Collaboration Benefits Student Success: Bringing text-to-speech software to the broader student body

Prepared by Lisa Bibeau and Jenny McDowell

About Us

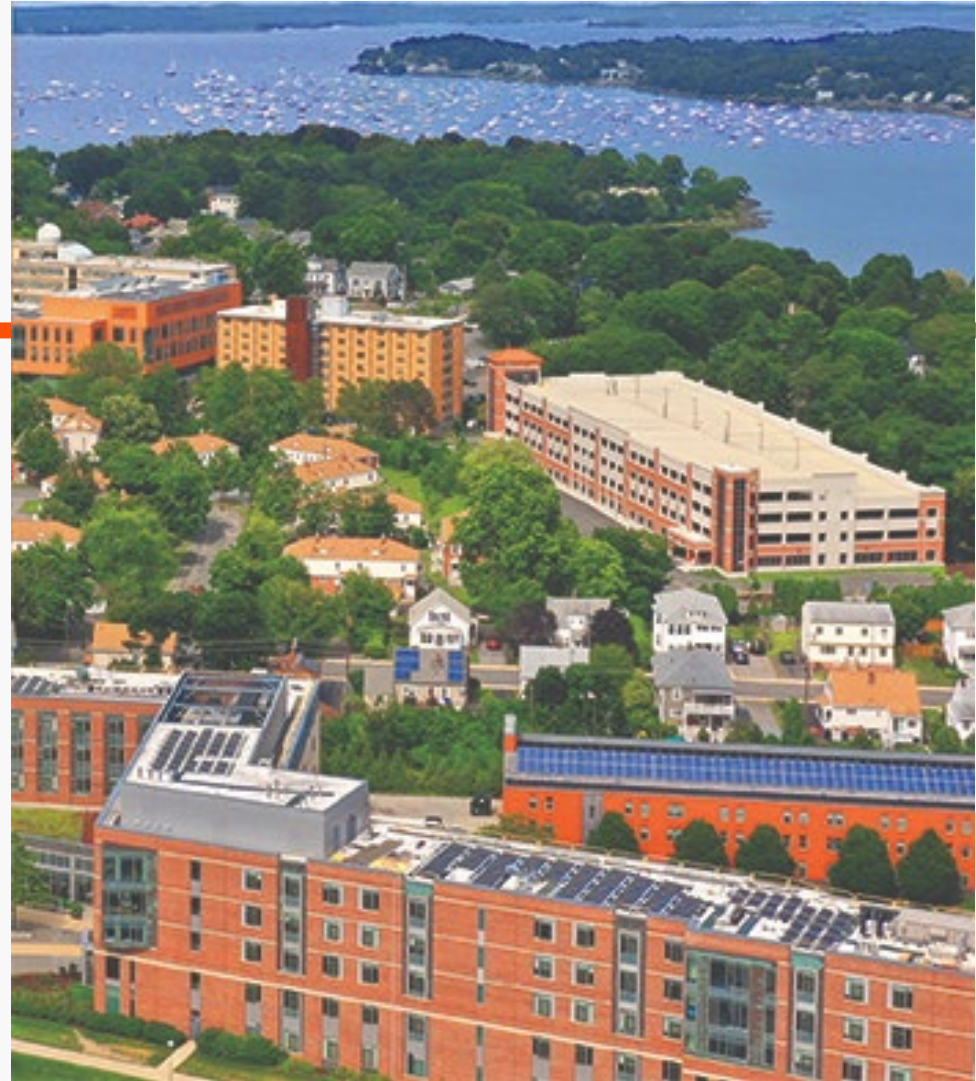Lisa Bibeau, Assistant Dean for Student Success in Disability Services

Worked at Salem State 21 years

Jennifer McDowell, Assistant Director, Alternative Text Specialist

Worked at Salem State 16 years, in Disability Services for 12 years

SALEM STATE UNIVERSITY

- Public regional university north of Boston

- ~5,000 undergraduate /
  ~1,500 graduate students

- 900 first-year students Fall 2022

- 95%+ of undergraduates qualify for financial aid and 50% are Pell-eligible

- 40% of undergraduates identify as students of color

- Emerging Hispanic Serving Institution

- 35-50% of undergraduates are first-gen

About Our Office

MEET THE TEAM!   Disability Services

Lisa Bibeau
Assistant Dean of Student
Success and Disability
Services

Joe Kelleher
Assistant Director

Jennifer McDowell
Assistant Director

Tim Erickson-Oberg
Staff Assistant

Emily Bradley
Staff Associate

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How Did We Get Here?

For 10 years the alt text accommodation supported a small portion of our student population

A student worker (or grad student) would handle scanning books when needed

The student workers also tracked requests and fulfillment of the requests

- We had bookmarks for students sharing free text-to-speech programs to use to read PDFs.

- As demand for this accommodation grew, and we lost a long-time student worker to graduation, tracking requests became a shared responsibility of the staff

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Alternative Text Specialist

- Eventually, in 2015, we received a grant from the Tower Foundation to create and fund an Alternative Text Specialist position for 2 years.

