# Transcript

Teresa Valais

Hi, I'm Teresa Valais senior instructional designer with the Faculty Academic Center of Excellence at Towson University. The purpose of the faculty success, higher Ed Conversations Podcast is to engage faculty in conversations to support professional growth with the aim of enhancing faculty and student success. In our podcast discussion today, we'll talk about course design with accessibility in mind. Let me introduce you to our guests. Brian Williams joined Towson University staff in December 2022. A graduate of Titus Information Systems program, Brian brings a lifelong passion for accessibility and assistive technology to his role as digital accessibility analyst. In his first year as part of the OTS team, Brian has collaborated with the department to improve the accessibility of the TU website and establish a process to review potential campus procurements in the lens of digital accessibility, and Tricia Halstead. Trisha is manager of Blackboard. Administration. She has been with Towson for the past 25 years in the Office of Technology Services. During her time as the manager of Blackboard, she has rolled out many upgrades of the blackboard product, including the recent move to Blackboard Ultra to be completed in fall 2024, and the anthology Ally Accessibility feature Welcome. It's great to. Have you both? With us today. To talk about course design and accessibility.

Brian Williams

Thanks for having us. Always a pleasure to make it down to Cook Library.

Tricia Halstead

Yes, thank you for having.

Teresa Valais

Us. Really. All right, let's start with you, Brian. OK. Can you tell us a little bit about how you got into digital accessibility? And when we talk about? Digital accessibility. What are we talking about?

Brian Williams

We're talking about a large topic that ultimately boils down to providing equal access through digital interfaces. In the context of a university environment, it must be said there were also speaking about legal requirements. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title 2 require universities to provide equal access to people with disabilities across all their operations and naturally digital interfaces. Are included in that these legal requirements exist for great reason. But they could lead to the feeling that accessibility is something that exists solely to benefit people with disabilities, and that is certainly a large pillar of accessibility. But it's important to realize that digital accessibility is largely tied in with user experience in general, and everyone stands to benefit from. Digital accessibility, and that's really true about all types of accessibility. It's clear to see how automatic doors and ramps, instead of staircases leading up to buildings, could benefit someone who uses a wheelchair for navigation. But that's also like a design that could benefit really anyone someone using a stroller? Someone carrying tools, textbooks. Any myriad of possibilities, and these this exists in parallel with digital accessibility features like captioning, clear contrast, text to speech really serve to benefit. Not only disabled people, but the world at large. I would boil down the definition of digital accessibility. To content or interfaces that support individuals and completing key tasks rather than barring them from completing key tasks, and I would add that for anyone listening, accessibility is definitely a journey or a never ending project. At Towson University, we're never going to close the book on accessibility and. Kind of pat ourselves on the back and say, job done, we've created an accessible campus. This is something we're always going to be working to. And I actually have a little story that can kind of highlight some progress that we've made on that front. We actually have a course that's all about teaching our information systems, students about basically blindness and accessibility and creating interfaces, and the legislature surrounding that. And the course was ultimately founded by someone who has, you know, an expertise in the subject matter. So one of his lessons was going to be to essentially go down through the Towson University website with a screen reader, commonly used tool for blind people to navigate the web. And his aim was essentially. To point out all of the deficiencies with the Towson University website that could, you know, bar someone with blindness from using it. Well, and of course he shared these issues with our OS department. So when the time came to actually hold his class and run through this, he ultimately found that the issues had already been remediated, certainly ruined his Lesson plan for the day, but definitely serves to highlight.

Thank you.

Brian Williams

The progress that we've made and we'll continue to. So I guess all that to say that you know this is very much a journey and if maybe you haven't taken the steps to make accessibility part of your you know course creation process today would be a really great time to start and hopefully we can, you know provide some insight as to how. One might do.

Teresa Valais

That so, Brian, how would you suggest someone new to accessibility get started?

Brian Williams

I would say someone who has like little existing knowledge about accessibility. Perhaps our course leaf syllabi service would be a really great spot to start. This is essentially a tool that lets you plug in information about your syllabus and automatically generates a completely accessible. Syllabus experience in both HTML and PDF. There's a whole host of benefits that come with that, but accessibility is definitely at the forefront.

Teresa Valais

Are there pre populated fields in this software application, Brian?

Brian Williams

And some of them will be automatically generated based on your like course requirements and such. So really it's going to be very much a tailor made experience that you can sort of tweak to your liking. You don't have to use all of the suggested fields, but they definitely serve to provide really nice guidance and just making the process so much. Easier than you know sitting down in Word and doing all of your formatting and you know another bonus is that this comes with TU branding so you don't have to spend a single moment worrying about that.

Teresa Valais

I can imagine that links such as institutional policies are kept updated as well.

Brian Williams

We have a a staff that has backed course leave syllabi headed up by Fred Merman. And Fred is very much open to any sort of feedback for changes and ultimately strives to keep this an up-to-date platform that hopefully invites utilization.

