Blackboard Ally Pilot Feedback Summary

January 2018

What is Blackboard Ally

Blackboard Ally is a tool, embedded in Blackboard, that focuses on making digital course content more accessible. A content creator uploads a file (i.e., Word, PowerPoint, PDF, Image, HTML and OpenOffice/LibreOffice) to Blackboard, and Ally provides both feedback on the overall accessibility of the file, and targeted instructions to correct specific barriers to accessibility.

Ally also allows students to choose alternative formats for their course content. If content creators upload PowerPoint or Word lecture notes and the student prefers an audio version of the notes, they can facilitate this with the click of a button.

Buffalo State Knowledge Base Articles

- [Blackboard Ally](#)
- [Blackboard Ally for Students](#)

The Case for Blackboard Ally

Our primary goal implementing Blackboard Ally is to improve the accessibility of digital course content for all students with a tool that is already a part of Blackboard. A welcome side-effect from using Ally is awareness of the need to create accessible digital content for all audiences. Ally helps faculty analyze existing documents, and provides clear instructions to correct barriers, ultimately improving the accessibility of existing and future digital course materials.

Implementation of Blackboard Ally responds to the campus strategic plan, Strategic Goal 1: Provide an Excellent Education Inside and Outside the Classroom, Strategic Goal 2.0, Enhance Academic Support Services.

Pilot

During spring 2017 and fall 2018 selected faculty taught 106 courses with access to Blackboard Ally. This included newly developed online courses, courses being reviewed by Open SUNY Course Quality Review (OSCQR), and courses outside of those perimeters for faculty who opted in. In general, faculty developing new courses saw this as an opportunity to get a baseline sense of the accessibility of their course content, with a commitment to continuous improvement.

Faculty Feedback

Faculty were surveyed at the completion of the pilot. When asked which features were most beneficial, the majority of respondents found the *Accessibility Score* feature, and the *Issue Explainer* feature to be the most beneficial in helping them make their course materials more accessible. Many had no concerns about using Ally and found it to be "a great tool."

When asked about how faculty used Ally to make their course more accessible, most respondents indicated that they uploaded their file, looked at the Accessibility Score, and then followed the instructions in the *Issue Explainer* to make corrections.

A note about the *Accessibility Score*: The score is simply a guideline. It's not intended to make one think that s/he passed or failed. The feedback itself is what's important. Understanding the feedback and being able to implement the feedback going forward is most important. Continuous improvement, and awareness are critical.

Most respondents reported being able to correct their files. Where issues exist, it is partly due to respondents not being aware that Microsoft is designed to be accessible when specific actions are triggered. For instance, many individuals type a title, and then bold it and enlarge the font to make it stand out. By using the *Headings* feature in Word, one can eliminate accessibility issues that are based on visual cues. Luckily, there are many [IT Knowledge Base articles](#) on how to use Microsoft's built in tools to create accessible documents.

Summary

Our goal is to be in a state of continuous improvement for accessibility, with faculty and staff always working toward the goal of making our communications and materials accessible. Overall, Buffalo State faculty who participated in this pilot, found Blackboard Ally to be a useable and effective tool.