

ELISA EDELBERG: So, thanks everyone for joining this webinar, entitled "University-Wide Accessibility, Supporting all Students and Faculty with Disabilities in Higher Education." My name is Elisa Edelberg from 3Play Media, and I'll be moderating today.

I'm joined from CUNY by Carlos Herrera, Assistant Director of Services for Students with Disabilities. And with that, I'll hand it off to Carlos, who has a wonderful presentation prepared for you.

CARLOS HERRERA: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you to 3Play and all the good folks for inviting me to present today. Today's topic, as you see, is how we expanded access to assistive technologies softwares here at the City University of New York through a unique university-wide licensing program that we were able to develop in partnership with VFO Group.

Today's presentation is basically a reprise of a presentation I did in November at the AHEAD Accessing Higher Ground Conference in Boulder. And at that time, it was a panel presentation with my colleagues from the CUNY Assistive Technology Services Project, CATS, and for colleagues at the VFO group, who are the manufacturers of the software that the university has entered into this agreement with, this university-wide licensing agreement.

And none of them are available today, so I'm carrying the baton, and I hope to be able to answer any questions that they may have fielded. Anyway, just to set the stage, the concept behind considering and deploying a university-wide licensing arrangement are grounded in some of the benefits that we wanted to extend to students generally, specifically to students with disabilities, and to the university as a whole.

We have a very diverse population in CUNY, and I'll go into a little bit more detail about who our students are. But we wanted to leverage an investment of this type to maximize the benefit to all students, not just those designated, or classified, or self-identifying as having a disability.

We want to increase access for all students, obviously. A big issue is that many students who need and can benefit from the tools that are available through these various assistive technology software packages only have access while they're in a campus facility, or a classroom, or lab, or library, and we wanted to try to extend some of that to the student outside of that venue-- those venues.

We also wanted to at least give some support to students who had not identified as having specific disabilities or learning disabilities that could conceivably benefit from many of the tools built into a lot of this assistive technology. And then, of course, there are those students that, for many reasons, either don't disclose, don't want to disclose, or have never been diagnosed or suspect that they actually have a disability that would be remediated through some assistive technologies.

So those were the philosophical foundations of it. On top of all of that is in tight financial times, you have to get as much of a bang for your buck. And so, we thought this was one method to try to accomplish most, if not all, those goals.

For those of you who don't know, the City University of New York, or CUNY, as we refer to ourselves, is the largest urban public university, city-based university. We're comprised of 24 campuses, and that's broken up, as you see, in a variety of ways, from senior colleges, community colleges. We have a grad center, a medical school, a law school, a school of professional studies, and different schools among all those different campuses, engineering, and so on.

So we're a very, very, very diverse university. We've got over 275,000 students registered in our degree programs. That does not include many other programs that the public directly interfaces with-- many high school and college prep courses, a lot of continuing education offerings. And so we really touch a huge segment of the population in New York that's seeking educational opportunities.

And many of those folks can benefit from the type of support and tools that are built into the assistive technologies that are commonly used in the higher ed setting. And we wanted to be able to reach them and break down some of the bureaucratic and pedagogical barriers that existed in the past through the different disability services that are offered on typical college campuses.

So that's a quick snapshot of CUNY. The VFO Group, I'm sure many of you have had some kind of interaction with through their product lines. They are pretty much the leading AT software and consulting company in the country at this point.

On my screen, you'll see their brand names. And I'll bet that most of you have either used and/or recommended the use of any of these products. They have a longstanding relationship in the higher ed world with CUNY throughout our different campuses. Our student body

generally has been exposed to these products and come with at least a modicum of familiarity with many of these product lines.

And so, it made sense for us to, not reinvent the wheel, but to go with the path of least resistance so that we could ramp up both the deployment and the training provision of this software to different departments and different student groups.

So the population of CUNY, of students self-identifying as having some sort of disabilities, has always hovered around 10,000 students. The last number I saw was, I believe, 9,800 and change. But that fluctuates, depending on the student's self-disclosure, and what student type you actually are measuring.

As I said earlier, these are students who are registered in degree programs. But we have so many others that are not in degree programs that are taking courses, or a course, or attending some sort of educational program in CUNY, who don't register with the CUNY Disabilities Services offices across our campuses.

