brightspace™
by D2L

Five-star accommodation

A university with a good reputation for accessibility discovers that it's missing the mark online—dramatic change ensues

Overview

It had always been a point of pride—Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) enjoyed a reputation for offering the most in accessibility. When it came to online learning, however, feedback was less than glowing. Students and faculty who needed accommodations, particularly the visually impaired, were regularly calling for help. Unfortunately, the platform used by SFASU made it impossible to resolve the recurring issues. Determined to reverse the situation, they set out to find a learning platform that would meet their accessibility requirements. In order to get it right, they asked for help from those who would benefit the most: students and faculty.

For demonstrating how partnerships and technology can make education more available to more learners, SFASU won the 2014 Desire2EXCEL Award for Accessibility.

AT A GLANCE

Client	SFASU
Students	almost 13,000
Level	Post-secondary[1] and Professional Development
Solutions	Brightspace Online and Blended Learning solution

CHALLENGE:

- Solve problems at the root of online accessibility complaints
- Improve quality of accommodation
- Be proactive in matters of online accessibility
- Protect SFASU's reputation as an accessibility leader

SOLUTION:

- Find a platform with greater accommodation functionality
- Allow end-users to have input in platform choice
- Create a dedicated support team
- Provide faculty training in accessibility

RESULT[2]:

- Significant reduction in complaint calls requiring administrative and tech support
- More resources available for new accessibility projects
- Re-established position as an accessibility leader
- Time savings for students and faculty

[1] Undergraduate, Graduate, Professional Degree, and Certificate
[2] Results provided by SFASU

Challenge

THEY KNEW THEY COULD DO BETTER

"SFASU is known regionally as being a little more friendly to students with disabilities than perhaps the huge institutions," says Janet Kamps, Coordinator, Distance Education at SFASU. "Yet we would receive calls from frustrated students and faculty, informing us certain components of our online courses weren't accessible."

Kamps was frustrated, too. "The platform we were using didn't provide the necessary support so sometimes we were simply unable to make aspects of an online course accessible. The main problem was with screen readers," she says about the application that assists individuals with low vision or who are blind by reading aloud content and navigational tools. "Sometimes you would get to a link and it would just say 'link,' so the student wouldn't know what it was for."

As their contract with the current platform provider was coming to a close, there was an opportunity to find a better fit: "Plain and simple, this time it had to be accessible."

THE VALUE OF WALKING THE WALK

Why take accessibility so seriously? "It's an institutional commitment that stems from our University's beginnings as a teachers' college," says Kamps. "Helping all students learn is a foundational pillar. We teach our teachers who go out into the K–12 environment that they must be equipped to help students who need accommodations. What that means for us as a university is that we had better practice what we preach, walk the walk." Accessibility isn't a matter of solving problems, explains Kamps. It's about ensuring problems don't happen. "SFASU has taken the position that we will be proactive. This commitment to students is in our DNA. We are going to help them have the most positive learning experience possible while they're taking courses here."

THE NEED TO PROVIDE A SEAMLESS EXPERIENCE

Having the right technology is only half the battle. "One of our major goals at the University is to create a seamless experience for students who need support services for their online experiences," she says. "Someone who reaches out for help must never hear, 'oh sorry, that's not my job.' We all have to be ready to help."

She adds, "Taking responsibility for accessibility is foundational here—it's something we all do."

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"You have to think about the student's experience and imagine what they face and you can tell D2L does that by the way the page is laid out. Nothing is too small or bunched together so that if a person has difficulty manipulating a mouse they won't accidentally hit the wrong button. They've thought everything through."

Janet Kamps, Coordinator, Distance Education
Stephen F. Austin State University

Solution

ENTHUSIASTIC SUPPORT FOR BRIGHTSPACE

Kamps, who helped lead the search for an accessible platform in 2011, knew the best judges would be those students and faculty with disabilities. She assembled a team and had them take Brightspace for a test drive.

She was taken aback by their enthusiastic support: "I asked what was behind the wonderful reaction and they told me that when they used a screen reader on Brightspace they could get to everything. D2L has put an enormous amount of time and effort into making sure buttons and links are labeled correctly so they work with screen readers, and it makes a big difference."

