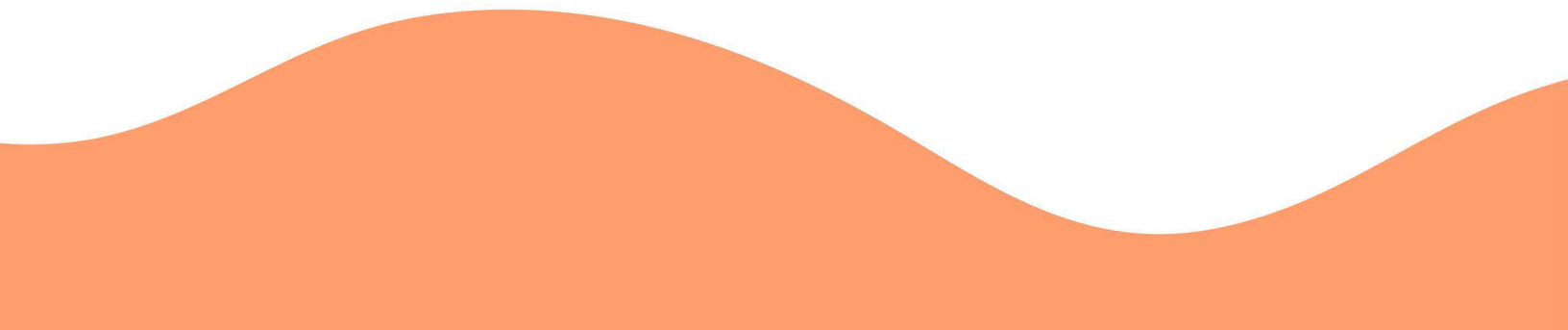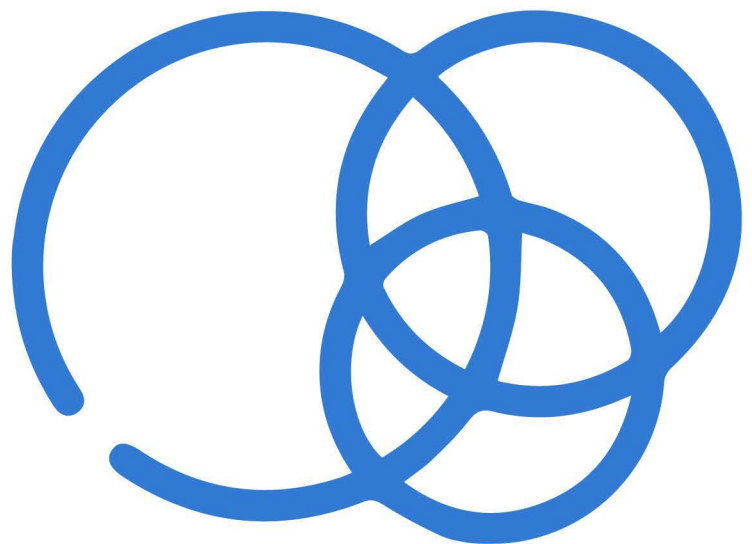# Transforming Higher Education from the Inside Out:
The Collaborative for Access and Equity (Pilot) Impact Report

By Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD

Microsoft

TEXAS
The University of Texas at Austin

Welcome to The Collaborative

Improving accessibilility, equity, and inclusion for disabled college students through vibrant cross-campus collaboration is the goal of the Collaborative for Access and Equity pilot project.

It's a true collaboration — an intersectional professional community of disabled student coaches and faculty partners who show by working together that they shift the mindsets and pedagogical approaches of faculty, with a significant impact on the future learning experiences of all students.

Supported with funding from Microsoft and housed at the Texas Center for Equity Promotion, the Collaborative sought to transform the culture of learning on The University of Texas at Austin campus (and beyond). If that seems like a tall order, it was! In the year since this project was conceived, we designed, recruited, engaged, learned, un-learned, and integrated.

Our results?

Empowered student coaches, broken down silos, mindset shifts, and a suite of accessibility strategies — including two infographics with the Collaborative's top nine tips — for leadership, faculty, and students to implement now and in the future. It was truly "research-to-practice on steroids"!

This report captures our design, implementation, and outcomes, which represent the passion and commitment of so many. I am grateful to Microsoft for not just providing the material support, but also for being our champions and continually engaging with us about the work. Thank you to our students and every team member who gave 110% to the project. And finally, thank you to all the staff who supported this project and its implementation. You are integral to our success.

As you learn more about the Collaborative, I invite you to think about how you can **be an ambassador for accessibility in your work — and how you can create a culture where all of us can thrive and succeed.**

Yours in future collaboration,

Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD
Director, Collaborative on Access and Equity

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[INFOGRAPHIC] Access for Success: 9 Tips for Disabled College Students

[INFOGRAPHIC] Make Access Easy: 9 Strategies for Higher Education Faculty

Transformation From the Inside Out

The Collaborative is an innovative and replicable model to transform colleges from the inside out by using evidence-based approaches and technological advances to:

- make access easy for students, faculty, and staff
- create a culture of accessibility
- leverage technology
- lead as ambassadors for change
- center disabled experiences

25+
UT Austin Departments

45+
People

1000+
Collaboration Hours

Top Takeaways

Through more than 1,000 hours of collaboration, our teams came to these top takeaways of the pilot.

☑ Disabled students are at the heart of any accessibility initiative.

☑ Breaking down campus silos requires many dialog points and a central focus.

☑ The key starting point? Awareness of ableism, disability, and access.

☑ Course planning needs to shift from reactive to proactive strategies.

☑ Access is more than accommodations; it requires a mindset shift.

☑ People will take risks in safe spaces and intentional conversations.

☑ Technology can support, but not replace, an accessibility mindset.

☑ Small steps and iterative improvement is the path to success.

Introducing the Collaborative

Meaningful, sustainable change in campus access for all students requires:

- shifts in attitudes about disability and disabled campus members;
- resources in the form of knowledge, strategies, and tools; and
- time and space dedicated to learning, implementation, and iteration.

Disabled students are an untapped resource and much neglected in terms of empowerment, agency, and co-creators of systems change.

This project built upon previous research spotlighting the importance of collaborative faculty learning communities, the importance of student perspectives and agency, and the value of a mindset shift away from accommodations-based to accessibility-based course design.
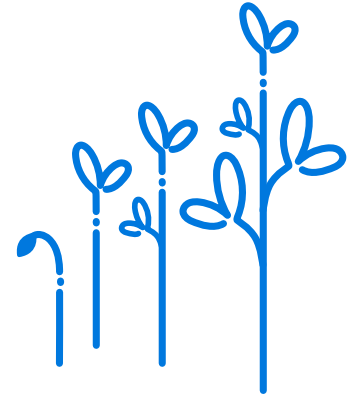
Unique aspects included:

- a focus on the partnership between disabled students and project faculty
- a full campus effort across multiple units
- a focus on inclusivity beyond the legal requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act

The content curation and participant recruitment also served as an opportunity for the currently siloed activities on the campus related to disability, instruction, technology, and accessibility to converge into a coherent slate of resources and support.

Grounding Principles:
Here's What We Know

As the Collaborative began, several key principles and knowlegdge points grounded its work.

Many college students (and faculty) do not disclose their disabilities, so the numbers of people affected are likely far higher than known — with some estimates as high as 25%.

