

Real-Time Access: Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms

[00:00:00.82] KELLY MAHONEY: Thank you, everyone, for joining us for today's session on real-time access strategies for inclusive classrooms. Before we dive into the fireside chat and meet today's speaker, I'd like to quickly introduce myself and take care of a couple of housekeeping items. My name is Kelly Mahoney. I'm on the Marketing team here at 3Play Media. And I'll be moderating today's session. Just a quick self-description, I'm a young white woman with long, red-brown hair. And I'm wearing a white collared shirt today.

[00:00:28.69] All right, that's all that taken care of. So today, I'm happy to introduce our speaker, Rita Inman. Rita is the Associate Director of the Disabilities Resource Center at the University of Florida. Thank you so much, Rita, for joining us today. I'm excited for our conversation!

[00:00:46.21] RITA INMAN: Well, good afternoon. It's so nice to be here today. I appreciate everyone joining. So, yeah.

[00:00:53.95] KELLY MAHONEY: Yeah, so introductions are always a great place to start. With that, why don't you tell us a little bit more about yourself, your background, and your role at UF?

[00:01:03.08] RITA INMAN: Absolutely. So I am a Florida native. So I am born and raised in the state of Florida. I don't ever plan on leaving. I love the Sunshine State, for sure. My background is-- I was a K-12 educator for about 10 years. I worked in the private and public sectors, and then I transitioned into higher ed. I grew up with a brother that had a physical disability. So it was always kind of a part of my life and seeing access play out in his world. And then, also, my sister-in-law had muscular dystrophy.

[00:01:35.81] So I have a degree in elementary education. And then my master's is in curriculum and instructional design, although I've realized tech is not my favorite thing. So I definitely like working with people and interacting. I've been at the University of Florida for about five years now. So October will be my five years. And my main role is to work and train our accessibility specialists who work one on one with our students. And then, I also get the pleasure of working one on one with a lot of faculty and staff.

[00:02:08.53] So I might consult with them about their syllabus. I go over to classrooms and look at spaces. A lot of what I get to do also might be coordinating with our Harn Museum, or maybe even going over to the stadium and accessing their spaces and talking about ways to make those spaces a little more inclusive and welcoming.

[00:02:32.91] KELLY MAHONEY: That's amazing. Well, we're absolutely glad to have someone with your expertise here. You've been on quite the journey. You said you started with K through 12 and then worked your way into higher education. Why don't you tell us a little bit more about the students that you serve now? What does that look like for you?

[00:02:48.20] RITA INMAN: Yeah, so we currently have over 7,000 students that are registered with our office. And so that's about 12% of the US population. So those students can be fully

online students. They can be undergrad, graduate level. I have a lot of students receiving services that are in professional programs, like the health science, med, vet med, dentistry.

[00:03:09.68] I prominently, myself, have a smaller caseload of students. So I work directly with our law school students. And then I also work with our athletes. Both are very unique cases, and so the services might look a little different. And then, like I said before, I manage all of our accessibility specialists. So I'm working one on one with them to help train them to be able to talk about access and inclusion on campus.

[00:03:36.17] KELLY MAHONEY: That's amazing, 7,000 students. It's great to hear how many are being supported through your center. I think, obviously, when we have conversations like this, it's natural to talk about supporting students with disabilities. But when we think about inclusive classrooms, how can we broaden that thinking? So how do inclusive classrooms not only benefit the students with disabilities, but also the greater university community?

[00:04:01.31] RITA INMAN: Yeah, so when I think about inclusive, I think a lot about universal design. So if you've been in education for any period of time, you might have heard that terminology. And really, honestly, it's kind of looking at, how can we provide access for as many students as possible? In a perfect world, I always say that my office wouldn't exist because things would just be inclusive. That's not always the case. When I talk to faculty and staff, little things that I sometimes discuss is, our highest accommodations are for testing services.

[00:04:32.73] And so that might be 50% extra time, 100% extra time. So one of the things I share with instructors is, you can make your tests longer, all on your own. Share with students that you're promoting that universal design, that you're making sure that any student with 50% extra time, their needs are going to be met. And they don't have to come all the way over to our testing office to take those assessments.

[00:04:59.07] A lot of times, I might talk about that especially related to quizzes because those are really short term and can be a little more difficult to provide that access. So it's really just looking at, what is something I can change in my class and change in my curriculum that I can maybe provide some options, or also just provide some accommodations or some access on the front end.

[00:05:23.87] KELLY MAHONEY: I love that you touched on the question I'm about to ask you next, which is about empowering faculty to really take accessibility initiatives into their own hands. So I know that, especially with such a large university like University of Florida, it can be a little decentralized when it comes to who provides these accommodations, whether it's a third-party group, or a center like yours, or the faculty themselves.

[00:05:47.57] So I'd like you to expand a little bit more on that. What role do faculty members play in not only creating, but sustaining these inclusive classrooms? And how do you empower them? Do you have any more examples of how they can take that into their own hands?

[00:06:02.67] RITA INMAN: Yeah, absolutely. So my role at our campus is-- we are our disability experts. And so we will provide the accommodation letter to students and say, these

are the accommodations that are reasonable based on the student's disability. But these faculty are experts in their courses. And so, while I can make a accommodation recommendation, it really is up to the faculty because they know their curriculum. And they know what it is that is expected.

