

Accessibility in the Archives

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>> LAUREN WITTEK: Hello, and welcome to our presentation, Accessibility in the Archives Through Firsthand Perspectives of Disabled Students. We are very excited to share our project with you. My name is Lauren Wittek, and I'm a faculty member and research and instruction librarian at Central Washington University, where I've worked since 2018. And my co-presenter is Julia Stringfellow.

>> JULIA STRINGFELLOW: Hello, everyone. I am Julia Stringfellow. I am a professor and university archivist here at Central Washington University, and I serve as the unit head for the CWU Archives and Special Collections. I worked - I am working on this accessibility audit with my colleague, Lauren Wittek.

So, I'm going to be providing some information about the overview of this project. We began this in February of 2022. Our students that we hired for this project completed their work in June of 2022. And then Lauren and I began looking at the results and compiling the data, and determining steps forward; next steps.

The reason that we began this, initially, was because in early 2022, there was a call for book chapter proposals, and the book was going to be called *Disability in the Archives*. And it's always been an ongoing concern of how to make the physical space of the archives as well as its online content accessible to anyone who - who wishes to use it. And so, we thought this would be a great opportunity to do just that.

So, in working with the library Dean's office, and with their support and funding, we were able to hire two students with disabilities. And later on in this presentation, I will be sharing about the process for that, of recruiting and hiring student workers with disabilities. And then, later on in this

presentation, I will be sharing about the tools that we used in creating the accessibility audit, determining what to cover in the audit, working with our students, and resources that all of you can use as you work on an accessibility audit for your repository.

So, to provide some information on the Central Washington University Archives and Special Collections. We are located on the second floor of the James E. Brooks Library on the main campus in Ellensburg. If you look at a map of Washington state, you will notice that there is a mountain range that literally divides the state in half. And so, we are located on the eastern side of the Cascade Mountains.

The Archives physical space is located just off a stairwell, and to access it, you can also use an elevator down the hall. We have an elevator in the back of the building, and then a second stairwell that's down the hall. It's difficult to tell from this picture. This is outside the entrance to Archives, and the space is rather dimly lit, which makes it a challenge to find if you have a visual impairment.

Our approximate square footage is about 6,000 square feet, and that space includes a reading room, it includes offices for two faculty members and a staff member, it includes a processing area, and it includes our stacks where our collections and books are housed. And, as you may know, Archives do not circulate content. And so, our stacks are known as closed stacks, and only staff members in the Archives have a key to go in and out of the stacks and retrieve collections and books as needed.

So, continuing with an overview of the CWU Archives and Special Collections. This is a picture of our reading room. We have four tables with a chair at each. The tables are very easy to move, which is great if we are moving them to provide more space for patrons, if we are moving them to set up for events and instruction sessions.

And the tables and chairs face the reading room desk. Whenever there is a patron in the reading room, there is an Archives staff member sitting at the desk, literally keeping an eye on the patrons and ensuring they are handling the collections or books correctly.

The Archives reading room is open to the public, 10:00AM - 3:00PM, Monday through Friday. It is also open by appointment. Our audiences include students, staff, faculty, alumni, and

members of the general public. Anyone, whether they are affiliated with the university or not, can come into the library and can come into the Archives and use our materials.

The Archives was established in 2005, and I like to note that because CWU was established as Washington state normal school in 1891. And so, many, many years, many decades passed before the university had an official repository that housed the permanent records that document its history and operations.

In the Archives, we have two full-time faculty members, we have one full-time staff member. We currently have one temporary staff member who is with us 10 hours a week. And we also have two students assistants, and they are each with us 10 hours a week. And we like to schedule the students when the reading room is open to help us provide - provide coverage, and to help us work with patrons as they - as they come into the archives.

Our collecting scope for the archives, we obviously serve as the official repository for the university. So, we house records from the president's office, from the board of trustees, provost records, other top-level office records. We house the records of student organizations on campus, athletics.

And then, we also, in addition to university history, we also document regional history. So, we focus on the eight counties east of the Cascade Mountains. Ellensburg is located in Kittitas County. So, we focus on documenting the industries of the counties, the way of life, organizations. And we do this through collecting correspondents, photographs, organizational materials. And then, we also have audio and video recordings in our university archives, as well as in our regional history archives.

