

Collaborations Between Centers for Teaching and Learning and Offices of Disability Services: Current Partnerships and Perceived Challenges

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Abstract

The authors report on the results of a survey conducted in the United States on collaboration between Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) and Offices of Disability Services (ODSs) in institutions of higher education. The authors, a disability services professional and a former director of a Center for Teaching and Learning, give particular attention to the current collaborative efforts occurring between these two offices as well as the perceived challenges of those collaborative efforts. Significant findings from the survey results include five key challenges to collaboration between ODSs and CTLs: (1) time and logistics; (2) faculty-related challenges; (3) competing priorities; (4) changing the campus culture; and (5) funding and limited resources.

Keywords: Center for teaching and learning, office of disability services, collaboration, challenges

Institutions of higher education are legally mandated—by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the original Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, and the revised Americans with Disabilities Act Amendment Act (ADAAA) of 2008—to support students with disabilities who are enrolled on their campuses and in their courses. At the same time, the diversity of college students continues to grow (Humphreys, 2000); this has caused increased attention by institutions regarding how to provide wholly inclusive experiences for all of their students, including those with disabilities (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). As a result, there is a pressing need for faculty developers (staff, administrators, or faculty members tasked with offering professional development opportunities for faculty, frequently related to best practices for teaching and learning in the higher education environment) to know more about access as it pertains to the diverse learner. Specifically, faculty developers need to educate faculty on the best practices, resource sharing, and methods of diversifying their instructional approaches in their classrooms. Many faculty developers are looking to the principles of Universal Design to guide faculty in the design and delivery of their courses so that all students, including those with disabilities are able to access the content in a manner that works best

for them (e.g., Burgstahler, 2003; Ouellett, 2004). The use of Universal Design to increase accessibility has become equally important in online courses.

In just ten years, online enrollment of courses as a percentage of total enrollment in higher education rose from 9.6% in 2002 to 32% in 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). As of 2012, 94.5% of higher education institutions have some form of online offering for students, with 62.4% offering fully online programs in addition to individual courses (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Online learning is not an area in which access has been strongly considered for students with disabilities, nor are most faculty members aware of best practices for accessibility when teaching in this medium. Both disability service professionals and faculty developers are struggling to figure out how to ensure that all courses are accessible to the wide range of diverse learners attending today's institutions of higher education.

The authors, a director of an Office of Disability Services (ODS) and a former director of a Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), are frequent collaborators on a range of initiatives and programs. These collaborations led the authors to co-direct a national research project on structures and resources for online accessibility in institutions of higher education,

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as well as the collaborations that are occurring between CTLs and ODSs. This project started with two research questions: what are current institutional practices and policies that support accessible online teaching and learning, and how can CTLs and ODSs best collaborate in support of institutional, faculty, and student needs around online accessibility? Linder, Behling, and Fontaine-Rainen (2015) responded to the first question, and this article focuses on the second question.

The research on unit-to-unit collaboration is neither recent nor exhaustive. Although articles exist on CTLs and student collaborations (Bhavsar & Skinner, 2008), and CTL collaborations with student affairs or research offices (Chism, 2004), this body of research is small. No literature specifically explores collaborations between CTLs and ODSs. Yet, these collaborations are becoming increasingly necessary as the number of students with disabilities increases, student populations continue to diversify, and faculty members are asked to consider access in terms of course design for all learners. This article will share the study's findings regarding the current collaborations occurring between the two offices and the challenges of collaboration that can impede partnerships between ODSs and CTLs.

Methodology

In the fall of 2013, the authors received a research grant from the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network to study the current institutional practices and policies that support accessible online teaching and learning in higher education in the United States as well as collaborations between CTLs and ODSs. The study began with the research questions referenced earlier in the article in order to better understand the current state of CTL and ODS collaborations as well as how CTLs and ODSs can better collaborate in the future. The main purpose of this study was to determine best practices for maximizing collaboration between CTLs and ODSs.