And those offices are, like most other universities, staffed by a few professionals and many part-timers, particularly when it comes to assistive technology staff. They tend to have part-time AT staff. Resources vary greatly across campuses. It's not one monolithic model.

The history of CUNY is such that this university has really come together over 100 plus years. And each campus has a history. Each campus has its own set of traditions. And so we've integrated many of those into a unified system, but there are still local differences. And that translates sometimes into the funding of services across campuses.

Generally, we try to provide consistent services across campuses, but the reality is that that doesn't always occur. Most of the AT staff work directly with students and in supporting faculty through either providing conversions or other support to allow for the provision of accommodations for students, for instance, captioning or some other related service.

So that you can get a picture of how things are set up in our system, we have a Central Office of Student Affairs, as most universities would. And an advisory council to that central office is what we call the COSDI Advisory Panel-- or council, rather. And they are a group of Disability Service Office directors who meet on a regular basis to discuss policy issues, to make recommendations, to exchange information, and to try to promote practices that will enhance the accessibility of the university to students with disabilities, and to inform the leadership, the

senior leadership of the university about needs that the university has, a student body has, and how we can stay current in addressing those needs through technology, programming, and other services.

As a consequence and result of that work that COSDI has done over the last 30 years, several special projects have been created and funded. That includes CUNY's Assistive Technology Services Project, the Media Accessibility Project, and the Learning Disabilities Project. And these are all funded at a relatively small level, but they do provide immense return for the investment in terms of being a source of information that is used across university lines and across departments to enhance the overall understanding and awareness of accessibility and accessibility issues as they impact students.

The first of these is the CUNY Assistive Technology Services Project, or CATS. CATS is about, I want to say between 20 and 25 years old. We're to pin down the actual date because we want to cut a cake for their anniversary.

But the main goal of CATS was to have a central resource that could do some basic research on the applicability and usability of products for our students. We would then, if we found products that made sense for us to utilize, we'd negotiate with the vendors to try to maximize the return on the investment, as opposed to having 24 distinct campuses reaching out individually to vendors and, at times, even bidding against themselves for products and purchasing products without any sense of what was available across the university.

[COUGHS]

Excuse me. This is helpful in many ways. Obviously, you start developing a university-wide knowledge base. You start building a cadre of people who are able to assist in deployment issues and training, in getting the products installed across different campuses with a minimum learning curves.

We then also have a group of trainers available that can train campus staff. They do presentations, and they're a resource for all faculty, administrators, and other people.

[COUGHS] Excuse me.

We maintain the CATS website as a resource and training archive, and that's available at that URL, CATS.cuny.edu. OK.

So there you go. CATS has done a lot of important work across the university, and is very heavily involved in promoting universal design. With this unlimited use license, we now are able to install these products across all the computers in labs, in just about any workstation on campus.

And an important note, this software is not only made available to students, but to anyone who works at CUNY. So anyone who has a cuny.edu email address is able to log in to utilize this software. And we work closely with the folks, at that point, Freedom Scientific to come up with a scheme that was manageable and fit everyone's needs.

Another one of the three special projects at CUNY that I referenced earlier is the media accessibility project, which was an offshoot of CATS. And you all know what the issues are-- [COUGHS] I'm sorry-- regarding media accessibility. And there was a need for a university-wide resource to begin that discussion and to provide some basic training, and to provide support in the conversions and preparation of documents, accessible documents.

Finally, we have the Learning Disabilities Project. And they are charged with promoting awareness and training on issues relating to learning disabilities and students with learning disabilities. They conduct webinars. They bring in outside experts. They have a resource base of online resources that they share with faculty. And they've been able to also assist with helping students obtain updated educational evaluations, which oftentimes, students come to us without.

And so, these are needs that the COSDI council has identified over the years and has tried to mitigate some of these problems by funding these three specific projects.

So again, this is a historical perspective that I want to give you so you can understand how we do things here-- have been doing things here at CUNY. And I'm sure there are many similarities. And obviously, the, I guess, determinative factor beyond a desire to help is the ability to help with resources. And resources, that usually means funding.

I don't want to give the impression that we're flush with cash, because we're not. That's a struggle here as well. But we do have a history and some resources, and we've, I think, smartly tried to maximize as much return on those resources as possible.

