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Elizabeth German and Eric Hartnett, "Disability Inclusion and Library Collections: Initiatives for Greater Access for All" (2017). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284316671>

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Disability Inclusion and Library Collections: Initiatives for Greater Access for All

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Abstract

One of the core values of librarianship as expressed through ALA's Code of Ethics is providing equitable service and access to all library users. This is further enforced by federal laws such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which includes Section 508 requiring federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology (EIT) accessible to people with disabilities. While there has been much said about accessibility within library scholarship, this paper takes a unique holistic approach at applying the accessibility maturity model to library collections and services through covering a number of initiatives that Texas A&M University Libraries have taken to try to ensure that accessibility is considered when reviewing new subscriptions and services. These include the creation of a pilot program to collect VPATs from vendors and the development of accessibility and accommodation plans.

Accessibility Maturity

As one of our core values is to provide equitable service and access to all library users, compliance with federal laws is not enough to embed this value into a work culture. Other fields have proposed using a maturity model as a framework for integrating and documenting how accessibility considerations are adopted within an institution (Day, Smith, & Whippy, 2011). An accessibility maturity model has not been created for libraries; however, considerations could include administration and leadership; resources and

costs; physical spaces; collections; vendor and acquisitions; software and development; and digitization (Table 1). By using an accessibility maturity model, the conversation can move away from legal compliance to providing equitable services across all areas of the library.

Case Study: Texas A&M University Libraries

The following examples detail initiatives that the Texas A&M University (TAMU) Libraries have

Table 1. Preliminary accessibility maturity matrix for libraries.

Focus Area	Level 1 Informal	Level 2 Defined	Level 3 Repeatable	Level 4 Managed	Level 5 Optimized
Administration	No buy-in	Goal statements	Goal priorities	Evaluation criteria	Strategic consideration
Resources and Costs	No support	One-off funds	Regular budget	Planned budget growth	Additional funding for innovation
Physical Spaces	Minimal requirements	Statement of support	Checklist consideration	Active services and improvements	User experience integration
Collections	Minimal requirements	Statement of support	Checklist consideration	Active service	Decision criteria
Vendor and Acquisitions	Minimal requirements	Statement of support	Checklist consideration	Active service	Decision criteria
Digitization	Low accessibility	Accessibility standards statement	Quality assurance practice	Workflow integration	User experience integration
Software and Development	Low accessibility	Accessibility standards statement	Quality assurance practice	Workflow integration	User experience integration

undertaken in order to provide equitable services and access to collections for all patrons.

Local Initiatives

VPAT Pilot

VPAT is the acronym for Voluntary Product Accessibility Template. It is a form developed by the Information Technology Council to help assess the accessibility of an electronic resource or service. Version 1.0, which focuses on Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, will be discontinued in January 2018. Version 2.0, which was released in October 2017, takes things further by including criteria from WCAG 2.0 and EN 301 549, a European accessibility standard, as well as the Revised 508 Standards and Section 255 guidelines.

TAMU Libraries began having serious conversations regarding VPATs about a year and a half ago, in the summer of 2016. At that point the decision was made to begin gathering VPATs from our subscription vendors. While there is a VPAT Repository (<https://vpats.wordpress.com/>), we decided that rather than going back and retroactively gathering them, possibly getting some that were outdated, moving forward they would be requested, but not required, at the point of license negotiations. We did this to try to get a sense of how many of our publishers have them. If a publisher has a VPAT, we add it to our electronic resource management system, CORAL. If they don't have a VPAT, we also note that in the system. The way our resources are tagged within CORAL, we can quickly see who has and has not provided us with a VPAT. In the past year and a half, we've found that about twice as many publishers have VPATs as those who don't.

In addition to requesting a VPAT during negotiations, we are also asking publishers to add accessibility language into their licenses. The language that our campus's Contract Administration Office would like us to add is very Texas-specific, so we've gotten quite a bit of pushback from publishers. One publisher made a fair point stating that, while they were open to adding accessibility language, they have customers around the world, so it would be difficult to meet such specific language for each one. Fortunately, our Contract Administration Office agreed to broader wording focusing on U.S. law, which the publisher was able to accept. It should be noted that the lack of accessibility language is not yet a deal breaker for us on whether or not we will license a resource.