[00:06:31.08] One very different thing from K-12 to higher ed is that, in higher ed, the accommodations can't go against the objectives of the course. And so I can suggest an accommodation. But if the faculty is saying, no, that's not going to work in my course, it's not reasonable, then we have to have that interactive conversation. One thing I tell instructors a lot, the power of choice is huge.

[00:06:56.88] Like I said earlier, I was an educator for 10 years. And my entire background when I was going through school was teaching outside of the text. So we were really empowered to come up with lesson plans that weren't in the text. And then, I got to my first classroom ever, and I was expected to teach from the textbook. And so I know my students, and I know my curriculum.

[00:07:21.89] And so it doesn't always have to be this paper-pencil test, and answer these questions, multiple choice or essay. Have that option, have that sense of-- I just want to know if my students have an understanding of the content. And is there a different way to assess that understanding? And if there is, be open to that, and have that variety, and have that option.

[00:07:48.56] KELLY MAHONEY: Absolutely. And again, a lot of the time, when we're thinking about implementing these accommodations, a lot of it comes from a compliance-based mindset, which is understandable, given the nature of an educational institution. But do you have any line of sight as to how we can move past compliance-driven approaches and move toward cultivating truly a culture of inclusivity that is beyond just checking a box or meeting the minimum?

[00:08:18.09] RITA INMAN: Right. And so that is why my office is here is I'm the compliance piece. I am required to be on a state campus. And so one of the things I talk about a lot when I'm talking to faculty, there's a big frustration because they might get this letter. And all of these accommodations are sent to them. And it's very overwhelming if they haven't really experienced working with a specific student.

[00:08:44.26] And it's also overwhelming because they don't know what the disability is. And sometimes, there's this disconnect. Like, why do you need all of these things? I don't understand. And DRC is just telling me what I'm supposed to do in my classroom. And when we take a step back and we look at, OK, well, what are the access barriers? And so that's the conversation I have a lot.

[00:09:03.36] If I have an assignment in a course that I'm expecting my students to do, having that lens of, what are some possible access barriers that my students might experience? Another really big accommodation that is requested, and I would say this is pretty vast across the nation, is extension on assignments. So we have lots of students coming to us and asking for those extensions.

[00:09:31.40] But if an instructor is able to provide as much information about the assignment on the front end of things, really carving out and paving a really good timeline of when things are expected to be turned in, maybe checkpoints, those are really good ways of being able to set students up for success and also set students up to know what to expect and where to get to. So I think one of the biggest things is, like I said, assessing, well, this is what I hope my students were to gain.

[00:10:03.13] And we're working with college students. And sometimes-- we know they're adults. They're 18. But they're not experts. And they're freshmen. And they're here for the first time. And so we have to understand that they're still learning along the way. And they're still really kind of figuring things out. And so when we look at, what are the potential barriers that a student could experience with this assignment or this task, then you have the idea of, well, what are some different options? And what are some different ways that I can provide some access?

[00:10:36.05] I think about going into spaces a lot. A large population and what we're seeing on the rise is autistic students. And some of those things, you're going to notice very specific behaviors. And so maybe it is having limited things on the walls. That wall noise is what we call it. That visual noise can be very overwhelming. Repeating questions is a really easy way to provide access, especially when you're in a large lecture hall room and there's a student that might ask a question or answer a question.

[00:11:10.25] It's a really easy way to say, thank you, Kelly, for that feedback. You said, x, y, z. And so then that student, little things like that is showing that student-- is feeling like, oh, wow, this classroom is already accessible. And I don't have to go ask the DRC to tell my instructor to do this and all these other pieces.

[00:11:31.24] Those little, tiny things that instructors can implement really do show that accessibility is being thought of beforehand, and it's not coming in after and cleaning something up. It's really considered prior to the class starting. And some of them are super easy. Walkways-- thinking about our desk and our spaces in classrooms, making sure that walkways are nice and clear is another thing that instructors can do. I think those are most of the ones I thought about before, yeah.

[00:12:05.45] KELLY MAHONEY: Yeah, I mean, that sounds similar to 3Play. I mean, we have to always remember to think about the end user. It's easy to just focus on your piece of the job, but keeping that in mind is so important.

[00:12:17.03] And you mentioned that, sometimes, the accommodation depends on the curriculum. And you work with faculty to assess these potential access barriers, hopefully ahead of time. What do you find are some of the most common challenges or barriers to providing live accommodations in classroom settings? And then, if we could take it a step further, how do you typically address those?

[00:12:40.67] RITA INMAN: So one of the difficult parts of my job is instructors are content experts. They're not always experts on how to teach, right? And we have some amazing faculty at the university. And so, like I said before, some of the biggest struggles is not understanding

disability and not understanding why something is needed. And so that's sometimes a little bit of a push-back I can get from faculty. Faculty like to own their domain.

[00:13:13.40] And some of them don't want their students coming and testing in our office because they want to control it all. And so having those conversations of, well, this is what the student needs is access, I've gotten some push-back. Assignments is a big one, when you're thinking about the pacing of a course and making sure a student is turning things in on time. Attendance is another really, really big one, where instructors are saying that maybe it's going against the objectives of their course.