So as I alluded to earlier, when you have 24 campuses and 24 different disability services offices who are responsible for purchasing anything, but let's stick to AT, you have 24 different

decision processes. And oftentimes, that leads to replication of effort. That leads to uninformed decisions. That leads to mistakes in purchasing.

Also, many times students will come to us, and they may have been trained, while high school students through their local vocational rehab agency, on a particular product. So there are some forces that kind of push you in a direction when it comes to making purchases, but there's no real central thought and no central discussion about why, or who, or where we should be doing these sorts of things.

Each campus has a budget, and they're expected to utilize it. You know, use it or lose it. And sometimes, purchases are made that don't make a lot of sense in the big picture. Sometimes, campuses get locked into software maintenance agreements, and they just automatically update a product, whether or not that product has kept up with the demands of the students and/or the needs of the institution. And generally, these products were being purchased only for use on the campus, in the libraries, not off-site.

CATS, over the last, I'd say, 15 years, has fought very hard to change that model, and we've been very successful in doing that. Through specialized purchasing and training, we have determined that there are certain products that make more sense for the university to recommend. We set the standards for labs in terms of equipment and in terms of software that should be included in labs and classrooms when it comes to assistive technologies. And we are in a position, through our relationships and through our testing and research, to recommend specific products and justify those recommendations.

Finally, the university-wide licensing, and particularly the arrangement that we've made with the VFO group, allows for our students to utilize this software from anywhere that they have access. And that is revolutionary. There are very few, if any, universities in the United States that we're aware of-- and VFO will vouch for this-- that employ this type of model.

It's not been done for whatever reasons, but we're finding that the thinking behind it has had many unanticipated benefits, which I'll touch on later. OK. So just like, I'm sure, most of your campuses, these are the types of assistive technology software that we need for our students. And these are just the brands of product that we use. We don't only purchase VFO-branded product, but we do have a mix of product that is recommended by CATS for use by all the different campus offices and campus facilities.

And some of this is historical. We've inherited some of this, and after careful consideration,

kept some of it. There's a lot fewer than there used to be. So there's a little less variation, but there's much more support. There's much more of a knowledge base. There's much more ability to troubleshoot and install in a shorter period of time because of the work that we've done.

As a side note, and I want to encourage you all to take note of this, one of the outcomes of this collaboration that we've had across the university has been the CUNY Accessibility Conference. This is something that's now going into its ninth year, and it was through a lot of the work that we were able to do at the other earlier conferences that many of the ideas behind the university-wide licensing, and some other training resources, and other projects that I described-- a lot of these ideas came out of our conference.

So if you're going to be in New York in April and can come join our conference, please do. It's no charge, and you'd meet a bunch of interesting people, very dedicated to the cause. And the URL is on there at the bottom of the screen. I'm sure we can share that later today.

As a result of one of our conferences, where we had the chief information officer and vice chancellor of the university as speakers, our keynote speaker, we got certain commitments from the leadership, the senior IT and university leadership of CUNY.

So again, this is more background information, but I want to give you an understanding of how we got to where we are. Obviously, we didn't invent this. This sort of happened along the way. But one of the catalysts for the success that we've been having and the initiatives and momentum that we have has been the CUNY Accessibility Conference.

In any case, the outcome of that presentation was that senior leadership became much more aware of many of the issues related to accessibility across the university. Obviously, with online courses, this is a huge issue with website remediation. I'm sure many of you are familiar with what's going on across the country in higher education and website remediation. And all of these issues sort of coalesced, and the vice chancellor for information and CIO put together a task force to address the issue of the accessibility of IT across CUNY.

Now we're going on our third year, and this task force is comprised of senior level staff and managers from across different areas that are impacted by accessibility. And this is a very hard lift. There are many things that had to be looked at. We had to devise a better understanding of how things were and where we wanted things to go.

We had to communicate across campuses. We had to get buy-in from administrators on each campus, staff on each campus, and faculty on each campus. And the IT Accessibility Task Force has begun that work, very important work. But, you know, and someone used this example earlier today in a meeting I was attending about accessibility-- you don't turn a battleship around easily, but it's turning.

