Final Report: Improving the Accessibility of Course Reserves

Project Overview and Goals

The University Libraries proposed hiring two students who use screen readers to test the accessibility of the PDFs used in course reserves. These PDFs are often generated by scanning physical materials, which requires additional steps to convert the visually conveyed information into a format that screen readers can use (also known as remediation). Improving the accessibility of course reserves allows students to focus on learning, rather than on trying to gain access to the material, aiding student retention. Improved course reserves accessibility also contributes to a more inclusive climate on campus, as students who use screen readers would need no or fewer accommodations to use them.

Goal 1: Ensure that the PDFs in electronic course reserves are usable by students with visual impairments.

Goal 2: Determine if the software used to remediate PDFs (remediation is the process of improving their accessibility) affects the level of accessibility.

Expenditures

Student Employment: $300 for 15 hours worked.
ABBYY FineReader licence: $174.90 (original corporate licence), $267.00 (3 year standard license)= 441.90
Total: 741.90

Outcomes

We were only able to recruit one student for the testing process; we also relied upon feedback from a Chester County Intermediate Unit student who was working in the library (but were unable to pay him because of the arrangement with the CCIU). Both students were screen reader users. The testing process involved four rounds, which allowed us to fine tune our remediation process as well as let us compare the quality of PDF remediation provided by Adobe Acrobat and ABBYY FineReader. Throughout the testing process, we documented our PDF remediation procedure and incorporated the solutions identified through testing.

By the end of our testing process, we were able to address issues affecting readability/usability of the PDFs as identified by the students. Some small issues remain (end of sentence breaks placed incorrectly in text, for example), that can only be fixed manually and are harder to incorporate given the volume of materials to process. The students did not find these to be major issues affecting their ability to use the PDFs.

We found that documents generated by ABBYY FineReader had fewer issues out of the box than Adobe Acrobat, and ABBYY FineReader also allowed for easier manual manipulation of the files. We will be using ABBYY FineReader as part of ereserves processing going forward, and we were able to use grant funds to buy another license in consultation with the grant administrators.

Next Steps

We have two main next steps: training students using this updated procedure for processing ereserves documents, and developing a best practices document for faculty submitting documents for ereserves.