[00:13:42.73] So I can reasonably say, a student with a chronic health condition needs more than four absences in a given semester. So we have to have that dialogue of, well, what does the student need to attend? Why does the student need to attend? Are they coming to class specifically for a reason? Maybe it's heavy lecture-based that they're not going to get in the course itself. There is no option of being able to remote into a classroom anymore. So what are the things that the student's not going to get by not attending class?

[00:14:13.51] And then we kind of step back. And we have the conversation of, OK, your class meets 25 times in this given semester. And how many reasonable-- if you're saying that they need to attend 50%, 70% of the classes, then we have that dialogue of what is the objective of the course. I would say, live captioning is one that I have to teach instructors about a little bit more often. Kelly, am I jumping ahead? Is that a question later on?

[00:14:43.95] KELLY MAHONEY: No, no, we do have an attendee question, though, which I think might pair well with what you may be about to say. When it comes to these conversations that you're having, have you found any strategies to be the most effective in training faculty, or communicating the importance of these things? I think it seems like this attendee has experienced resistance. And so how do you typically navigate those conversations?

[00:15:09.44] RITA INMAN: Yeah, so I have learned that, sometimes, they just want to be mad. And sometimes, they just need someone to complain to and get really upset. And so a lot of times, when I'm talking to faculty, that's about the first 10 to 15 minutes of my conversation is they just are not understanding. Why are you telling me to do all of these things? I don't understand. And I have to hear them out. And I get that.

[00:15:38.31] I get the frustration. It's a 50-minute class, and they have to do all these things before class to make sure that certain things are in place. But then I remind them, we are here for the students. If it weren't for the students, we would not be here. And so this accommodation isn't to give a one-up or give an advantage. When I talk about equal access, I'm saying, everyone is getting what they need to be successful.

[00:16:05.46] It's not, oh, just because you have extra time to take your test, then that's going to give you this high advantage. No, it's really, let's talk about the equal access that this student needs. This student needs maybe this alternative text format of their book, or the student does need two additional absences in a semester. They need that to be able to access the content and be in the class. Now, accommodations do not mean that they're going to be successful.

[00:16:34.06] And so that's something I do remind my instructors all the time. That is very different than K-12. In K-12, students have to meet benchmarks. And as long as they're meeting their benchmarks, they're considered to be successful. And those benchmarks aren't always on grade level. In higher ed, no, a student taking a chem course has to complete all of the same requirements as their peers, accommodations or not. But sometimes, we do have to change the access that the students are receiving.

[00:17:01.99] So the biggest lesson I've learned-- I've had to bite my tongue a lot of times. But it really is, sometimes, they really just want to be heard. And they really just want us to understand that they're doing all this extra work to get to that and do this for this student. And so we normally get to a good, common middle ground. And I kind of-- listen, help me help you. What can I do? Do I need to come and assess your classroom? Would you like me to look over your syllabus or this assignment with you?

[00:17:34.70] Tech is sometimes a big barrier, especially with some of our older faculty, our tenured faculty. They're a little hesitant of that. And so, sometimes, it's, let me help support you, and what other things can I do to support you, and how can we meet in the middle kind of thing.

[00:17:52.76] KELLY MAHONEY: That's great. And just for a little rainbow at the end of the rain, so to speak, you got a shout-out from Kristen in the chat, who says, thank you for the work that you're doing. Her daughter's a student at UF and has accommodations. And they make a big difference. So that right there is the perfect example of the end-user impact.

[00:18:09.44] I wanted to move a little bit further into some other constraints that you might experience. So, obviously, I think we know here the importance of accessibility and having these live accommodations. But oftentimes, there are very real constraints, for example, budget limitations or logistical considerations. How do you strike a balance between the need for these accommodations and these very real factors you have to take into account?

[00:18:38.48] RITA INMAN: So one of the really nice things about the University of Florida is we really do have a great support system from our up-line. So I am really grateful. But I also am really realistic and know that not every institution has some of the resources that we do have. So sometimes, we do have to have the conversation of, what are some other things that we can try?

[00:19:04.13] Something that my accessibility specialists, I've trained them to talk about, give what you can, withhold what you must. So just because a student might have received all of these types of accommodations maybe in high school, it doesn't mean that they need the same types of things now that they're in higher ed. A lot of times-- this is a whole new learning environment. So a lot of times, they really don't know what to expect.

[00:19:28.98] And a lot of times, they find out that some things are a little more accessible now that they're in a different academic setting. So when I'm thinking about budget constraints and things like that, sometimes, I'm going to try a couple other different things before we go straight into, oh, you're going to get an interpreter in every single one of your classes. And you're going to have live captioning all the time. We might have to try some other things, especially when it's tied to funds.

[00:19:56.37] I am very fortunate that we do not require documentation on the front end of meeting with our students. We truly have a holistic conversation of-- disability is a piece of it, right? But what are the access barriers? I try to recognize that every single student that has ADHD does not need the same type of access. Just because there is a disability that's the same does not mean that the access that they need is the same.