As a consequence of this task force and of the Vice Chancellor, Brian Cohen's efforts, the CUNY IT Steering Committee, which is composed of all the vice presidents for information technology from all the campuses, created a Strategic Technology Initiative and funded that with a million dollars.

So these funds were made available to purchase software and to fund demonstration projects. The initial purchase of this license, the university-wide license, was funded through that fund. Multiple demonstration projects have been funded and have either completed or are working, including a Blackboard Learning Management System, faculty accessibility training course, which we want to make available to all faculty on how to make their Blackboard workforces accessible. That's the LMS that we use.

We've provided training to web content managers on auditing and remediation of campus websites and a couple of other projects, including a project to make the learning modules of the Teacher Education Program at Lehman College fully accessible.

So the license that we've purchased is allowing for us to expand and support our reach into areas that we normally do not have an official presence in, but where we can demonstrate benefit. We've been able to get buy-in from directors of learning centers, from administrators of English language learning programs, tutorial services, and testing services-- areas not traditionally considered fertile ground for assistive technology.

But beyond the fact that a large percentage of students with disabilities utilize all these services, there are benefits that are obvious to these folks once they see the power of these different programs. We are working closely with both college-based programs and pre-college programs, and we hope that we can continue this conversation with other programs throughout the university.

Deploying the software is a relatively simple matter. Once the VFO Group and CATS were able to come up with a licensing arrangement, a licensing scheme that made sense, so that we can monitor the usage as well as control the software utilization, we were able to easily

deploy across campus networks and across campus systems through a simple scripting system.

There were no issues in terms of using imaging software. And it allowed us to provide IT and their technicians with the actual software, with installation documentation, with some basic training. And I think even more importantly, it was a way of demonstrating the value of utilizing assistive technology, the importance of accessibility.

And it has helped to promote the conversation across the university from many different levels, from library database procurement, to the setting up of electronic classrooms, smart classrooms, so that by enabling us to go to the different departments and say, hey, here's some software free of charge, we'll show you how to set it up, we'll show you how to install it, we'll support you, we have a good relationship with the manufacturer, who will provide us with support where necessary. They've set up a dedicated help system. We made this painless for folks who, in the past, might be a little reluctant or even resistant to installing software, even though it is an obligation.

I understand the network security issue and the management issue, but this helped sort of lubricate that relationship, if you will. So how do we get this product out to everyone? Well, the first thing we do is we make sure that all the assistive technology specialists across the university are aware that this product is available. And generally, they're the point persons on their campus that interact with the IT staff. They're not always the same person. So they are our bridge to IT across the 24 distinct campuses.

We hold Train the Trainers workshops to demonstrate the new features. And in the past, those were generally open primarily to AT staff, but now we're getting more non-AT people to participate. We're inviting more non-AT folks to attend. And we're also approaching the lab techs and the folks who maintain labs at different departments to encourage them to take a look and to install this software.

It's not a mandate, obviously. But we find that folks tend to be very receptive to the idea, particularly when there is no issue of cost. That leads to other benefits, like once you're aware about software, oh, you provide services like accommodations? Oh, you can help a student with whatever other service? And it's helping us to benefit from the relationship. And at the end, students are gaining maximum benefit.

So we're recommending to all campuses that they install this software in the basic skills, or

literacy departments or services. If you do any sort of remediation, CUNY has a large segment of its entering class, which requires remedial level courses before they can take college credit courses. And so, they often offer tutoring and other academic supports. And this software is relatively easy to learn and easy to use.

And so we're demonstrating how this can be helpful to students, again, who don't consider themselves disabled, who don't have a diagnosed disability, and who are in need of support. So anyone with a cuny.edu email address, including staff, can benefit from this offering. And again, this is a new aspect. Generally, product is purchased just for students, but were able, because of the nature of an unlimited license, to offer it to faculty or any other staff that may need it and/or want to use it.

CUNY Start is a college prep program that is a feeder program for other programs at the university. And we work with them very closely on incorporating assistive technologies. Our testing services utilizes this software. And it can even be used by web content managers to do some basic accessibility testing once they get past their remediation efforts. Obviously, English learning students are a prime target for this sort of software. And any special program throughout the Q&A system would benefit from this utilization.