Participants

The data for this research are drawn from two groups of participants: (1) members of the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network listserv, and (2) members of the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). The POD Network consists of professionals who provide

support for faculty members, primarily through CTLs or similar programs at institutions of higher education in the U.S. According to their mission, the POD Network "provide[s] a community for scholars and practitioners who advance teaching and learning through faculty and organizational development" (POD Mission Statement, 2015, para. 2). AHEAD (2004-2017) consists of professionals who primarily support students through their work in ODSs or similar programs at higher education institutions in the U.S. and abroad. AHEAD describes itself as "professional membership organization for individuals involved in the development of policy and in the provision of quality services to meet the needs of persons with disabilities involved in all areas of higher education" (About AHEAD," para. 1).

Participants responded from institutions across the United States with 40 states represented in this sample. Of 192 total respondents, 143 were affiliated with an ODS, 29 were affiliated with a CTL, 14 identified as being affiliated with both an ODS and a CTL, and six identified as "Other" (e.g., Student Development Office, Instructional Design Office, or Advising Office). The number of ODS respondents may have been disproportionately higher due to the higher number of AHEAD members than POD members. Respondents were drawn from a range of institution types and sizes, with over half of the respondents (59.8%) coming from public institutions.

Design and Procedures

The data analyzed in this study were from a survey instrument that the authors developed for broad distribution. The instrument was reviewed several times by the authors as well as an expert researcher, to clarify language where necessary. The survey included 37 questions and was divided into the following areas: institutional demographics, CTLs and ODSs demographics, collaborative programming, and information on the presence of and preparedness of online learning at that institution. The survey also included questions to gather information on the resources of ODSs and CTLs, the level of awareness and joint programming done between the two offices, and specific information regarding those programs. Sample programming questions included:

1. Which of the following joint programs do you offer with faculty development or disability services (depending on your affiliation)?

2. How many programs have you jointly offered within the last year with faculty development or disability services (depending on your affiliation)?
3. For the programs that are jointly offered, please describe the target audience and program goals.

The survey also collected information about universities' experiences with online learning, faculty development, and the access needs of all students. Responses were examined to determine how institutions are supporting faculty as they move toward a more online environment. Sample questions included:

1. What steps has your institution taken to address the needs of students with disabilities within online learning environments?
2. If your institution has created any educational resources about online accessibility for student audiences, please describe them below.
3. Have you designated a "point person" on your campus for online accessibility initiatives?

For the purposes of this paper the authors focused on two different aspects of the survey: (1) information regarding the collaborative work between CTLs and ODSs, and (2) the challenges of these collaborations. To better understand the collaborative efforts, the authors examined the responses to questions in the survey that focused on number of collaborations, type of collaborations, effects of those collaborations, and plans for future collaborations. A question regarding the challenges of collaboration was answered with qualitative responses that were imported into QSR Nvivo (version 10), a qualitative software analysis tool, and coded for further analysis. Following the coding method outlined in Creswell (2014), each author read through all of the qualitative responses for the question familiarizing themselves with the data. Each author then independently identified the primary themes that emerged from the data. The authors compared notes and further honed the themes. The authors then re-read the qualitative responses with the themes in mind and added some additional sub-themes. Lastly, each author independently coded the qualitative responses according to the previously identified themes. The coding was then compared through the use of QSR Nvivo queries to identify the Kappa score. Scores of over 0.75 were considered to

be excellent agreement, scores between 0.40 - 0.75 were considered to be fair to good agreement, and scores below 0.40 were considered to be poor agreement. KAPPA coefficient scores for each theme are offered in the results section below (see Table 1).

Results

Current Forms of Collaboration

Centers for Teaching and Learning and Offices of Disability Services are currently offering a range of programs and services in collaboration with one another (see Table 2). The most common of these services is individual consultations (74.2%) followed by workshops (67%) and group consultations (60%). A little more than a third of respondents noted collaborating specifically around online content or resources and about a quarter of respondents collaborate to provide training on online learning.

The number of programs that are jointly offered by CTLs and ODSs (measured within the year previous to the survey offering) was wide ranging (see Table 3). The vast majority of offices collaborated on one to five programs (72%), but 31 respondents had no collaborative programs together. Less than 10% had six or more collaborative programs in the last year.