Accessible learning requires more than accommodations and course retrofits.

Faculty learn best with just-in-time, embedded, iterative support.

Disabled students and faculty have to be centered in all accessibility initiatives.

Technology is a critical tool to increase accessible learning.

Access Is More Than Accommodations

Work across the field recognizes the need for a change in how we approach equal access and opportunity in higher education. People talk about DEI — diversity, equity, and inclusion. We encourage people to use DEI + A — diversity, equity, inclusion, plus accessibility — as the key to real transformation.

Disability is also an identity that exists within the context of multiple identities, and these intersections need to be front of mind.

The content of this initiative is thus both aspirational (what does accessibility mean and why is it important) and practical (what tools can help my class be accessible and how can my teaching amplify those benefits).

In recent years, higher education institutions have come to see faculty development as a critical component of diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Many institutions now understand that what happens in the classroom — both classroom climate and also the nuts-and-bolts of curricular content and course design — determines whether a diverse range of students persist and succeed in college.

That said, the experiences of disabled students are rarely centered in discussions of inclusive teaching. Disabled students are routinely undercounted by institutions, since many do not seek official accommodations, and can be overlooked by faculty, since many disabilities are not visible.

"I think [the Collaborative has] made me very sensitive to the idea that there's a lot of invisible problems — invisible to me." – Faculty Member

When faculty development programs do include accessibility, they often focus on implementing a narrow set of accommodations or on achieving minimal compliance with federal law — legalistic frameworks not conducive to cultivating environments of true inclusion and belonging. Yet accessibility is more than accommodations.

The project also drew on disability studies theory and research that has shown how accessibility design frameworks can assist a wide range of students. For example, common technology tools — such as captioning, visual descriptions, video capture, resource sharing, communication, and feedback platforms — benefit all students, not just students with disclosed disabilities.

Several pockets of work on these resources already existed on the UT Austin campus. This initiative thus focused both on the big picture of access as well as on the nitty gritty of how to best marry technology tools with specific content, varied teaching approaches, and types and levels of student engagement within the learning environment.

Pilot Development and Implementation

The Collaborative's 2021-2022 pilot year focused on identifying accessibility strategies and technology tools, sharing perspectives about access and inclusion, and building an online learning community with faculty members.

Fall Semester 2021: Development and Recruitment

- Created project's branding and messaging

- Recruited project teams

- Curated content and resources

- Established online platforms and integrated content

- Drafted needs assessment and evaluation tools

- Finalized IRB

Spring Semester 2022: Implementation

January/February
- Onboarded and launched project teams

- Collected baseline data on knowledge, interests, and experiences

- Established mini-action plans for faculty teams

- Bi-weekly check-ins with all teams

- Weekly check-ins with student coaches

March/April
- Implemented action plan

- Observed student coaches

- Collected data of strategy implementation and iterative improvement

- Bi-weekly check-ins with all teams

- Weekly check-ins with student coaches

May
- Wrapped up all observations and data collection

- Interviewed participants and provided opportunities for reflection

Meet the Teams

The heartbeat of this work — more than 45 people from 25 departments throughout The University of Texas at Austin — are the Collaborative's interdisciplinary teams, which collaborated for more than 1,000 hours in just eight months.

They are diverse, authentic, supportive, and dedicated. Coming from all parts of campus and nearly every school, each member played a critical role in the process and outcomes of this project. They showed up, engaged, enquired, challenged, and applied our foundational ideas around accessibility.

Team Structure

The teams were structured to address a key challenge at the core of educational inaccessibility: the power and visibility imbalance between faculty and disabled students.

The team design was based on a National Science Foundation-funded student-faculty learning community model created by Dr. Cawthon. In a student-faculty partnership model, students serve as course consultants to faculty — reversing the traditional flow of expertise, which typically runs from instructor to student.

In this pilot project, student coaches were recruited and chosen because of their direct experience with disability in education, then faculty participants were paired with a single student coach in semester-long partnerships. They met regularly to discuss the instructor's courses, process shared readings, exchange perspectives, and work on action plans for course improvements.

Project Director
Stephanie W. Cawthon, PhD
The main goal of the Project Director was to ensure that each person had opportunities to share their experiences and contribute to the overall project goals. This continual return to vision, meetings galore, and strengthening on-campus relationships was an absolute joy for Dr. Cawthon.

Project Coordinator
Ryan Mata
Ryan Mata served as a Project Coordinator, supporting the Student Coach Team and acting as a liaison with the Project Director.

Student Coach Team

The student coach team was composed of four undergraduates and one graduate student, all of whom are disabled and were empowered to coach, research, and support.

Søren Aldaco
Søren is a second-year undergraduate majoring in Sociology and Critical Disability Studies. Søren collaborated with Dr. Katie Tackett to expand the scope of autistic perspectives in the special education teacher preparation program, which is also part of the Students-As-Partners initiative.
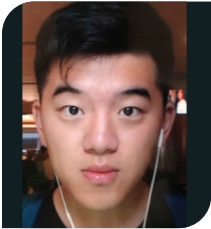
Eric Ge
Eric is a senior undergraduate majoring in Computer Science. He is most excited about enacting change so students with disabilities like his can have a better experience in class. Eric collaborated with faculty member Dr. Madeleine Holland in Communications Studies.

Desiree Lama
Desiree is a fifth-year undergraduate majoring in Human Development and Family Sciences, with a minor in Educational Psychology and a certificate in Applied Statistical Modeling. Also part of the Students-As-Partners initiative, Desiree collaborated with Dr. Amy Kristin Sanders.

Ximena Pastor Navarro
Ximena is a junior majoring in Human Development and Family Sciences with a minor in Educational Psychology. Ximena collaborated with two faculty members, Dr. Deanna Buckley and Dr. Anthony Dudo, and has an interest in supporting mental health and well-being via Students-As-Partners.

Gayathri Ramesh
Gayathri is a first-year graduate student in the School of Information with a special focus on accessibility. Gayathri collaborated with two faculty members: Dr. Andrew Dillon from the School of Information and Dr. Tonia Guida from the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Concentration in Natural Sciences.

"I decided to apply [to be a student coach] because I had a very uncomfortable experience with a professor and it made me realize that faculty aren't very accommodating and don't remember why students ask for accommodations in the first place." – Student Member

Faculty Team

The faculty team came from more than five different schools on campus and brought a range of expertise in fields of study and teaching styles.

Deanna Buckley
UTeach

Madeleine Holland
Communication Studies

Andrew Dillon
Information and Technology

Amy Sanders
Journalism and Media + Law

Anthony Dudo
Advertising and Public Relations

Katie Tackett
Special Education

Tonia Guida
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Concentration, Natural Sciences

"The reason I wanted to get involved in this project is actually a little bit embarrassing. I teach about different aspects of identity that foster exclusion or inclusion and I realized that I had a place in my learning and teaching that was not well developed. And that was about creating inclusive spaces for understanding the experience of students with disabilities." – Faculty Member

Circle of Support at UT Austin

Key to the success of the pilot was building a community of support for the student coaches and faculty partners. At a state flagship university like UT Austin, this was no small feat.

The result? A dynamic, collaborative team that included an advisory board, a university resource team, and a support team with experience in faculty development, information technology, assessment, course design, UX design, DEI initiatives, social work, and disability studies.

The pilot also had five Student Ambassadors to amplify and advocate for the Collaborative across campus.

