ONLINE COURSE ACCESSIBILITY: COLLABORATION FOR CHANGE AT CUNY SPS

Antonia Levy & Christopher Leydon

Accessing Higher Ground 2015
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Presentation Summary

• Drawing on recent experience at the CUNY School of Professional Studies, the presenters will outline practical collaborative approaches to improving accessibility of online instruction in the setting of a public institution of higher education.*

• *Please note that this presentation describes initiatives that are not complete, but are instead works in progress.
The City University of New York (CUNY)

- 7 Community Colleges
- 12 Senior Colleges
- 7 Graduate / Professional Schools
  - CUNY School of Professional Studies
CUNY School of Professional Studies (CUNY SPS)

- Founded 2003, degree programs launched 2006
- 2,700 students (as of Fall 2015)
- Mix of certificate, advanced certificate, bachelor’s degree, and master’s degree programs, plus non-credit workforce development programs
- Almost all undergraduates are transfer students, typically working adults, attending fully online courses
- Almost all faculty are adjuncts, many of whom are either instructors on other campuses or working practitioners who teach part-time
Disability Studies at CUNY SPS

- Graduate Certificate in Disability Studies
- MA in Disability Studies
- BA in Disability Studies (fully online)
- Online tracks added for MA and Graduate Certificate (Fall 2013)
- MS in Disability Services in Higher Education (fully online, Spring 2016)
- AT Certificate (coming soon…)

University-wide accessibility groups

• Council on Student Disability Issues (COSDI)
• Central Office of Student Affairs (COSA)
• CUNY IT Accessibility Task Force
• Strategic Technology Accessibility Initiative (STI)
• CUNY Accessibility Working Group (Blackboard administrators)
Council On Student Disability Issues (COSDI)

- Founded in response to the Rehab Act of 1973
- 19 CUNY campus directors of student disability services currently participate and attend monthly meetings
- COSDI funds three special projects
  - CUNY Assistive Technology Services (CATS)
  - Media Access Project (MAP)
  - LD Project (learning disabilities)
- COSDI participates in New York State Disability Services Council (NYSDSC), which is now an AHEAD affiliate
- Reasonable Accommodations
Reasonable Accommodations: A Guide to Teaching Students with Disabilities
CUNY Central Office Division of Student Affairs (COSA)

- Collaborates with COSDI, liaison attends meetings
- 4 former COSDI members on COSA staff
- Performs audits of campus disability services offices
- Works with CUNY Coalition of Students with Disabilities to develop student leaders and encourage advocacy
- 2 special projects to support students with disabilities:
  - CUNY LEADS (Linking Employment, Academics, and Disability Services) career counseling for students with disabilities
  - Project REACH (Resources and Education on Autism as CUNY’s Hallmark)
- Full-time staff member working on D/HOH services
Here’s the Old News:

“Developments in online learning can present opportunities for a more inclusive education for students with disabilities… The same developments, however, can pose further barriers to those with disabilities.” (Pearson & Koppi, 2002)
Collaboration on Campus

“Collaborative relationships between instructional faculty, staff, college administrators, and students with disabilities create an atmosphere where everyone’s input is valued. This collaborative atmosphere can help determine the most effective instructional and support strategies and resolve issues that may arise when educating students with disabilities in higher education.”

(Finn, Getzel, Asselin, & Reilly, 2008)
Collaboration in Online Instruction

“Furthermore, distance-learning offices working in conjunction with disability services, students with disabilities and instructional design specialists to develop standards for course accessibility will ensure that all online courses and degree programs are accessible to all users not just those with disabilities.”

(Roberts, Crittenden, & Crittenden, 2011)
Universal Design and Disability Services

“The expansion of the concepts of UD into education has been instrumental in the evolution of disability services as well as instruction in higher education. When a disability office adopts a UD philosophy—that access for all leads to equality of opportunity and experience and a reduced need for individual accommodations—its role and engagement with campus constituents changes. Marginalization and separate treatment are reduced or even eliminated when the experience of students or faculty members with and without disability is equivalent.”