There was praise, too, for the audio capability for feedback on Brightspace. Kamps tells us it comes in "very handy" for faculty members who have students with processing issues: "It provides the option of giving verbal feedback to students who understand better that way."

A DEDICATED TEAM AND COLLABORATION

Confident that they had chosen the right platform, the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at SFASU pushed the envelope even further and created a dedicated student support team that was well versed in accessibility matters. "What a student needs on a day-to-day basis, such as getting a screen reader to read email right, those kinds of things go to our Brightspace support team," says Kamps.

Being proactive, though, requires planning—and that takes collaboration. To that end, the CTL has reached out to Office of Disability Studies (ODS) to create a partnership. "We meet formally at least once a month to keep track of our successes and our challenges," says Kamps. "It's very useful because when students go to ODS they may need one kind of accommodation, and then need something else from us. If we all work together it's a smoother process."

Solution continued

MULTIPLE WAYS TO PROVIDE THE RIGHT KIND OF HELP

A key feature of SFASU's accessibility plan is providing a variety of channels for support. If you need help you can pick up the phone, send an email, or visit a website to watch video tutorials created to address SFASU's unique course needs. All the bases are covered.

"We wanted to make sure we had not just one way of getting information out, but multiple ways," says Kamps. "It's about personal preferences and it plays into learning styles as well."

Those who receive requests for assistance are well-equipped. "When D2L trained our office they made sure we had all the documentation at our fingertips to help students with accommodation needs. I've sent links and copies of D2L's support and received feedback like, 'Thanks, that was so easy to figure out'—and that's absolutely wonderful."

TEACHERS ARE AN IMPORTANT POINT OF CONTACT

Because instructors play a crucial role in ensuring a positive learning experience for students, SFASU insists that faculty members understand online accessibility issues. In addition, all of their online course materials must be accessible—or the course will not be approved.

Says Kamps, "We offered faculty a week-long conference to learn the Brightspace platform and that's where we really brought home the need for creating accessible material online. We called it 'Camp D2L' and it was so successful that we now hold it every year."

Result

SUCCESS—IT'S THE SOUND OF SILENCE

SFASU set out to find a replacement for their previous platform in hopes of determining the source of an accessibility problem and staunching the flow of faculty and student complaints.

"Since we switched to Brightspace, we may get one or two calls per semester, rather than weekly or monthly. These days, it's rather unusual to receive a call for support regarding accessibility inside the learning environment, and Brightspace has been a major part of that success."

GREATER ACCESSIBILITY EQUALS EFFICIENCY

Of course, students who need accommodation are the big winners. But that does not diminish the fact that there are significant payoffs for the university too.

Kamps explains, "Using Brightspace saves staff hours— not just for the student support staff who have to fix the problems, but also for faculty. Because the platform we were using before didn't have the needed functionality, they had to put in many hours to make accommodations for students, or maybe links weren't accessible so they had to provide the material another way."

Without problems to solve, more can be accomplished: "Partnering with D2L has enabled us to shift some resources and branch out into more innovative educational endeavors." Among other things, they have been able to develop a quick-start guide for students who navigate with screen readers, as well as other in-depth how-to guides.

Since switching to Brightspace, she says, the difference is huge. "It's night and day."

A STELLAR REPUTATION FOR ACCESSIBILITY WELL MAINTAINED

Choosing what they have determined is the most accessible platform available has a result that is not quantifiable—pride. SFASU's reputation as a university that goes above and beyond to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to learn was at stake.

"As a means of protecting our foundational values, Brightspace has been very valuable to SFASU. Receiving the 2014 Desire2EXCEL Accessibility Award gave us visibility as a leader in online accessibility in higher education, and it sent a message to other institutions that they, too, can do more in the area of accessibility for their online students without much additional expenditure."

About D2L

A global leader in EdTech, D2L is the creator of Brightspace, the world's first integrated learning platform. The company partners with thought-leading organizations to improve learning through data-driven technology that helps deliver a personalized experience to every learner, regardless of geography or ability. D2L's open and extensible platform is used by more than 1,100 clients and almost 15 million individual learners in higher education, K–12, healthcare, government, and the enterprise sector—including Fortune 1000 companies. The company has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. **www.brightspace.com** | **www.D2L.com**

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