Respondents also noted a range of different kinds of additional collaborative activities that were occurring between CTLs and ODSs (see Table 4), the most popular of which is New Faculty Orientation (64%) followed by participation in Advisory Boards (35%). Less than 10% of respondents noted sharing resources like space, staff, or administrative tasks. A little over one quarter of respondents noted that they were not collaborating at all with their respective counterpart in the ways that were mentioned.

Survey respondents were also asked if they thought that faculty members were more aware of disability-related teaching and learning issues as a result of their collaboration or partnership with a CTL or ODS. Interestingly, 120 respondents (65.93%) answered in the affirmative, 7 respondents (3.9%) answered "no" and 45 respondents (24.7%) indicated that they did not know.

Challenges of Collaboration

Of 192 total respondents, 150 answered the qualitative question regarding the kinds of challenges the respondents perceived when collaborating with their respective counterpart. In our analysis five themes

emerged: (1) time and logistics; (2) faculty-related challenges; (3) competing priorities; (4) changing the campus culture; and (5) funding and limited resources. Eight respondents (5%) noted that they did not have any challenges or that they could not identify any challenges at this time. Two independent coders had at least fair to good agreement on all categories with two categories having excellent agreement (see Table 1).

Time and logistics (104 references by 61 individuals). Lack of time was the most common challenge cited by survey respondents:

- Finding time to get together can be tough, even when there are just two or three of us – because we are all so busy.
- It can be difficult at times to get individuals together and to agree on what/how something should be accomplished.

Other challenges cited were lack of staff. Interestingly, only respondents from ODSs cited this challenge:

- The Disability Services office is understaffed, therefore time to work on collaboration is difficult to find. Resources are also not centralized making arrangements for simple things like reserving labs for training more difficult than at some other institutions.
- Not enough staff resources on DS side.

A minimal number of comments mentioned that there is no CTL office on their campus, they have had staff turnover, or that the offices are located in different buildings:

- Ever-changing staffing that requires continuous establishment and nurturing of relationships.

Faculty-related (84 references by 53 individuals). Lack of faculty understanding of the role of the ODS office and the needs of SWDs, or lack of buy-in for accessibility related initiatives, were the most commonly cited challenges in this category:

- Faculty see the office of disability services as a student affairs program and not relevant to their needs.
- Confusion of faculty about varieties of for-

mats, student needs, and accommodation guidelines. Some faculty feel overwhelmed by requirements.

- Faculty do not feel accessibility is their job, and would like to defer all responsibility to [the Office of Disability Services].

Several respondents also noted the challenges of faculty having a lack of time and faculty being resistant to change:

- Faculty typically do not have the time/energy or see a need for training opportunities until they are in a difficult situation.
- Many faculty have been teaching for an extensive period of time. Some of these instructors really do not like change or the thought of changing their approach on teaching.

Respondents also noted the unique challenges of working with adjunct instructors or faculty who teach primarily online:

- It's tough to find the part-time faculty who are not on campus regularly.
- It can be especially difficult to work with faculty who are online only.

Competing priorities (75 references by 48 individuals). The most common challenge cited by respondents in this theme was the differing perspectives or goals of each office:

- We don't always speak the same language – figuring out how to bridge the practical realities of guaranteeing 'reasonable accommodations' and the idealistic goals of 'good pedagogy/universal design' can sometimes be challenging.
- Either 'side' being entrenched in 'this is the only way we can do things...' and not listening well.

Respondents also noted the challenge of accessibility not always being part of the primary workload and that accessibility concerns and initiatives can feel like "extra" work on the part of faculty members or CTLs:

- Priority workload takes precedence.

- Getting sucked into the day-to-day administration of either office.

Several respondents also cited the challenge of having different reporting structures:

- Oftentimes, one office (the CTL) is in academic affairs and the other (ODS) is in student services. Because of reporting structures, then, partnerships can sometimes be challenging.
- We are not organizationally related.

Changing the campus culture (65 references by 43 individuals). Culture or climate barriers were the most frequently cited challenges in this category:

- I'm not sure I even know how to attempt a collaboration on my campus.
- Disability services are not seen as important enough to warrant time to address in formalized training. At this point we only trouble-shoot. Nothing proactive.

