Academic Technology Services Interview with
Dr. Maria Claver, Associate Professor, Family and Consumer Sciences

Mariza Hernandez:
Hi, my name is Mariza Hernandez and I'm the Assistant Director of Instructional Technology. Let me introduce you to our guest, Dr. Maria Claver, who is a Professor of Gerontology and Director of Gerontology Program in the Family Consumer Science department.

Dr. Claver is going to share with us her experience using Blackboard Ally in her Perspectives on Aging, Gerontology 400 course.

To give some context, this semester the Family Consumer Science department decided to develop an optional pilot program to see how Ally performed in actual online courses.

Hello Professor Claver. Thank you for joining us.

Dr. Maria Claver:
Thank you so much for having me.

Mariza Hernandez:
Let me start by asking you, what motivated you to participate in the pilot program?

Dr. Maria Claver:
So as you mentioned, Casey Goeller--who is a longtime colleague of mine in Gerontology-- he is a faculty champion for a lot of technology innovations on campus. So of course, he always volunteers the Gerontology Program to become guinea pigs for whatever the new technology might be on campus, and I'm so glad that he did.

He also was able to get the Family Consumer Sciences department to pilot the program. He has honestly had such a major impact on my continued education and skill development in many aspects of online teaching, so of course I signed up right away.

I've also had several students over my years of teaching at Cal State Long Beach who have had different needs in the classroom and certainly online, so any other tools that I can acquire to help my students succeed in classes is a welcome tool in my toolbox.

Mariza Hernandez:
What was your first impression when you saw what I could do?

Dr. Maria Claver:
I think like many faculty- even though I just said that I was eager to learn this particular tool, especially in the last year- I know that a lot of my colleagues have had maybe technology fatigue and there's so many tools that are out there to help make our jobs more successful and maybe even easier. And I think because it's been such

a year over a year of adapting to techniques that we're not used to, that sometimes we get a little bit like, "Oh, no. Not another tool."

I was really surprised at how easy it was to make minor changes in my courses that make a big difference in how accessible it is for students. So, it was not a difficult tool to use. It was extremely user friendly.

I love the fact that it uses colors from red to green and orange to show you how each component of the course is either accessible or maybe could use a little work, or it could need a lot of work.

So, I really enjoyed the fact that it was easy to use. I think I'm maybe going into another question, but I did look at some of the instructional guides, but I really didn't have to study how to use this before I could jump right in and start using it right away.

Mariza Hernandez:
How did you use Ally? Did you use any of the tips and help guides provided?

Dr. Maria Claver:
Some of the help guides were provided by ATS. I also know that Casey who ran the pilot program also provided some tip sheets and guides that he found very useful.

I did do that just to see what things looked like/what I was looking for. But, I think that it was most effective for me to just jump right in and start using the tool and it really didn't take a steep learning curve to figure out how to use it. So I feel like the time investment was very reasonable. And something else I thought about as you were asking this question, is that it's interesting that as faculty are learning new techniques like Blackboard Ally, and how much we appreciate when something is easy to use--that's exactly the goal that we should have in setting up our online courses for students.

You know we think that they're just whizzes all the time and being able to access everything. But if you think about it, many students have a number of courses-- it's quite possible that each faculty member sets up the course slightly differently. So they have to learn where everything is and how to navigate through the course each semester when they get new courses.

And that's whether they're completely in an online course or maybe in a hybrid or even taking a face-to-face course that uses Blackboard Ally to organize materials and perhaps give some supplemental instruction. So, I just try to remember any discomfort that I might have in learning a new tool, is exactly what my students must be feeling. So, again, my goal is to set up my course in a way that makes me feel, that makes them feel as comfortable as I felt learning this new Blackboard Ally tool.

Mariza Hernandez:
Did you find it easy and intuitive to use?

Dr. Maria Claver:
I think the most challenging part was just remembering how to add the Blackboard Ally icon to the navigation bar. That's just something that we've all been using since we've been using BeachBoard-- is how to add things to the navigation bar. I think that was probably more complex than using the actual tool.

Right away, I was able to see which components of my course had a green or an orange --meaning they needed a little work (or a red). And then once I clicked on those components, whether it be an assignment or

my syllabus or some other reading material, right away a box popped up with suggestions as to what I could do to make that more accessible.

So, you know, it was little things like just including headings, or maybe I missed a picture that didn't have a description in it. So most of the stuff was very intuitive; it did not take long. But for the most part, I maybe spent an hour going through all of the different things that popped up.

Mariza Hernandez:
What do you find to be the most useful aspect of Ally?

Dr. Maria Claver:
As I've mentioned, it's quick and easy to use-- that's a big plus. I think it's also helped me to prepare for class knowing that I've made the extra effort to make sure that my class is accessible for all students.

Sometimes students don't register with BMAC, for example, but they might have challenges that might impede their learning or even their level of enjoyment of the course. So, it's worth a few minutes of my time to check that the materials that I'm using are accessible.

Mariza Hernandez:
Now, I'd like to ask you questions that are related to your students. How do you think you will inform your students in your class about how to use Blackboard Ally?

