implementing accessible content was perceived lack of knowledge. For those faculty who did try new techniques, some reported that they disliked auto-captioning (and often did not check these captions for accuracy) or could not find online videos with captions. Documents saved as PDFs presented the greatest challenge and several faculty reported being unable to find alternatives. Faculty reported that materials can become more “boring” and that engaged teaching techniques are adversely affected by some accessibility changes.

The biggest barrier faculty reported to implementing digitally accessible content was time. Faculty stated that their workload increases when they have to check for accessibility, and they do not always have the “spare” time to do the “extra work.”

Several interviewees reported that they are willing to spend additional time, but they lack a course model and technical support during evening or weekend classes, so they skip some accessibility efforts. These findings reflect informal comments from faculty as reported by Frankel et al. (2020), indicating that on-line teaching methods are “harder” to implement.

Evaluation of Observed Outcomes

The qualitative data used to evaluate this program came from 15 faculty interviews conducted one year after the DAC with faculty in ten departments (addiction studies, biology, business administration, criminal justice, design, education, music, public administration, public health and social work). Interviews consisted of mostly open-ended interview questions about confidence with accessibility and the implementation of DAC content in courses. Sample interview questions include the following: “What were your experiences with incorporating digital accessibility concepts into your course materials? What were barriers to incorporating digitally accessible content in course materials?”

Qualitative data were important to evaluate this program because intended outcomes were improved faculty awareness and perceived knowledge and confidence about accessibility. Interview data suggest that faculty who participated in the DAC were motivated to modify or develop their courses to be more accessible and that they understood how using concepts from universal design can sidestep the need to make edits later for students with accommodations. For example, by allowing all students additional time on tests, there was no need to set up special testing protocols for students with accommodations. Students who use assistive technology or who cannot view and/or hear digital content had similar experiences as other students with added captions and image descriptions or modified color schemes and format types.

A limitation of this project was possible self-selection bias of participants who may have already been interested in accessibility. Another was the potential influence of a close relationship between the author and faculty from within their academic unit, who represented one-third of interview participants. The scope of implementation by discipline was also not measured and could have been impacted by workload or other department-specific support. Lack of formal student feedback is a limitation, although faculty provided anecdotal student responses during the interviews. For example, students reported they liked extra time and makeup/resubmission options, the variety of assignments and materials posted for pre- or

post-class review. Negative student feedback included comments about unprofessional audio recordings and “random pictures of animals” in course materials that a visually impaired student found distracting.

Implications and Transferability

Results of this pilot project align with findings in the literature (Roth et al., 2018) that link faculty training with increased accessibility efforts and engagement. Faculty in this project reported that the DAC provided new knowledge about accessibility and gave them the “nudge” they needed to implement accessible course design. Participants reported making significant accessibility changes to their courses, but barriers, such as insufficient time and perceived knowledge, limited implementation. Other reported factors influencing DAC efficacy included timing (before summer limited prompt implementation), concerns about academic integrity or attendance when materials are given in advance, lack of institutional support, course content (current events require accessible materials to be created more frequently), and faculty status (innovations may be riskier for those with fewer job protections). Faculty feedback about training for online classes reported in Frankel et al. (2020) also indicated that having sufficient time to digest course material, mentors to assist during development and implementation and an ongoing review would enhance effectiveness.

Elements of the DAC course that should be part of future courses include instructions and practice with modifying documents and other digital content and universal design. The DAC included information about laws pertaining to accessibility and higher education, which could be helpful for faculty (especially considering the 2024 Title II changes), but it is likely that faculty are more motivated by student experiences and institutional expectations than by the laws themselves. Some of the barriers reported by faculty in this paper may also inform future similar projects. Course designers could anticipate concerns about time, oversight, lack of motivation or skills by providing examples or personal narratives from faculty who have monitored time spent making materials accessible or universally designed, and whether they saved time or avoided stress by not having to modify anything after the course started.

A program like the DAC may be replicated at other institutions if the above barriers are addressed, but faculty also need ongoing support and incentives. Expanding the role of the DRO, establishing or utilizing a teaching and learning center, allowing accessibility efforts to be counted toward tenure and

promotion, and providing release time or other financial incentives could encourage participation, according to faculty participants in this program. To gauge efficacy, the institution should ask students with disabilities about accessibility efforts. STEM faculty at the author's institution used surveys and focus group interviews to learn about the experiences of students with disabilities and have modified their practices when receiving a letter from the DRO about student accommodations. If participating in an accessibility program and modifying courses becomes an administration requirement, faculty may also seek support from their union, as the expectations may affect workload or working conditions.

As universities consider changes to digital content, we should keep in mind an analogous disability concept—that of “retrofitting” (Dolmage, 2017) a building to comply with disability law. When disability laws were being implemented in the US during the last century, many existing physical structures had to be modified with ramps for people who could not use stairs. These ramps were often placed on the side of buildings and signs were installed directing people around the back to access the building. These modifications allowed more people to access the buildings, but the message was clear: Accommodating disabled people is an afterthought and something we are doing to meet legal requirements. Creating a disability website which will not be regularly updated, for example, may be worse than having no website at all. Deciding to remove online content that does not meet requirements, as UC Berkeley once did (Lederman, 2017), is also unacceptable. Universities should recognize that declaring a commitment to accessibility or providing additional faculty resources does not mean that students with disabilities will feel welcome or included. Messaging from university administrators will also reinforce the importance of these efforts campuswide.

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