So what happens when a publisher does not have a VPAT and is unwilling to add accessibility wording to their agreement? As a major research institution, we know that there are going to be some resources that our researchers need that are not going to be accessible because the publisher is either unwilling or unable to make them accessible. In those cases our campus has a process, an exception form that we must fill out where we must make a business case for acquiring the resource despite its lack of accessibility. In the exception form we basically have to answer three questions:

1. *What* is the resource?
2. *Why* do we need it?
3. *How* will we provide accommodations for the resource, if necessary?

Once completed, the form has to be signed by the dean of the libraries, the campus's coordinator for accessibility, the chief information officer, and finally, the university president. Needless to say, the process takes time, but until the exception form has been fully signed, the license cannot be completed.

Captioning Plans

Captioning is a hot-button topic in higher education as illustrated by several high-profile lawsuits against Berkeley, MIT, and Harvard on the basis of inaccessible video material (Lewin, 2015; Straumsheim, 2017). Libraries face many complicated challenges when considering providing closed captions to their videos, including financial, copyright, licensing, expertise, and scope.

In terms of budget, the TAMU Libraries' initial allotment for outsourcing captioning was set at \$5,000 for fiscal years 2016 and 2017. In the initial captioning pilot in FY16, we expended \$1,400. Now that captioning plans have begun to be implemented, the libraries have expended \$4,600 in just the first two months of FY17.

The goal of a captioning plan is to provide equitable access to all users. For example, a streaming video that is available to patrons 24 hours a day, 7 days a week should be available to all patrons 24/7 regardless of ability or disability. The goal of a captioning plan should be to make this as close to a reality as possible. Considerations for captioning plans should include:

- What material will be captioned without the need for accommodation requests?
- Who is responsible for captioning?
- What vendor or process will you use?
- How much funding is allotted?
- If accommodations are necessary,
 - How will the patron contact the library?
- What is the expected turnaround time?
- What happens if the library cannot provide accommodation?

It is important to note that captioning is not the only type of remediation that might be needed for video material. For example, an individual might need visual descriptions. Therefore, even if you have a policy of captioning everything, you still need a plan to address requests for accommodation.

To develop a captioning plan, TAMU Libraries have taken a multistrategy approach based upon the type of material:

Video Used in Library Instruction

Videos used by courses are considered a high-level risk for captioning. It is our policy to create closed captions for all video created by the library that will be used in instruction. The libraries' Learning and Outreach department is responsible for providing this captioning.

Course Reserves

The libraries have an extensive streaming course reserve service. While it is a goal of the service to provide captioning regardless of an accommodation request, the costs are currently prohibitive. The next iteration of the course reserves captioning plan will incorporate looking for alternative mediums for the video, including replacing the item from a VHS to a DVD, or licensing the item through a service that includes closed captioning.

Licensed Collections

During the acquisition process, the Monograph Acquisitions Unit, along with the Electronic Resources Unit, investigates whether a media product has captioning abilities inherent within the product. Licensing of database products will have

accessibility wording negotiated with the vendor if a license is required for purchase. For individual products such as DVDs, the Monograph Acquisitions Unit will ensure that it is purchasing, if at all possible, discs with closed captioning included, and those items lacking it will be flagged for Media and Reserves as candidates to be outsourced for captioning.

Digitized Items

Items that the library owns and that are digitized will typically be captioned as long as the cost of doing so is less than \$500. Individual items will be captioned by accommodation request only if it is not fiscally feasible for the library to caption the entire collection. By extension of this captioning plan, the digital library interfaces will need to be designed such that a patron can easily request an accommodation. Figure 1 illustrates an example of a potential captioning decision tree and highlights other considerations such as cases where a video is publicly viewable or a part of a high use collection.

Exhibits and Marketing

It is the libraries' policy to caption all videos used for marketing purposes or used within a physical or virtual exhibit.