Teresa Valais

Speaking of utilization, Fred has mentioned. That he will. Probably be holding some. Drop in Sessions on using the software application in the future would be very helpful.

Brian Williams

Yeah, having spoken to Fred extensively, about course. Leaf syllabi, I I know he's a great resource and can definitely kind of, you know, empower people to really get to know this great platform.

Teresa Valais

So faculty wanting to learn more about syllabi, software can contact syllabi at towson.edu. Let's turn now to Trisha to hear ways accessibility is built into Blackboard Ultra.

Tricia Halstead

So obviously, since COVID happened, we have a lot more faculty using Blackboard for their courses, whether it's online, hybrid or just a web supported. Format and we're also in the process of moving to Blackboard Ultra, which will be completed by fall of 24. And just by moving to Blackboard Ultra, the layout of Blackboard Ultra. Is accessible and it kind of takes care of some of that for you. And not only is it accessible as far as screen reader goes and other options, it's also accessible via your phone via iPad and not just a regular computer. But we also have Blackboard ally which is integrated into all courses. So when a faculty member uploads. Bio two blackboard. They kind of get an ally indicator and it will let them know if their file meets accessibility standards. But it's not. It doesn't stop the file from being uploaded. It doesn't stop the file from being used, but the benefit of it is there's some indicate color indicators will say. There's red, yellow and green. Red obviously being. You need to stop for a minute and look at this file. But if a faculty member clicks on that, it's going to tell them what they need to edit in that file, and it's going to step them through. Exactly how to do that process. So it's very user friendly. It's very. Easy to use. In inside your course. The other thing that we have is panopto for online classes or web support classes, and if you are doing any type of recording for a class you can use panopto. It's integrated into your course. And then there's an auto caption generator, so that's going to automatically caption your video files for you. They can be when you're recording, they can be when you upload, and it's automatically done for you, so you'll have closed captioning on your file.

Teresa Valais

Patricia, one of the. Things that I think is also. Beneficial is that with. Panopto it actually is a repository as well. So faculty will always. Have access to the videos they recorded through panopto. And be able to pull those. Videos into their ultra courses. Is that right?

Tricia Halstead

Yes, that's absolutely correct. And we also have faculty. That share their files. So UM master courses. So we have we offer faculty to use a master shell course. So the benefit of that is it's an empty. Course that you would use to set up your course, but your students are never going to be enrolled in that course in that master course. So you're going to take the time, add your files, set up your layout. You could link your syllabi in there, add your print out to videos, and then you can copy that. So that implies. Or if you as an. Individual want to set up a master shell course, but also for any programs out there that use that are going to use the same. Drills in multiple courses they can use. A master course.

Teresa Valais

A work with a lot of faculty in particular course coordinators. For example public speaking, 20 some sections, and we're actually developing a master course that can then be copied into each of the sections and what that brings along with it is as a template. Now here at FACET and actually. With Blackboard we have templates as resources that are accessible and actually build out the organization for. You know, but also I work with faculty who may want to create their own templates, and that that's very, very helpful in particularly with if you're hiring adjuncts to teach those core sections who may not be as familiar with.

Tricia Halstead

Yes, exactly. It's all set up for them. The courses can be copied over into multiple sections and it can be done semester after semester. So you always kind of. With that clean slate of your files for you, so the other benefit that I wanted to mention with Blackboard Ally is that for students, so once a faculty member uploads a file, students have multiple options to view that file. So just opening the file and viewing it in Microsoft Word. Ally has different download features, so there's a beeline reader and that kind of does a gradient text and you can read along and the gradient kind of changes as you're reading, reading along with the document. So it. Kind of helps you speed up and stay on track as you're reading.

Teresa Valais

I can imagine that. That's very helpful. There's certain types of disabilities. For example, maybe dyslexia.

Tricia Halstead

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely, yeah. And you can also download a file as an audio file. So say you're the type of learner that just likes to listen to your files as opposed to read them. You can download it and you know, play it through your headphones and listen to the file that's been.

Teresa Valais

Uploaded what I like about the audio file Trisha is that that's the the whole premise here. With accessibility it is accessibility for. All for those who do have disabilities, but also the benefits are to those who. Don't that downloading of the audio file is. Just perfect for today's on-the-go learner, right?

Brian Williams

Absolutely, yeah. Personally, that's the type of thing where if it was available to me, it's something I'd be seeking out every time. And another great feature is that it supports the downloading of Braille files as well, which ensures. Complete compatibility with anyone who uses like a A Braille output device.

Teresa Valais

Well, Trisha, how? Do people contact you or get in contact with you? And what are the resources that you have to offer?

Tricia Halstead

Yeah, so we have lots of resources. The easiest way to get ahold of us is to e-mail us at Blackboard. It tells them that Edu that's the easiest way, but we also have resources after you log into Blackboard. On the left hand side, you just click on my institution and you can find all of our support resources and multiple ways of contacting us from there.