Others noted the challenge of a general lack of awareness on their campus regarding disability-related issues:

- Denial that issues exist.
- Getting faculty & admin to pay attention and time to SWD/ADA issues in anything but an emergency.

This lack of awareness led to the challenge of constantly educating the campus community in response to misconceptions or myths regarding accessibility and students with disabilities:

- Misconceptions of hidden disabilities and social behavior.
- Educating everyone.

Lastly, respondents also noted that lack of administrative support, as well as a lack of awareness of who should own accessibility issues, presented additional challenges:

- Not supported as a priority from upper admin/institutionally.
- Pervasive lack of ownership with regard to on-line accessibility.

- Some confusion regarding who is responsible for what.

Funding and limited resources (29 references by 15 individuals). It was surprising that a lack of funding or other resources were the least-cited challenge by respondents. However, upon reflection, it is possible that respondents did not see a lack of funds or resources as a challenge to collaboration although it may be seen as a challenge in other ways. One respondent noted that a lack of financial incentives for faculty presents a particular challenge:

- No incentives for faculty—they see it as going WAY above and beyond.

Other respondents noted that lack of funds for programming or other initiatives presented a challenge:

- Finding resources to do what we want to do.

Discussion

This study examined the collaborative relationship between Offices of Disability Services and Centers for Teaching and Learning, with a particular focus on online learning and accessibility. Respondents from both fields answered the questions as they reflected on their own experience at their institution of higher education. Overall, it appears that these two distinct offices do collaborate in a wide variety of ways to educate faculty as to the needs of students with disabilities in their courses, but that their collaborations do not yet fully address accessibility in online learning. Through this study, we were able to identify five challenges for collaboration between ODSs and CTLs: (1) time and logistics, (2) faculty-related challenges, (3) competing priorities, (4) changing the campus culture, and (5) funding and limited resources.

Programming

“As higher education steps up to make broad, institutional level change, [CTLs] should be prepared to function in partnership, leadership, and collaboration” (Schroeder, 2010, p. 2). This statement is certainly also true for ODSs. While the study found that CTLs and ODSs are collaborating in a wide range of ways, it was significantly less common for collaborations to be connected to issues related to online accessibility. According to this study, only 37% of CTLs and/or ODSs are working together to offer faculty trainings

or resources specific to ensuring that online courses are accessible. The data suggested a lack of awareness of the importance of online accessibility as an institutional imperative. Previous research has provided evidence of the confusion regarding institutional responsibility for online accessibility (Linder et al., 2015) with most responsibility falling to ODSs by default.

Interestingly, individual consultations make up the majority of collaborative efforts between these two offices, occurring at 74% of respondent institutions. However, the authors found this number is misleading as the data suggested that these “collaborative” consultations frequently refer to a situation in which one office recommends a faculty member to the other. In the data, respondents did not report working together with a faculty member at the same time. In the authors’ experience, a commitment to shared consultations between the units, involving staff from both offices, might take more time and staff resources initially, but ultimately result in additional learning for all involved, as well as communicating the offices mutual respect for one another to the faculty client.

The data also reflect that about 40% of the collaborative efforts between CTLs and ODSs are passive in nature. Disability service professionals may make recommendations for the CTL lending library or may develop tools for faculty use on their own time. CTL websites in turn, may include information about disability services or host information, trainings, and/or tutorials for faculty to use when designing a course. The passive nature of providing resources to faculty may be in response to the challenge of finding time to work together and to attract faculty to a specific workshop. Passive forms of collaboration were frequently described in combination with “active” collaborations such as shared initiatives or co-developed and co-facilitated programming.

In many institutions faculty developers and disability services professionals see the importance of working together in advocacy roles. This study found that CTLs and ODSs often spend time participating in each other’s advisory boards (35%), helping to develop best practice documents (34%), collaborating on policy creation (31%), and working together on strategic planning (27%). These efforts reflect the perceived value in the other office as well as the effort that can be made given the time restraints involved in their day-to-day work. In the authors’ experience, this kind of advocacy work has led to the most institutional-level change around online accessibility concerns.