ELISA

EDELBERG:

Thank you so much. We're getting ready to begin Q&A. And now, let's get started. So the first question that someone's asking is, what is your funding model? For student accommodations, does your office pay 100%, or is there a central university fund where all accommodations are paid out of?

CARLOS

HERRERA:

Well, generally, each campus will receive an allocation based on the number of documented students registered for the previous year. And that model is weighed based on the type of disability. So the funding is centralized, but it's distributed to each campus to use as they see fit. That funding is pretty static. It has not changed in a long period of time.

There are other sources of funding in New York State, including something from the State Education Department for print disabilities, but it generally is not a huge amount. There are also funds available for students who are sponsored by vocational rehab agencies. There are some reimbursements. But you know, they're just that, reimbursements. They're not a big pool of money.

ELISA

Thank you so much. The next question that someone's asking is, what kind of relationship do

EDELBERG: you all have with online and digital education offices? Where are there opportunities to administratively synergize on accessibility initiatives to also support our online learners

CARLOS HERRERA: Well, the online-- I missed the second part of that question. Can you repeat that for me?

ELISA EDELBERG: Yeah. Where are there opportunities to administratively synergize on accessibility initiatives to also support our online learners?

CARLOS HERRERA: Well, that's a big focus of the CUNY IT and of the Center for Educational Teaching-- for Excellence in Teaching and Learning rather. And there's been a lot of work done in those areas to collaborate, both in terms of the creation of content, the exchange of information and practices. And so that's an ongoing development. I am not very involved in that, but there are centers throughout the university that are taking that on.

So in terms of where the opportunities are, I would think that the School of Professional Studies is one of the places where there are leading that. Most of their work is online, and they tend to be the university experts on the model, so I would look there.

ELISA EDELBERG: Great. Thank you so much. The next question that someone is asking is, can you speak to how important it is to get the most senior level involvement on an accessibility committee? Any suggestions on how to have the conversation to entice them are most welcome.

CARLOS HERRERA: Well, I think one of the things that we learned was that you have to build an awareness campaign. It's not enough to tell folks that there are legal mandates. That is helpful, but that doesn't generally get a lot of action until, of course, there's a complaint filed with OCR. And then people's hair catches fire.

But the awareness piece is the long-term effort of getting folks involved on task forces, in advisory panels, in getting them exposed to student successes. And that's the other, I think, hugely important piece. And that is to build a cadre of students, both students with disabilities and who are not disabled, who make this an important part of their mission as students in terms of improving the university.

Administrators respond to students. And if students are informed, and involved, and can carry some of that message, that's huge. Now senior leadership is essential. But at the same time, senior leadership helps. They can also be limited as to what they can do because of the level of responsibilities, the number of responsibilities, and constituencies that they have to work

with.

So you have to have a mix. Our accessibility conference brings together senior leadership and people who are working underground. It brings together outsiders who can talk to how things are done in other universities, and other experts, who can give guidance. And through the task force that we created, we use exactly that mix. We have senior leadership, , but then we have the folks who are actually doing the web content management.

So it's an ongoing process. It's a slow process. It can sometimes be painful. And you have to play the long game.

ELISA EDELBERG: Great. Thank you. Someone else is asking, you mentioned that IT Accessibility Task Force assessed the accessibility of IT products and services. Did they develop an internal testing rubric? Or did they utilize existing protocols like WCAG 2.0 AA standards?

CARLOS HERRERA: Well, they used primarily external protocols, but they have begun developing internal systems and processes to ensure that any internally created services and products are accessible. They are making it more of an issue when it comes to procurement, and VPATs, and other commitments from manufacturers.

And again, it's a long slide, but the approach now is that accessibility is no longer an afterthought, but is included in the initial conversations whenever any of these things are occurring or purchases are being considered.

ELISA EDELBERG: Great. Thank you. Someone else is asking, does CUNY develop software for people with disabilities, or do you only test that software?

CARLOS HERRERA: No, we only test. I mean, we've not developed anything that I can think of that we're utilizing. I mean, obviously, now with the proliferation of apps, there are folks who are doing stuff, but there's nothing on our menu that we've built internally and recommend. No.

ELISA EDELBERG: Great. Thank you. And someone else was asking, how do you support non-academic student experiences on campus film screenings, the guest lecturers, concerts, et cetera?