And finally, we have a rare and unique book collection. Our books focus on the Pacific Northwest and its history. And we also collect books by CWU faculty, staff, student, and alumni authors.

Okay, so, in providing a summary of our project. So, we were able to conduct an - an accessibility audit of the CWU Archives and Special Collections, beginning in spring quarter of 2022. And as you all may know, a quarter is 10 weeks. So, it went from March of 2022 to June of 2022. And we were able to hire two self-identified disabled students to conduct the accessibility audit of the archives. For privacy purposes, we

will be referring to them as Student A and Student B throughout - throughout this presentation.

So, both Student A and Student B reviewed eight digital collections that we have available through CWU's institutional repository scholar works. They evaluated them to determine how accessible they are to patrons with disabilities. And Student A and Student B both reviewed the physical space of the Archives and the library area that you need to access in order to get to the Archives. So, in order to find the Archives, you have to come in through the library's entrance, find where the stairwell is, or the elevator. Once you arrive on the second floor, being able to tell from signage where the Archives is, and where to enter it. So, they surveyed that, as well.

The two students were - were paid hourly over a period of seven weeks during spring of 2022. And I'll be talking more about the recruiting and hiring process later in this presentation. But we - we were able to work with the university's disability services offices in - in getting the word out about doing this hiring. And the job description that we used that was posted on the CWU Human Resources website is included as a handout with this presentation.

>> LAUREN WITTEK: So, we started this project off in February of 2022 by requesting funding from our library dean to pay for the student workers to conduct the accessibility audit. Once that funding was secure, we reached out to the director of disability services on campus to help us with recruitment.

In April 2022, we posted the job listing by the campus's online jobs board, and then we conducted brief Zoom interviews. While we didn't receive very many applications overall, having that recruitment assistance from the disability services office really helped us find the two students rather quickly.

The audit work was completed between May and June of 2022, and now we are working through the findings to meliorate those accessibility issues. My co-presenter and I also started writing a book chapter last summer that is slated for publication in September of this year.

Now, I'm going to get into the actual items audited. So, first up is the digital collections. We selected eight digital collections within our institutional repository called ScholarWorks for the student employees to review. These eight collections were specifically selected between they contained a

mixture of media formats, including videos, images, written documents, and artwork. These collections were from both the Archives and Special Collections unit as well as the Community Projects collection. Both students were assigned the same set of collection - the same eight set of collections to allow Julia and I the ability to compare their work and look for any discrepancies.

Moving on to the physical space that was audited. We actually had one student audit the physical space, which included the library building as a whole, as well as the Archives and Special Collections area. The student used a checklist containing a mixture of directed and open-ended questions that Julia and I compiled. They contained questions such as "are the elevators easy to find and use?", "is the entrance to the Archives wide enough for a wheelchair to easily get through?", "are the tools the Archives provides for magnification adequate?", and "what other aspects of the physical space can be improved to make them more accessible?"

We provided the student with a measuring tape, some pen and paper, and asked them to take photos of any issues they came across. They insert their findings into a shared document at the end of each shift, and we made this checklist available for you to download and tailor to your space if you're interested in conducting a similar audit at your institution.

The two student employees ended up working for approximately a month and a half on this project. While we know they're not professional accessibility testers, each of these students employees has a wealth of lived experience that we found invaluable when looking for ways to improve our library and its services. We wish that we had additional student workers to work on it, but since that was our first time exploring such an audit, we thought it was best to start small. Then we could always scale up in the future if we decide to replicate the project.

The findings for the digital collection were overall positive. Listed here on the slide are some examples found by our students, including adding audio description to videos for folks who are low- or no-vision, improving the color contrast for better readability, updating or adding alt text for context of what an item is, like an image, particularly, improving descriptive titles of what an item is in a collection, and finally, changing the format of a collection landing page for

more logical reading order, particularly for someone who uses a screen reader.

The issues related to the physical space of our building came as no surprise. The library building is about 50 years old, so it was built before any ADA-built environment guidelines and requirements. Some of the issues include we have some uneven floor surfaces, which can be a tripping hazard. Some of our overhead lighting creates a glare on select signage. The back elevator's frequently out of order. However, we have a second elevator, thankfully, that folks can use if need be. Our water fountains are not accessible for those who are shorter in stature, or who use a wheelchair. We have some dim lighting in the stairwell right outside the entrance to the archives. And one of our emergency exits is not wheelchair accessible.