- Gracie Goldreyer: Undergraduate, Youth and Community Studies
- Ariel "Rosie" Head: Undergraduate, Natural Sciences
- Marijose Hurtado: Undergraduate, Biomedical Engineering
- Raja Sankar: Graduate, iSchool
- Malika Shetty: Undergraduate, Neuroscience and Government

Six people comprised the team of Student Advisors, who worked closely with pilot leadership on data collection, analysis, and evaluation.

- Strategic advisor Ana Vielma, Human Development, Culture, and Learning Science (HDCLS) doctoral student
- Faculty development advisor Julie Sievers, HDCLS graduate student
- Curriculum and assessment advisor Echo Yan, HDCLS doctoral student
- UX advisors Miraj Mehta, Suyash Ekre, and Wendy Chuang; iSchool graduate students
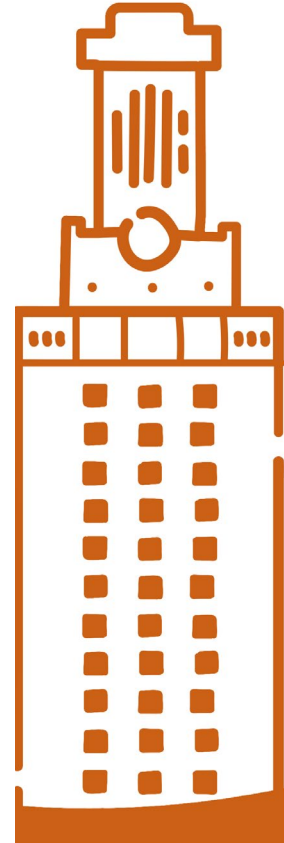
A Focus on Accessibility for All

The Collaborative sought to deepen understanding of the experiences disabled students face and what accessibility can mean in the context of higher education.

Accessible classroom design is often provided through external services and accommodations. An approach based in Universal Design for Learning (UDL), though, seeks to engage students in learning by creating classroom spaces with accessibility integrated into the pedagogical approach. Realizing these goals requires participation from one of the most valuable, yet underused, resources: the students themselves.

"Language is so important and the usage of ableist sayings/phrases needs to be addressed to create a welcoming environment on campus and in everyday life" - Faculty Member

Research Foundation

Dr. Cawthon's article, Student Observations of Postsecondary Classroom Instruction: Accessibility Challenges and Collaborative Feedback, in *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching and Learning Journal* examines a student-faculty collaborative approach to increasing accessibility in postsecondary classrooms. Results of this study suggest that student observers are able to provide concrete and constructive feedback on strategies to increase classroom accessibility.

In an article called "generative for researchers interested in accessibility" by the editor of the journal *Future Review*, Dr. Cawthon and her colleagues provided the scholarly groundwork for a new accessibility measurement framework that can reflect the lived experiences of study subjects and drive what data is collected.

Better accessibility means learning is easier for all students. For example, Dr. Cawthon and her coauthors explored the relationship between executive functioning, cognitive load, inclusive teaching strategies, and ratings of teacher effectiveness in another study — research that is necessary with increasing student enrollment in higher education of people from diverse academic, cultural, disability, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Centering Disabled Students

Building a campus culture of access requires centering efforts on the expertise and experiences of disabled students and community members. These voices are usually missing from discussions about inclusive teaching and learning, professional development for faculty, research activities, or systemic institutional support.

Here is an example story from one of the student coaches on the significance of even a seemingly small barrier in a chemistry lab.

"An instance where I felt the course design was NOT accessible and did NOT allow me to perform my best was in the general chemistry lab. In this lab, we were expected to stand up for the four hours we were there. While the professor said the intent of this requirement was for safety, it really did not feel as such. I dreaded going into the lab because I knew how exhausted I get doing lab work. So, not even being able to put my knee on a stool or sit down without getting a grade deduction was one of the cases where it did not feel inclusive. There is so much room for improvement in labs because that is a common classroom guideline. It just did not seem feasible because there are many circumstances where a student needs to sit down for rest in a four-hour chemistry lab. In addition, there were many points throughout that semester in the lab where I NEEDED to sit down because I get dizzy more often than not. It may seem like a little aspect to many students just because it is expected of us but that really shouldn't be the case." – Student Member

Accessible learning requires more than just accommodations and course retrofits. The work of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) is critical to laying a foundation and an entry point for accessibility, but it is not sufficient on its own. Course design requires a mindset of flexibility, adaptability, and inclusion that starts with each faculty member and requires collaboration from leadership, resources, and supports across the campus.

"This is kind of like a 30,000-foot level shift — thinking about how accessibility should be there at the start of designing a course ('part of its DNA') as opposed to something that gets applied like band-aids to an existing course." - Faculty Member

Integrating Accessibility and Teaching

Once the foundation was established for centering the conversations of accessibility on the experiences of disabled students, the teams were ready to start thinking through these topics in the context of their own classrooms and teaching experiences.

The Collaborative, together, took these foundational ideas and applied them into the practical work of teaching. They discussed how to think about accessibility across many learning contexts and content areas, ranging from graduate writing labs to large enrollment undergraduate courses.

One key content area was focused on each week. They included:

- Syllabus and Course Planning
- Presentations
- Group Work
- Assignments
- Technology
- Mental Health
- Working in a Collaborative

The result of these discussions was a deep dive into the HOW of accessibility. Members of the Collaborative proved to be innovative and critical thinkers about assumptions around teaching and ways to move into a more inclusive approach.

Some of the strategies that arose from these conversations were very concrete.

"One 'aha' moment we had was realizing the burden of screen time that students faced. Even those without disabilities or migraines that reduce one's visual stamina can face negative health consequences from the high amount of screen time caused by a lot of school events going virtual (meetings, homework, readings, etc). Therefore, any reduction to this visual load such as having an audio-only alternative and printable notes to follow along with asynchronous content can go a long way." - Faculty Member

Assessment best practices is to measure knowledge in multiple ways and to balance out how students are evaluated. Universal design supports this diversity of assignments and testing.

> "[In the past,] 80% of grades came from four MC exams. I scaled it back to 60% and other assignments to diversify the ways they are assessed, and added group work assignments as well to diversify the percentage of where grades came." - Faculty Member

> "We discussed how a common barrier to implementing more accommodating policies has been a 'strawman' of a malicious student — one who takes advantage of the system and uses professors' accommodations as a weakness to enable cheating." - Faculty Member

Of course, since the pilot was during pandemic times, what accessibility looked like at one point in the semester may be different than at another.

There was also the continuing differential impact of instructional shifts on many students in marginalized communities, as well as the continuing likelihood that a significant part of the student body was absent from full class participation for a period of time in the spring semester. This was especially true for disabled students and was a particularly challenging question that the Collaborative engaged with.

Structured Dialog:
How the Pilot Happened
(the "Secret Sauce" for Transformation)

People learn and grow through conversation, by engaging with each other.

This Collaborative intentionally designed opportunities for meaningful dialog across several different platforms over the course of Spring 2022. These occurred at regular intervals to fit the size of the group and the focus of the tasks at hand.

"…some of the most valuable conversations I've ever had about my teaching." – Faculty Member

Project structure strove to strike a balance between grounded and generative. The structure was, at times, quite firm. The meetings between student coaches and faculty were scaffolded via sample agendas and discussion questions. The All Hands meeting agendas were sent out ahead of time, with prompts ready for participants to prepare to respond to in the real-time conversation.

