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The R.I.S.E. Guide to Making Course Materials that are Accessible to Students

Introduction

A great way to foster students' sense of inclusion and belonging is to make course materials that are accessible to all students. This means taking the necessary steps to ensure that all students, regardless of disability status, do not encounter barriers when accessing course material. Ensuring your course materials are accessible to students of varying abilities is a great way to create a welcoming environment for all.

You might be thinking the following: *I only need to worry about accessibility when a student has requested accommodations. If my students have not requested accommodations, they do not have a disability or condition that could hinder their learning and participation in my course, right?* This is not necessarily true. "An estimated 19% of undergraduates - more than two million - report having some type of disability" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). However, these numbers are misleading, since researchers estimate that approximately 60-80% of undergraduates choose not to disclose a disability (Wynn, 2021).

Given that many students choose not to disclose a disability, we should not wait until we receive an accommodation request to implement accessibility measures. Research shows that **making our courses more accessible will benefit all students** (Tobin & Behling, 2018). As much as possible, we should strive to ensure that all students have equal access to learning materials, resources, and environments.

For more information about students with disabilities in higher education, see the following:

- The National Center for College Students with Disabilities (NCCSD): General Statistics about College Students with Disabilities and Disability Resource Offices
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES): Fast Facts

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Explanation

Many believe that making course materials more accessible is a huge undertaking and very time consuming. While it does take time, keep in mind that you do not have to do everything all at once. Start small! A very easy first step to ensuring that your course materials are accessible is to use the Check Accessibility functions embedded in Microsoft Office. After reviewing your documents, the Accessibility Checker flags items that students may find problematic and offers suggestions to fix them.

- How to make a Word doc accessible
- How to make a PowerPoint accessible
- How to make an Excel file accessible

Adding captions to video is another great way to increase accessibility for a variety of students. While some think captions are only beneficial for students with hearing impairments, that is not the case. Research has found that many students, including those without impairments, use captioning to help them learn the course conte and to focus (Linder, 2016). See the following resources for the results of a national study on students' perceptions of captioning and for tips on adding caption to video:

- College Student Uses and Perceptions of Closed Captions and Transcripts (video)
- Institutional Solutions for and Student Perceptions of Closed Caption and Transcript Use in Institutions of Higher Education (research)
- Quick Start to Captioning
- Creating Accessible Videos

 *Note: If you upload a video to YouTube, it will be automatically captioned.

Other simple ways to make materials more accessible include reconfiguring tables, embedding hyperlinks in the text (as we have done throughout this guide) rather than pasting in the URL as text, and creating accessible PDFs.

Finally, as you prepare your Canvas shells for upcoming courses, take a look at the following resources to ensure that you are not unintentionally creating barriers for your students:

- General Accessibility Design Guidelines for Canvas
- Accessibility with Canvas
- Creating Accessible Electronic Content

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Please know that this brief guide is just the beginning. If you have questions or wish to learn more ways to make your courses accessible, please contact your R.I.S.E. scholar, Jeremy Keye in Accessibility Services, Lindenwood Online, or the Learning Academy.

Let's plan!

Choose a course that you would like to make more accessible and take a close look at the course format and materials. Keeping in mind the information reviewed above, use some of the checkers listed below to see how you could improve the accessibility of the course. Remember, the goal is to ensure that all students have equal access and do not encounter barriers to the course material. Start small and increase your efforts as time goes on!

- Course Accessibility Checklist: A Promising Practice in Helping Instructors Create Accessible Online Learning Courses
- USFSP Distance Learning Accessibility Checklist
- Basic Checklist: Online Content Accessibility
- SLU Online Course Accessibility Checklist

We hope that the information on this strategy encouraged you to make your courses more accessible as a way to foster students' sense of inclusion and improve student learning outcomes. If you have any questions or wish to receive feedback on your ideas for the practice activity, please contact your R.I.S.E. scholar or the Learning Academy.

References

Linder, K. (2016). Student uses and perceptions of closed captions and transcripts: Results from a national study. Oregon State University Ecampus Research Unit.

Nilson, L., & Goodson, L. (2018). *Online teaching at its best: Merging instructional design with teaching and learning research*. Jossey-Bass.

Tobin, T., & Behling, K. (2018). *Reach everyone, teach everyone: Universal Design for learning in higher education*. West Virginia University Press. **AVAILABLE THROUGH THE LEARNING ACADEMY LIBRARY**

Wynn, T. (2021). *Designing with accessibility in mind* [Workshop]. Online Learning Consortium.

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