(Ashmore & Kasnitz, 2014)
Tailor the message: Administration

- Risk Management: University administrators must have all heard about the lawsuits by now
- May need major points of consent decrees explained
- Like it when you bring money in through grants, etc.
- Never have enough funding to do more than the bare minimum for compliance
- Want to do the right thing—or be seen to be doing the right thing—but don’t plumb the depths of their souls
- May be receptive to a case for accessibility promoting retention (student success) and recruiting (marketing)
Tailor the message: Faculty

• Typically faculty do not like being told what to do
• Always overworked already, whether exploited adjuncts or tenure track professors
• Possibly legitimate concerns about contractual obligations and academic freedom
• May respond to appeals to ideals of social justice and inclusiveness (access is part of CUNY mission)
• Move from face-to-face into online instruction is an opportunity to consider new pedagogical concepts
• UDL is good pedagogy and it goes beyond SWDs
Universal Design in Learning (UDL)

• Making all aspects of education accessible to the widest possible range of students.

• Designing all instructional practices:
  • equitable & flexible,
  • simple & intuitive,
  • tolerant & accessible to the greatest extent possible.

• Inclusive for a variety of life experience, knowledge, skills and abilities, learning styles / preferences, concentration level, etc.
UDL as good pedagogy

- UDL principles as integral part of online course design, implementation, and teaching

- Consider diversity of learners, e.g.
  - Intellectual / physical disabilities
  - Learning styles
  - Adult learners, etc.

- Provide various means of
  - Representation
  - Engagement
  - Expression

- Raise awareness of faculty, staff, and students
Communication via multiple media

“Offering [faculty training resources in] different formats not only models the use of universal design techniques but also helps to address the challenge of faculty and staff finding time to participate in professional development activities.”

(Finn, Getzel, Asselin, & Reilly, 2008)
Reaching the Faculty (1)

- CUNY Accessibility Conference (April 2014, May 2015)
- Faculty Development Day (April 2015)
- “The UD Nosh: Your Monthly Tidbit of Inclusivity” (feature in faculty/staff e-newsletter Snapshots)
- Presentation at monthly meeting of CUNY SPS Deans and Directors (October 2015)
- Accessibility as Good Pedagogy: Universal Design for Inclusive Learning (Dec. 2015 webinar)
- CUNY IT Conference (Dec. 2014, December 2015)
Reaching the Faculty (2)

• Include UDL tips in PTO Workshop (CUNY-wide facilitated faculty training for online instructors)
• UDL-focused faculty training and workshops at SPS
  • e.g. Faculty Development Day 2015
  • Quick guides for captioning and document accessibility
• Accessibility requirements included in course review rubric for newly developed courses
• Developing a grant-funded, self-paced online faculty training workshop, eventually to be scaled up for University-wide use
Progress to date

- Standing collaboration between Student Disability Services and Faculty Development/Instructional Technology (with Disability Studies as an ally)
- Hired AT assistant to address Blackboard / screen reader interface issues and create training materials for students
- Increased awareness around video captioning (marketing, faculty created, third party) leading to formation a new ad hoc group working to find solutions
- Campus Accessibility Committee formed after Deans & Directors presentation
Initiatives in progress or planning

• Additional modes of communication with faculty
• New incentives for faculty development
  • Carrots such as free software, remuneration, awards
  • Sticks such as holding up course approval process
• Include students with disabilities in the discussion
• Assessment and evaluation of various efforts
• SPS Accessibility Steering Committee
  • Tasked with overhauling policies and procedures
  • Form subcommittees to address particular areas
  • Perform accessibility audit of campus
• Develop an accessibility plan for the School
Christopher Leydon
Student Services Coordinator
christopher.leydon@cuny.edu

Antonia Levy
Instructional Technology & Multimedia Manager
antonia.levy@cuny.edu