Getting Our Teacher Education Graduates into Classrooms
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The overarching goal of our project is to get teacher education graduates into classrooms.

Hi, my name is Leslie Lieman, Educational Technology Coordinator for the School of Education at Lehman College. I present to you on behalf of Naliza Sadik and faculty at the school of education who collaborated on the creation of our test prep modules. For demonstration of online content, this video presentation has a readable PDF and is closed-captioned.

First, the true title of this presentation should be: Lehman College School of Education Offers Teacher Candidates Asynchronous-Online Educator-Certification Test Preparation ADA Compliant Modules. Now I recognize this is a mouthful, so let me break it down and give a little history.

Across 9 senior colleges and six community colleges, CUNY enrolls over 16,000 teacher candidates. We are the largest provider of teachers to the NYC Department of Education.

All CUNY education candidates must pass several exams to become State certified. Unfortunately, the State Education Department's reform efforts and test changes have also resulted in a large percentage of CUNY students failing the new exams. This potentially closes the opportunity to enter the profession or places a financial burden on students who need to repeat exams.

To tackle this problem, Lehman College designed online modules that focus on test preparation content. We did not focus on a single course or program, but on a way to deliver key principles and content to all CUNY education students. At this time, more than 3,500 students have been enrolled at Lehman or have self-enrolled to access a variety of resources through CUNY. With our CUNY Strategic Technology Initiative funding, we were able to revisit all aspects of our modules and consider how to ensure they were ADA compliant.

So now that you have an understanding of our project, I will focus on accessibility issues.

Let me start again.

I would have considered myself fully attuned to access and ability issues. My parents were both special educators, my brother is an expert in the field of Assistive Technologies, my sister-in-law is an occupational therapist and due to polio as a child she is in a scooter at all times, my niece and nephew go to a public school renowned for inclusion of children with special needs. I studied sign language as my official language in college and I have studied Universal Design for Learning.

But as you will see in phase 2, I still had a lot to learn.

We attempted to create the modules with accessibility and universal design in mind.

In phase one of our STI Award, we immersed ourselves in ADA compliance issues, and reviewed all aspects of our modules.

We always provided transcripts for our videos, but Khaitsa Wasiyo, our Phase 1 technologist made sure that our PDFs were readable by screen readers and updated all our links so that they were not the exact URL of a website, but included text that provided clear descriptions and made sense. She also put Alt tags (or descriptions) behind all our images so that screen readers would be able to understand the images in context.

This is very easy for faculty to do in both Blackboard and Softchalk when offering images in online courses.

In Phase 2, we specifically reviewed our modules for accessibility for the visually impaired.

We invited William Medina and Crystal Negron to join our team. William is legally blind and we sat with him as he went through our modules with several screen readers. Crystal is a skilled technologist and wiz with both Softchalk and Blackboard and plows through anything required.

Well, you've never experienced anything until you have someone try to understand your material with a screen reader.

Recognize this Blackboard landing page? Imagine even trying to find our modules with a screen reader. We were surprised to learn how much we would need to tear down to rebuild.

Our images of an "idea lightbulb" or downloadable PDF are visual cues that we used for visual learners to support Universal Design. But they should only have Alt Tags if the image assists content understanding and has a function. The ALT TAG should be left empty for these "asthetic" images.

Most screen readers say, "link" before each link in the text. Often users navigate from link to link, skipping text in-between to skim content. This is a reason never to hyperlink to text that states, "click here."

Be specific and give link text meaning. For example, to assist a screen reader in differentiating a downloadable PDF link vs. a hyperlink to another webpage, put (PDF) at the end of the link and the user will then know the difference.

In Phase 2 we also reviewed heading titles and how we organized our pages. Although we used font size, bold, and color to differentiate sections of our work, a screen reader can only navigate if the Headers are coded properly.

We are in the process of revisiting every page to make sure that pages are organized correctly.

Even when you create a new document in word, using Heading Styles will enable easy navigation for screen reading of the document.

We also began to evaluate all our use of color. We are avoiding using color as a representation of an idea, but we are selecting contrasting colors as much as possible.

Our goal in Phase 3 is to get all our videos closed-captioned. We know this is certainly best practice to meet the needs of hearing impaired students, but studies have shown it also improves access and understanding for English Language Learners and others.

We tested YouTube, but the lack of accuracy was too high. We tested a company that claimed 80% accuracy, but 80% accuracy was not sufficient is not ADA compliant.

And even though I had funding for an outside vendor, this phase was not easy to navigate. Thanks to the many people who consulted on the phone and the support of our budget office, we will be moving forward with a pilot project to get all our video closed captioned by 3PlayMedia in the next several months.

And my dream for both accessibility and Universal design is to someday have access to the 3PlayMedia plug-in that allows for searchable closed captioning. Speaking of Universal Design, for Phase 4 we are reviewing how the UDL principal of representation and features that offer differentiation for learners can be maintained in our modules.

For example, our interactive images are accessible, because a screen reader is notified at the keyhole that the content has opened as accessible text in a new window. And this is true of our self-checking questions.

But Softchalk notes that rollovers are NOT accessible by a screen reader, so access to content needs to be considered before using these features.

In Phase 5 we are aiming to review and improve all aspects of our modules. We had students review the module content and we are now having faculty consider their comments as well as update content, video and images to improve accessibility and universal design of our test preparation resources. And we will even be creating a brand new test prep module.

Our team and faculty members will also be visiting a public high school in the spring to get additional video of classroom practices. Additional closed-captioned video and a UDL designed classroom will give us the opportunity to offer stronger content and assignments to better prepare students for the State exams.

This is all with the goal to get more notes from students that they got a teaching job!

The School of Education project has prompted conversations across campus, and has been well timed with other initiatives that are starting at Lehman.

Before I go, please raise your hand if this presentation impacted how you now think about access and ability in online coursework. Raise your hand if you would like user guides and resources that will help you create accessible course content.

Our CUNY colleagues already have already offer a lot of resources online. But I believe online ADA compliance will need more strategic initiatives and funding to really move forward.

Finally, thanks to everyone at Lehman College and throughout CUNY and beyond who shared their experience and expertise. We couldn't take on a project like this without your help. Thanks for joining me.