Make Your Course Content Accessible for All Learners

Spotlight on: Accessibility

Ensuring all students feel supported and set up for success in their educational careers is of the utmost importance, and it is the goal Pearson constantly keeps in mind with every resource they create. Speaking to several individuals from the higher education field, including an instructor, an Assistant Director at an Accessibility Services Office, and a Senior Director of Accessibility Resources, provides us with a variety of perspectives about why accessibility matters and what faculty should know in order to promote inclusivity.

Accessibility

Looking at it from the student perspective, Aimee Cekau Stubbs, Senior Director of Accessibility Resources at Broward College, understands the importance of accessibility and ensuring all students have the same opportunities to be successful in their educational journeys. "There are a lot of barriers for those students (with disabilities) getting into programs and participating in the college environment altogether, or to just access the same curriculum every other student has," she says. With this thought in mind, Aimee suggests putting the **focus on accessibility from the start** for those faculty and Deans who are helping with procurement. They need to have a clear understanding of 508 compliance as it will help them to choose the best product for their study body. "Having things about accessibility at the forefront is so critical and having that be part of the conversation from the start," says Aimee.

After 28 years of teaching, Carla Wurtz, an instructor at Central Alabama Community College, encountered her first blind student. This inspired a whole new mindset for her about the accessibility of her MyLab Math materials, sending her on a journey to discover the best way to accommodate her student. "(The student) had never used a Pearson product, so me having to see how she interacted with the way I had the course set up changed everything that I thought about accessibility," says Carla. Having this experience with a student really helped Carla to understand the needs of future students. She is now armed with tools, resources, and ideas for how she can make her course more accessible.

While accessibility efforts are especially important for students with disabilities, those considerations also positively impact students without disabilities, according to Lisa Stender, Assistant Director at the Accessibility Services Office at West Virginia University. This is because "accessibility efforts tend to be done in a way where it is removing barriers from multiple areas and can across the board really improve access. It allows all students, not just those with disabilities, to benefit."

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Aimee also feels the considerations of accessibility are beneficial for all students. Assessing the course materials and creating accessible design trickles down to create an inclusive environment all students can be successful in. "Be patient and look at all the aspects and resources you implement in the classroom, and it will help with retention and completion rates for all students. Our ESL and first-generation students, many of them have the same struggles and need just a little bit more explanation, or the opportunity to look at different aspects of modality to help them learn and understand the concepts."

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Go-to inclusive practices

At West Virginia University, the Accessibility Services Office has several practices they recommend to all faculty to ensure their courses are set up right from the beginning to support their students with disabilities. These practices help remove potential barriers that can lead to students falling behind in their courses. First, instructors are encouraged to run their syllabi, any documents they create, and reading materials, through an accessibility checker. They also suggest creating alternative text for all their images. Since this process is such an integral part of West Virginia University's accessibility efforts, not only for students with disabilities, but also those who may have low bandwidth or internet issues, they make sure to have this detailed process written out and readily available for faculty to reference. Lastly, they encourage instructors to make closed captions on all their media.

As a community college, Broward has an open-door policy, so to ensure students don't fall behind in their coursework, Broward College keeps a list of high needs students with disabilities. They check that list and determine their future schedules, so they have time to adequately assess the course set up and the materials used.

Advice and considerations

The biggest piece of advice Lisa has for faculty is to always rely on the resources that are already available, such as your disability support office and publishers. These individuals are happy to assist you in creating an inclusive environment where students with disabilities can walk in, ready to learn, like every other student. "They're not expected to do this themselves. We're here to support them, and we want them to know there are resources out there, ideas out there, that will make the process a lot easier," she says.

Aimee agrees that communicating to the faculty that there are several levels of support is critical, but she also suggests making it a total team effort by including the students themselves. "Listen to the students and find out what is best for them, what they would like to have, what they have tried before, and what has worked best for them in the past," she says. Asking these questions streamlines the process and instills confidence in the student that their voice, and needs, are being addressed.

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According to Carla, ensuring that a student with blind or low-sight disabilities is proficient with a screen reader is very important. This was something that the Pearson Accessibility Support Team made her aware of during a virtual meeting with the student. But she also says faculty need to take into consideration the lengths the student has to go through to function in a college setting, as well as how they develop different learning strategies out of necessity. "I'm blown away with the level of knowledge that she had to have compared to my sighted students because she had to explain things instead of just write it down," says Carla. "There was a whole other level of learning there."

Pearson support

During the Spring 2023 semester, Lisa needed some assistance creating accessible course materials for a student with rather extensive disabilities. As the course materials were from Pearson, she reached out to Pearson's Accessibility Support Team who were able to help determine the best way to proceed to accommodate the student, as well as ensure the student did not fall behind in the course. **"They went through all the materials that our faculty member had given us and looked at everything that we could do to really determine what was feasible in order to make this work for our student,"** Lisa says. As Pearson's materials already had many accessibility features, with a lot of assignments offering alternative text, the team was able to help foresee any potential issues that would hinder the student. As the student was concerned about utilizing only alternative text, the team met with him one-on-one and they "really put his concerns to rest and made him feel a lot more comfortable knowing the alternative texts are going to work," says Lisa. "Them sitting and meeting with him really helped."

Carla and her blind student also had a wonderful experience with **the Pearson Accessibility Support Team**. They were able to meet with a member of the team who was blind themselves, giving the student tips and tricks on how to most effectively use the MyLab materials. Carla says, "She was super helpful. She had experience with a screen reader. We had a virtual

meeting, and she walked her through how to navigate MyLab. Had we not had that experience, I don't know if I, as the instructor, could have successfully walked her through that process, so that was an integral part of her success in my class."

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A number of students at West Virginia University use Pearson, and Lisa feels it has been really beneficial for them, saying, "the text-to-speech feature and functionality that they often use is great. They appreciate having that built in. It gives them the ability to go through the material that's not just in the textbook, but also all the external resources. I have had students tell me they really like that."

When Carla encountered her first blind student, she realized she had to explore what accessibility features were already available within her Pearson course materials. She discovered that the homework problems included an icon which would alert the instructor to which ones are accessible to a screen reader. This was extremely helpful for her in order to start the process of accommodating her student. On

the students' side, there is a keyboard shortcuts feature that Carla felt was very helpful for her student.

Considering Pearson's features, Aimee thinks there has been some improvement over the last five to ten years. "I do think Pearson has put some additional resources and supports in place. I was very happy to see that they do have someone who does have a disability working and vetting the material. That has been really positive because they get it from the user perspective, and it's not just the accessibility, the usability is also critical." This improvement in usability is also seen in the newly updated, and more accessible, eTextbooks. Aimee also noticed how navigation was easier for all her students.

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Conclusion

Taking into consideration the needs of your students, listening to your students, and preparing your course well in advance, all contribute to a successful experience, not only for the students with disabilities, but for all students. Faculty should take advantage of the variety of readily available resources and individuals who are proficient in 508 compliance, knowing they are not expected to make their course accessible on their own. We need to keep accessibility at the forefront of thoughts and conversations to ensure that all students are set up for success, right from the start.

Pearson believes that accessibility is critical to ensure that all learners have equal access to educational content. In recognition of the ongoing efforts to advance accessibility in higher ed, Pearson is now a Benetech Global Certified Accessible publisher. This certification recognizes those publishers who produce EPUBs that meet a full range of accessibility features required to support the needs of all readers, including those with disabilities and learning differences.

Learn more about Pearson's Accessibility Guidelines for Higher Education