

SARAH FERGUSON: Welcome to Building an Accessible Culture in Higher Ed. My name is Sarah Ferguson. I am the program director for digital accessibility at Brandeis University.

ESTHER BRANDON: Hi, all. My name is Esther Brandon, the digital literacy specialist at Brandeis.

SARAH FERGUSON: Given the current state of the world, we are very excited for the opportunity to share a somewhat compressed version of our presentation for March. Since we can't all be together in the same room, we've provided a couple of photos of us. Here I am with my adorable dog, whom I adopted. And here's a photo of Esther with a very cute dog that she kidnapped, but that's a story for another day. So building an accessible culture.

Notice the -ing in the title-- we aren't done yet. This is a process. Building accessible culture requires transformation, and a lot of time, and a lot of effort, as I'm sure you all know.

ESTHER BRANDON: And accessibility evolves with student needs and the rapidly changing technological landscape. We need to continue to evaluate what is accessible based on our student expectations every year.

SARAH FERGUSON: So we're here to talk about our continuing journey to becoming a more accessible university. As you go through your own journey, just remember people need time to adjust. Nothing's going to happen overnight. And don't let the slow movement get you down. Focus on making things better and building on the improvements that you make each day. Make it better today than it was yesterday.

ESTHER BRANDON: I also want to mention my favorite saying that perfection is the enemy of good. Making something 80% accessible is much better than 0%. Don't let fear get in the way. Doing something is always better than doing nothing.

SARAH FERGUSON: The accessibility journey in each community starts in a slightly different place. When you first arrive on the scene, you need to do a little bit of assessment of the state of your community. If you haven't been there all that long talk, to people who have been there forever. Every university has people who've been there for decades. They are a great source of information when it comes to the overall culture at your university. People are afraid of change, no matter what kind of change it is. And knowing how past changes have gone over is really helpful as

you make your own approach to changing the culture of accessibility on your campus.

When it comes to accessibility, it's important to know if there is any underlying hostility, misunderstanding, or fear on campus. This will make a big difference in how you approach this transformation. A lot of people don't really understand what accessibility means. And fear of the unknown is going to be a huge impediment to change. You may have to start out by quietly and gradually spreading awareness of what accessibility is all about and its benefits before you can start making demands of people.

Other things to assess include thinking about what your community is doing well. Every community is doing something well. And you should identify that and show your appreciation. Point out these positives to encourage momentum. And of course, there are going to be plenty of things that you identify that need to be worked on.

Everyone has issues with resources. That is universal with universities, with few exceptions. Brandeis definitely included. We've achieved all that we have with very limited dedicated resources. I am actually the only person who's dedicated to web accessibility on campus. And that can be disheartening, but this is the reason why the next question you ask yourself is so very important.

Who are your allies? Every place has little pockets of advocacy. You might not know they're there and they might not be where you expect them. I certainly expected student accessibility support to be among my allies, and they were. But I also found allies in lots of other places, as you can see on this list-- some in the first year, some not for several years. Esther and I actually met through acquaintances who were allies to accessibility. Accessibility is not in her job title or necessarily even part of her original job description, but as an accessibility advocate, it's a passion of hers. Luckily, she had a boss who supported that interest.

Allies can be a treasure trove of resources, ideas, and positivity. They can help keep you going. They provide a safe space for venting your frustrations and make you feel like you're not all alone in fighting the good fight.

ESTHER

BRANDON:

I found most of my best allies in unexpected places. They have helped me to grow both professionally and personally. Finding people who support me in this fight is essential for my own emotional well-being and the success of the programming I offer on campus.

SARAH

And of course, naturally, you have to assess the knowledge gaps, and there will be many of

FERGUSON: them. I mentioned earlier the importance of identifying fear and misunderstanding on campus. These gaps in understanding are even more important to fix in some ways than the skills-based gaps. If people don't understand why they're doing the extra work to attain accessibility, they're less inclined to be open to learn how. Once they have an understanding, they often become hungry to learn those skills.

