The following excerpt is based on an interview conducted by Gerry Bayne, EDUCAUSE multimedia producer. To listen to the full podcast, go to <http://www.educause.edu/er/Accessibility>.

Gerry Bayne: What is the current status of universal design and accessibility for those with disabilities in higher education?

Kara Zirkle: It depends on which college or university you're talking about—whether it's a two-year or four-year, private or state, institution and which state it is in—as to whether accessibility falls under state requirements or ADA. For example, the state of Virginia adopted rules and regulations within the last few years requiring state universities and agencies to comply with web accessibility standards. This encouraged George Mason University to be one of the first to hire a full-time individual for IT accessibility. Our Assistive Technology Initiative Office has two full-time and two part-time individuals, and that's simply for the technology side. ATI is under the Office of Equity and Diversity Services, which serves faculty and staff with disabilities. In addition, the staff in the Office of Disability Services are coordinators who advocate for the students. If students want to come to us for assessments, or just to see what technology is available, then they can do that. Learning disabilities is probably one of the most difficult areas, because those are harder to see visually. People with learning disabilities often don't want to self-disclose. So we've tried to use technology in more of a universal design aspect so that they can still get their needs met without having to self-disclose.

Cyndi Rowland: I think there are two separate issues. On the one hand, there is what Kara was just talking about: the campus services provided at a disability resource center, office, or wherever for qualified individuals who self-disclose. And those individuals include employees, I should mention. Those services may not come out of the disability service office, but on every campus that receives federal funds, there is someone whose job it is to make sure that provisions and reasonable accommodations are made for people with disabilities. That's a blanket thing. So the funding status is sort of tricky to determine because each institution has to figure that out on its own.

The other issue is technology access: how is that being treated? Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and under the Americans With Disabilities Act, there are provisions for reasonable accommodations, so one of the things particularly frustrating to individuals with disabilities is after-the-fact fixes of problems. And I think that's where technology is key, because we have the capability of creating an environment where there aren't problems. Then the question is: do colleges and universities take the opportunity that they have, or do they sit back and say: “When we get a complaint, we'll fix it”?

Terrill Thompson: Overall, we advocate for the universal design model. And we do so by focusing on how that benefits everyone, not just a particular group of people with disabilities or even people with disabilities in general. The fact is, there are hidden beneficiaries whenever we build an accessible environment from the ground up.

Bayne: What are some of those hidden beneficiaries?

Thompson: A good example is this podcast, which you mentioned is going to be transcribed. A transcription will benefit people who aren't able to hear the podcast. And it will benefit a lot of other people too—those who might not want to listen to the entire podcast but want to get to the information. They can certainly read the text a lot faster than listening to the audio. Or maybe somebody has low bandwidth and might not be able to stream audio or video; a transcript is going to help those folks too.

Zirkle: Or if we said something particularly earth-shattering thirty minutes into this podcast, because it's also in a text form, it will be searchable and automatically obtainable. That would be another hidden benefit.

Thompson: At the University of Washington, we are gaining a lot of ground related to video, because we have thousands of videos that have been produced. Lecture is very easy to capture now. And we're getting lots of action on YouTube. The university has dozens of independent channels that all represent the University of Washington, through iTunes U. If we caption all of that, we've got full text that's searchable. A user can jump directly to the point in the video where particular content is being spoken. On YouTube, Google is also translating on the
fly into other languages if the video is captioned. If it's not captioned, we lose that capability.

Bayne: What is your approach in talking to faculty?

Thompson: I don’t think we should burden an individual faculty member with a lot of accessibility issues. Faculty need to ensure that their courses are accessible, but they may not have the expertise to do that. They may not have the resources to do that. So we, as an institution, need to identify what sort of supports exist centrally that can help faculty. And we really like to frame accessibility as a support, as a service. We are not here to police the courses or infringe on the academic freedom of faculty. We are here to provide a value-add—a service to help faculty deliver courses using technology in a way that is effective and that enhances teaching and learning for all students, including those with disabilities.

Rowland: We haven’t encountered too many faculty who get upset that if they are going to upload PowerPoint slides, they need to have an accessible PowerPoint slide. Some of the accessibility steps are so simple: using the styles in Word instead of the tab and bold to create a header, for example. For some of the higher-end stuff—if faculty are going to create Flash animation or something like that—they certainly would want to search out the accessibility people on campus so that they can learn how to use the technology the right way.

On those campuses where accessibility is a wide initiative, I think many faculty feel that they are being dumped on, that there aren’t supports for them, that accessibility demands are adding time to their role. I think there are also many faculty who are at their wits’ end trying to make sure that their materials are accessible.

Thompson: Those who are leaders and who are doing innovative things—developing simulations and interactive applications—tend to embrace the challenge of accessibility. Doing so adds another layer, but they don’t perceive it to be burdensome, simply because they embrace challenges in general and want to try to build an application that will work for everybody. So this audience tends to be receptive to the accessibility message.

Rowland: Or again, going back to what you said earlier, Terrill, maybe faculty want to build in accessibility because of the other advantages—such as the fact that typical students can now get content on their cell phone. Or maybe some little tool that a faculty member has just created comes up high on a Google search because, as an accessible element, it’s more standards conformant. There are many reasons that folks get hooked into the idea of using universal design and developing with those principles.

Thompson: The opportunity is right for champions. I’ve seen champions emerge out of nowhere. People who previously had no experience or no interest in accessibility do something really cool, a lot of people look at what they’ve done as a model, and that further reinforces their work.

Zirkle: As much as I agree, I also have to disagree due to situations that don’t fall within the mentioned areas. For example, we have many adjuncts who come in to teach for maybe a semester, and then a year later they will come back. And we have many tenured faculty who have been around forever, and they’re used to the way they teach. So within that aspect, universal design and accessibility does add time, because it’s about learning something new, something different, within a discipline that they don’t teach often or that they’ve taught for ten or more years.

All of this goes back to one of the larger problems in our area: awareness. We have to raise awareness. And that is one of the most difficult issues we face.

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