Dr. Maria Claver:
At the beginning of each of my courses, I usually give students a bit of a tour of BeachBoard. So if I'm teaching a hybrid class, my first class session is usually in-person and I make sure to let the students know where I've located everything in BeachBoard.

If it's an asynchronous online class, then I will either record a video, or I will have an optional Zoom session where, if people aren't 100 comfortable with where to find everything, they can log in and I'll do a tour of the BeachBoard.

So, I just like to orient the students as to the way that my brain kind of thinks about where everything is located. Of course, that's based upon a lot of the training that I've also gotten about best practices in online instruction.

And then also, I think it's really important to normalize it as much as possible. So, I try to preface the introduction by letting students know that we all have different learning styles. And so, it's important to explore well, "How do I learn best?" So I try to normalize the fact that, hey, I've tried to build into the course as many things as possible to address the many learning styles that all of us have. So, it's not just for people who are registered with BMAC, or just for people who know that they have a certain challenge with learning-- it's for all of us. So, I think that's probably the most important thing that I could do to introduce the tool to my students.

Mariza Hernandez:
How do you think that your students will react to the availability of alternative formats?

Dr. Maria Claver:
You know, I think that the one of the big things that's different between face-to-face and online education is the way that you build community among students. And in online education, you know you have to do that in

a way where you don't get all of those social clues--and you know, you can't use the same tools that you would use in an in-person class.

So, I think that by prefacing, "Hey, you know, this class is for all of you. Let me know what tools you need to be successful in the class." I think those are the things that will help build community amongst the students, as well as the discussion boards that I use--you know in in the courses that I teach, there's a lot of applying the information we're learning to one's own life, if not the lives of family members, especially the ones who are aging and older. And so, I think especially in fields where we're talking about making sure that people of all abilities have access-- this is just kind of doing so by example. I'm not just talking about making sure that our world is accessible to older adults that may have challenges, but hey, I'm giving an example by making sure that I'm using this tool so that all of my students have the same accessibility.

Mariza Hernandez:
Do you have any advice for other faculty about how to introduce Ally to their students?

Dr. Maria Claver:
I think my first recommendation would be make sure you are comfortable and familiar with how it works first. And I think once faculty take just a moment to see how easy it is and how easy it is to make sure that you get your class maybe from orange to green --that the explanation to students will be a little more authentic. And again, I think normalizing it and making sure that faculty let students know that this is for the benefit of every student in the class-- I think that's the best way. So that students will say, "Oh, this is just another tool let me check it out-- it's kind of interesting," rather than feel like it's a stigma and having to use it.

Mariza Hernandez:
Have you needed to remediate your course content ? If so, what are some of the biggest challenges that you have had related to providing accessible course materials to your students?

Dr. Maria Claver:
So I haven't had any instances necessarily where I've had to do some any major revision or overhaul of my course materials. But I think that the more you can set up your course to be accessible to all, at least in some minimal way, then when you do get a student that maybe needs a little bit more extensive remediation or some more creative ways, I see them as opportunities of getting more creative. Then, it won't be such a challenge because you'll already have been at least at that minimum level of accessibility. So, I think it's just a good idea all around.

Mariza Hernandez:
What would you say is the most challenging part of adapting your course with Ally and what advice would you give to faculty?

Dr. Maria Claver:
I think that the biggest challenge I saw was there were a couple of course materials that I had scanned from a resource that I really liked and just trying to find an alternate way of looking for a website where they might be located, or something like that-- where it's not from a journal that I could just look up at the library --that was more of the challenge than anything.

Like I said, the initial work to set things up is really not that much of a time commitment. And if you give that minor piece of time, you'll have at least the satisfaction of knowing that you have at least reached a minimal level of making it accessible.

So I really would encourage faculty to just take a shot. Even though, again, we've been faced with a lot of different options of different tools that we can use for our online instruction, this is one that is very worth taking the opportunity to do and to learn. Because it really helps your class be take it to the next level without that much of an investment of time and energy.

Mariza Hernandez:
Do you feel more confident about making your materials accessible now that you have Ally as a resource?

Dr. Maria Claver:
Yes, yes. So seeing the way in which the resources were --"graded" I'll say-- using red, orange, green, makes me think now, as I'm developing, you know, when I'm refreshing my content, or let's say I'm putting together a new class --it's going to have helped me think ahead about okay, what is going to be accessible from the get-go? Whereas, you know, now, I'm kind of learning the new tool with my existing coursework. So as I revise my classes going forward, it'll give me something to think about. And I think I'll just understand a bit more what accessibility means after using the tool. Because I've been through trainings and things, and those have been very helpful, but the actual seeing it in action and how that applies to the materials that I provide for my students, really helped drive the points home about what does accessibility mean.

Mariza Hernandez:
Thank you, Dr. Claver for taking the time with us today and sharing your experience with Blackboard Ally.

It's been great talking to you and thank you for being an early adopter and innovator of Blackboard Ally and we appreciate that you contribute to accessibility awareness here at csulb.

Here at ATS we think the work that you are doing for your students is amazing and we appreciate you contributing to accessible awareness here at csulb.

Dr. Maria Claver:
Thank you so much I'm so proud to be part of a campus where this is a priority, so thank you for all of your support.