

An Interview with Leyna Bencomo, Office of Information Technology

As part of ACCESS @ UCCS series



Interview Questions

1. What is Digital Accessibility?

Digital Accessibility encompasses websites and all digital content. Today this is an incredibly important topic since our need for remote access to class materials and content has increased due to the pandemic and remote classes. Class content should be made easy to retrieve and use by all individuals. Some examples of digital accessibility are:

1. Aesthetically pleasing, easy to navigate, and clearly designed webpages.
2. Consistent, well-structured textual content that can be read, magnified, listened to, searched, and printed.
3. Graphs that are understandable in high resolution, color and gray scale and are explained in detail textually.
4. Videos that are succinct, accurately captioned, and that can be paused by the viewer.

2. What population of UCCS students are affected by inaccessibility?

Everyone is affected when digital material is not accessible. Think about how frustrating it is to navigate a website that forces you to mouse click 8 times just to get to where you need to be. Aren't you annoyed when someone expects you to read a faded, blurry document written in a fancy serif font with the first letter of each line cut off?

An old IBM Manual is often quoted as: "For people without disabilities, technology makes things easier. For people with disabilities, technology makes things possible." An updated version of this might be **Digital accessibility makes things easier for everyone and possible for people with disabilities.** Digital inaccessibility directly affects our student retention rate.

3. What are the three top access barrier that you see students with disabilities have in the classroom?

Unfortunately, it is the lack of education on the part of the educator that presents one of the biggest barriers. Faculty and curriculum designers are rarely trained to consider accessibility when designing classes.

Older classrooms can also be a barrier. Many are designed with the "sage on the stage" method of teaching in mind. For students who have mobility challenges, it is particularly difficult to participate in group discussions, presentations or even to socialize if they are literally stuck in one specified "handicap seat" for the duration of the class.

Thirdly, class materials offered up by publishers for instructors to purchase are not often vetted for accessibility. As a result, instructors are using materials that are inherently inaccessible to begin with and students are forced to find ways around these barriers, often getting behind in research and reading or sometimes giving up and dropping the class.

4. What do you want faculty to know about students with disabilities?

Students are individuals with differing needs. Most of those needs are not obvious based on a person's appearance. Invisible disabilities make up most of the disabilities within our student body. If a student is struggling in your class, asking for their input in what they need can be the best starting point. Flexibility and communication can right many wrongs. Don't forget to utilize the campus resources such as Disability Services for solution ideas. No one expects instructors to go it alone.

5. What are the three most used assistive technology that remove barriers for students with disabilities in the classroom?

Some students are unable to read printed text. We have a wonderful suite of programs available on student computers on campus and available for download on personal computers for students, staff and faculty. This suite is called **Read & Write**. Along with numerous other features, it enables the student to listen to text rather than read it. They can adjust the reading pace, the reader's voice and even the appearance of the text being read aloud. When instructors have accessible digital reading material available, students who can't read in the traditional manner perform just as well as their peers by listening instead.

Many students are unable to take notes effectively in class. We have various tools available to assist with this challenge. By far the most popular one is the **smart pen**. This pen enables students to write notes and record audio that syncs with their notes. In other words, they can go back to their written notes and listen to parts of the lecture that took place at the exact moment when they wrote each note. As they re-listen, they can add to their notes. Their notetaking skills grow as they use the pen. Instructors must allow students to record the lectures to make this work.

6. What advice would you give faculty who wants to learn more about accessibility in the classroom? OR If there was one piece of advice you wanted faculty to take away from your experience, what would it be?

Don't forget the end-goal. We want students to learn what is listed in the course objectives. We shouldn't care how they learn, just that they do learn. If they have learned the material, then they have done their job...regardless of whether they read the textbook, attend our lectures, participate in class discussions, or write an essay. Our job is to be flexible in how we assess students to accurately determine whether they have learned the material.