ESTHER
BRANDON: On a college campus, accessibility is key for the students who need it to be successful in their schoolwork and their lives in general. When identifying gaps, I learn the most from listening to students' experiences and their difficulties navigating campus life. Some things that might not occur to me are an issue for some specific students. And even the best intentions can go awry, like facilities placing a Braille sign upside down.

SARAH
FERGUSON: So now that you've finished your assessment, you know where you are as a community. So the next step is to think about where do you want to be, what are your goals? You need to be reasonable in your expectations. Do, by all means, have lofty goals, but expect change to be slow. It's important to have that roadmap to chart your progress.

It will give you a sense of accomplishment to help keep you going. And it's important to demonstrate your progress to the administration. No matter how little the resources you're getting, you've got to speak to why you should keep getting them. Change can be slow and it can be easy to lose sight of how far you have come. Having specific goals and a roadmap will help in that transition.

So here we have a breakdown of our accessibility journey along parallel tracks. They all start in slightly different places. They all have their own obstacles. And they all affect one another. Your focus will shift from track to track as time goes on. You make a little progress in one track, then another. One track might temporarily move in the wrong direction, oddly enough, due to progress in another track. But the overall goal is to get all of the tracks fully on board.

So when I say administrative support, I'm, of course, talking about high level administration--the president, the provost, et cetera. But for my experience, I'm also talking about marketing and communications. This is where my position was founded. So I've had most of my support and access to higher administration through that.

The accessibility squad is what the other accessibility advocates and I call ourselves. Naturally, it includes anyone who works with accessibility directly, plus any of those allies and advocates I've been collecting over the years. And I really feel we need to get Accessibility Squad t-shirts

made at some point, because we are a real team.

ESTHER

Yes, we do. Our academics track includes faculty, students, deans, and people helping to

BRANDON:

support the creation of course materials. And our last track, culture, which is an overall feeling on campus. Do students with accessibility issues feel welcome and heard? What is the

community feeling towards those students? Are people able to have open conversations?

These are some of the questions we ask ourselves when talking about culture.

SARAH

So we're going to talk a little bit about the history of our accessibility journey at Brandeis. I'm

FERGUSON:

starting just before 2015, because 2015 marks when the web accessibility specialist position was created. Just prior to 2015, the university decided to redesign the website. The web team in communications knew it needed to be responsive and accessible. They did their research.

And they pushed the administration to hire an in-house expert. Support for this move came from student accessibility support, who provide accommodations. And most effectively, from the senior associate provost. So that is one of those key allies.

ESTHER

Right. And so Sarah was hired as the web accessibility specialist. Woo woo. So accessibility in

BRANDON:

academics at this point was entirely reactive. They followed the medical model of making accommodations for individual student needs. And the Student Accessibility Services office was the one making those accommodations. In terms of culture, there was really no open conversation about accessibility on campus.

SARAH

In 2015, the web accessibility specialist, me, was hired to ensure the outside developer who was working on the website was providing an accessible website design and functionality. We actually had a lot of back and forth with the developer testing and retesting. So it was very, very important that we had someone who had actual expertise in accessibility.

FERGUSON:

I also created a plan for all content being migrated from the old site to the new site to be made accessible at the time of editing and review. I trained my fellow members of the web team in content best practices for accessibility. Things like using headings, using alt text-- stuff like that. They were the first people on campus to get accessibility training.

ESTHER

So conversations about how to spread awareness and accessibility began between Sarah and Student Accessibility Services. They did the initial needs assessment on campus and began creating documentation.

BRANDON:

SARAH

In 2016, Brandeis hired an academic technologist. That was Esther.

FERGUSON:

ESTHER

BRANDON:

Yay! So I supported faculty. We also identified some allies on campus. We began to build relationships and cultivate ideas for how to get the ball rolling.

SARAH

FERGUSON:

In 2017, the first pages of the new site start to go live. There are over 20,000 pages all being manually migrated. So we're still not done with this project to this day. We run on a decentralized model, which means we have over 450 people on campus with editorial privileges to some part of the site. This is frightening, to say the least.

As we finish each chunk of the website, before handing over the keys to a shiny new accessible pages, the web editor assigned to maintain those pages must go to accessibility training. We need them to be able to maintain the accessibility of the pages and only introduce new content that is accessible.