Accessibility and Accommodation Plans for Collections

In addition to the captioning plans, the TAMU Libraries' Collection Advisory Committee has been working to develop an accessibility plan for acquiring electronic resources. The current draft is a three-year plan that would start at the point of negotiating a new license or license renewal when a publisher is unwilling to provide a VPAT or agree to add accessibility language to the license. An exception form would be completed if the publisher states an intention to move toward compliance. We would also create a benchmark of the current accessibility state using a product such as WebAIM's WAVE Web accessibility tool.

At the end of the first year, we would look for some movement toward accessibility. If there hasn't been any, an intermediary page would display when patrons access the resource that would tell them that we may be forced to cancel the resource due to a lack of accessibility.

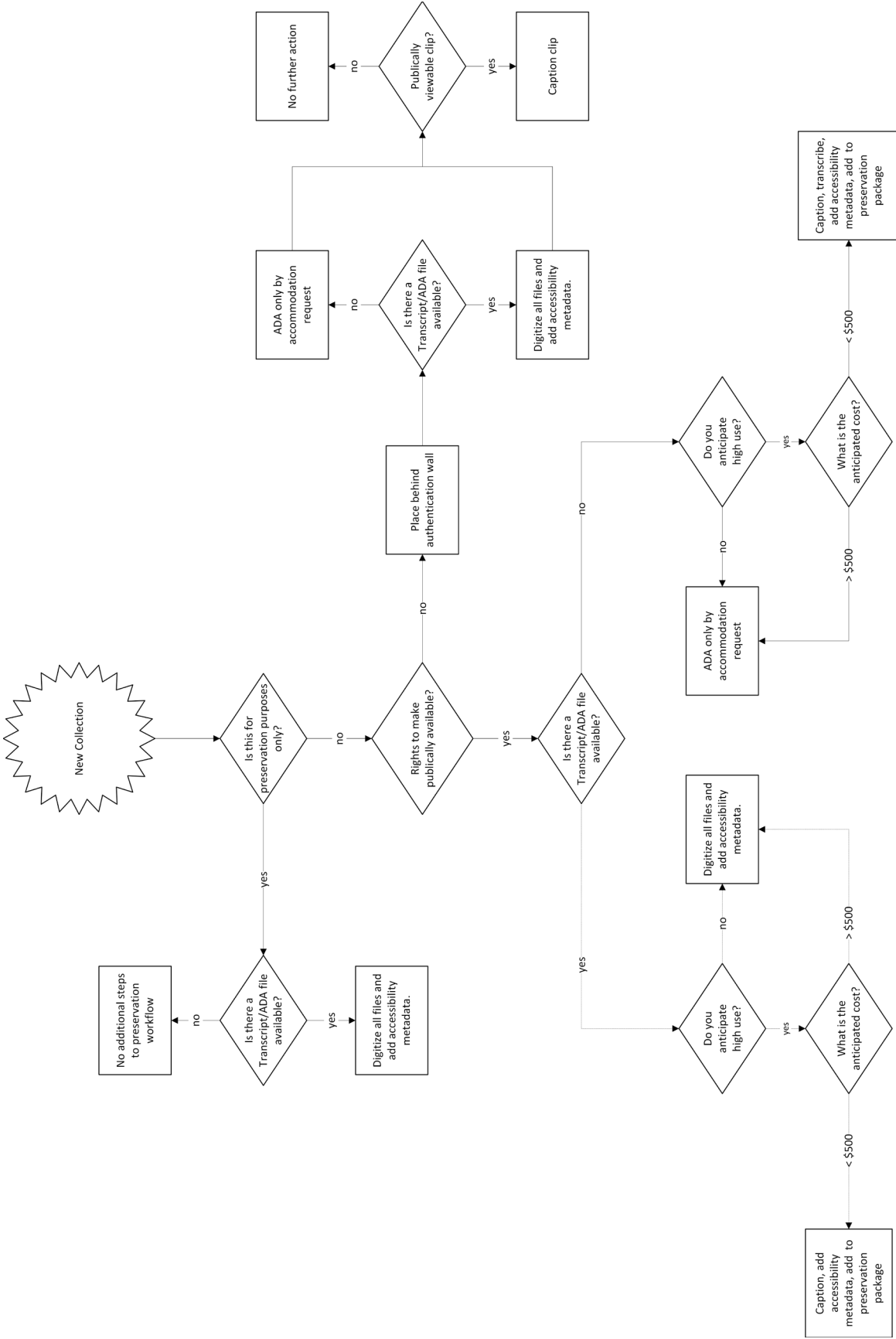


Figure 1. Example of a captioning decision tree.