On the other hand, much of the detail of each person's contribution and learning was left to develop organically. This required a level of trust in the dynamic of the group as well as ownership of the process by its members. Specific examples were documented and shared but not prescribed, leaving implementation up to the individual faculty member to consider either during the pilot semester or in planning for the future.

Six Student Coach & Faculty Partner
Bi-weekly Check-Ins

The student coach/faculty partner's bi-weekly check-ins were designed to be conversations regarding various aspects of the faculty partner's course design and teaching methodologies, particularly regarding the accessibility of content and learning opportunities for students in the classroom.

The check-in topics included syllabus design, content delivery, small group assignments, independent assignments (including exams), and student wellness. Additionally, student coaches spent the second half of the semester designing a "mini action plan" with their faculty partners, geared toward addressing improving accessibility and accommodations for their class.

"An 'aha moment!' I had was realizing how much power professors had over the accommodating nature of their courses. From flexible attendance to due dates, professors' personal policy vary greatly over the university and they are given great power over student experiences." - Student Member

The final two check-ins included a discussion of the mini action plans, along with planning, implementation of new strategies, resources, mindsets, and reflection. During these meetings, student coaches typically used note-taking and annotation to highlight significant moments during their check-ins.

"I was meeting with [student coach] and it was a nice way to pull back and zoom out of the trees each week and really have a chance to take a deep breath and re-center the students' perspective on things. And we did so much back and forth learning. I know there were so many points over the course of our time together where I was like, 'I literally have never thought of that from a student perspective, ever. Oh my gosh, how did I not make that connection that that might be how they're perceiving this thing that I'm doing or not doing?' And likewise, I think, from her perspective, she realized a lot of the normative and logistical challenges that are on the instructor side and the TA side of things, too. It was really cool to go back and forth, and I kept thinking, my goodness, if every professor had one student and they did this all the time, how much good would come from that? We were both expanding our minds." - Faculty Member

Online Discussion Boards Bi-Weekly on Canvas

After meeting with their faculty partners and making notes from their bi-weekly check-ins on accessible course design and teaching, the student coaches were asked to share insights on a private discussion board available to participants invited to the collaborative.

Typical discussion board prompts probed significant statements, revelations, or "aha! moments" experienced by coaches and faculty during their meetings. Generally speaking, discussion boards offered an online environment for student coaches and faculty partners to "share out" across pairings and summarize the aspects of their bi-weekly check-ins that they found to be most important, insightful, and relevant to the aims of the pilot.

Each discussion board corresponded to one topical "module" including the aforementioned categories (syllabus, content delivery, small group work, independent assignments, student wellness, and each pairing's "mini action plan").

"[In the past,] I was starting to make design choices in the course that were around preparing for worst-case scenarios [. . .] I was so focused on those 10 students who were going to try to cheat that I was designing everything around that. [I was] so gleeful when I decided to get rid of Proctorio and just trust the students. You know, with the flexibility that they needed to take the exams. Everything about how I feel in terms of my identity as a teacher is so much more enjoyable and sustainable and gratifying, as a result of focusing everything around being as helpful as I possibly can, instead of being focused around, how I catch the few bad actors every semester." - Faculty Member

Four All-Hands Meetings

The All-Hands meetings gathered all teams across the project, including project advisors, IT and evaluation specialists, UX design team members, student coaches, faculty partners, the project coordinator, and the principal investigator.

Generally speaking, the hour-long All-Hands meetings had broad project roadmap updates and activities designed to bring various teams within the Collaborative together in a more familiar light. In the middle of the semester, teams were also asked to share out any insights or "aha! moments" with the larger group, facilitating an environment where project members could learn from each other's experiences.

"One of the really amazing things is that we were able to have these conversations in a space where people felt like they could be open and honest, and that is so important to the learning." - Faculty Member

Exit Focus Groups

At the conclusion of the spring semester, the faculty team and the team of student coaches participated in exit focus groups and were asked to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of their involvement in the pilot.

In particular, the student coach team was asked about their experiences with their multiple roles — as a coach, disabled student, and researcher — and the faculty team was asked about their experiences as both an instructor (to their students) and a learner (to their student coach).

Outcomes and Impact

The Collaborative's main outcomes focused on its mission — creating a culture of access, transforming attitudes, making accessibility easy, leveraging technology for learning, leading as ambassadors for change, and centering disabled student experiences — and expanded to include the development of a replicable model, dissemination, and integration with campus initiatives.

Yet the most vital outcome of the pilot was the experiences, insights, and reflections of the teams, as they embraced the many opportunities to reflect and share their journeys.

12 Key Themes

The artifacts from each of these dialog points were analyzed as part of our continued understanding of the pilot's impact. Many of these reflections were written or recorded, allowing for substantive analysis.

The evaluation team used a formal qualitative analysis approach and, in conjunction with both student coaches and pilot leadership, coded and categorized project artifacts across 12 themes. Each theme below has two dialog excerpts, to illuminate the insights.

THEME 1: Defining accessibility and its purposes

"She believes that creating a more accessible environment does not put anyone at a disadvantage, but rather makes everyone feel welcomed."

"Accessibility is really about removing whatever obstacles people perceive are in the way, that you probably can't perceive at all because they're not an obstacle for you. So if you take for granted that the space is navigable and movable about…You don't see the obstacles, but for many other people that-- that there are huge obstacles right in the way."

THEME 2: Understanding the challenges of disabled student experiences

"I wasn't being given accessible like material, or like my needs as a disabled student…my first year, just because I had this internal conflict of not wanting to actually like, admit my disabilities…"

"We discussed how a common barrier to implementing more accommodating policies has been a "strawman" of a malicious student. One who takes advantage of the system and uses professor's accommodations as a weakness to enable cheating."

THEME 3: **Gaining new perspectives after centering disabled students' experiences**

"I believe that when professors provide tools for student's mental health and self-care strategies makes me mindful of how I care for myself."

"All of us just kind of form our own perspectives and our own experiences and our own lives as disabled people…were able to like, provide different things, which is kind of the beauty of having a diverse group of people working on it [the project]."

THEME 4: **Observing the challenges of existing technology tools**

"She was able to present the Powerpoint to those students on Zoom but not to those in the physical classroom."

"Students may feel alone when someone is judging their work since they're zooming in from their room, and not in the same room with everyone else which might offer more supporting cues."

THEME 5: **Having positive faculty experiences**

"To be able to have the time this semester, where Søren often times came to class and to be able to see what I was doing in class was really helpful.. and having those two week reminders of putting it back on my forefront…thinking about it repeatedly throughout the semester [not just at the beginning]."

"My meetings with Gayathri were, like y'all have said, some of the most generative, exciting moments of the week, and I definitely looked forward to blocking off the time and having conversations and having that more like 'meta', sitting back thinking about the course…"

THEME 6: **Having negative faculty experiences**

"Pre-Covid, Dr. S noticed that around 3-4 students would miss out on their group activities. But now, she has noticed more and more students not participating and engaging with their small groups. Because of this, the groups are struggling and all the work is being done by 2-3 students."

"Since sharing research ideas and writing is a sensitive moment [the students] need to be in the room together to build that trust. [It's] hard to manage that over Zoom when a person's camera is off."

