

Career Inquiry Improving Accessibility Through Student Feedback

Travis Lee
University of Colorado at Denver
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Introduction

UCLA has over five thousand students registered as disabled and over 3,700 students who receive accommodations through our Center for Accessible Education(CAE). I have worked in my current role as the UCLA Disabilities and Computing Program Coordinator for a little over a year. During my time, it became apparent that student attitudes toward UCLA's services were mediocre at best. I have contemplated the issue and have brought up many times how we might be able to better service students with disabilities. UCLA spends millions of dollars every year on staff and programming for students with disabilities however the students we are meant to be service rarely get a say on how to improve programs.

This inquiry will focus on how UCLA can improve disability services and student attitudes through the use of student regular and measured student feedback. This essay will include one student interview.

The Current State at UCLA

There are many issues facing students with disabilities at UCLA. The two issues I will focus on are student attitudes toward disability services and improving student learning outcomes through the lens of student feedback.

In my current role and head of digital accessibility at UCLA many students come to me with many different complaints. The one I hear most is that UCLA does not listen, students make a complaint and then nothing happens. I believe that students should be given a regular forum with disability leadership possibly once per quarter. I decided to pilot this idea by one student with a disability on how we might be able to implement the interviews and feedback.

Most decisions on campus are made with little to no student feedback or input. Administrators will decide to implement a policy like Matlab will be used for all calculus classes without interviewing students with disabilities nor do they test with this student population. UCLA has recently purchased a campus license with Matlab, just this week I had a blind student told me that the Matlab interface is not accessible with her screen reader. This is just one of countless examples where we can improve the learning experience of students with disabilities by getting more regular feedback.

Proposal

My proposal is to ask 10 students who have voiced concerns about their quality of service who are also registered with CAE to do a 10 minute interview about how they think we can improve the services, review disability policy, test new tools and technology and in general get more qualitative information to better inform the decisions that the administration makes.

The interview will take place every 10 weeks and will focus on some of the most important changes that UCLA is making around disabilities. Getting regular feedback will help the administration make better choices and have the students feel more empowered and engaged in the decisions that are being made that directly impact their education.

Interview with Student

I tested this idea by interviewing a student with a disability. His name is George and is a third year environmental engineering major. I wanted to see how a student might answer these questions and also what type of questions would work best.



Interview with [George Full Video](#)

I met George through the Center for Accessible Education. He is learning disabled and very bright through the interview he mentioned many of the challenges that most students face whether disabled or not, such as class size, lack of individualized attention, boring non-interactive lessons, missing classes, time management, and faculty who are not interested in teaching.

My big take away was that he was not going through normal channels to get educated, he relied on friends, youtube and online resources. He also mentioned that the one Biology class that used UDL such as video, audio and interactive lessons he was able much more engaged and it was a more enjoyable learning experience. George's answer is aligned to many studies that found students with learning disabilities are educated using an inclusive framework with multiple means of learning.

According to (Cunningham 2017) "When asked what they liked most about the UDL framework, teachers mentioned, among other things, its focus on reaching all students in the classroom, especially those with special needs" (p.32).

This is valuable information to the university. The fact that the only class the George mentions in his interview is a class that have built in UDL shows that the university should further investigate this faculty and the model used in his class. We might interview other students with disabilities who also took the Bio class that included the UDL framework. Upon further investigation and data collection we could encourage other faculty to also use similar software.

George's support system is not traditional. He relied on friends and family to often provide accommodations. This is something that I often hear from students with disabilities. From early on the school system does not provide the support framework for success. I have found that most students with disabilities fail out of college not because of academics but because of the non school related activities such as time management, locating food, self care, laundry and many of the soft skills necessary to succeed in college.

According to (Massengale 2016) "From primary grades through high school, students with disabilities often depend on their parents and teachers to provide accommodations and modifications needed for academic success. Once students with disabilities move on to postsecondary education it is the students' responsibility to obtain documentation for accommodations relating to disability and activating those accommodations; however, not all students with disabilities realize this and struggle early in their college career" (p.30).

George discusses struggling with gateway math courses and had to repeat one class. He explains that he received little support from the CAE and from his faculty for most of his STEM courses. George is one of the few students with disabilities in STEM at UCLA.

According to (Fisher 2019) “However, only 5% of SWD enter the STEM workforce (Leddy, 2010). Researchers have found few SWD report engineering-, science-, or computer-related majors in college (Newman et al., 2011). There are many reasons why SWD are not successful in STEM fields. Students with disabilities struggle with grade-level standards across STEM content areas because the learning becomes more abstract beginning in the fifth grade” (p.3).

George is an example of how a single interview can shed light on issues that are only known by the students and do not often cross the minds of faculty and staff.

Implementation of Student Interview Program

I program that I am proposing would require ~~and~~ 50% full time equivalent (FTE). I also think that we could hire a graduate student from the school of education to run the program. It would require strong interpersonal skills and a background in qualitative analysis. The person running the program would be responsible for:

- Finding the right students to interview
- Ensure diversity of student voices
- Ensure that different disabilities are represented in the study
- Schedule and Conduct interviews quarterly
- Write a report on the findings
- Provide recommendations
- Present findings to a leadership committee on disability

Conclusion

The goal is to even the playing field for students with disabilities, improve our services for students with disabilities and also design classes that are more inclusive for this population. Universities are notorious for making decisions with little input from the people that matter most to the campus, the students. The goal of the student interview and feedback program is to give students a voice at the table, to empower students with disabilities, to make better decisions about programming and technology, improve the optics of the administration and build a more inclusive campus for all.

The proposal is not groundbreaking or controversial, it would require some investment from UCLA but the benefits far outweigh the cost of not hearing from the students. Introducing non-accessible software and teaching will not only subject the university to possible lawsuits but more importantly there will be a student who cannot get the education they are entitled to and paid for. I believe that a regular qualitative study of students with disabilities will greatly improve the learning environment for all students at UCLA.

References

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