ALLY

Blackboard

Pathways to Inclusion

Stories from the Ally Community

Data-Driven Strategies for Inclusive Learning

with Eric Kunnen, Assoc. Director, eLearning & Emerging Technologies

University Context: Pillars for Inclusion and Equity

Recently acknowledged as one of the top public regional universities in the Midwest by U.S. News and World Report, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) has made a committed effort to providing nearly 25,000 students with a more inclusive campus through a variety of programs and initiatives. The University's vision and value statements highlight the commitment to providing an inclusive learning environment for all students. The Division of Inclusion and Equity coordinates an ADA Advisory Council that includes student, faculty, and staff representation who meet throughout the year to discuss strategies to better support members of the campus community with disabilities. Each year, the campus hosts a Teach-In focused on discrimination issues related to race, ethnicity, gender expression, sexual orientation, ability, and class to encourage campus conversations around the importance of inclusion and equity.

Grand Valley State University's (GVSU) Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons

Goals for Ally: Awareness, Capacity, and Insight

Distance education continues to expand at the university with more than 5,000

> ◤ Ally's indicators are the initial introductions to understanding a much larger cultural shift- a shift away from the idea of meeting a standard required by law to a more equitable accomodation for all. In a broader sense, they signify that there is work to be done by all of us at the university to help create pathways of inclusion. – Hunter Bridwell

enrollments in online and hybrid courses each semester. Further, GVSU is seeing increases in the use of open educational resources, along with continued adoption of digital instructional materials by nearly 1,800 faculty. These demands along with more emphasis being placed on ADA compliance, has caused unique challenges for the eLearning and Emerging Technologies and Disability Support Resources (DSR) offices who are charged with supporting faculty and the learning needs of students. Accessibility support is focused on the 1,600 GVSU students, faculty, and staff who have registered with the DSR office, however, ensuring all students have equal opportunities for success in digitally-mediated learning experiences has become a key priority for the campus. GVSU's Academic Senate established an Accessibility Task Force

to investigate the existing accessibility impediments that faculty and students face, and to make recommendations for collaborative decision-making on accessibility matters, such as in drafting

Captioned Media Guidelines to support the University's web accessibility policy.

To address accessibility issues with course files, Ally was adopted with three goals in mind: 1) Increase instructor awareness about the importance of accessibility and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for all students; 2) Build capacity of faculty to create accessible content; and 3) Improve insight at the institutional level to help ensure course content meets accessibility standards.

Implementation Strategy: Targeted Messaging and Support

After spending two months implementing Ally and preparing our roll-out strategy, Ally became available to all faculty and students on June 21, 2018. Rolling-out Ally in the summer enabled us to start with

> ◤◤ **To date, students have downloaded over 6,800 alternative formats in 1,150 courses, and we share these data with faculty and administrators to help demonstrate Ally's impact on the student learning experience.**

a smaller number of courses to better gauge faculty response and refine support and training efforts. Initial messaging included targeted email newsletters, social media and blog highlights, and a Blackboard Learn portal module promotion campaign. Ally and Panopto (which supports closed captioning for video) were promoted as part of the new faculty orientation for the first time in the Fall 2018 semester. Further, these applications are included in a required training for faculty new to online teaching.

Using our institutional report, we identified our three most prevalent accessibility issues: missing document headers, images without alternative

> ◤◤ **Next semester, the team plans to use Ally's reporting and usage data to spark a friendly competition between departments, where the department with the most improvement will receive a small student scholarship in their name to celebrate their committment to inclusive learning.**

descriptions, and documents with contrast issues. We created tip sheets and training to target those specific issues as a supplement to the Ally instructor feedback. We also distributed a survey to instructors early on in our rollout to

gather feedback to better understand how faculty were responding to the Ally indicators in effort to improve our support efforts and messaging.

Evaluation and Findings: Demonstrating Impact with Data

Persistent messaging efforts around Ally's alternative formats for students has helped create a buzz on campus, and recently the student newspaper ran a front-page article entitled: "Blackboard Ally provides resources to improve accessibility." As a result of this increased awareness about the benefits of accessibility to all learners, we have seen an increase in faculty attendance of our accessibility and UDL workshops.

Ally usage data have also helped inform our campus messaging campaigns. Since our summer launch, instructors have engaged with Ally indicators 3,100 times in over 1,200 courses, and 138 instructors made fixes to over 460 files. With course information available in the institutional report, we engaged faculty who improved their course files and shown a commitment to inclusive learning. Moving forward, the eLearning and Emerging Technologies team is offering assistance and encouragement to faculty for implementing UDL principles in their courses.

Pearls of Wisdom: A Scalable Solution

Trying to affect change and scale the impact of a new technology on a campus with nearly 25,000 students and 1,800 faculty demands a strategic, creative approach. When it comes to accessibility of course content in Blackboard, detailed information about existing issues and progress can be hidden from view, often leading to an "out of sight, out of mind" mentality. Without accessibility information, designing and implementing effective strategies can be even more challenging. With Ally's accessibility insights and usage reporting, GVSU can more effectively leverage data to both inform outreach efforts and to demonstrate impact to drive further adoption, creating a feedback loop that is both sustainable and scalable. Showcasing tangible results through alternative format downloads and instructor fixes, and embedding those results in creative messaging that reaches across the multiple channels of a large institution, can help build momentum on the pathway to a more inclusive campus for all students.

Resources and Examples

Ally in the GV Lanthorn

Ally Supports Inclusive Education

GVSU Ally Website