[00:20:26.52] I had a brand-new law school student come in a couple years ago and had a progressive disorder where he was starting to go blind. And he just said, well, every single one of your students that is blind should be using Braille. I've got about 25 students that are blind on our campus. And actually, only one of them uses Braille. A lot of them use other types of services to access that material. And so we really try to have that holistic conversation of what is the barrier, rather than the disability.

[00:20:58.57] And then, when we have that, we're pretty versed in a lot of our curriculum and our courses. And so I have different buckets of accessibility specialists. Like I said earlier, I work with law school and athletes. But I have some accessibility specialists that work prominently with our health science students, so all of those professional, clinical-type things. I have someone that works predominantly with graduate-level students.

[00:21:22.96] And so us knowing and working really, really closely with the deans of those colleges helps us to know, well, these are potential barriers, especially if you're in an engineering major and you're going to have a lot of lab settings and things like that. That helps us have the conversation of, you're telling me, this is a barrier. I understand that these are things that are going to be expected of your program. So let's talk about some reasonable accommodations.

[00:21:51.22] And sometimes, it might not be anything that the student ever experienced before. Or it might not be something that they ever even thought of or knew that was a potential accommodation. And so we focus on that access barrier. Another piece of budgeting is I look for money wherever I can find it. And so I always have at least two of my staff members at any given time working on a grant, working on a proposal. We're getting really good at writing those.

[00:22:22.39] So any opportunity that we have to look for funds and be able to support our office, that shows the growth of our office and the need for it. But it also shows our up-line, our president and our associate president of the university, that, hey, students are coming to us because they're receiving the access that they need. And then, look, we're also trying to get funds to support our students before we have to go to you first kind of thing.

[00:22:54.96] KELLY MAHONEY: Yeah, and that's a fantastic point that you made. Equal access does not always look the same for every student. I'm so happy that you said that. And we actually got an attendee question that relates to that as well. So Alisa asks, do you ever have the opportunity to have discussions with faculty and departments at the curricular level, especially when the traditional way that students are assessed is not what typically happens in the field and can possibly create additional barriers for no reason? She gives the example of being able to interpret a recorded measurement versus being able to take the measurement yourself.

[00:23:28.92] RITA INMAN: We are trying to get to that point. Most of the conversations that I get to have now are one on one when instructors are reaching out. But this semester-- well, this academic year that is coming up, that is our goal of our office is to make a connection with every single dean at the university. And so we're working on a plan over the summer to start with our leadership team in doing some of those reach-outs.

[00:23:54.81] I've been really fortunate to where there's specific colleges-- I think we have 15 colleges on our campus. And I probably have about four that I work really great with. They're inviting me to their new faculty orientation. I'm talking with their advisors pretty consistently.

[00:24:14.82] I know their dean. I have a lot of their deans' numbers on my speed dial. And so I'm starting those conversations right now. And that is our hope, within the next academic year, we're just making that connection. It's really a big part of-- we want faculty to know that we're on your side. And we understand that this is something that you're required to do.

[00:24:37.46] And I mean, if I have to play the bad, ugly card, I'm going to say, hey, nobody wants to be in an OCR complaint. The University of Florida does not want to have to talk to Office of Civil Rights. Of course, that's part of our world. And it always can happen. It can happen when you're doing everything right.

[00:24:54.02] But let's talk through what are some options and how do we avoid that as much as possible. And so it's our goal for this academic year. So check with me next summer. And hopefully, I'll say that it's been kicked off.

[00:25:09.65] KELLY MAHONEY: Yeah, I'm sure building these relationships makes those conversations go a lot smoother when you have to have them. So when we think about working with these students to identify barriers-- and you also talked about how you'll share a little bit about the disability with the faculty member, just so that they understand who they're trying to accommodate here-- how does your office typically ensure that live accommodations are provided in a manner that's respectful of students' privacy and confidentiality, while still meeting their accessibility needs?

[00:25:40.41] I know that, sometimes, there can be a hesitation to self-identify. And that can lead to a little bit of a lapse. So how do you typically navigate those situations?

[00:25:51.64] RITA INMAN: So one thing we really try to do when I'm thinking about especially live and associated with cost-- and so that would be, definitely, our interpreting services, our closed captioning, and our live captioning services-- we start having those conversations probably two, maybe three weeks before the semester starts. So when I'm talking and I'm working with faculty, especially if I'm going to have an interpreter in the classroom, a lot of times, that might not be something that they've ever experienced before.

[00:26:19.07] And so let's have a conversation about what it's going to look like. What are we going to need from you as the faculty? And what are you going to expect, having some of these accommodations present in your classroom? Sometimes, it's really difficult. If I have one student that is deaf, and they're talking back and forth with the interpreter, there is some self-identity

there. And I think it's a question a little bit later on. We really talk to students about being OK with advocating for yourself.

[00:26:51.57] But advocating doesn't always mean that, I'm going to tell you everything that's wrong with me, and I have all of these disabilities, and this is why I need this access. So we really help teach those self-advocacy skills to discuss, hey, this is what I need for my access and my success in your course, rather than justifying. We don't have to tell you what the disability is to justify the need for that type of access. These live accommodations can sometimes be a little-- like I said earlier, a little intimidating for instructors because it does require some extra steps on the front end.

