CALIFORNIA STATE POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY, POMONA
ACADEMIC SENATE

FACULTY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

REPORT TO

THE ACADEMIC SENATE

FA-008-189

Blackboard Ally Adoption and Use

Faculty Affairs Committee	Date:	02/6/2019
Executive Committee Received and Forwarded	Date:	03/20/2019
Academic Senate	Date:	03/27/2019 First Reading

Background

Expected outcome or action
1. We ask the Academic Senate to consider a resolution positively supporting the use of the Blackboard Ally tool provide information and guidance for faculty to make instructional materials accessible to students with disabilities and available in other formats for the benefit of all students. The resolution should specify that incremental continuous improvement to the accessibility of instructional materials is the goal. The resolution should clarify that Ally does not infringe upon academic freedom in any way. The resolution should urge that university funding be provided for resources to support faculty directly in improving the accessibility of course materials.
2. We ask Faculty Affairs to formulate a policy for the Senate to consider that excludes the use of Blackboard Ally results from faculty evaluation (lecturer or tenure line) unless and only to the extent that the faculty member voluntarily provides information about their activities to make instructional materials accessible.

Need for this referral
Cal Poly Pomona instructional materials are required to be accessible, in accordance with Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 11135 of the California Government Code, and the CSU Chancellor's Office Executive Order 1111 of 2018 that superseded Executive Order 926 of 2004. Blackboard Ally offers a significant step toward a solution for improved accessibility of instructional materials, as Ally guides a faculty member to create one accessible instructional document that is then available in alternative formats to all students in the course. These improvements will remove barriers to success for students with disabilities and also help us better meet the diverse learning needs of all our students.

Ally is a powerful, seamless Blackboard add-in that enhances the accessibility of Word, PowerPoint, and PDF instructional materials within Blackboard in two ways: 1) Algorithmically assesses each item uploaded, providing an accessibility score (0 – 100%) and in-line instructions about making the item more accessible. Faculty can take actions to improve the accessibility of their materials. 2) Automatically makes alternative formats of uploaded items available to students, such as tagged pdf, html, downloadable mp3 audio files, and other formats. Students can download the format(s) that work for them to use as needed.

This referral is submitted in preparation to roll Ally out to the entire campus, hopefully in Fall 2019, pending acceptance of this referral. Ally will automatically be enabled for all Blackboard courses and organizations. Instructors may then request to opt out. In addition to this submittal and depending upon its acceptance, other steps for the roll-out include: 1) developing and implementing an organized communication and outreach campaign during Spring 2019; and 2) developing proposals in collaboration with units in Academic Affairs, Student Affairs and Information Technology to expand campus accessibility resources to support faculty. The proponents listed above anticipate the increased accessibility awareness generated by Ally will result in additional requests for support. We are developing a plan to prioritize and provide support for these requests. Again, the goal is not to remediate all materials overnight, but rather to show incremental improvement in the accessibility of instructional materials.

eLearning has conducted small pilot projects of Ally since January 2018, with up to 50 faculty and approximately 200 classes. We have gathered faculty response data, data about how much effort it took to remediate instructional materials to improve their accessibility, and types of instructional materials faculty use. See Supplemental Materials for a summary.

A very significant concern arose during the pilot about the demands on faculty time to make materials accessible. The CFA should be consulted. Much remediation can be accomplished without faculty input. However, instructional materials created by faculty are their intellectual property, and subject matter expertise can be critical for some aspects of remediation, so faculty input can be required. Creating new documents accessibly is much easier than remediating existing documents, in some cases even saving time once a workflow habit has been formed (e.g. using "styles" rather than manual formatting in Word).

Another concern arose during the pilot phases regarding the potential use of Ally as a factor in faculty evaluation. Ally can provide reports about accessibility at several levels: individual faculty courses, departments, colleges, etc. We recommend that department chairs and administrators be able to request aggregate reports only, and that individual faculty course reports are available only to the faculty member their own purposes. We recommend a policy that faculty evaluation documents cannot directly address Ally scores, but that faculty are free and encouraged to use their activities to improve accessibility of instructional materials as evidence of teaching improvement.

Benefit to the University
Ally provides answers at faculty's fingertips for some of the most common and readily solved accessibility problems with many instructional materials. In addition, Ally provides alternative formats for the benefit of all students, not just those with disabilities. For example, Ally can automatically convert materials to HTML, EPUB, or MP3 format that the student can access via the browser, e-reader, or audio player of their choice. Many students find they learn much better when they can both hear and read their materials.

Ally is being used at 13 CSU campuses in various stages of roll-out. Other campuses have experienced immediate and significant positive student response, and campuses that provided information and support to faculty have not experienced negative faculty reactions. Cal Poly Pomona's 2018 pilot has demonstrated both faculty's interest in making their instructional materials accessible and the challenges to doing so. We have a clear picture of the level of information and support for faculty that will be needed for Ally to catalyze significant progress in the improvement of instructional materials.

The need for accessible instructional materials is increasing. Ally is a powerful tool to support Cal Poly Pomona in meeting these needs, and adopting Ally will help us demonstrate and operationalize a campus commitment to improving accessibility.

Recommended Resources: Kathy Fernandes, Senior Director for Learning Design & Technologies, CSU Chancellor's Office (kfernandes@calstate.edu)

Discussion

The Faculty Affairs Committee (FAC) did not believe the resolution request in this referral was the domain of the FAC. The FAC believed the resolution should be considered by Academic Affairs.

The FAC did believe that the request for policy development regarding the evaluation of faculty was the domain of the FAC. Although one member of the FAC did not believe a policy should be written to limit what an evaluating body should be allowed to evaluate, the FAC voted to accept the policy recommendation in this referral. Thus, the majority of the FAC voted to accept the policy recommended in this referral; however, there was one vote against and one abstention.

Recommendation

The FAC recommends adopting the following policy recommended in this referral:

Relevant Polices (e.g.,1327 and 1328) should be modified such that accessibility monitoring (e.g., Black Board Ally), if it should be implemented, shall be excluded from faculty evaluation (lecturer or tenure line) unless and only to the extent that the faculty member voluntarily provides information about their activities to make instructional materials accessible.

Further, the resolution called for in this referral is not the domain of the FAC.