Challenges to Collaboration

There were a number of challenges cited by faculty developers and disability service professionals in terms of collaborating with other another on their campuses.

Time and logistics. More than half of the survey respondents indicated that part of the challenge of collaborating involved time and logistics. Time in particular was a challenge on a number of fronts. A lack of time to meet with staff from the other unit was a consistent theme. Both types of respondents also cited difficulties in getting faculty to find the time to attend a workshop devoted to accessibility issues and concerns.

Another challenge is the logistics associated with collaborating. For example, several respondents noted that on their campuses the two offices are not located near each other on campus. This is not too surprising given that CTLs are typically under the academic affairs umbrella and primarily serving faculty, while ODSs can be in academic or student affairs and primarily serving students. In addition to setting aside time to schedule meetings, respondents noted the challenge of meeting with one another because of not being in the same location on campus.

Faculty-related challenges. This study highlighted the lack of understanding that faculty have toward the daily operations of ODSs and students with disabilities. Most faculty members may only be aware of ODSs through the accommodation notifications that they receive regarding a specific student. It is often not until faculty struggle with the accommodation needs of a student, that faculty contact ODS for guidance. The results from this study provide evidence that faculty members find it difficult or unnecessary to attend informational trainings related to access or to the specific needs of students with disabilities. Moreover, the results indicate that faculty members tend to think that anything beyond providing basic accommodations to students is not their job.

Both CTLs and ODSs have also experienced difficulties getting faculty to attend an event regardless of topic. Since faculty members are quick to cite a lack of time when asked if they might attend a workshop or come to a meeting, many CTLs and ODS are working collaboratively to develop self-guided instructional materials for faculty. However, there is a perception of a greater level of effect with face-to-face meetings and trainings than stand-alone materials, which is why the respondents of this study attempt more collaborative programming when possible.

Competing priorities. Perhaps not surprisingly, this study also found that the desire to collaborate is tempered by the reality of day-to-day responsibilities within each office. While there is some mission overlap in terms of helping students learn, each of these offices has a different focus: CTLs work on faculty development while ODSs work on student advocacy and access. The differences between these offices extends to their reporting structures, divisions in which they are located, geographical location, day-to-day work and finally the staffing support that they have within their own offices.

As noted above, many times these offices report to different university divisions. CTLs are typically placed in the academic function under a dean or provost. ODSs can be under academic affairs, but in those cases they are more student-centered. The difference in each offices' priorities, combined with a lack of time or staff support, can leave little motivation for collaborative "outside-the-box" conversations.

ODSs may also be located within the student affairs division with offices like Residence Life and Student Life. In those cases it may not be obvious to reach out to a CTL and propose collaboration. Because each office has a different reporting structure, the staff will have different goals and objectives to be met. This may leave little room for cross-collaborative efforts. Finally, this study frequently noted the lack of staff support or, in some cases, an actual office on campus, most common for a CTL. Not having enough support or even having a dedicated staff member to drive faculty development leaves little to no opportunity for collaboration.

Changing the campus culture. Of the respondents who are actively concerned with access for students with disabilities, about a quarter of them cited institutional barriers as a key challenge to effectively working together (this issue is also discussed in further detail in Linder et al. (2015)). When access issues are brought to the attention of faculty members, the response is to refer the student to disability services for an individualized response. Respondents, particularly those from ODSs, noted a lack of awareness by the campus community that by ensuring access for one student, access for additional students is also increased. The individual referral process also bypasses the faculty developer offices and puts the onus of accessibility strictly on the disability services office. This decreases opportunities for collaboration if the CTLs are unaware of access issues.

Funding and limited resources. Importantly, a lack of financial resources was not a deterrent for collaboration between CTLs and ODSs. This study indicated that faculty developers and disability service professionals are willing to discuss accessibility concerns regardless of the resources that each office has. Resource limitations that were cited included a lack of staff to assist with programming and one-on-one consults with faculty.

The primary area, regarding the issue of faculty incentives, mentioned a lack of financial resources. There is a notion that in order to get faculty to participate in workshops and trainings to design an accessibility course they must be compensated. Most institutions of higher education in this study do not have the resources to do that for faculty. Many respondents assumed that the lack of funding was causally related to poor attendance and buy-in to accessible online courses.