- Jenny (front desk/office manager at the time) applied for and started that position in September 2015.

PDFs

- At the time Jenny started, PDFs were most of the focus

- Most work time was spent contacting publishers, scanning books, tracking and fulfilling requests.

- A few trainings were done with students on free text-to-speech programs

Our History with Text-to-Speech Software

- We were fortunate enough to receive a gift from a donor that we used to purchase a universal site license for Read&Write by TextHelp.
  - We have since also added Equatio and OrbitNote
- This allowed for a more focused outreach to all SSU's students around 1 program everyone could use
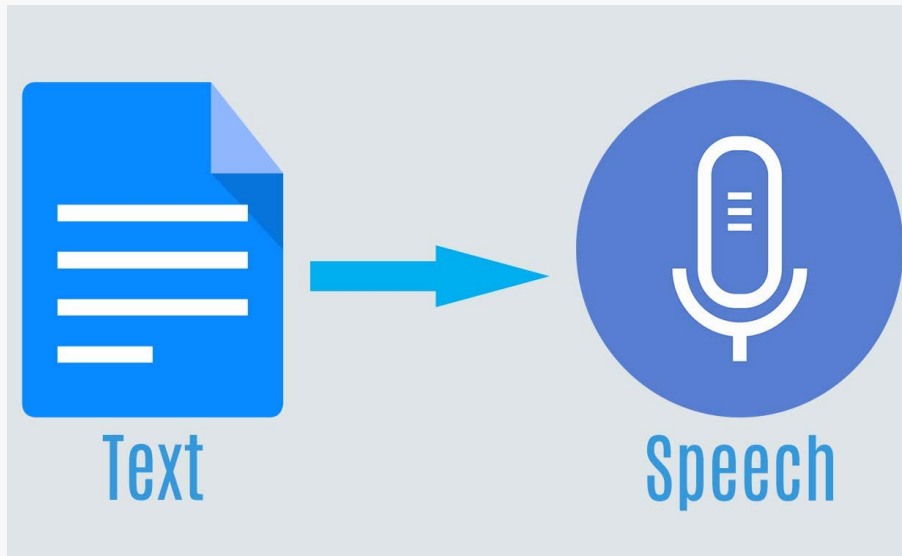
Increased Student Trainings

- Increased focus on referring students to a one-on-one training.
- There were initially in person when the student would learn how to use text-to-speech programs
- These continue to this day, but now we have also moved to offer training over zoom to reach more students

Viking Toolbelt

Text → Speech

- With the help of IT, we developed a Canvas course to provide additional academic resources for students.

- This gave us a central page to direct students to for download instructions, resources, videos, and more

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Collaborative Partners

Once that central location was established, we began building partnerships with other offices on campus to try and push Test-to-Speech programs out to the campus community

- First year seminars
- Writing Center
- Tutoring

First year seminars

- Presentations to faculty at trainings and bootcamps for First Year Seminar faculty
- Participating in these faculty development opportunities allowed us to talk about these programs and how it could fit into their courses

Writing Center

- Student driven, practicum course for future writing tutors

- Teach one class each semester to the practicum cohort, focused on inclusive practices but also using text-to-speech software in the editing and writing process

- Meetings and demonstrations with writing center staff.

Tutoring

- Brought into two-week training program for tutors to talk about inclusion each year for new and returning tutors.

Even with all those plans, meetings, and trainings, we were not getting anyone very interested in utilizing Text-to-Speech programs outside of our immediate office

Accuplacer problem… momentum starting

- Accuplacer Reading and Math exams are proctored at orientation for incoming students.

- Students registered with our office would often use a text-to-speech accommodation for the Accuplacer Reading test.

- Many students were struggling to pass the reading test, which was a requirement for graduation

Students failing reading test

- Many students without a diagnosed reading disability would struggle to pass this exam, which brought it to the attention of the Associate Provost.

- As the AP became more aware of this, she brought together a task force to think through solutions.

- Moving away from deficit model, the idea of using Text-to-Speech programs became more exciting to the group

- We started to produce a plan internally to push these programs out to the general population, which lead to new office initiatives.

Sustainable, without straining staff

- With the taskforce it became apparent we wanted to start pushing out more training opportunities for the general populations.
  - But we wanted to do this in a way that didn't overbook/overwork the two staff who did all the trainings for the students registered with our office.
- So we found some students to help
- Undergraduate student Intern building presentations (last spring and summer)
- Drop-in hours with the student intern(s) for students to come by to learn or troubleshoot the programs during this academic year