[00:27:29.73] It does require maybe me coming in and consulting and me coming into their space, checking in on things. And so, sometimes, that is a little intimidating or thought of as more work. But when I show instructors that I'm here to support you, and I'm here to make sure that things run as smoothly as possible-- we know that they're not always perfect, and they're not always going to go off amazingly, especially if we have a 500 lecture hall classroom. But being that support system and building that kind of relationship is really a key part of all of that.

[00:28:05.37] KELLY MAHONEY: We received a similar attendee question from Marissa or Mareesa. Please forgive any mispronunciation. But she says, it can be hard to accept accommodations that will make a student stand out. So sometimes, they have a tendency to refuse the support that they might actually need. It's good to learn about how you handle these situations. Marissa asks, do you take it at face value or have more discussion with these students? So it sounds definitely like you work closely with faculty. Do you have much of an opportunity to coordinate directly with the students?

[00:28:36.70] RITA INMAN: Yeah, so our students, when they come to our office, they are assigned an accessibility specialist. And so that's their person. UF is very large. We kind of help it be a little bit smaller. So the initial start of our office is they're going to have an initial appointment, we're going to talk about access, and these are the accommodations you're approved for.

[00:28:59.32] After that, it really is up to the student. So the way that our system works is they can send an accommodation letter for the courses that they want those accommodations for. So that really does empower them to pick and choose. Maybe I need a specific type of accommodation because I'm in a lab class, but I don't need it for some of these other courses that I'm in.

[00:29:20.68] When I talk to students also, one of the hard things is UF is a top-10 university. It's very difficult to get into UF. And so, sometimes, there's that perception of everyone's going to know that I'm different. I definitely love social media. I'm on it all the time. I'm a TikTok person. I'll admit it.

[00:29:40.43] But the problem with that is people are normally putting out their best self, and they're not always showing the things that they're struggling through and the hard things. And so one of the things I talk to students about is, hey, 12% of the US population is registered with our

office. We have, I would say, I think it's 85% of our students disclose that they have a mental health disability.

[00:30:06.07] You are not alone. And although it's really hard right now, it might not be really hard six months from now when you're receiving the access that you need. And I go back to what I said earlier about just because you're receiving this accommodation does not mean that you are getting a one-up or you're being treated any different. You're getting the access that you need, and it's OK to ask for that.

[00:30:29.75] So I really try to build them up in those types of ways. But ultimately, it is on the student. And it is their determination if they're going to request to receive those accommodations. And I will also say that we are supported really, really well from most of our up-line at our university. And so I think that helps. It helps paint the picture of disability is not this bad word. It's not this taboo. It's OK to request what you need.

[00:31:01.73] I also have-- we have a group that's associated with our office. They're called the Disability Ambassadors. I can talk disability all day long, and I can be their cheerleader, and I can kind of promote them up. But I'm almost 40. It's been a hot minute since I have been a college student myself. And a lot of things have changed. So the great thing about our Disability Ambassadors is they're students that identify and don't identify as having a disability.

[00:31:27.51] So sometimes, talking to their peers and discussing, oh, well, this is what you experienced in this classroom? I did that, too. I sent my accommodation letter, and this faculty was so great. It's having that peer conversation and those mentorships, in a way, that helps ease it a little bit better.

[00:31:49.26] Because, like I said, I can be their advocate. I can help them learn how to talk to their faculty. And I can help them learn how to ask and discuss what they need. But also, having that with their peers can be really helpful as well.

[00:32:02.88] KELLY MAHONEY: I think that's a great idea, having ambassadors, not only to serve as that middleman for the communication but just to promote the self-advocacy portion of that. This has all been amazing. I want to transition into thinking a little bit more specifically about the technology side. We talked about that a little bit at the beginning here. When we talk about technology, obviously, I'm sure there's a million different platforms that UF uses for a million different reasons.

[00:32:32.91] If you can generalize, what role does technology play in facilitating live accommodations in classroom settings? And what sort of considerations should faculty and staff keep in mind when they're selecting and when they're implementing technology solutions? This is another thing I know can be kind of decentralized in a university setting. So it can be a little nuanced.

[00:32:54.96] RITA INMAN: Yeah, and actually, that's one thing. It is decentralized in association with our office in some ways, too. UF is able to provide a lot of resources to our students for no cost. It's part of their fees and services. We have something called UF Apps. And

there are, I think, hundreds-- 150, 200 apps that the students can have access to with just their UF ID.

[00:33:21.45] So about a year ago, we-- and the way that the students access these is they're going through their UF system. And then they have to put in their Gator ID and all of these things. So it's not-- the app doesn't work in the typical way that it would if it was on a desktop or a laptop.

[00:33:37.27] And so we ran into a lot of accessibility issues with our screen readers and things like that. And so I've really had to have several meetings with UF IT and work really, really closely with them and talk about, OK, if this is available for all UF students, we have to make sure that it's accessible.

[00:33:58.76] And so we had to do some backtracking. And we had to do a lot of troubleshooting. And they did some coding and things on their end to help make some things a little bit more accessible. So as a general population, our IT department handles all of those types of things. But again, it's going back to building those relationships.