Conclusion

This research study finds that while there is a diverse range of collaborations between Centers for Teaching and Excellence and Offices of Disability Services, these collaborations are also fraught with many challenges. CTLs and ODSs are providing programming around new faculty orientations, overviews of the needs of students with disabilities, and assisting each other with one-on-one consults as needed. However, there is also quite a bit of room to grow in terms of collaborative work around equal access to courses for students with disabilities. A lack of awareness regarding the work of ODSs and CTLs can prevent staff from both offices from effectively responding to accessible issues and concerns.

The data from this study suggested five areas that present challenges to collaborations between CTLs and ODSs: (1) time and logistics, (2) faculty-related challenges, (3) competing priorities, (4) changing the campus culture, and (5) funding and limited resources. Despite these challenges this study did find examples of institutions of higher education that have successfully navigated each of these challenges. Through grass root efforts, CTLs and ODSs have created innovative programming and stand-alone materials for faculty to access. The lack of institutional awareness and support for collaborations between these two offices is perhaps the most troubling challenge found in this study. If an institution created supports for collab-

orations around accessibility initiatives, there might be a reduction of the other challenges cited.

Van Note Chism (2011) argued that “members of campus communities who can help with identification of issues, ideas for strategic approaches, research skills, and skills for facilitating communication and collaboration are sorely needed” (p. 53). This research project offers some preliminary findings regarding the collaborative efforts of Centers for Teaching and Learning and Offices of Disability Services related to accessibility initiatives in the United States. As the diversity of our students, both in terms of their identities and learning preferences, continues to increase, universities should expect to see institutions of higher education take additional steps to ensure access. Continuing to explore the collaborative relationships within institutions of higher education regarding accessibility issues and concerns will be a fundamental component to successfully developing resources, structures, and policies that help all students learn. Further research, including case studies of successful campuses, is also crucial to the success of higher education accessibility initiatives.

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Table 1

Theme Categories and KAPPA Coefficient Scores for Each Theme (Challenges)

Theme Category	KAPPA Coefficient Score
Time and Logistics (104 references)	.6634 (Fair to Good Agreement)
Faculty-related (84 references)	.6666 (Fair to Good Agreement)
Competing Priorities (75 references)	.5859 (Fair to Good Agreement)
Changing the Campus Culture (65 references)	.4137 (Fair to Good Agreement)
Funding and Limited Resources (29 references)	.7539 (Excellent Agreement)
No Challenges or Unaware of Challenges (8 references)	.8263 (Excellent Agreement)

Table 2

Joint Programs and Services Offered Between CTLs and ODSs (N = 190)

Service or Program	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Individual Consultations	141	74.2%
Workshops	127	66.8%
Group Consultations	114	60.0%
Online Content or Resources (modules, bibliographies, links, etc.)	71	37.4%
Online Training (video tutorials, templates, etc.)	49	25.8%
Book or Video Lending Library	29	15.3%
Other	21	11.1%
Multi-day Trainings	15	7.9%

Table 3

Programs Jointly Offered by CTLs and ODSs in the Previous Year (N = 170)

Number of Programs	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
0	31	18.2%
1-5	122	71.8%
6-10	10	5.9%
11-15	4	2.4%
16-20	1	0.5%
21-25	1	0.5%
26 or more	1	0.5%

Table 4

Additional Collaborations Between CTLs and ODSs (N = 188)

Collaboration Activity	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
New Faculty Orientation	120	63.8%
Advisory boards	66	35.1%
Developing best practice documents	64	34.0%
Policy creation	59	31.4%
Programming	54	28.7%
Increasing institutional support for initiatives	51	27.1%
Strategic planning	51	27.1%
Trading/sharing resources (books, websites, journals, conferences, etc.)	50	26.6%
None of the above	28	14.9%
Sharing programming costs	21	11.2%
Sharing space	16	8.5%
Grant writing	14	7.5%
Sharing staff	12	6.4%
Sharing administrative tasks	8	4.3%
Other	7	3.7%