And because these issues fall out of our purview as an archivist and librarian and rest with campus facilities and will be quite costly to address, we are compiling the list to provide to our interim dean for consideration.

>> JULIA STRINGFELLOW: Okay. So, for the hiring process for two student assistants, the reason that we chose two is because that was the funding available from the library dean to fund the project for spring quarter of 2022. We were budgeted for 10 hours per week for each student for 100 hours for the quarter. A quarter here at Central Washington University being 10 weeks.

We worked closely with the university's disability services office to - to communicate with them about we were - what we were doing to make sure that everything that we do is in compliance with the ADA, and for them to reach out to students who use DS services to see if any students might be interested.

The job posting, we did make sure it was in compliance with state and federal laws. We did have our Human Resources office look it over, as well as the disability services office look it over, to approve it. It was posted on the CWU Human Resources student jobs website. And the job description is included in your handouts for you to look over, but we provided - the position was - the position title was student assistant to conduct accessibility audit of the Central Washington University Archives.

And it - the position described it would be a review of the accessibility of the physical space and on eight online collections of the CWU Archives in determine how accessible they

were for - for all patrons. And then, we - we included that the - that the student would be working closely with the university archivist and user experience and assessment librarian in assessing the physical space and online - online collections. And we asked that they adhere to archival standards and guidelines for working with - for working with the collections.

And then, for qualifications, we included an understanding of the difficulties faced by people with disabilities, we included strong written and oral communication skills, and we also included that they be a current student at Central Washington University.

So, in doing that, and in having the job on the Human Resources website and having disability services also reach out to their students, we had two interested students. We did Zoom interviews with each of them. By "we," I mean myself and the user experience and assessment librarian. And then, once they accepted the positions and the paperwork was done for them to start work, they came in on their first day to meet Lauren and me in person and to receive a tour of the Archives, of the library's physical space, and to receive an overview of its collections, and then also its online collections.

I must say that, throughout this process, we kept telling Student A and Student B that they were guinea pigs, that we too were learning as we went along, and to please ask us questions along the way. And so, this was a learning process for all of us. And the students kept in excellent communication with us. Email was usually the preferred form of communication, and that seemed to work well for - for all of us.

Okay, so, in recruiting and interviewing students who are disabled, it's very important to follow certain guidelines, laws. Obviously, with this project, the students that we hired identified - self-identified as a person with a disability. When you are interviewing a student, you can never ask if they have a disability. You can never ask that. There are some wonderful guides in determine what you can and cannot do in recruiting and interviewing students who - who self-identify as having a disability.

Obviously, the Americans with Disabilities Act, this website is a wealth of resources. It should always be your go-to in working with students who self-identify as having a disability. Disability discrimination laws vary by state. This website provides - basically has an alphabetical listing by

states, describing very clearly what that state's discrimination laws are. And finally, how to interview without violating the ADA is also an important one.

With - with the interview questions that we asked the two students, we provided a summary of the job, we asked them if they were comfortable with the duties described in the job description, we asked if there were any concerns with it. And then, obviously, we asked if they were still - still interested in doing this accessibility audit. So, definitely review these resources in compiling your interview questions.

Something very important to do, and your Human Resources department probably always does this, but before posting any job description, before asking interview questions and setting up interviews, always have your Human Resources department look over, review, and approve the job description. And do that, as well, with your interview questions. It is crucial to have your Human Resources department involved in all recruiting and interviewing and hiring. They - they must be in the loop, they must know what is going on.

>> LAUREN WITTEK: I'm now going to talk about the resources we used to conduct the audit. As I mentioned in the previous slide, Julia and I compiled a list of questions for reviewing the physical space that one of our students worked off of for her shifts in the building. And that is available for download, in case you're interested.

The second resource you probably have heard of. It's WAVE's collection of accessibility tools, which are great for checking the accessibility errors on your webpages. You can enter your site and it'll tell you errors on each page. You've just got to do it manually, one by one, so it can be time-consuming. But WAVE also offers a free browser extension that you can use right in your browser for checking accessibility errors, which is pretty great.