Also in 2017, conversations with our media services team ramped up. These are the people on campus who film events, will film lectures for classes. So we started discussing new solutions and guidelines for standardizing captioning. Brandeis' first instructional designer was also hired that year.

ESTHER

BRANDON:

In terms of academics, the instructional designer support and knowledge was very valuable in helping faculty to create accessible course materials. We also debuted our first FACET training program, which was a small but invaluable program, where we had faculty members learn through a series of six workshops how to change their overall teaching styles in order to make their content more accessible. And those faculty members ended up convincing colleagues to join the following year, and really helped spread the message of accessibility.

Also, there was a digital accessibility help desk created to support the Brandeis community, mostly answered by Sarah. They would help answer questions that came out of training and would also provide support for people making materials accessible.

SARAH

FERGUSON:

So in 2018, over 100 people have been trained in the basics at this point. Those trainings are continuing, but demand for more skills has led to the introduction of a Microsoft Word and PDF remediation hands-on workshop. In addition, a gap is identified in the accommodation support, and a graduate student-focused accommodation specialist is hired.

ESTHER

BRANDON:

In 2018, student advocacy really ramped up on campus. There was a student survey that was sent out about accessibility needs on campus, all student-run. Students also wrote op-eds in

student newspapers about accessibility. And the demand got so great that the Brandeis president led a town hall to hear from students, faculty, and staff. This led to movement on increased administrative buy-in, which involved more resources, including financial resources, which are really key towards our efforts.

Working in the library. I began my role as a digital literacy specialist. And I began a universal design for learning workshop series to support faculty.

SARAH

FERGUSON:

In 2019, a call for advance accessibility skills increases. More topics are added from advanced PDF techniques, things like forms, to writing effective descriptions, to producing accessible InDesign files. The pace of change really starts to pick up at this point. The Office of Equal Opportunity is created. A 504 coordinator is hired. And students now have an official system for lodging any and all complaints regarding accessibility and discrimination.

In addition, communications hires two student workers who have disabilities. And they provide a unique perspective to our work. Another instructional designer is also hired to support faculty at this time.

ESTHER

BRANDON:

So our FACET program in the second year had a huge amount of interest. Our enrollment expanded by over 250%. And we actually had to turn some faculty away. The dean of Arts and Sciences publicly called for accessible course materials, starting with accessible syllabi, which was a huge, huge win for our efforts, and also to creating and maintaining this accessible culture on campus.

So therefore, we had to create even more trainings to create not only a welcoming academic environment for students with disabilities, but also, to work on creating more accessible materials. Administration starts communication with the community about our accessibility gaps in earnest. This resulted in the administration making ally a focus.

So we have a contract rider for accessible software that was introduced. Facilities planning and actions to make buildings more accessible. They provided more funding for gaps in our accessibility training and services. And they're also listening to the community. This is really where we began our transition from the reactive to a proactive model.

SARAH

FERGUSON:

So here we are in 2020. Over 350 people have been trained. Migration is coming to an end. Forget about mandatory training for web editors in migration. People from all over campus are asking to be trained. They're not web editors, necessarily, but they want to be included. They

want to know what's the buzz about. I want to do my part for accessibility like everyone else.

Training is now mandatory for all web editors. So those in and out of migration, if you're part of a graduate school, if you're part of a center, you are also tasked with taking training.

Anyone who makes any digital materials is encouraged to come to training. So that's pretty much everyone. There's no need to chase people down. Actually, I can barely keep up with demand for training. The position of program director was created this year to reflect the hard work done and the accomplishments made. There's still a ways to go, but so much has changed.

ESTHER

BRANDON:

So a training program for all faculty began to make course materials accessible. And thanks to this global situation, asynchronous online courses are being developed for the entire community to continue the momentum of skill building. The Center for Teaching and Learning introduced bootcamps for faculty to build skills for online teaching, as well as universal design for learning taught by yours truly. I also started an initiative within the library for all library materials to be examined for accessibility improvements.

