



Academic Technology Services Interview with Dr. Virginia Gray, Assistant 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. Virginia Gray, who is an Associate Professor of Nutrition and Dietetics in the Family Consumer Science department. Dr. Gray has been a faculty member at Cal State Long Beach since 2008. Dr. Gray is going to share with us her experience using Blackboard Ally in her Introduction to Nutrition course this past semester.

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

Hello Professor Gray. Thank you for joining us.

Dr. Virginia Gray:

Thanks so much for having me.

Mariza Hernandez:

Let me start by asking you what motivated you to participate in the pilot program?

Dr. Virginia Gray:

Well there are two things that motivated me.

First, I coordinate a large GE class and I thought it would be really great to have the experience of using Ally to be able to help others who teach the course implement it and be able to speak to its use. And then, also just to ensure that my materials are accessible to students.

I had participated in some prior trainings and heard this really simplified the making of my course materials accessible, so I was interested to see how it worked.

Mariza Hernandez:

What was the first impression when you saw what Ally could do?

Dr. Virginia Gray:

I was amazed at how simple the tool is and how it gave you quick insight into how each document on your BeachBoard page rated in terms of accessibility and then what to do to fix it. The drag and drop feature, to be able to just identify and fix whatever's not accessible in your documents was really, really, really amazing.

Mariza Hernandez:

And how did you use Ally? Did you use any of the tips and help guides provided?

Dr. Virginia Gray:

I watched a quick video on the tool and figured out how to access it in my course and then from there I really didn't have to read many more of the tips or tools. I simply opened the tool and it told me where to go in my course and which documents needed to be altered. Then I could click and it would bring up the document and show me you need to add a heading here or you need to add alt text to this photo. I could find the document in my own filing system or download it right there and then drag it right into the Ally tool and it would put the altered document into my course and then tell me how much my accessibility score on that document went up. So I might start out with a 60 accessibility rating and then suddenly now it's at 98, so getting that instant feedback that I had addressed the issues that needed to be addressed was really cool.

Mariza Hernandez:

Did you find it easy and intuitive to use?

Dr. Virginia Gray:

Absolutely, yeah. I had participated in some prior trainings that ATS and AIM Center had provided and so I had some ideas around how to make course materials accessible- again, like headings and alt-text and things like that. But yes, the tool was super intuitive and I'm actually working right now and preparing my course- my summer course -and I've loved just seeing in my modules the accessibility rating for each individual document right there so I'm able to make sure that my modules are accessible.

Mariza Hernandez:

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

Dr. Virginia Gray:

I'd say that the fact that it's integrated with the learning management system. It's right in BeachBoard and so you can immediately look at a page or a component or module of your BeachBoard page and see which documents are okay and which ones need attention. So the fact that it's built-in, letting you know which ones to address and then, of course, the remediation is built-in as well is really, really, really helpful.

Mariza Hernandez:

How do you think you will inform your students in your classroom about how to use Blackboard Ally?

Dr. Virginia Gray:

Well, I'm holding orientation for my summer class next Monday and so as I'm showing students around the BeachBoard page. I'll be sure to let them know that that icon's there for them to be able to be aware of the alternative formats for the materials in the course.

Mariza Hernandez:

Have you needed to remediate your course content before?

Dr. Virginia Gray:

So I'd say one of the areas that I've had to work with remediation of course documents is for documents that are going on the website. I coordinate the graduate program in Nutritional Science and so if a document isn't accessible, we don't want it on the web-- on our on our university webpage. So that's one of the things that I've done with those trainings I've attended is ensure that if I have a handbook or a document for students - that it's going to be accessible on the web.

Having to go through the document through Word or through PowerPoint-- it was just a much more cumbersome process of figuring out what needs to be addressed. Ally just seems to make it so much simpler

drawing red boxes around the items in your document they need to need to be addressed and then indicating really at the beginning this document's inaccessible because of these two things e.g. headers and alt-text and taking you right to it.

So the experience in the past- I learned what to do in those prior trainings, but this tool just makes it so much easier to actually do it.

Mariza Hernandez:

What are some of the biggest challenges that you have had related to providing accessible course materials for your students?

Dr. Virginia Gray:

I'd say "time," honestly.

You know that that's another really great thing about Ally is it makes it simpler to do and so it's more likely that instructors will comply with the need for making accessible materials.

It just seemed to take a lot of time to do to check each document outside of BeachBoard and then make sure it's accessible before uploading, but this tool really does save you time.

Mariza Hernandez:

What is the most challenging part of adapting your course with blackboard Ally and what advice do you have for other faculty?

Dr. Virginia Gray:

You know, there's always a way to make a document a little bit better.

So you know, just for me, I think the thing that I'm still working on is headers within tables. Headers in text are easy to fix. Sometimes, I'm still getting caught on headers within tables. Just continuing to learn how to make the documents as accessible as possible when you're presenting material in different ways. It's a road that we all have a journey ahead on. But I really do think that in general, it's pretty simple to figure out how to fix the items that come up in the in the tool.

Mariza Hernandez:

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

Dr. Virginia Gray:

It's really night and day. This tool makes me so much more confident. Before, I really did kind of worry, "Have I done enough to make this this document accessible for students who need it in alternative formats?" But now, I don't have to question that because the tool lets me know.

Mariza Hernandez:

Thank you Dr. Gray for taking the time with us today and sharing your experience with Blackboard Ally and most importantly, thank you for being an early adopter and innovator of Blackboard Ally and overall help contribute to spread accessibility awareness at Cal State Long Beach. It has been a pleasure.

Dr. Virginia Gray:

Well, thanks so much for the tool and opportunity to share about it.