[00:34:19.48] I'm really close with the IT that services our office. But then, the student side of IT, that's something where we really had to work on building that relationship and being a part of those conversations.

[00:34:30.31] I think that-- going back to what I said earlier about just hearing, being that sounding board, making sure people know who we are and making sure people feel comfortable coming and talking to us is really our first step. And so building those connections with the IT department, building it with our e-learning department has been really huge and instrumental in making sure some of those technologies work.

[00:34:54.64] When it comes to the classrooms itself, that one's a little difficult as well. UF is really unique in terms of who owns what buildings and who's in charge of what buildings. And so the IT can look very different from the engineering department to the math department. And so, sometimes, it's those proactive things on the front end and going in and assessing the spaces prior to the semester starting, especially if I know that a student needs a specific type of accommodation.

[00:35:29.44] Making sure that the HyFlex system that they have in the classroom is up to date because we did all that during COVID. But not every department has kept them up to date So it's really that proactive thinking and thinking of things on the front end when we know what to expect. It's hard when it comes up in the moment or we realize we need something last minute.

[00:35:50.09] And so, like I said, if I don't know how to do it, and my department doesn't know how to do it, I am not afraid of going and asking for help. I do have an amazing assistive technology accessibility specialist, so he is my guru and my go-to. So if Sam ever leaves me, I'm going to be a little worried. So he's definitely a really great resource. And also, training-- he trains our students on how to use new technology, but he also can train our staff as well.

[00:36:21.25] KELLY MAHONEY: I'm glad you mentioned procurement among that. I know it's not necessarily within your purview or your responsibility. But do you have recommendations that you share, with either the IT department or the respective departments that you need to work with, recommendations for procurement to make sure that what they're procuring is accessible?

[00:36:40.40] RITA INMAN: Those don't normally happen until there's a problem. And so, unfortunately-- and that's kind of the world that we're in sometimes. As much as we try to be accessible on the front end, it doesn't always happen. But then, when they get into this high-need situation, where it's, oh, class is already a week in, and there's no access, and I have to do all of these things, it's kind of that panic mode. And let me just do what I need to do.

[00:37:09.08] So departments have a lot more funds than the student affairs side of things. So academics definitely does have the funds to be able to purchase things. And so, like I said earlier when I was talking about building those connections with each different department, or each different individual college, that's where we're really hoping to have those conversations of, hey, I was working with the construction management college, and these are some things that they experienced as some barriers related to the technology that they had.

[00:37:40.98] I noticed that some of your spaces have this still. Can we talk about maybe updating that, or can I have my assistive technology accessibility come and do a demonstration about some possible things that your staff, your faculty, can utilize? So it's those connections. It's really making sure that, even if we're coming and being talked to because they're upset about something or they need assistance, they feel comfortable coming back to us.

[00:38:09.64] So that's a big piece of it, is, hey, oh, yeah, I saw Rita at this presentation, or I saw one of your accessibility specialists, and I just want to know more. Or I had this weird thing come up. Can you help me a little bit? It's building those connections and really kind of helping them grow.

[00:38:28.03] KELLY MAHONEY: That's great. Thank you so much for speaking to the technical aspect of it. I'll switch gears here a little bit and broaden our scope a little bit more again. As we talk about all the different accommodations that are available to students, a lot of this focus has been on live accommodations.

[00:38:43.91] But when we think, again, more broadly about everything that's available, what methods do you and your team use to evaluate the effectiveness of these accommodations and to hold staff accountable for delivering high-quality services? Maybe on the other side of that, how do you address any potential shortcomings? I'm just curious if there's some kind of review process or if it's based on student feedback. What's that like?

[00:39:10.26] RITA INMAN: A lot of it is that student feedback. And so we tell our students, when we meet with them and we provide their accommodations, my accessibility specialists, they have heavy caseloads right now. I'm currently hiring three new people. So that's going to be nice, to bring down the caseloads. But there is no possible way that they could meet with every

single one of their students. So we go off of the, no news is good news once we've approved accommodations.

[00:39:34.68] We teach students how to send their letter and the steps to follow each semester. And in that initial appointment, it's a little bit longer because we talk through, OK, if you're not receiving your accommodations, if you're struggling with talking to your faculty, if your faculty is asking you to send them your medical documentation, I'm your person to reach out to. So make sure you connect back with me.

[00:40:00.19] When the students send their accommodation letter, it is initiated through our online system, and it's initiated through the student, it also does list the accessibility specialist at the bottom of the letter. So if an instructor themselves is having issues or has questions, they have a point of contact to reach out to.

[00:40:18.71] We also provide information about our universal design team over at our Center for Teaching Excellence. I was trying to think of the acronym in my head. So we do provide some resources on the front end to let instructors know where they can go to.

[00:40:35.57] But for students, we really help try to teach them that if you need help, if something is not going well, if you are not receiving your accommodations, please reach out to us as soon as that's happening. If you're feeling uncomfortable about being questioned by your faculty, please reach out to our office. And we will make sure that we address it with your faculty. Because that's our role, is to be their advocate, but then also to help teach them those advocacy skills as well.