At the start of the third year, if we find that significant progress has still not been made, we would renew but also inform the publisher that we would be cancelling at the end of the subscription term. This would give our subject librarians a year to communicate with the TAMU community. In addition to providing equitable access, the goals of the TAMU Libraries' accessibility plan is to put pressure on publishers to improve accessibility, reduce the number of exceptions we have to complete, and try to make sure that any cancellations do not catch our students and researchers by surprise. The plan hasn't been formally approved as there are some details that still need to be worked out, but we have already taken a first step by introducing accessibility into the work that our selectors must do as part of our new acquisitions process. On our resource proposal form we now expect our subject librarians to have checked with the publisher about VPATs and accessibility language so that this information is included in the decision-making process, as we do not want to spend time and energy acquiring and setting up a resource that we're going to have to turn around and cancel in three years.

In conjunction with the accessibility plan, we've also started working on an accommodation plan, which details how we will accommodate different types of materials.

Partnering with Campus

As all services do, engaging with the campus community is essential for providing the right services in the right ways for users. TAMU Libraries have a strong relationship with both the campus's Student Disability Services unit and the Division of Information Technology Accessibility Services. It was through these partnerships that the libraries prioritized the VPAT and captioning initiatives. The library hosts an annual meeting between the library and these partners in order to facilitate communication and align goals. In addition to these relationships, we have collaborated in other campus efforts including:

- *Campus-Wide Captioning Task Force*
Charged by the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Studies, a campus-wide captioning task force was created to investigate the campus's captioning needs. Two librarians participated in the task force. While a vision was developed for a centralized campus captioning service, funding and cost sharing remain an obstacle.

- *Resource Exception Process Pilot*
One of the things not mentioned about the TAMU's resource exception process is that the exceptions are only good for one year, so every year that a resource is not accessible, we have to start the process over again. To try to streamline the process, we've worked with the campus IT department on a pilot for a system they are developing that will move the entire process online. The form is a bit shorter but still addresses the questions of what, why, and how. The hope is that this new system makes the process easier to track and reduces the completion time.
- *Accessibility Hack-a-Thon*
The libraries' map librarian participated in the College of Architecture's Accessibility Hack-a-Thon. Working with students, the team mapped the accessible features of campus.

Looking Wider

Accessibility is an important value across the library profession, and the TAMU Libraries are continuously looking for ways to contribute to the endeavor. National initiatives the libraries are participating in or looking to adopt include:

- *ARL Captioning*
The Association of Research Libraries is investigating the potential for a shared repository of captioning files (srt). The libraries have participated in preliminary discussions and are interested in contributing in the future.
- *A11y Metadata*
The A11y Metadata schema is a way to describe an item in terms of its accessibility features. The libraries are investigating how to add this metadata to digital objects.
- *FOLIO Accessibility Special Interest Group (SIG)*
TAMU Libraries plan to implement FOLIO, a next-generation open source library services platform. The libraries have a number of people involved in the development in various capacities but specifically, in regard to accessibility, two TAMU librarians are contributing to the Accessibility SIG, helping to ensure that the system is built in an accessible manner.

Challenges

While creating equitable services is a value, it is always difficult to change practices and grow a culture. Keeping the momentum going for implementing and growing the libraries' accessibility maturity is a challenge. Similarly, finding the resources, time, and money for new accessibility initiatives can be difficult. Additionally, how do we verify the accessibility of resources? There are also the difficult questions that we become faced with when we accept that collections should be accessible for all; for example, does that mean that we start cancelling subscriptions when vendor platforms are not accessible? There has to be buy-in from all stakeholders

and support from administration because if we do cancel, we have to stand by that decision when we receive complaints.

Key Takeaways

There is no one way to become an accessible library. Compliance with local laws is not enough to provide equitable access to our patrons. Accessibility considerations should be embedded in all that we do. It is also important to consider the patron as an individual and invite participatory design into your services. With a multistrategy approach, your library can grow its accessibility maturity and provide greater access for all.

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