CARLOS HERRERA: Well, we can try to outfit and make sure that we're prepared for anyone who comes to use our facilities in pretty much the same way that, whether they're a guest or a student, we need some sort of notification. But generally, everything we try to do is, we try to be as accessible as possible.

I'm sure things fall through the cracks, but we are very conscious of the need for FM systems and other things that are important for visitors to have access to, TTY and other devices that are important for anyone coming as a visitor. So usually, folks who have a specific need will request that in advance.

Generally, it's difficult to turn on a dime, but most of our campus facilities are, if not all, accessible. So we try as hard as we can.

ELISA

EDELBERG:

Great. Thank you. And someone else is asking, what is the process for instructors to make course content accessible? What percentage of instructors take advantage of the training and attempt to create accessible content?

CARLOS

HERRERA:

Well, since this is, again-- and I'll say relatively, because anything less than five years old, I think, is still almost a new idea. I think more and more faculty are aware, which is a result of a lot of the outreach. We encourage each campus Disability Service Office to inform their community.

There are now more resources. The CUNY IT Accessibility Task Force created an accessibility portal at cuny.edu/accessibility. And that contains any number of resources. And so, again, it's a matter of promotion and informing the public.

Now, more of the courses that are offered have either a fully online or a hybrid component to them, where there is some Blackboard or online component. So through the centers, the academic computing centers, and the other centers that support faculty, accessibility is a topic that is discussed early on.

I can't give you numbers, but I know that the media accessibility project does any number of captioning services for campuses across the university, and I know that that has been increasing in the last five years, which is how long we've been doing the media accessibility project. We've seen a definite increase.

I know that different campuses have reached out to us to inquire about these types of services. So maybe we should be keeping better numbers, but off the top of my head, I would tell you that it definitely is a shared concern. There is a greater awareness, and there is definitely a greater utilization.

I've not heard of any issues that have arisen with not providing greater accessibility. Obviously,

website remediation is a long-term process, and there have been some issues with that, which the university is forcefully addressing, and that has shown some real progress. But it absolutely is being addressed.

ELISA EDELBERG: Great. Thank you. And someone else is asking, does CUNY have online courses? How do you make those videos accessible?

CARLOS HERRERA: Well, yeah. Actually, we do. We have huge numbers of online courses. It's the fastest growing segment of our course catalog. I'd say maybe 50% of our courses, if not already 50%, are online. We encourage them to be made accessible prior to posting. But generally, the disability services offices get involved, or the CUNY Assistive Technology Services, through the media project, get involved in making courses-- videos, accessible. They do the captioning, and they turned it around in a day or two.

So we have a process in place, and the university task force on accessibility is currently working to increase the availability of captioning services throughout CUNY, and they're working on a specific model. So I can't tell you how that's going to be deployed, but it is on everyone's radar. And there are processes in place to make that a better, more widely used solution.

ELISA EDELBERG: Great. Thank you so much. Someone else is asking, does your institution provide captioning in-house, completed by the staff involved in these projects at the individual campuses?

CARLOS HERRERA: Usually. Usually. Well, there's two parts to that. The first part is, yes, that usually we do captioning in-house. There are instances where some captioning work is done by other vendors, including companies like 3Play-- excellent company, I have to say. And that's unpaid commercial.

But generally, it's done in-house, not necessarily by the creators of the content, but sort of after the fact through the media accessibility project, or through the disability services staff. You know, we've encouraged AT staff and the disability services to hire part-timers to do some basic captioning, to be available to caption a short video that might crop up on an emergency basis.

It's relatively simple work. And with the appropriate training, you can build an in-house solution at a very low cost. Now there are different levels of proficiency, and different amount of work, and if you want to archive and do any number of other things, that's a different animal. But if

you have to caption a three-minute video for a class that's occurring next week, that's relatively simple to do. And we have shown that students can be trained, that some students love doing this kind of work. There's some financial as well as emotional benefit to helping a fellow student. And we find that that's one answer from a buffet of many possibilities.

ELISA

Great. Thank you. That's all we have today. Thanks everyone for joining, and thank you,

EDELBERG:

Carlos, for a wonderful presentation.