

Building Inclusive Learning Environments: Steps Everyone Can Take to Make Content More Accessible

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Objective

This project aimed to identify inclusive teaching practices that will inform the development of the school's equity, diversity, and inclusive excellence strategic plan.

At UMSOP inclusive excellence is promoted as a community that engages and "systematically leverages diversity for student learning and institutional excellence" (Williams et al., 2005).

Methods

Beginning in August 2022, UMSOP's Assistant Dean for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) worked with the school's research librarian and a P4 student to search for literature and resources related to inclusive education. Specific areas of interest were EDI-informed curriculum, inclusive writing/language, and inclusive workplaces. After review and curation of these resources, additional searches were conducted to identify examples of EDI syllabus statements. In Fall 2022, the School's Curriculum Committee established an EDI subcommittee charged with EDI curriculum integration and identifying areas for faculty development.

Varied definitions of inclusive teaching were identified with themes including:

- 1) Considering the needs and diverse backgrounds of students
- 2) Creating environments where all feel valued and supported
- 3) Removing learning barriers

Inclusive Learning Essential – Accessibility

Digital Accessibility was identified as an essential approach to remove material barriers ensuring that all learners can understand, perceive, navigate, and interact with digital instructional resources regardless of their ability.

10 Steps to Improve Digital Accessibility

Contemporary digital content creation tools make it easier to build accessible content eliminating the need to understand Web Content Accessibility Principles (W3C, 2019). To begin awareness an accessibility guide was created to promote 10 easy everyday steps to that improve digital accessibility.



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- 1. Use Headings Styles For Document Formatting**
Embedded headings help people who use text-to-speech programs and screen readers skim the document to find needed information.
- 2. Use Slide Templates and Layouts in PowerPoint**
Presentation templates in PowerPoint include multiple layouts, including a slide "title" and several slide layouts with content placeholders that ensure slides have the correct reading order.
- 3. Create Meaningful Hyperlinks**
Instead of using "click here" to describe links, use words that describe the link destination.
- 4. Check Color Contrast**
Use high contrast colors to help readers who have low vision, are colorblind or are in a low-light environment read materials.
- 5. Avoid Using Only Color for Meaning**
Using an additional indicator, like a text label, line pattern, or shape, will help ensure people can still understand your data.
- 6. Add Alternative (Alt) Text for Images**
"Alt" text provides a descriptive representation of non-text content for screen readers in electronic documents and web pages.
- 7. Use Tables for Data, Not Document Formatting**
Use tables for tabular data and include columns and rows with headers to ensure readability. Tables should never be used to format the design of a document.
- 8. Provide Closed Captions for Videos, Media, and Web Conferences**
Add captions to your videos. Consider editing automated captions for accuracy and providing transcripts. Captioning is also available in Webex and Zoom by default.
- 9. Use Accessibility Checkers**
Accessibility checkers help identify issues in materials to ensure they are accessible. There are great tools available for you to check including Microsoft's accessibility checker for Office documents, Acrobat's Accessibility Checker for PDFs, Blackboard Ally for Blackboard, and Site Improve for web content managers.
- 10. Consider Accessibility When Making Purchases**
If you are procuring software or web-based services, web accessibility should be considered to ensure tools are accessible for everyone. UMSOP includes this as an item in procurement.

Developing Core Accessibility Competencies

UMSOP developed an ongoing Practical Accessibility Workshop series that interactively explores document accessibility in depth for content creators that fosters ongoing development of accessibility competencies.

- Part 1: Accessibility Basics and Document Accessibility**
In this workshop attendees learn the basics of accessibility and how to leverage basic accessibility features in Microsoft Word to create inclusive documents and PDFs.
- Part 2: Accessibility in PowerPoint**
In this session, participants learn the basics of accessibility in PowerPoint to create accessible slides for a variety of applications.

Implications

Inclusive teaching practices necessitate removing learning barriers. While measuring accessibility in courses provides a measure of EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) change in academic programs, accessibility is for everyone. By providing development for everyone, UMSOP is creating transferrable skills that support digital content accessibility across the organization, creating accessible content for everyone.

References

W3C. (2019, May 10). Accessibility principles. W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI). <https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/accessibility-principles/>

Williams, D.A., Berger, J.B., & McClendon, S.A. (2005) *Towards a model of inclusive excellence & change in post-secondary institutions*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.