THEME 7: **Supporting learning moments in the Collaborative**

"An 'aha moment!' I had was realizing how much power professors had over the accommodating nature of their courses. From flexible attendance to due dates, professors' personal policy vary greatly over the university and they are given great power over student experiences."

"The collaborative process is so valuable and important. Students are able to listen to others' opinions and learn from their peers. They are able to see their peer's thoughts and processes which is more valuable than just knowing the correct answer."

THEME 8: **Scaling these efforts institutionally**

"It seems as though many involved with the collaborative already strive for accessibility and inclusion within their classrooms… how might we use our collective influence, then, to help enlighten others and encourage the adoption of similar attitudes/policies in those less inclined or familiar?"

"And I know it shouldn't be this way, but I do think there's value to putting money behind getting faculty to participate in this, and I think the University has an obligation to do that, to say that these conversations are really important."

THEME 9: **Shifting mindsets**

"We need to ensure that we are intentionally building our courses to be accessible, rather than relying on our training and/or lived experiences to create accessible spaces naturally."

"We discussed how currently professors talk about how they theoretically 'could' accommodate students, but we want to shift that to a 'should', which requires more professor-led initiative."

THEME 10: **Embracing pedagogy strategies that support accessibility**

"Dr. Guida includes mental health services and resources beyond mental health, such as food pantry in the syllabus."

"Dr. Dillon sends out a mid-semester check-in email to the students to let them know they can contact him if there are any issues."

THEME 11: **Using technology tools to support accessibility**

"Dr. G uses InstaPoll for students to actively participate in small group discussions. This also helps quiet students to reflect on the topic. InstaPoll is anonymous, but their participation grades are reflected automatically on Canvas. Dr. Guida also uses it for open-ended Qs and to get participation going, and for the class to chime in."

"Dr. G thought about making the Canvas page seem more intuitive by making the resources available at multiple places and in lectures which helped the students identify it. There is less confusion and emails regarding searching for class content and resources."

THEME 12: **Replicating this model**

"I'm thinking about 'How do I continue to have this happen, and how do I make sure that a student has the space to be able to do this with me?' It's just, it's really been a new way of thinking about my teaching and where I can go and how I can continue to improve.

"The idea of partnering with students just needs to be done, as much as we can. I think like we've been saying, there's a lot of cross-learning that happens. . . particularly around accessibility."

Indispensable Insights Toward Transformation

This pilot study produced several important insights about the benefits of incorporating disabled student voices in conversations on course accessibility in higher education. Some were expected — such as a better understanding of the disabled experience — but there was also surprising growth that exceeded all expectations.

If any other college is considering such a project, that quick and meaningful progress in just a few short months should be compelling. There is no downside, and the upside is quite literally an opportunity for transformation.

KEY INSIGHT: The importance of including disabled experiences is foundational to the professional learning experience for faculty.

Although all faculty were "bought-in" as volunteers and were compensated for their time, there was a recurring theme of "oh wow!" and often "oh no!" when learning about challenging experiences the disabled coaches had during their time at the university. Concepts of accessibility, ableism, and disability were often still in the abstract prior to the start of this project. Direct contact and a full semester of dialog and partnership with disabled students had a significant, positive impact on the effectiveness of the program.

Conversations between disabled student coaches and their faculty partners were at the crux of the larger initiative to create improvements and opportunities for faculty development in accessibility. Important recommendations and insights from the disabled student coaches precipitated from their bi-weekly meetings with faculty partners, where accessible pedagogy and existing strategies were juxtaposed against the coaches' own lived experiences, trials, and tribulations with the "status quo" of course design, accommodation policies, and the existing architecture of resources offered to them.

The sharing of personal experiences and perspectives laid the groundwork for creating recommendations for course design improvement, including the creation of each student coach/faculty partner pairing's "mini action plan".

Furthermore, the sharing of experiences between our five student coaches also fostered a sense of community among them. Each student had the opportunity to expand their definitions of accessibility, including its purpose and "what it covers" based on the stories — both positive and negative — that they heard from their disabled colleagues.

"The class I teach is on autism and neurodiversity. I am not on the spectrum, and I start off the class by centering on the idea that I'm not an expert and that there are students with lived experiences that are the experts. When [student coach] first came to class and I was able to introduce them, explain why they were there because we were in this partnership and I was still learning about things, and it was so helpful for students to see that positioning of me as a learner in this way…to see that it is something that we continue to learn about." - Faculty Member

KEY INSIGHT: "Coaching" instructors on accessible course design redefined the power dynamic between disabled students and faculty members (for the better).

Student coaches partnered with faculty not primarily as attendees (past, present or future) in their classes, but as consultants to instructors who voluntarily identified as desiring more knowledge of challenges facing disabled students.

Without the added pressure of needing to perform well academically (or at all, for that matter) or conform to the existing structure of their faculty partner's classes, the student coaches hosted a "level playing field" in their one-on-one meetings where their input was valued and their experiences taken in earnest without negative consequences.

"Hearing about her experiences in class and getting her thoughts on my syllabus was so valuable. It made me realize that even though I had always gotten feedback on my syllabus from students, I never sought the feedback out from specific students -- in particular from my students with accommodations. This is definitely something I want to think about in the future." - Faculty Member

Whereas disabled students typically have to disclose information about their accessibility needs to their professors for fear of their disability being rebuked or downplayed, the project's structure created regular spaces for student coaches to be open and assertive about disabled student needs without the risk of rejection.

KEY INSIGHT: Mindset shifts occurred early and often and had a profound effect on both faculty and students.

Student coaches had shifted in their perspectives about faculty decision-making in teaching, with many revelations that helped to contextualize the purpose behind pedagogical choices, particularly in the broad range of platforms, subject areas, and course enrollment sizes.

Faculty were able to drill down into their own assumptions about aspects of their teaching with an accessibility mindset. Because a "quick fix" was not the goal, faculty were able to think more holistically about their teaching. Most importantly, faculty began to think about how intentional design elements could reduce the reliance on official accommodations to reduce barriers for disabled students (and all students).

> "I think teachers, professors, feel like there are these limitations. "No, we can't do that." But actually, you can do some things that are a little outside of the box, I think. And I think our students need to know that they're valued as individual human beings and that the investment that we make in them is well worth it, and sometimes that means a little extra time, sometimes that means a little more one-on-one." - Faculty Member

> "Both Dr. Sanders and I are trying to navigate the world with a disability and we discussed the challenges we have faced. Prior to the meeting, I was unaware of the lack of training faculty receive prior to teaching. This makes it difficult for faculty to understand the steps they need to make to accommodate students with disabilities." - Student Member

KEY INSIGHT: Collaboration "learns" students into advocates.

Between the sharing of perspectives, "aha! moments", and anecdotes, student coaches learned from each other, leading to an expansion in the scope of their personal definitions of accessibility. Additionally, the student coaches were more willing to advocate on behalf of their colleagues, other disabled students, and "disabled people in general."

When the student coaches engaged with the pilot's resources (reading materials, discussion boards, and meetings included), they became equipped with a better idea of what accessibility encompasses. Before the pilot, the student coaches were unsure about even advocating for themselves, but by the end of the project, armed with new information and perspectives, they felt like advocates not only for themselves but for those around them.

KEY INSIGHT: Collaboration leads to improvements not just for participants, but for the wider student body.

The work between student coaches, faculty partners, and other pilot teams led to changes that will not only impact the accessibility of resources for pilot participants but for the larger student body.