IS SUCH A THING EVEN POSSIBLE?
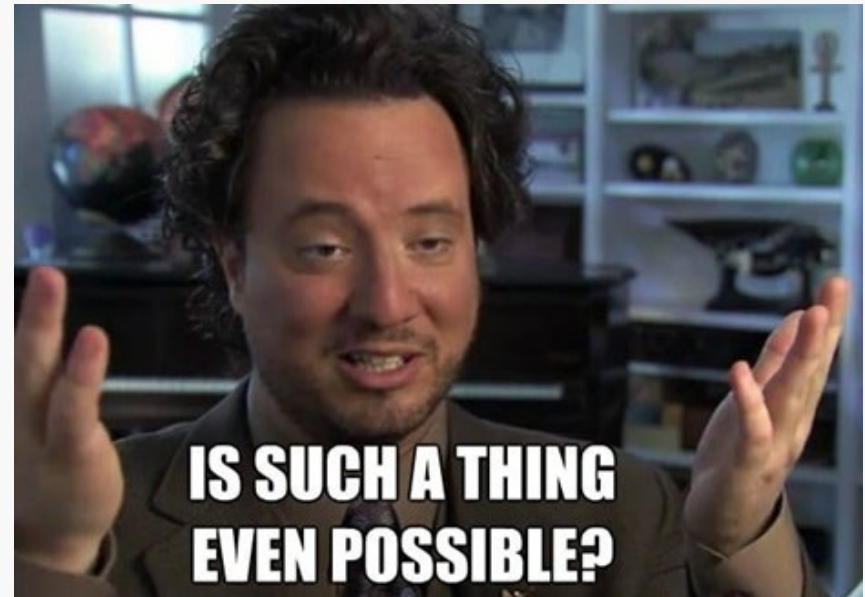
Where are we now

- We started working with the library to make sure there were more OER/electronic resources available to all students (that were compatible and would work with Text-to-Speech programs)
- Working with student organizations and student government
- Partner with different departments first year courses
- Hoping to build a larger team of students who can train and increase drop-in hours/availability for the general population

Transition Planning

- While acknowledging the difference between a high-end software program and built-in accessibility functions within computer/smart devices, it became important to us that students leaving the university have a 'transition plan' for their technology related to reading needs for when they graduate.

- Talking to juniors and seniors about learning features built-in to their own devices to help transition post-graduation

- Opportunities for trainings their senior year, work with career services to think about specific needs.

- Academic strategies become life strategies

Looking to the Future - CAAR Center

- Department structure change to now encompass all areas of academic support with a focus on reading
- The development of the Center for Accessibility and Academic Resources, CAAR, brings supplemental instruction, tutoring, the university testing center, and disability services under one center
- It promotes a centralized and streamlined approach to support services, making it easier for students to access the resources they need
- This integration allows for better coordination and collaboration among the various support services
  - tutors can be aware of specific accommodations needed by students with disabilities
  - supplemental instructors can incorporate strategies recommended by disability services into their sessions
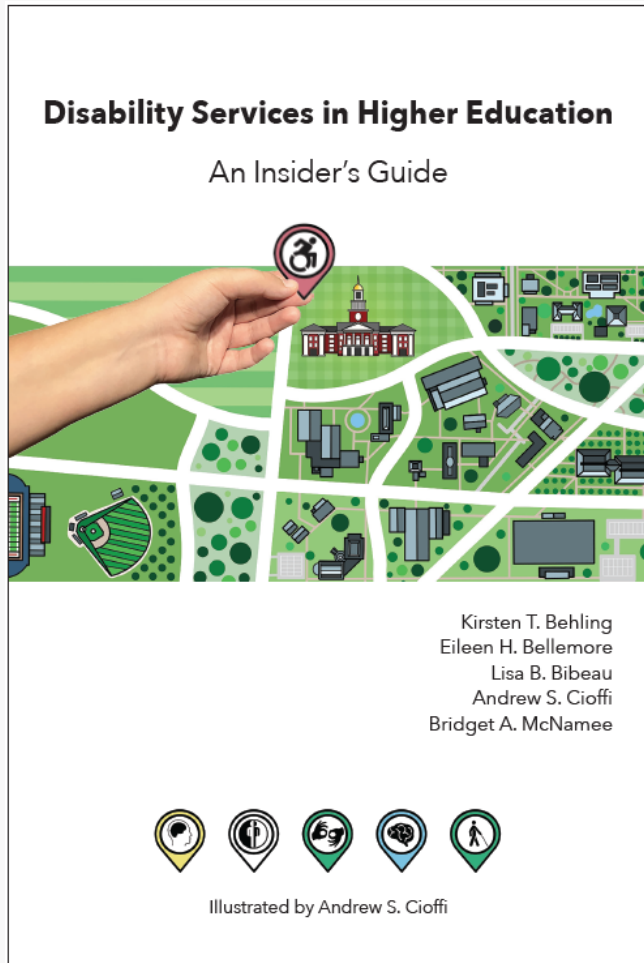
THANK YOU!

Any questions?

Feel free to contact us-

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- Lisa: lbibeau@salemstate.edu

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For additional resources…

Disability Services in Higher Education

An Insider's Guide

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Bridget A. McNamee

Illustrated by Andrew S. Cioffi

Disability Services in Higher Education is the first comprehensive guide for people working in the field of ADA compliance in higher education. The authors examine how disabilities are supported to ensure students receive appropriate accommodations throughout their collegiate experience as well as provide guidance on overall campus accessibility.

This practitioner-friendly book will help newcomers and seasoned professionals explore and evaluate best practices in the field through questions, examples, and functional job aids available for immediate use.