

October 9, 2014

Dear Colleagues,

In mid-September several UTC employees were strategically selected to attend the Accessible Instructional Materials and Technology Summit. Attendance ranged from members of Academic Affairs, to the Disability Resources Center staff, to staff from Housing and Residence Life. The conference was originally organized by the Tennessee Board of Regents but due to the importance and urgency of the subject matter it was expanded to include University of Tennessee system employees. The goal of this forum was to emphasize the need for universities to understand their obligations to increase access to educational materials and technology for all students.

Universities must recognize that “accessibility” is more than access to educational tools, it more closely resembles a basic educational right. In other words, students who require additional methods to complete educational assignments should not be required to do anything extra in order to have the access that other students enjoy. Access must be equally effective for all of our students, much more than a level of basic accommodation.

What does access for all mean? It means this: we must ensure that all students can complete an activity thoroughly and independently regardless of disability. A descriptive example used by one of the presenters is that providing a person to read to a blind student is distinctly different from providing a way for that student to read independently, on his or her own schedule.

We as a university must continue to grow and change the way we think about educational accommodations. Moving forward, it is important to consider accessibility in all areas, from the mundane to the obvious. We must require that textbook publishers provide all materials in accessible format upfront. We need to make it as easy as possible for faculty members to follow best practices and ensure that all instructional materials are accessible to all students simultaneously. This initiative will require creativity and flexibility to ensure that all students can learn, grow and succeed.

In the coming months, we all need to continue to examine how we will make this campus a completely accessible learning environment for all. Thank you for your commitment and support.

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