First were the "mini action plans" that each student coach/faculty partner pair collaborated on during the latter half of the semester. Faculty partners implemented new strategies such as increased, mid-semester check-ins with students, more mental health resources (communicated through class announcements), accessibility-based course evaluations, interactive slide decks for presentations, transparent assignment rubrics, and make-up credit policies, flexible deadlines, and use of accessible language.

"The real takeaway for me [is] I am far more comfortable sitting here now having conversations with students about what they need than I was in January. Because I also understand that I may not have the vocabulary, I may not always say everything right. But [my student coach] reassured me that just the good intentions and the wanting to have the conversation go so far. Because she encounters so many people that aren't willing to have the conversation and aren't willing to listen." - Faculty Member

KEY INSIGHT: Teaching choices must be transparent.

Routinely, these meetings also mentioned practices that increase transparency around the purpose of assignments, expectations for grading, and how to successfully complete the work. Something that faculty partners came to realize is that students often do not know the purpose of the work that they are doing, and that this creates unnecessary frustration among students.

"Makes assignments a week ahead; talks for reasons about assignments and introduces it in class (a week and a half in); talks about HW and expectations: Why is the HW being assigned? What is the HW purpose?; does give templates as well examples of expectations." - Student Member

"Make it [independent assignments] accessible by having a very clear description + rubric; uses the same rubric for the whole course; at the start of the semester, she goes over the rubric being used in order for students to know how they are being graded and the expectations." - Student Member

KEY INSIGHT: Start small and continue to improve.

There was a sense of vulnerability among the faculty, wondering if what they were doing in their classrooms was "enough".

This pilot was brief but mighty! The number of possible strategies that faculty could implement was more than what could be implemented in such a short period of time. But the pilot was there to support each other and provide reassurance that mindset shifts alone were a huge step forward. While the possibilities seemed endless, this creative brainstorm and new ways of thinking will have an impact for years to come.

"As far as accommodating disabilities goes, we wanted to focus on a 'do-able' action. Currently professors are required to include an SSD paragraph in their syllabus, and many brush over that in their first day instruction. Something that could help significantly in acknowledging and supporting disabled or newly disabled students, especially those who are unable to get SSD accommodations, is getting professors to also create and mention open one on one office hours, specifically for discussing student accommodations. We discussed how currently professors talk about how they theoretically 'could' accommodate students, but we want to shift that to a 'should', which requires more professor-led initiative." - Faculty Member

KEY INSIGHT: **Faculty were thinking about scalability at all times, with a strong desire to engage with their peers and ask for institutional leadership.**

There was also a tension between a desire for more information, more examples, and more application with the understanding that — in a fully scaled out model — participating faculty would be unlikely to even have as much time available as pilot faculty participants gave to this project.

How much is enough? How much is available? How do we create both incentives and consequences to improve engagement? These were recurring questions regarding resources of time and attention, as well as accountability at the institutional level for accessibility of its learning contexts.

"I plan to share a lot. And I really love that [all of the program information is] in a Canvas course, and that these materials are there and I can pull from those, and you know, say, 'I've been part of this grant that was a phenomenal way for me to examine the way that I think about teaching.'" - Faculty Member

"In terms of my own thinking, I am going to incorporate not only an awareness of this as part of my class. I'm actually going to give a week within the semester to readings and discussions about the whole idea of accessibility more broadly. We've actually got a whole new class starting on accessible design here in the [college]." - Faculty Member

Some focused on carrots and sticks, thinking about annual reviews and the extent to which accessibility of courses could be part of how we evaluate our work as educators.

> "Even if you say 'I haven't done anything' at least you're prompted to acknowledge that it's an issue and think about it. So that it becomes an inevitable consequence of the way we think and evaluate what we're doing." - Faculty Member

This sense of accountability extended to the thinking about high-level university teaching awards and those faculty who have their pedagogy spotlighted as exemplary.

> "Nobody should win a $25,000 teaching award if they're not engaging in accessible practices in their classrooms. So put that in the rubric for these teaching awards." - Faculty Member

Professional development models in higher education often include groups of faculty gathering together and sharing strategies. The unique aspects of this design allowed for broader conversations regarding accessibility across the campus as a whole — with faculty, students, and staff gathered throughout the pilot project to discuss, within their own roles and spheres of influence, barriers and strategies for reducing them. This common goal and breaking down of institutional silos had a multiplicative effect on project impact and outcomes.

> "I think it may be interesting to think about what a learning community could look like if those of us who have gone through this — this is what my coaching experience was like, this is what my mini action plan was and how [and let] that be a model for another group of faculty that come in and do something that's a semester-long sort of commitment." - Faculty Member

Leveraged Resources and Expanded Opportunities

One of the essential components of the Collaborative was to include people from across the different places and spaces on campus — continuing to break down institutional silos and acknowledging the way the pilot acted as a magnet, attracting interest and further collaboration.

There were several bonus benefits to this approach, both during the pilot and as it continues forward with this accessibility lens. The pilot was able to expand the reach of our work to other initiatives on campus, including:

- **Students-As-Partners**, housed in the Center for Teaching & Learning, served as an amplifier for three of the disabled student coaches and their accessibility work. This initiative provided additional stipend funding and resources for projects that were aligned to but beyond the original scope of the pilot.

- **Provost Teaching Fellows**, also housed in the Center for Teaching & Learning, is a natural fit as a future catalyst for change. Both in the development and now outreach phase of the pilot, several members of the Provost Teaching Fellows community engaged with the mission of the Collaborative. This group is also central in the onboarding of new faculty each fall in the New Faculty Symposium, and Collaborative members (both students and faculty) are already a part of the planning for Fall 2022 events.

- **Campus Solutions** at the Information Technology Services Department and the partnership with Mario A. Guerra and his team were instrumental in conversations throughout the pilot. There were many revelations that came from our dialogs that have already begun to influence decisions regarding the Canvas Learning Management System and ways to make accessibility easier on that platform.

"I am a bit surprised given the University's syllabus template that we don't also have a Canvas template. I can't imagine how challenging it would be for students to navigate five different courses designed five different ways." - Faculty Member

Members of the Collaborative also served as critical colleagues with the two other projects funded by Microsoft during the 2022 spring semester: The Smart Hand Tools project led by Dr. Ken Fleishmann at the School of Information and a survey for disabled students in STEM led by Dr. Nick Winges-Yanez. Both projects tapped into the insights of our disabled student coaches and the broader Collaborative membership in the development and implementation of their work and expanding the mission of increasing disability awareness and access on the UT Austin campus.

The circle of support for the outcomes of this project continues to expand. Conversations are occurring earnestly about ways to bring disability awareness into the larger UT Austin community. These entry points are happening across different administrative offices and hubs for student support, as well as 1:1 conversations with disabled students, faculty, and staff.

Dissemination

Core to the Collaborative is engaging with others and advocating for accessibility, specifically strategies that center disabled students. Dissemination was a vital step in this effort. Together with Collaborative members, project leadership and student coaches have already disseminated findings across multiple venues and platforms.