[00:41:03.37] KELLY MAHONEY: Absolutely, the self-advocacy, again, is so important here. And we received another attendee question from Kristen, who asks more about potentially how these students could interact on their own about the resources that they're receiving. She asks, do you have an in-house document remediation team or do you work with a third-party vendor to ensure that accessible documents are being provided to students? So thinking about the actual materials that they need to work from.

[00:41:32.40] RITA INMAN: At this time, we don't. We don't have a remediation team. I work really closely with our libraries because they are phenomenal. And so there's been a few times where PDFs are being shared that are-- I don't know why they're being shared. They're 30 years old. But maybe they thought it was really important to their content. I'm not sure. That's really when we run into the most issues when it comes to documents themselves.

[00:41:59.95] And so I do work really closely with our library. And they typically can get something turned around in an accessible format. If it's not something that our libraries can help us with, we've had to do things like send them off to Target Copy.

[00:42:14.98] We have these things on our campus. They're called Bookeye scanners. And so we have one housed in our office. And we have them in three other places on campus, a couple of the libraries, and I think it's over at Newell, which is a study center for students, where students

can-- what they do is they can scan any textbook or any material, and then it will create it into a PDF.

[00:42:40.40] And then we can take that PDF file. And we can put it into an accessible format, depending on what that means-- enlarging the font, maybe it's putting it into a law text format. So we can help assist in those ways. And again, a lot of those things are going to come up as the student needs it. It might be something that it's an approved accommodation, so that could be something also that we're thinking about on the front end of things.

[00:43:06.15] KELLY MAHONEY: That's great. You know, again, going back to your point about equal access doesn't always look the same, you mentioned larger font. Whatever it is that you need to do, it's great that you have the resources in house. UF is certainly well stocked when it comes to stuff like that. How do you decide, though, when it's best to go in house for something or when you might need to bring in outside help? What considerations are involved in that decision-making process? Is it simply just a matter of the resources at your disposal?

[00:43:35.13] RITA INMAN: It is. And so, sometimes, it could be the resources, or it could be the time that needs to be put into it. We have a Braille machine in our office. We're not super efficient at using it. But also, we've determined that it is more efficient and it's more beneficial to send that off to have that completed for us. And so it really just depends on the complexity that is involved in requesting that accessible format.

[00:44:05.97] But our first line of action is typically to try to do something in house if we possibly can. We have a really great captioning department on our campus through UF IT. And so if there is any pre-recorded video, then our in-house captioning department, we can send those. They house all of those on something called Mediasite. It's kind of like their-- what's the word I'm looking for-- cloud system that they use.

[00:44:37.34] So it's really accessible for an instructor to upload something into Mediasite. And then, because the video is prerecorded, then their caption department can typically turn it around in 24 to 48 hours. So I think that's one of the biggest in-house services that we use the most. And then, like I said, it's really just dependent on-- we have to outweigh cost versus time and the things that we have.

[00:45:03.32] Because ultimately, yes, UF is big. And we do have a lot of resources. But no matter what I do, it is my role also to be a good steward of the resources that we're using. And so I do always have to make sure, if my up-line is questioning me, I do have to say, well, it was going to take 15 hours of my staff to put into this versus me sending it off and getting it completed and spending x number of dollars. So sometimes, I just have to be able to justify what it is that we're doing.

[00:45:31.99] KELLY MAHONEY: That makes perfect sense. And it sounds like a very collaborative environment at UF. There's a lot of different departments that you can work with to get these accommodations done, whatever that may look like. So going back a little earlier in our conversation, you mentioned that there's a universal design team at UF, too, which is very exciting to me.

[00:45:50.66] We got an attendee question relating to UDL, Universal Design for Learning. How do we make sure that our implementations of UDL in the classroom are also aligned intersectionally? So to support this broad array of disability. Like we said, we know that accommodations are not always going to look the same, even for someone who has the same disability.

[00:46:14.24] RITA INMAN: Yeah, so that team does a really great job of training. And so I would say, one of the biggest things that our UDL team does is they do a clinical-- not a clinical, a tracking course to where you can be UDL-certified as an instructor. And actually, they promoted it pretty heavily. So it's almost like this prestigious thing, that they went through this UDL program.

[00:46:42.47] A lot of the individual colleges have promoted that program for their faculty. And there's incentives to doing it. And then, a lot of times, what they'll do is then they will highlight who's using these UDLs. So I don't know if there is necessarily an assessment for it. A lot of it is more so the training that they're doing on the front end of it and then also just really giving credit and props to those individuals that are using it because then that inspires more faculty to utilize it.

[00:47:19.85] KELLY MAHONEY: Again, going back to that relationship building, a lot of our conversation has centered around collaboration and building these relationships. So when we think along these lines, how can universities continue to create opportunities for this cross-departmental collaboration and, more importantly, knowledge sharing to promote accessibility and inclusion across campus? If one department found something that really works for them, how can we make sure they're sharing that with each other?

[00:47:48.31] RITA INMAN: I think the biggest thing is making sure that those connections that you make when you're talking to faculty, when you're talking to directors of departments, making sure that those connections, you're planting seeds. And so you're starting that conversation of, like I said earlier, how can I help you? Help me help you, right? And those little opportunities, it might be a 10-minute Zoom conversation with a faculty, or it might be presenting to a freshman class.