Teresa Valais

Wonderful. Thank you. So now we're going to shift the discussion to ways that FACET supports faculty. In accessibility and course design, we do this in multiple ways to all the key ways we help faculty is in the. Eligibility to teach online and new online course development training that we provide instructional designers work closely with faculty, providing them with tools and templates and resources to develop and support their courses while infusing best practices. FACET supports faculty integration of accessibility as a fourth thought. In course design rather than an afterthought, we partner with ADS and Blackboard to support faculty in meeting institutional accessibility AIDS. So FACET recently rolled out the course design with accessibility in mind. self-paced workshop. This workshop focuses on accessibility essentials such as fonts, headings, links, color and contrast, image alt tags. Tables media and accessible documents and software that is actually integrated into Blackboard that has built in accessibility. I'd also like to. Share with you a recent contribution from an accessibility librarian named Amy Wolfe in the CUNY central system. She says it's important to think about making your course, materials and assignments as accessible as possible to as many different people as possible right from the start. It's proactive inclusion instead of reactive accommodation. And that's something that we focus on in the workshop. We help faculty learn about usability best practices that lead to accessibility. And when we think about usability, we're talking about. Designing the course so it's easy for all learners to accomplish the tests needed to be successful that involves. Ease of use. So they can navigate the course without frustration or difficulty and a a design that allows all users the ability to complete tasks if needed. Accessibility ensures all people, regardless of ability, can interact with the information or services you provide. Some of the takeaways faculty have shared with us who have participated in the accessibility workshop. Are consider all learners from the start when designing your course. The use of UDL is a proactive design, so all learners have equal access. Include headers and brief descriptions of images using alt tags. And the take away was how to use different accessibility tools like Ally to make course content more accessible. And the still advice software to update their syllabus. And one testimonial I'd. Like to share is. I have learned that you can't do everything in one semester, so I'm going to work on accessible documents, including updating my syllabus using the software. The syllabi. Software. In sharing videos have captions and transcripts and utilizing the Ultra accessibility tool to help me in the process. In a recent publication titled Guide to Digital Accessibility Policies, Practices, and Professional Development. Contributing authors talked about the importance of an accessibility and inclusive design professional development strategy that calls for quote shifting the paradigm from accessibility as an accommodation practice to a tacit convention of effective teaching. And learning End Quote. This circles back to the notion that you don't need to be an accessibility expert to make strides in making your course content more accessible. One of the drivers for this podcast was an experience I had this past spring. Working with faculty who had received an ADS remote learning accommodation mid semester. For instructional designers, accessibility is always for ended. In other words, accessibility is built into the design of the course. I work with faculty on ways to remediate for accessibility and also provided support steps to ensure accessibility is built into the course. Next go around. A suggestion I have for generating accessible digital content is to consider building content directly in your course instead of uploading content files. This practice is especially helpful for assignment descriptions where students in online courses often access the course for just in time information using their mobile devices. Another easy solution is to use the Ultra content editor style headings and tables to build accessible content directly in Ultra rather again than uploading the file. The benefit is that having contact directly on the ultra page gives students the ability to scroll using their mobile devices, reducing the time and effort it would take to download the file and scroll through the pages of the document. Of course, there are times when a file does need to be uploaded to your course. It is better to convert the file to an accessible PDF, as PDF's are more compatible with most types of assistive technology, which means that your content from the start will be accessible to students who have disabilities. This is an example of proactive, accessible design, and there are other options that can be discussed in FACET instruction design consultations. A recap of a few accessibility resources available to faculty or the FACET course design with accessibility in mind. self-paced workshop are one-on-one instructional design consultations. And the syllabi software video tutorial for support. So the key takeaways in course design are course design with accessibility in mind. Benefits all students, not just students with disabilities. Proactive, inclusive practice that requires shifting from accessibility as a reactive accommodation process to thoughtful intentional. Accessible course design from the start. To reiterate something that Brian said, you don't have to have an accessibility need to benefit from alternative formats. And faculty have tools and supports available to them, including steps to the process to optimize accessibility. So before we wrap up. I wanted to ask Brian and Trisha, is there anything else you wanted to add?

Brian Williams

We welcome to you faculty to check out the syllabi software information page through my to you, or simply just by contacting Syllabi at towson.edu.

Tricia Halstead

And I think I just want to. Reiterate, as we've all said, is the softwares are very easy to use, it's easy to understand to step through. There's no rush as much as it is a learning experience for everybody. And as Brian has said, it benefits everyone. It doesn't you don't have, you don't have to. Have that need. To use any of these products and softwares, it makes life easier and better. For all of your students.

Teresa Valais

I look forward to embracing. Faculty with this as well. And then finally, for support with accessible course design, contact asset at bassett@towson.edu. We want to thank our podcast guest, Brian Williams and Trisha Halstead for today's course design with accessibility in mind. Your contributions in body, our FACET by faculty for faculty tagline into our audience. We'd like to thank you for tapping into our faculty success, higher Ed Conversations podcast series. The FACET Podcast series generates conversations on important topics that support faculty, professional growth, and student success at Towson University.