

# PRACTICE BRIEF

## A Paradigm Shift on Providing Alternative Formats of Textbooks

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### Abstract

Providing services to students who qualify for textbooks in alternative, useable formats is a staple of many Disability Services Offices throughout higher education. This practice brief seeks to examine how current trends, along with a department's willingness to evaluate its departmental, professional, and institutional cultures, can impact this process and a department's greater mission.

### *Literature Review*

When people with disabilities face discrimination, they are stereotyped and trapped in roles by societal expectations. They often face discrimination because they are perceived as people eligible for special privileges, such as altered hiring standards, giving the appearance that achievements are tainted (Smart, 2001). Because disability is often portrayed in a negative light, individuals may withdraw from an important part of who they are (Michalko, 2002). This form of self-denial could lead to a retreat from friendship, kindness, love, affection, and other desirable social attributes, for fear of rejection and further separation (Firestone, Firestone, & Catlett, 2003).

The disability community has spent decades forming strategies to promote its demand for civil rights. This struggle consists of destroying stereotypes, capturing support and strategically building coalitions with other groups through identifying differing needs and agendas (Switzer, 2003). The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 established the precedent that separate is inherently unequal (Goldman, 1991). Being aware of and actively fighting against separate but equal practices on college campuses allows Disability Service Providers an opportunity to further the push for Disability Rights.

### *Problem*

It is beneficial for disability-related offices to review practice, policy, procedures, and relationships both within their individual departments and in relation to other areas of their institutions. During a vetting process about textbooks in alternative formats and the role of the University Bookstore, several key issues arose. First, providing textbooks in a traditional print format to all students except students with disabilities (SWD) is a separate but equal practice and is in direct contrast to the principles of Universal Design Theory (Center for Universal Design, 2008). Second, the relationship between the University Bookstore and the Office of Disability Services (ODS) did not mirror those with other key constituents on campus such as Residential Living, Facilities Management, or the Faculty Resource Center. Third, aspects of Western Carolina University's (WCU) culture lent themselves to an open review and discussion about policy and procedures. Finally, a focus on advocacy and modeling instead of service providing was the preferred approach when working with SWD.

### *Students and Location*

Students affected by the processes being addressed are those eligible for alternative text formats, such as texts in Braille, digital formats, or audio formats.

This is applicable to students with visual impairments, certain learning disabilities, and particular mobility impairments. The population is not limited by any demographic other than disability. WCU is a comprehensive regional university with a student population of approximately 9,000 in the mountains of western North Carolina.

### *Strategic Reasoning*

Providing the same service to two categories of students each in their own unique location is an example of a separate but equal practice. A primary role of any official university bookstore is to provide usable textbooks for the students on that campus, but if a student with a significant visual impairment purchases a traditional textbook from the university's bookstore, that textbook is not functional. Additional steps are then required to convert the text to a usable format. While it is possible for the student to convert his/her own textbook, he/she is more likely to approach the school's ODS for conversion services, due to the sizable investment of time, money, and equipment. This dynamic makes ODS the de facto purveyor of usable textbooks for SWD. No other office on campus offers textbooks to the students they serve. For example, do Multicultural Affairs Offices provide textbooks for minority students, or do women receive their textbooks from the Women's Center? Why would that be different for SWD? An official university bookstore providing usable textbooks to all students except students with print disabilities is not only a separate but equal practice, but also contradicts key principles of Universal Design.

Universal Design is "the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Center for Universal Design, 2008). There are three principles of Universal Design that apply to the provision of textbooks in alternative formats: Equitable Use, Flexibility in Use, and Perceptible Information. "Equitable Use" is the designing of goods or services to be usable by as many clients as possible without altering means of use, and without segregation or stigmatization of users. "Flexibility in Use" is the design of goods and services in formats that provide access with as little modification as necessary. "Perceptible Information" is the presentation of pertinent information in a manner in which the user can access and use it (Center for Universal Design, 2008). The Center for Universal Design is located on the campus of North

Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. In keeping with the principles espoused by the Center, there has been a formalization of the partnership between the North Carolina State University Bookstore and the Disability Services Office. The crux of the arrangement is that the bookstore maintains an institutional membership to the Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic to assist in the provision of purchased texts in alternative formats. (C. Branker, personal communication, November 6, 2008). This example gives credibility to the concept of formalized partnerships.