The third resource we recommend is the WCAG 2A and AA spreadsheet compiled by Yale University. We loved it because it listed the WCAG guidelines into an easy-to-read spreadsheet for our student workers to start using right away. You just need to understand it's not a substitute for the WCAG 2 specifications, and it may not cover all cases. But for us, it worked.

And finally, Harvard University's template for reporting accessibility issues. It contains a severity matrix, which is

helpful after your audit is complete and you need to start ranking your results.

Here is that 2 x 2 severity matrix from Harvard that I just mentioned in the previous slide. Along the horizontal axis is the content relevance, which ranges from not relevant to very relevant. And then, along the vertical axis is content operability, which ranges from operable/perceivable to inoperable/unperceivable. You, as a user, can rank your accessibility here as either low, medium, or high, depending on where it falls within this 2 x 2 matrix. And while we want to address every accessibility issue, this guideline helps us to determine what is most critical.

So, for our next steps, we're going to rank the accessibility findings according to severity using that matrix I previously mentioned. We're going to summarize and share our findings with relevant stakeholders. For instance, for the interim dean, we can share our findings with the - with the building itself. Items that we can't change, such as lighting, issues with the elevator being down, etc.

For the Archives and Special Collections faculty and staff, we can share items within the repository that we can edit. So, just alt text. And finally, items with the repository itself will have to be shared with the repository host because that may require some backend coding.

And finally, Julia and I are working on a book chapter about this project, and we have an expected publication date in September of 2023, so please look out for that.

I wanted to start to wrap up our presentation by including some lessons learned. Number 1, by far, is start early. Almost every step of this process took longer than we expected, particularly the job-posting portion. It had to go through several layers of approvals, and it got hung up with HR before finally getting listed. So, your institution may be different, but it's always a good idea to leave some wiggle room.

Number 2, consider having two students audit the same collections and/or spaces. As previously mentioned, it - it helped to have a second set of eyes in case anything is missed the first go-around.

Number 3, set aside time to debrief with your student auditors at the end of the project. We, unfortunately, had to

wrap up rather quickly, because spring quarter ended, and our student employees moved off-campus for the summer. And we really would've liked to have more time to review their findings for additional clarification.

And finally, build flexibility into your project. One of our students needed to move out-of-state for personal reasons for a few weeks into our project. And we only assigned them digital collections to review once they moved away. So, that was helpful. Our other student employee experienced some health issues, so we had a plan in place for working remotely and made sure to be available by phone or Email in case either of them had any questions when they were working.

>> JULIA STRINGFELLOW: Okay. So, there are some additional resources that we wanted to hyperlink for - for you all to access. If, for some reason, you have any issues with the link not working for any of these and you'd like us to - to Email these to you, please Email and let us know, and we'll be happy to do that.

These are all sources that we - that we actually read and took to heart as we were compiling the accessibility audit and working with the student workers who did the audit, and then reviewing their findings.

So, the first one is the Society of American Archivists, SAA, Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics. They have a very clear access and use section stating that access and use should be available to all patrons, regardless of disability. So, it's a good reminder to have.

The SAA Guidelines for - for Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities is another good one. The Beginner's Guide to Web Accessibility is just, a beginner's guide. The language is very clear, it's very easy to follow. It certainly encourages you to begin your web accessibility audit rather than discouraging you and making you feel overwhelmed about having to do an - an accessibility audit of your web content and your online collections. It was certainly encouraging for us to use as we began looking at the accessibility of the CWU Archives online collections.

And then, the Americans with Disabilities Act Checklist for Existing Facilities. This was done by the SAA chapter of New England, and it's very clear. It obviously follows ADA guidelines, and it's certainly helped with doing the review of

the physical space for the Archives, and how accessible or inaccessible it is for patrons with disabilities, as well as evaluating the accessibility of the library, and being able to access the library and find the Archives.

So, these are all great, easy-to-follow practical resources that I highly recommend.

>> LAUREN WITTEK: And with that, we just want to say thank you so much for watching our presentation today. We're very excited to share our results with you, and we hope that you - you learned some tips and tricks that you can take back to your institution and try out, even if it's just start small and work your way up to something bigger for accessibility auditing. We think it's really, really important.

If you have any questions or comments, please Email us. My Email address is Lauren.Wittek@cwu.edu, and Julia's Email address is Julia.Stringfellow@cwu.edu. Thanks so much.