Team Recruitment
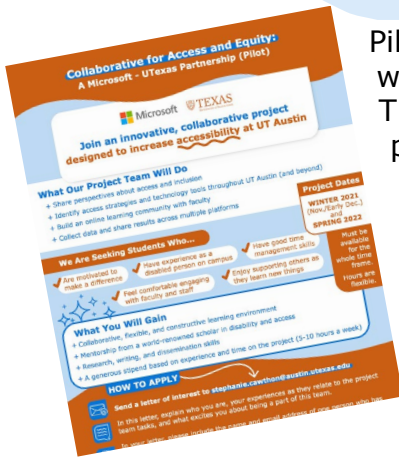
Pilot dissemination began in the pre-planning phase, when the teams were recruited from throughout campus. The flyer for student recruitment was shared digitally and in print, attracting an unexpectedly high response rate.

Website Hub

The teams agreed from the start that the pilot needed a digital "home" — a website that could highlight information about its goals, resources, and team spotlights. It was designed to be a hub for further collaborations, where other programs could find out more and connect with the Collaborative. The website has three main sections — About, Teams, and Resources — and will include this impact report.
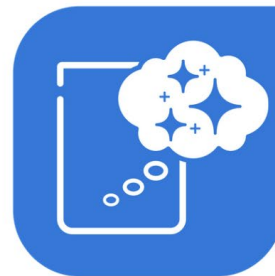
**About**   **Teams**   **Resources**

Infographics

The Collaborative spent a great deal of time curating strategies for accessibility that reflected both the personal team experiences and the results of its joint dialog. It was important to put these into actionable tips in ways that could reach (and empower) both students and faculty.

Two infographics were created as a result of these conversations and they are posted on the website, to be downloaded as accessible PDFs and shared digitally or printed as posters. (See pages 38-39.)

- **Access for Success: 9 Tips for Disabled College Students** provides practical advice, whether or not the student has chosen to disclose their disability or is receiving official accommodations. One simple tip? Ask for the instructor's presentation materials, to get a head start on note-taking.

- **Make Access Easy: 9 Strategies for Higher Education Faculty** is designed for busy instructors. The tips range from holistic — set a welcoming tone for disabled people enrolled in your course — to practical advice on attendance, office hours, and testing.

The Collaborative also distributed printed posters of both infographics to the greater Collaborative community so that they could be posted throughout the UT Austin campus (and beyond, for supporters on other campuses and outside of higher education).
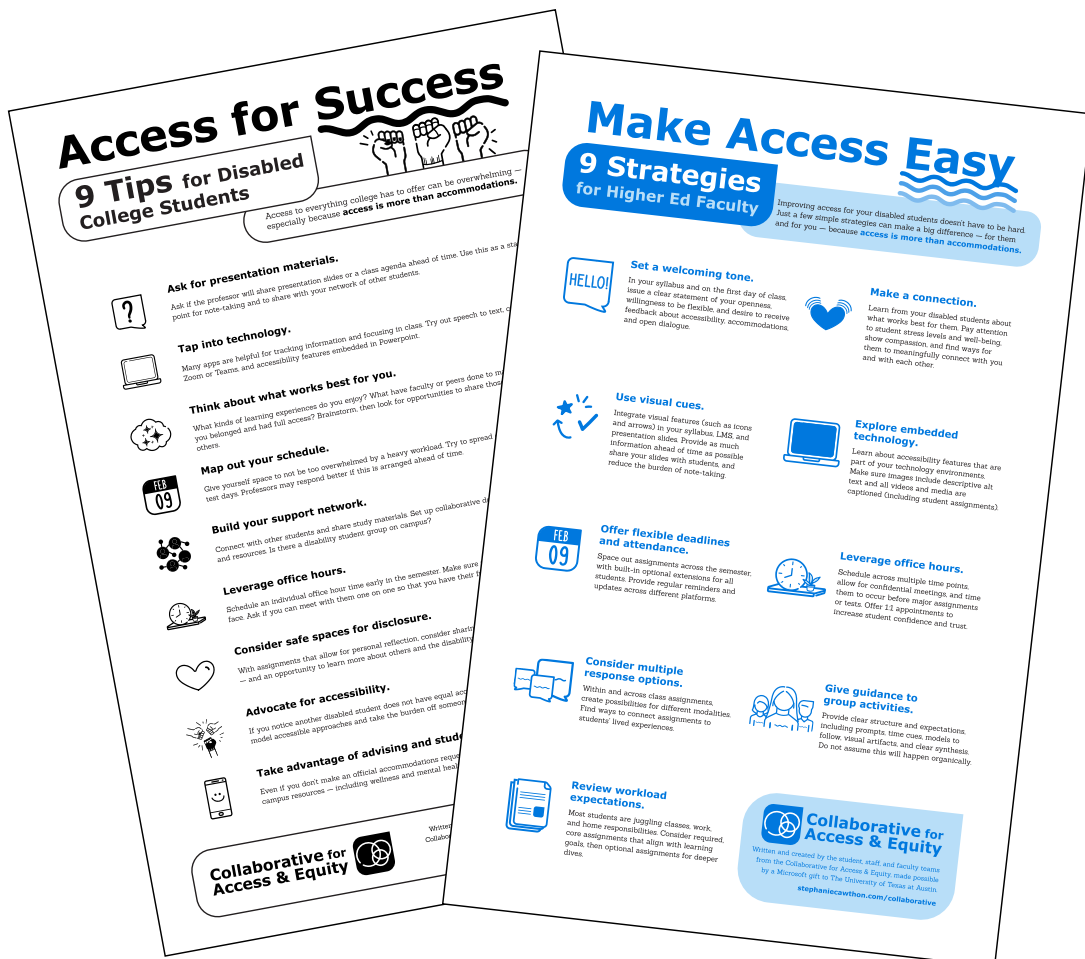
Presentations

Due to its innovative approach and focus on making access easy, the Collaborative has already received many requests for Dr. Cawthon to present. This is a sampling of presentations in Spring 2022. There are several more presentations scheduled for Fall 2022 and in the review pipeline for Spring 2023

- The University of Texas at Austin | What Starts Here Launch | "Collaborative on Access & Equity: Transforming a Campus from the Inside Out" | Pictured: Dr. Stephanie Cawthon (center) with Ryan Mata and Desiree Lama

- Academy of Distinguished Teachers Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost | Weekly Lunch: Inclusion and improving systems for student well-being

- Microsoft Inter-University Showcase "Transforming a Campus from the Inside Out: Accessibility as a Mindset and Practice"

- Lilly Conference for Evidence-Based Teaching & Learning | "The Microsoft Collaborative for Access and Equity: Co-Creating an Accessible Campus Culture with Disabled Students and Faculty Partners" and "Ableism in Higher Education: Reducing Barriers to Disabled Student, Staff, and Faculty Success"

Articles and Interviews

Student coach Gayathri Ramesh wrote an article in the *Texas Design Journal*. This article focused on disability and online learning, drawing from her personal experience in the Collaborative.

"Through this project, I was able to understand the finer details of presenting course content and the importance of including accessible solutions to ensure a supportive learning environment for students with disabilities. The pandemic has shed a light on the inadequacies in online accessibility, especially in the learning sector. However, with the efforts of students and faculty, it is possible that accessibility can be improved so that online learning environments can still be offered post-pandemic and provide equal learning opportunities." - Gayathri Ramesh

In addition, Dr. Cawthon was profiled about instructional design by the Office of Instructional Innovation at the College of Education at UT Austin. Two of their members, Karen French and Lucas Horton, were part of the Collaborative's larger circle of support for the pilot. This spotlight was an opportunity to share her thoughts about how to make the learning experience meaningful for students — with accessibility baked into the course structure — specifically as it relates to her course The Culture of Disability. Insights she shared included:

- **Keep the assignments short.** "I find we put too much value on the 10-15 or 20-30 page paper, and I don't think such page requirements really help in this type of course. I keep the individualized assignment to four pages, which has been helpful for students in focusing on the most important content and helpful for me in providing detailed feedback to all students."