Students are continuing to be vocal, writing op-eds in student newspapers, and asking their faculty members about making these materials accessible. So hearing guidance about accessibility from all sides has really helped build this accessible culture on campus.

SARAH

FERGUSON:

In addition, we've also introduced an internship for digital accessibility on campus. And we had our first web accessibility intern this semester. The semester hasn't quite gone the way we planned, but we're continuing this online and hope to pick it up in the fall, as well. There's been a ton of interest in it.

ESTHER

BRANDON:

And we've also gotten optical character recognition scanners. So faculty, as they're scanning course materials, will be able to have readable PDFs for students. So while this initiative is on hold for the next few months, we're looking forward to expanding that when we return to campus.

SARAH

FERGUSON:

Looking to the future. Here are our goals. Some are loftier than others. We would love to see accessibility training at least at an introductory level be mandatory for all community members. That includes even students. I think it would help the overall culture for students to also be educated in what accessibility is all about. Having a dedicated accessibility department with its own budget would lend clout and make changes move a little faster as opposed to the current

model, where we walk around with cap in hand begging for money.

I'd like to see all digital materials accessible, all buildings be ADA compliant. I would love to see my old position of web accessibility specialist filled to double the work done out of my office.

ESTHER

BRANDON:

On the academic side, I'd love to see all course materials made accessible from the get-go, including all educational technologies to be accessed by a screen reader and any other accessibility needs our students have. We would love to see every scanner on campus to include software for optical character recognition and text tagging. So we've already rolled out four licenses to machines this year before we had to go off campus and looking forward to more when we return.

In terms of our accessible culture, we want everyone to feel welcome in the community and to be heard. We'd also love to be running fully on a proactive model. So that's our history up till now and a hopeful glimpse to the future. Now a few tips and specifics.

SARAH

FERGUSON:

So when you're training, it can be tempting to cram in as much as possible into accessibility training. People have limited time. They're going to complain. Oh my god, you need me for an hour, you need me for 90 minutes. Let's get this over with.

So people might have limited time, but they also have limited attention spans and ability to absorb information. Start them off with an introduction. Teach them enough to get started and to make a change so that what they're working on is, in fact, more accessible than before they met you. If you do a good job sparking an interest, most of them will actually come back to you asking for more.

Keep your attitude positive and your mind open during training. Don't lecture at them. Make it a conversation. Make people comfortable so that they can ask questions. Allow them to meet with you privately, if necessary. Help attendees realize how they use accessibility in their daily lives examples include curb cuts, elevators, and captions. You can blow their mind when they realize how much video they themselves watched with the sound off and how much they appreciate when a video on social media has captions.

Use hands-on demos to ingrain in their memory how much of a difference their cooperation will make. In our trainings, we do screen reader and keyboard-only navigation demos, and describe specific instances of the effect a decision can make on a student from their point of

view. For example, using a heading properly or deciding to use a descriptive link instead of a [click here](#). Get them to the moment where the light bulb goes on for each attendee. Then you have them.

ESTHER

BRANDON:

So faculty and staff are often overwhelmed and overburdened in higher education. And I have found training to be the most successful when you celebrate their small achievements, focusing on small and concrete changes people can make that actually make a really big impact on their students' lives. That can be from administrative policy updates to physical building improvements, faculty and staff spotlights on creating accessible material. We want to find a hook for people to really show how making things accessible improves the lives of the students they care so much about.

We also want to highlight when advocacy works, especially with student activism. Students' voices are so important in the university setting and we need to make sure that they're heard. Language is also really important, especially when building a culture. How do you talk about accessibility or ally or students with disabilities? Aligning language with a social model can really help. And also, lastly, to remind them that this is not a fad. Ally is here. It's real. And we can't wait to help.

Thank you so much for your time today. Please feel free to contact us with any questions.

SARAH

FERGUSON:

Thank, you everyone.

So we have a little bit of time left over. And we had prepared some prompts for the post live presentation discussion. So we're just throwing these up here. Some ideas to get people thinking and sharing experiences. We're going to stick around and we're going to answer your questions in the chat. But also feel free to answer these questions and share your experiences. Thank you again very much for joining us today.