

Student Success in the Faculty Center for Teaching and Learning

FCTL Success Story: The Blackboard Student Practice Course for the ATC

This past spring we sat down with Megan Shadrick, Associate Director Disability Resource Center, to discuss some of the issues of student accessibility in learning. During this conversation it was mentioned that students in the Access Technology Center (ATC), particularly those with visual impairments, incur a lot of stress in the beginning of a semester because of the use of learning platforms like Blackboard. For some students this is their first experience in college, first experience with a screen reading software like JAWS, and their first experience using a learning platform to like Blackboard to access course materials.

While there is a lot of discussion around making learning accessible, unfortunately it is not always at the forefront of our minds when we are developing content. In fact, we often do not consider the potential barriers until we have a student who needs an



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accommodation. Faculty are not to blame, there are workshops that talk about universal design and the need to make content accessible but unfortunately not on how to do some of the very simple things that would actually make courses more accessible – not just for students served by the ATC but for all students.

After our discussion with Megan it was proposed that the ATC students might benefit from a Blackboard course that was built specifically to prepare them for what to expect when navigating an online platform. My thought was to address this problem from both sides – first by focusing on creating a Blackboard tutorial to better prepare students before classes begin.

The tutorial, which is now available, is not a how-to with Blackboard, although there are some instructions included on the most common tools. It is a “what to expect” as a student; with tips specifically added for students with visual impairments. The tutorial will allow a visually impaired student opportunity to practice using screen reading software in Blackboard in order to test how the most common functions operate prior to them accessing their actual courses.

Working with the ATC in the development of the tutorial has produced a product that will not only be a benefit to their students but it will also benefit the FCTL as we continue our relationship and begin to develop



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professional development activities for faculty, focusing on universal design, in which we can identify common barriers for students and then show faculty how they can easily eliminate most of these barriers. It has been a valuable and eye-opening project and I am very thankful to Megan and her staff for working with us and look forward to continued collaborations.

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