- **Use the same rubric or assignment structure.** "[It] makes a big difference for students. [They] have the opportunity to complete a similar assignment with a similar rubric prior to the final paper. This helps them get a grasp on the expectations and how they can best show their learning."

- **Be consistent with due dates throughout the semester.** "Having this consistent structure seems to help students who may be navigating multiple or unique responsibilities outside of the classroom; they know what to expect during each unit and when they will be responsible for submitting their work."

Videos

Dissemination has also reached several video platforms. Three members created a series of videos about their experiences in the Collaborative — showing their energy, vision, and passion for the pilot.

- Faculty team member Dr. Madeleine Holland's video (pictured) addressed why she was motivated to participate in the pilot.

- Student coach Ximena Pastor Navarro created an in-depth video that addressed all aspects of her involvement with — and transformation by — the pilot.

- Advisory board member Dr. Anita Swanson's video shared her wishes for the future: "My hope is that accessibility will become what we always do. Not just something that is done afterward but is the typical everyday form of what we do."

- Student coach Desiree Lama filmed a documentary as part of her collaboration with Students-As-Partners initiative. There are very few spaces where disabled perspectives are represented and that faculty can learn more about their experiences. Desiree's extensive set of interviews can be utilized throughout the Center for Teaching & Learning's online resources.

Recommendations for Campus Leadership

This Collaborative encourages more collaborations on campuses far and wide. Start the conversation, then empower it. Recognize that accessibility needs to be led by example and has to be at the heart of both student success and campus improvement initiatives.

The following recommendations are a starting point for further dialog on what steps to take at the institutional level.

- ☐ Recognize that not all disabilities are visible and many students do not disclose them.

- ☐ Invite disabled student perspectives and integrate their input.

- ☐ Empower students through meaningful partnerships with faculty.

- ☐ Understand that accessibility benefits all students, not just a few.

- ☐ Intentionally focus on accessibility as part of course design and instructional support.

- ☐ Emphasize flexibility over standardization in course assignments.

- ☐ De-emphasize a "cheating prevention" mindset in course syllabi.

- ☐ Create structured and safe spaces for faculty to share strategies.

- ☐ Spotlight and incentivize accessible teaching models and examples.

- ☐ Start at the top with clear messaging about accessibility from institutional leadership.

- ☐ Include accessibility as part of rubrics for course evaluation, teaching observations, promotion and tenure, merit reviews, and teaching awards.

- ☐ Ensure that disability is a part of all diversity and inclusion conversations and policies.

- ☐ Invest in technology to support accessibility, particularly in LMS and online platforms.

- ☐ Break down silos on your campus through ongoing, collaborative, and systemic efforts.

Appendix

The Collaborative on Access and Equity

https://www.stephaniecawthon.com/collaborative

Dr. Stephanie Cawthon's Research

Framework for Equity and Access for Disabled Students

Faculty Perspectives on Learning Communities

Students as Coaches and Observers of Faculty Teaching

Student Observations of Postsecondary Classroom Instruction: Accessibility Challenges and Collaborative Feedback

Measuring Accessibility of Postsecondary Education and Training for Deaf Individuals: A Proposed Conceptual Framework

Profile: Office of Instructional Innovation

Resources at Microsoft

Commitment to Accessibility

Accessibility Technology and Tools

Higher Education Solutions

Resources at The University of Texas at Austin

Center for Teaching & Learning

Office of Instructional Innovation

Faculty Innovation Center

Provost Teaching Fellows

Students as Partners

Division of Diversity and Community Engagement

Texas Technology Access Program

Campus Solutions

National Centers Focused on Disability and Access

CAST

National Deaf Center

National Center on Deaf-Blindness

IRIS Center

National Center on Educational Outcomes

AHEAD

National Autism Center

Access for Success

9 Tips for Disabled College Students

Access to everything college has to offer can be overwhelming — especially because **access is more than accommodations.**

Ask for presentation materials.

Ask if the professor will share presentation slides or a class agenda ahead of time. Use this as a starting point for note-taking and to share with your network of other students.

Tap into technology.

Many apps are helpful for tracking information and focusing in class. Try out speech to text, captions in Zoom or Teams, and accessibility features embedded in Powerpoint.

Think about what works best for you.

What kinds of learning experiences do you enjoy? What have faculty or peers done to make you feel like you belonged and had full access? Brainstorm, then look for opportunities to share those examples with others.

Map out your schedule.

Give yourself space to not be too overwhelmed by a heavy workload. Try to spread out your due dates or test days. Professors may respond better if this is arranged ahead of time.

Build your support network.

Connect with other students and share study materials. Set up collaborative documents to pool class notes and resources. Is there a disability student group on campus?

Leverage office hours.

Schedule an individual office hour time early in the semester. Make sure your instructor can put a name to a face. Ask if you can meet with them one on one so that you have their full attention.

Consider safe spaces for disclosure.

With assignments that allow for personal reflection, consider sharing your experience as a disabled student — and an opportunity to learn more about others and the disability community.

Advocate for accessibility.

If you notice another disabled student does not have equal access to class activities, be an advocate. You can model accessible approaches and take the burden off someone else.

Take advantage of advising and student support services.

Even if you don't make an official accommodations request through disability services, you can use lots of campus resources — including wellness and mental health centers.

Make Access Easy

9 Strategies
for Higher Ed Faculty

Improving access for your disabled students doesn't have to be hard. Just a few simple strategies can make a big difference — for them and for you — because **access is more than accommodations.**

Set a welcoming tone.

In your syllabus and on the first day of class, issue a clear statement of your openness, willingness to be flexible, and desire to receive feedback about accessibility, accommodations, and open dialogue.

Make a connection.

Learn from your disabled students about what works best for them. Pay attention to student stress levels and well-being, show compassion, and find ways for them to meaningfully connect with you and with each other.

Use visual cues.

Integrate visual features (such as icons and arrows) in your syllabus, LMS, and presentation slides. Provide as much information ahead of time as possible share your slides with students, and reduce the burden of note-taking.

Explore embedded technology.

Learn about accessibility features that are part of your technology environments. Make sure images include descriptive alt text and all videos and media are captioned (including student assignments).

Offer flexible deadlines and attendance.

Space out assignments across the semester, with built-in optional extensions for all students. Provide regular reminders and updates across different platforms.

Leverage office hours.

Schedule across multiple time points, allow for confidential meetings, and time them to occur before major assignments or tests. Offer 1:1 appointments to increase student confidence and trust.

Consider multiple response options.

Within and across class assignments, create possibilities for different modalities. Find ways to connect assignments to students' lived experiences.

Give guidance to group activities.

Provide clear structure and expectations, including prompts, time cues, models to follow, visual artifacts, and clear synthesis. Do not assume this will happen organically.

Review workload expectations.

Most students are juggling classes, work, and home responsibilities. Consider required, core assignments that align with learning goals, then optional assignments for deeper dives.

Collaborative for Access & Equity

Success
Together

Transforming Higher Education from the Inside Out:

The Collaborative for Access and Equity (Pilot) Impact Report