Supporting Student Academic Success with Kurzweil 3000
at California State University, Long Beach

Supporting students with disabilities' with convenient and efficient access to their course materials is the mission of the staff in the Accessible Instructional Materials (AIM) Center at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). In order to meet their students' needs, the Center provides a computer lab and services with assistive technology software, one-on-one training, and technical support on assistive technologies. The staff also converts course materials into accessible formats for students who cannot effectively read print because of a visual, physical, perceptual, developmental, cognitive, or learning disabilities. The coordinator, Velma Martin and her staff, Sonia Acosta, Jessica Wood, and Sergio Rangel perform the student assessments and evaluations to determine what assistive technology hardware and software the students may need to meet their educational and professional goals. Thus, the Center's goal is to provide assistive software and hardware for students to become independent learners and overcome their limitations due to a disability.

The staff works diligently to convert texts to alternative formats such as e-text, Braille and audio and to assist students to utilize assistive technology. "Most of the students I assist are usually bringing me handouts that they were given in class so that can reproduce them into an accessible format for them," shared Jessica Wood. As a result, Jessica and the Center's staff spend much of their time on scanning, converting, formatting, and editing textbooks and course materials so that the students with disabilities will be able to utilize them in their studies more effectively. Sergio Rangel stated that the staff also spends time demonstrating and assisting students with the computer lab software, emphasizing how the features can benefit them to compensate for limitations due to their disabilities.

A very popular product utilized to create these print alternatives is the Kurzweil 3000 software which is a text to speech program that assists students with their reading materials. According to Sergio, "Kurzweil gives the student the tools to become avid and independent learners with the variety of options to access their learning materials." He stated that Kurzweil provides rapid and efficient uploads of the students' course materials into the Cloud, a welcome change to flash drives and potential copyright issues dealt with in the past. In general, the students appreciate their course materials in the various Kurzweil formats because they can access them easily anytime, anyplace, and they can utilize the variety of formats that best suit their learning styles.

In addition, the students take advantage of the Kurzweil web-based and mobile version called Firefly which they can use at home, in class, in the library, or wherever they are able to study. To that end, Velma shared, "The largest percentage of our disabled student population (78%) uses Kurzweil as their primary resource for their course materials, classroom exams, and standardized testing." She also noted that second or foreign language learners and students who benefit from differentiated instructional models have benefitted from having access to the Kurzweil tools, too.

Since Kurzweil provides easy access to its software and converted course materials from any location, the students with mobility issues do not have to struggle to be in a single place at one time. Still, many students struggle with being able to afford their course materials and the mobile devices such as laptops, tablets, or smart phones needed to use the alternative media which according to Sonia can affect the students' success in any course.

The challenges students with disabilities experience while studying in higher education is keeping up with the ever changing technologies, the cost of hardware and software, easy access, communication with faculty, and timing. According to Jessica, "It is difficult to reproduce textbooks and course materials in a timely fashion if students cannot get their hands on these items until a few weeks into the semester." When adjunct faculty are hired at the last minute or full-time faculty do not select books in a timely manner, many students are not informed of their course materials until the first day of class. Students with disabilities then experience difficulty acquiring their course materials in time to allow for alternative media production because of last minute textbook selection. As a result, "they risk falling behind because they do not have access to the same content as their peers when classes begin," Sonia added. The CSU is seeking to address these issues by distributing a Higher Education Opportunities Act (HEOA) reminder to administrators during the campus textbook ordering periods and by administering an Accessible Technology Initiative (ATI) at the system office.

The cost of assistive technologies is another challenge for students which the AIM Center seeks to address by purchasing a university-wide site license so that all students may have access to the myriad of Kurzweil resources enabling and enhancing their learning experiences. The site license provides the students a complimentary Kurzweil 3000 Firefly account in the Cloud and the software

installed on their laptops if they wish. In order to expand student access to Kurzweil, it is installed in the library computer labs so that students have convenient access throughout the campus. Velma added that the library and the AIM Center have a partnership focusing on converting course materials placed in eReserves into accessible formats and in making Kurzweil available to all students who are accessing course materials via the library databases.

The AIM Center staff are clearly dedicated to their mission of providing effective access to the students with disabilities at CSULB. In addition to the alternative media projects, they find themselves "communicating with the students to ensure that h/she stays on track with their coursework" said Jessica. In this advisory capacity, the AIM Center staff fill a larger role beyond technical support with their commitment to advancing their students to graduation. According to Velma, the coordinator of the AIM Center, the assistive technologies such as Kurzweil help the students "achieve their goal of graduating from CSULB in a timely manner and for finding jobs." The AIM Center's dedication to their students with disabilities is reflected in a high graduation rate and supports many of their students' continuation to graduate school or in finding meaningful employment.

Since the Center is serving approximately twice as many students compared to five years ago, taking advantage of web-based software products such as Kurzweil 3000 has helped to streamline the materials' conversions and provided flexible, more efficient access for the students. The Center's staff have adopted additional strategies to handle the additional load by bringing on student assistants to convert the course materials and to partner with the library so more students are served at any time.

In order to reach the AIM Center's goals and to address the growing student demand, the Center has implemented an online workshop entitled "Microsoft Word Accessibility 101" which includes documentation and video tutorials designed to inform faculty on how to create effective instructional materials for students with disabilities. Upon finishing the workshop, faculty will receive a certificate of completion and an accessible syllabus template, self-paced course. Last but not least, they have implemented a "Faculty Champions Accessibility Training Program," which includes a series of five face-to-face workshops covering accessibility issues with Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, PDF, Videos/Captioning, Copyright Laws, and a learning management system (LMS) overview.

The AIM Center's dedication to their students is reflected in their concerns that their graduating students will receive similar technology resources and support once they graduate. They would hope that the assistive technologies' software they provide their university students are more affordable and that the students would be able to continue to enrich their lives by using similar services and software as they begin their careers after graduation.

When the AIM Center staff was asked what "student success" would mean to them, they shared two benchmarks. First, the CSULB students should successfully meet their academic goals and earn their degrees, and second, the students should learn how to be independent learners and citizens. Sergio said it best by stating,

"Success to us would mean that we have exposed our student to the tools available in
the assistive software field in order for them to be able to compensate for their
limitations and achieve their academic goals. That is, success to us means that our
students become independent and lifelong learners even if they are no longer a part of
the academic institution."

Contributors to this article were Velma Martin, Coordinator, AIM Center, Sonia Acosta, Assistant Coordinator, Jessica Wood, Alternative Media Specialist and Sergio Rangel, Alternative Media Assistant at the Accessible Instructional Materials' Center, California State University, Long Beach, California.

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