[00:48:20.45] The more that you're invited to the table, the more that it's going to be remembered or thought of. Oh, yeah, I was sitting in this new faculty orientation. And DRC was there. Oh, I was at preview, and I saw a tabling event. And I saw DRC there. So anytime you have the opportunity to be invited to those spaces, if you have the ability to send a staff member, send a representative, take advantage of those opportunities. Because the more that you're seen on campus, the more it's shown that we value disability and we value the diversity of our students.

[00:48:55.84] And hey, I talked to this accessibility specialist, and they were so helpful. And I'm going to remember that person when I need to go ask a question later on. So I would really say, when you're invited to the table, go to the table. Have dinner, stay after, make those connections, and definitely play up on any of those opportunities that you get because it's going to be remembered in the long run.

[00:49:22.50] KELLY MAHONEY: Absolutely. And we received another attendee question that might be the other side of that. So the relationship building certainly helps, makes those conversations much easier. But this attendee asks, how can we support faculty in understanding that they are unable to pick and choose accommodations?

[00:49:40.20] Like you mentioned, those conversations can sometimes be, first and foremost, educational about why they need this thing. But the attendee wants to know, how do you communicate that? The student needs to get all the accommodations that are listed on their plans or their letters or their documentation.

[00:49:57.36] RITA INMAN: So when a faculty is reaching out, one of the things I mentioned earlier was that accommodations can't go against the objectives of the course. And so I definitely have that conversation with faculty. You have to explain to me and be really specific as to why this accommodation is going against the objectives of the course. And if you're telling me that, then we really have to have a holistic conversation of, if this accommodation doesn't work, then let's talk about what are some reasonable accommodations.

[00:50:28.66] So that's a lot of what I do as well is-- I'll be presenting it ahead, and it's when the faculty say no. And so if you're telling me that this accommodation is not reasonable, then we have to get to a point to where we're providing access, and we have to put in a different type of accommodation. That's not always an easy conversation to have. And sometimes, it can be a little difficult. I also do have to remind faculty that it is their responsibility to provide the accommodations.

[00:50:59.45] And so if they're questioning what the accommodation is, and they're questioning and saying that it's not something that works for their class due to the course objectives, then let's talk through, well, what are some different options? Because the student does need access. And the student deserves equal access. And so we really have to figure out what's going to work.

[00:51:19.48] And that's where-- I don't like to, but that's where I have to play that card if I really get a lot of push-back. It's happened twice where I've had to go to a dean. It's not fun. But sometimes, we do have to have those hard conversations.

[00:51:38.59] KELLY MAHONEY: Probably our last question here. This has been such an insightful conversation. I feel like I have probably 50 more questions that I want to ask you. We've talked a lot about what your office does, in collaboration with the faculty and different departments. But thinking more about student involvement here, how can universities involve students with disabilities, or without disabilities, in the development and implementation of accessibility policies and initiatives, making sure that their voices and their perspectives are heard and, more importantly almost, understood?

[00:52:15.08] RITA INMAN: I think the biggest thing is working with your student groups. We try to always build a really great relationship with our student body president whenever a new one is elected. That's a really great opportunity because that's who the students are talking to. I mentioned our Disability Ambassadors group a little bit earlier. We work really, really closely

with those students because education looks very different than it did five years ago. It looks different than it did 10 years ago.

[00:52:45.27] So the barriers that these students are experiencing are very different than what we've had going on in the last few years. And so we do a lot of Qualtrics at our university. And so we definitely send out those student surveys and things like that. And we try to build those relationships with our students, just like we do with our faculty. When they're talking to their accessibility specialists, if I constantly am getting complaints about a specific course or a specific instructor, that's where I'm probably going to need to step in and have a conversation.

[00:53:19.89] I can also-- the system that we use is really great. I can see how many of a specific type of accommodation is being requested in a course. And so that provides me the opportunity to-- oh, well, why is this accommodation always being requested in this course? So we do try to empower our students that their voice is heard and that they do play a very valid role in their access and in their accommodations.

[00:53:47.40] I try to promote that a lot at that initial appointment with our students, just because they've had their parents, their grandparents, aunt, uncle, whoever their person was going through maybe high school, they've had an advocate along the way. So like I said earlier, those self-advocacy skills, when they're working with their accessibility specialists and talking with us, it really is sometimes a conversation of, hey, let's talk about what is it that you need, how can we teach you to advocate.

[00:54:15.43] You're not seeing this in this course? Well, let's talk about, do you need my help? Do you need my assistance? Or do you want to take this on your own as well?

[00:54:25.00] KELLY MAHONEY: Absolutely. It's like the learning curve is almost double. You're in college, but then you also have to learn how to self-advocate. Well, thank you very much again, Rita. Unfortunately, that is all the time we have today. But like I said, this has been such an insightful fireside chat today. We really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us. Thank you very much to everyone for joining us and for asking such great questions. You were very engaged.

[00:54:47.98] Thank you all very much again. I hope everyone has a great day. And thank you again, Rita, for joining us.

[00:54:53.38] RITA INMAN: Thank you all so much for having me. And I always have to end with, go Gators.