When Accessibility Doesn’t Make It into the EDUCAUSE Top 10: Turn It Up to 11

The mission of community colleges has always been to serve their communities. As almost every EDUCAUSE Review Connections column has noted, this open-door admission policy reflects the community college value of making postsecondary education an option for anyone, including historically underserved populations. Community colleges strive to accomplish this mission by providing an affordable, flexible, and supportive alternative to the larger public universities and more expensive private colleges and universities. In Washington State, for example, we have worked to support our students’ unique needs and experiences by offering prior learning credit, competency-based certificates, and fully online and low-residency online certificates and degree programs, as well as programs dedicated to first-generation college students and low-level English language learners. Yet as vital discussions around diversity and equity have moved into the spotlight, people with disabilities have frequently remained an afterthought, reflecting an ongoing societal struggle to adequately recognize their rights.

The ways in which staff in various campus departments talk about accessibility further reflect an inconsistency in institutions’ commitment to accessibility. Depending on which stakeholder is speaking, accessibility may be embraced as a civil rights issue, or regarded as risk mitigation, or called (as was the case in a recent posting to a web developers listserv) a “suffocating noose of restrictions upon all the beauty a well-designed and well-built website has to offer,” or—in the worst-case scenario—considered irrelevant and pushed back to staff members in the disability support services office as “their issue.” These reactions, ranging from the appropriate to the offensive to the absurd, may seem better suited to a Christopher Guest mockumentary.

Regardless of how accessibility is regarded, there is consistency when it comes to the frustration that community college leaders face when trying to incorporate the work of “unfunded mandates” into their already short-staffed offices. Budget cuts have left many of e-learning, public information, IT, and disability services offices stretched thin and unable to take on the additional burden of making all digital content accessible. Faculty at community and technical colleges carry larger teaching loads for less pay than faculty at four-year colleges and universities. For full-time faculty, non-instructional work hours are often consumed with advising, participating in institutional governance, and other administrative responsibilities such as scheduling, hiring, and peer evaluations as well as program and curriculum review and development. The heavy reliance on adjunct labor in community colleges only increases the likelihood of a faculty body that has largely been granted the time and resources necessary for learning accessible practices or for evaluating whether or not their increasing reliance on web content and applications is marginalizing a portion of the student body. As a result, this work is done piecemeal—reactively rather than proactively—and often is not done at all.

Another issue community colleges face is relative size. In Washington, the average FTE for our two-year colleges during the 2015–16 academic year was 5,338, compared with 47,006 FTE at the University of Washington. When products or services are based on an FTE cost model, and when discounts deepen the higher the FTE, small institutions are left paying a much higher cost per FTE to implement solutions that support accessibility. And although we are proud of the work done at all community and technical colleges, partnering with a single, small rural college does not have the same appeal to vendors as partnering with an Ivy League or Big 10 school. As a result, when working with vendors or publishers on issues related to accessibility, a community or technical college’s request for accessibility remediation is rarely given the same consideration it would receive if it had come from a larger or more prestigious institution.

In addition to these challenges, research has shown that students with disabilities are more likely to enroll at a community college: “Among students with disabilities, an estimated 54 percent were enrolled at community colleges (Raue & Lewis, 2011), compared to 36 percent in the student population as a whole (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011). Likewise, a recent study of young adults with disabilities indicated they were more than twice as likely to have attended a two-year college at some time after leaving high school (44 percent) than young adults in the general population (21 percent) (Newman et al., 2011).”

Given these realities, when those of us in community college systems see that digital accessibility is yet again missing...
from EDUCAUSE’s annual list of Top 10 IT Issues, we may find ourselves asking why. But more often when we realize that students with disabilities are overrepresented, and potentially underserved, at our institutions, we do not ask why. Instead we ask: “What can we do about it?”

Stakeholders have begun to recognize that digital accessibility is a fundamental aspect of access to information and education and that digital accessibility makes for a better experience for all students. This is often cited as a reason to adopt accessible practices and as a way to align digital accessibility initiatives with the larger community college mission.

Captions are a prime example of how accessible strategies can benefit the populations served by community colleges. Captions visually reinforce vocabulary and spelling for English language learners, international students, and returning adult students encountering new vocabularies. Military veterans are significantly more likely to benefit from captions: according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, those who served between September 2001 and March 2010 were “four times more likely than nonveterans to have SHI [significant hearing impairment].” Captions also support students who are trying to study in a loud household or late at night or who are watching videos on their bus commutes between college and work.

Some of the resource disadvantages that community and technical colleges face can be addressed when colleges harness their system, state, or district identities to approach accessibility as a collective force. For example, whereas the Washington State community college average FTE is 5,338 (noted above), as a system the 2015–16 FTE count was 181,451. That collective FTE count can be a great benefit when looking at products or services where the pricing structure is tiered to reward larger institutions.

Community college systems can further leverage their size and power to collaborate with other higher education institutions and state lawmakers. In Washington, the legislature enacted House Bill 1509, which (1) allowed public institutions of higher education to enter into an interlocal cooperation agreement to jointly develop and utilize purchasing contracts and (2) created the Washington Institutions of Public Higher Education (WIPHE) contracts clearinghouse. This means that any solicitation or contract has the potential, if WIPHE language is included, to be a contract used by all public two- and four-year colleges and universities in Washington State. This makes each of us a very attractive potential client—and one that may have more sway when it comes to requiring that products be made accessible for students, faculty, staff, and community members.

Staffing limitations can also be mitigated through collective efforts. Although many people tasked with leading accessibility efforts must do so while wearing multiple other hats on their campuses, a dedicated position or office at the system, state, or district level can help coordinate collaboration across multiple schools and can represent the power of the collective identity.

A coordinated effort with dedicated staffing can promote efficiency and reduce duplication. However, simply creating a position for an “accessibility person” is not going to get the job done. This position—whether at a central office or on a campus—cannot carry or own the work but must focus on building capacity and expertise across institutions. As a central agency, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges has been able to develop a position, at the system office, dedicated to accessible technology initiatives. This position has been responsible for developing system-wide accessibility training, pulling together all public colleges and universities in the state to identify a vendor for a statewide captioning contract, procuring and subsidizing a system-wide contract for Ally (an accessibility checking and remediation tool), and managing Access360, a cross-functional capacity-building program that has helped to identify opportunities for collaboration and greater centralized support. Lastly, the Committee for Accessible Technology Oversight, composed of Washington State Board staff and of members from community and technical colleges, is working to develop a tool for system-level accessibility compliance testing and tracking, in addition to establishing a trusted tester certification and network to build capacity and distribute testing among the system (and ideally, the larger state).

As national-level conversations continue to take shape around supporting accessibility and sharing resources, community colleges must be included: the issues are too critical to us and to the populations we serve to not have our voices heard. And just as we must insist on being considered as systems in order to build our resources and our capacity for influence, likewise when we consider a list like EDUCAUSE’s Top 10 IT Issues, we must redraw the boundaries. We must collectively blink, stare back, and paraphrase Nigel Tufnel: “But our list goes up to 11.”

**Notes**


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