An institution of higher education, like many larger organizations, is comprised of many smaller groups or offices. While the end goal is the same for all members of the community, student learning and developmental growth, each department has its own mission and area of expertise. In many instances, ODS serves as a referral and resource to other offices in their missions. Examples of this include residential living, facilities management, and in various ways for faculty. In these partnerships, the divisions choose to serve all students, including SWD; and ODS does not attempt to duplicate the services provided by these specialists. Why does the partnership between university bookstores and ODS differ? Encouragement for the partnership between ODS and the official university bookstore can emanate from an institution's culture.

In discussions with other professionals within the field, a common thread emerged. Institutional culture was often seen as a limiting factor or inhibitor in the evaluation and implementation of new policies and procedures. Making a conscious effort to be aware of and engaged with the pillars of an institution's culture can help to alleviate this barrier. These pillars are the decision makers, and building relationships with them can result in decreased professional isolation, increased engagement across departments, and a cooperative environment in which evaluation and innovation are encouraged. Two examples specific to WCU were the textbook rental program and the call for innovation and risk taking from the top levels of administration.

WCU is one of a minority of higher education institutions that use a textbook rental program. The program applies to undergraduates only and is accompanied by a flat fee that covers the primary text for each course up to 18 credit hours. Supplemental textbooks are purchased separately. Ownership of rented texts remains with the university. As with any rented property, the decision to modify resides with the owner and not the renter.

At the beginning of each academic year, the Chancellor and Provost hold an open forum to discuss the upcoming year. In this address, both top administrators made an open challenge to the staff and faculty of the university to be innovators, risk takers, and to engage in collaborative relationships across colleges, divisions, and departments. After attending the forum, ODS contacted the Chancellor and Provost to describe the efforts and reasoning behind a partnership between the ODS and the bookstore and how it benefits the university's constituency. This information was shared to highlight the efforts of ODS to heed their call and to garner support. After establishing one's position within the institution, it is beneficial to examine the role fulfilled within the profession.

Service providing is an essential component of any ODS, but should this be the dominant modus operandi? In the absence of service providing, the main focus turns to advocacy and student development. Being able to implement outreach activities both on and off campus provide the staff of ODS the opportunity to reduce social stigmatization of persons with disabilities. Reducing stigmatization then leads to increased avenues to access and an openness to engage in disability culture. A campus that embraces this philosophy will be more welcoming and comfortable for SWD, enabling them to actively and fully participate in all aspects of campus life, which provides for greater growth and a natural student experience. Through outreach activities and taking on projects like transferring responsibility for providing alternative textbooks, the ODS is modeling behavior that reflects personal empowerment and self advocacy.

#### *Observed Outcomes*

After garnering support from the direct supervisor for ODS, discussions of the reasoning were held with the University Bookstore, followed by meetings with the pillars of the institution to broaden support for transferring the responsibility of providing alternative textbooks. The outcome was successful, as the WCU Bookstore representatives agreed the proper location for SWD to receive alternative formats of textbooks was the bookstore (R. Nicholson, personal communication, September 8, 2008). The initial plan was to transfer the production after appropriate training was conducted by the ODS director. During the initial preparation, key publishers were contacted concerning their willingness to work with other constituencies in providing texts in digital format or providing authorization to create digital

copies of traditional texts for eligible students. The publishers adamantly refused to work with any office on campus other than ODS. That refusal prevented the transfer of the process, so an alternative plan was ultimately developed in which the WCU Bookstore took financial responsibility. This plan took effect in the Fall semester 2009.

#### *Implications*

Since most, if not all, disability related student issues are funneled to ODS, it is easy for disability offices to become bogged down in the area of service providing. Inclusionary movements, such as Disability Rights and Universal Design, work towards removing disability from a perceptual vacuum. Encouraging these trends should be a goal of ODS, and SWD going to a separate location to receive useable textbooks is counter to the aforementioned trends. Establishing a formal partnership with official university bookstores is a step in a positive direction, not only philosophically but practically. The provision of textbooks in alternative format requires an extensive amount of time and money. Partnering with the bookstore could free up one or both of these valuable resources. With that infusion, ODS can spend more time promoting awareness activities and advocacy causes. This brief is a testimony to the benefits of an office reviewing its own professional culture and how it interacts with a specific institution's culture, as well as a challenge for others in the profession to partake in a similar examination.

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