



Essay

Innovation During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Activating Student Employees for ETD 508 Remediation in a Remote Work Environment

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ABSTRACT

In 2020 our library launched a project to train student assistants to remediate inaccessible Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) during the COVID-19 pandemic. We revisit that original project to reflect on how it has evolved into an established program and policy. We describe the organizational changes since then, including staff turnover, refined documentation, and a return to a smaller, on-site student workforce. We discuss how a closer partnership with our campus Office of Graduate Studies has increased the number of accessible submissions we receive, through shared training modules and required accessibility checks. Furthermore, we trace the transitions our repository has undergone, from DSpace to ProQuest ETD Administrator and Esplo, and the shifting landscape of accessibility tools we use. Finally, we consider how new ADA Title II regulations and growing campus investment are opening opportunities for improvement, requiring flexibility in our workflows.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility; electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs); academic libraries

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Introduction

It is humbling to revisit this article and see how that early project has transformed into an established program and policy. Since “Innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic: Activating student employees for ETD 508 remediation in a remote work environment” was published, like many, our library has been in a near constant state of flux. The intervening years have seen return to work orders and implementation of more flexible work schedules; the original authors have moved on to other positions within and outside of the library; all the student assistants who originally participated have graduated; new staff were hired and began overseeing Electronic Thesis and Dissertation (ETD) accessibility work; and constant changes to our technical infrastructure have necessitated regular changes to our workflows.

Accessibility Post-Pandemic

Organizational infrastructure

Many positives developed from the original project (February 2020–July 2021), and reflecting on our initial foray into the world of accessibility remediation demonstrates how much progress we’ve made, even if it sometimes feels like we are going in circles. To date, the University Library at Sacramento State has been able to retain institutional support to remediate incoming ETD submissions that do not meet accessibility requirements, which in and of itself is a success in this era of budget austerity. During the pandemic, the library employed an average of 29 student assistants working remotely. Currently there are four working on-site, including one dedicated student assistant working approximately ten hours per week, and another student assistant in the same department who contributes during their downtime. Two students from the Sacramento State Information Resources & Technology (IRT) department work on ETD remediation as well. As previously mentioned, Elyse Fox moved to a different department and became the Digital Collections Librarian (though is still much engrained in accessibility work), and Ariell Lomax was hired to fill the staff position overseeing ongoing ETD accessibility. Thanks in large part to robust documentation created during and after the initial project, Lomax quickly picked it up and has since revised and converted the student assistant training manual into a Canvas course format with practice materials in addition to overseeing the ETD Accessibility LibGuide. Currently, student assistants predominately remediate born-digital ETDs rather than scanned PDFs, unless there is a thesis digitization request. With the current staffing levels described, the library has been able to keep up with the incoming ETD submissions that do not meet accessibility requirements, which is only approximately 10 out of an average of 100 total submissions per semester.

Campus partnership

The student assistant partnership with IRT was one of the positive outcomes of establishing a new campus relationship during this original project. The library has additionally

developed better working relationships with the Office of Graduate Studies (OGS), which has helped to significantly increase the amount of accessible ETD submissions received. Through this project, the library was able to get a much better understanding of OGS department workflows and policies and assess their level of competency with regards to accessibility practices. To support OGS and student assistants, our Accessibility LibGuide¹ was enhanced with more detailed guidelines on making works accessible. Accessibility guidelines were originally only created for Microsoft Office Word documents, but it became clear that more students were creating, editing, and finalizing their documents in Google suite before downloading their PDF for submission.

As OGS uses Canvas learning management system for students' orientation, review, and submission workflow, the library was able to incorporate into the OGS Canvas course a previously created course module on creating accessible files. OGS also began requiring students to validate their documents using the Word accessibility checker prior to submitting them online, which has greatly increased the number of accessible documents that are submitted to the library. Finally, in Fall 2024, the library reviewed the Word document templates that OGS makes available to students to be formatted for accessibility. However, these templates are not mandatory and thus only useful if a student uses the template, which can't be tracked sufficiently.

This closer partnership with OGS was also fortuitous as throughout the initial project, the library was simultaneously transitioning the ETD submission platform from DSpace to ProQuest ETD Administrator (PQETDAdmin). Our campus has a mediated deposit policy, so OGS must approve ETDs before they are remediated and published through the library. This transition to a new system benefited from the existing partnership, as collaboration was essential in the development of the deposit form to ensure that OGS's workflows could be translated to the new system. As the library oversees PQETDAdmin and the institutional repository, the library continues to provide training and troubleshooting support now that the site is live.

Technology

The transition to PQETDAdmin came on the heels of our migration from DSpace as our institutional repository to ExLibris' Esploro. Considerations for integration included ensuring that files could still be reviewed for accessibility in an efficient way, and that metadata from PQETDAdmin was ingested and mapped to Esploro in the platform-specific fields. While this was labor-intensive to set up, the transition has allowed for better integration of accessibility guidelines and documentation into the student submission workflow. Namely, PQETDAdmin

¹ University Library, California State University, Sacramento. "Creating Accessible Documents," Sac State Library Research Guides, <https://csus.libguides.com/accessibility>

allows for customization of the deposit interface which enables us to reference accessibility guidelines prior to submission.² Prior to this ability, communicating accessibility guidelines and providing resources to students was not uniform and often overlooked by students. Ultimately, this has resulted in a major improvement in the number of incoming submissions that meet our accessibility requirements. In addition to these major changes to infrastructure, the actual remediation workflow has undergone several iterations because of changes to and access to new accessibility applications. Many of these new tools have become available in recent years as part of the California State University (CSU)'s Accessible Technology Initiative³. For example, the original workflow relied on performing an initial accessibility check in Canvas using the [AL1.1] Ally tool and performing remediation tasks on inaccessible files using Adobe Acrobat. The library was also able to acquire several licenses to ABBYY FineReader. While Ally didn't have remediation capabilities, it was a useful tool but has since been replaced with UDOIT by Cidi Labs. While UDOIT is provided for free by the CSU Chancellor's Office, PDF Validate better fits the needs of our existing workflow. The library recently received a temporary license to SiteImprove's PDF Validate tool, which we found to be more complementary to our specific accessibility needs while giving detailed reports and feedback. Unfortunately, that license expired in June 2026 and, at the time of this writing, is still being vetted at the campus-level along with other accessibility tools.

Future considerations

The intervening years since this initial project commenced have seen changes at every level, requiring nearly constant adjustments. When this project was initiated, accessibility remediation was frankly challenging to advocate for. Since then, due in large part to the updated American Disabilities Act (ADA) Title II regulations, the number of resources, products, and support for accessibility across the CSU have steadily increased as deadlines for compliance loom. This university-wide commitment to accessibility provides more opportunities to explore new technologies and develop more efficient workflows, though exploration is also limited to what products are adopted by the CSU. In addition, as artificial intelligence continues to be incorporated into our existing platforms and applications, we hope that these integrations will enhance accessibility features and functionality. What these authors can be certain of is that we enhance accessibility features and functionality. What these authors can be certain of is that we won't allow ourselves to get too comfortable!

² California State University, Sacramento. "Resources and Guidelines." *ProQuest ETD Administrator*, <https://www.etdadmin.com/main/resources?siteId=1053>. Accessed 30 July 2026.

³ California State University Accessible Technology Initiative, <https://ati.calstate.edu/>