

LBDP Guest Hour_ Maryland Accessible Textbook Program

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SPEAKERS

Ashley Biggs, Joseph Beckett, Maryland State Library Agency LBDP

M Maryland State Library Agency LBDP 00:01

This podcast is brought to you by the Maryland State Library Agency. The MSLA podcast features presenters from Statewide Youth Programs, as well as learning opportunities for library staff and resources for patrons of the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled.

A Ashley Biggs 00:21

Hey, everybody, welcome back to another LBDP podcast. We are so excited today because we are interviewing one of our own. I'm so happy to have Joseph Beckett here with us. Joseph is the coordinator for the Maryland accessible textbook program at the Library for the Blind, and print disabled. He's been in that position for 14 years. In that time, he has increased the number of print disabled college students receiving the services from 11 in 2011, to nearly 100. In 2024. He and his team edit and convert approximately 1500 chapters per academic year, prior to becoming a mat coordinator at LBDP, who was a teacher and administrator in Baltimore and Memphis for 17 years. Joe enjoys reading, writing, photography, travel, and time with family and friends. Originally from New York, he's been a resident of Maryland for 30 years. So Joe, yes, thank

J Joseph Beckett 01:18

you. Thank you wonderful introduction, I couldn't have said it better myself greatly appreciated. What what the mountains assessment textbook program and LBDP has done has been phenomenal. So those 14 years have gone by very quickly and have been very appreciated by not just myself, but by the many people that have had the opportunity to touch along the way and the many colleagues that I've made, who have become friends, ultimately. So very proud of where we are, what we do, and the MAP program for surviving the sometimes bumpy road. But we are still here, and we're still making things happen for our for our students. That's

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Ashley Biggs 01:55

wonderful. Now I've had to ask, because I did my graduate school work in New York. Yes. So tell me what brought you down from New York to Maryland.

J

Joseph Beckett 02:04

When I was in graduate school in New York, it became very, very difficult to complete the programming, there was a lot of, unfortunately, there wasn't a lot of money for for me to be able to complete my graduate study. So I came here to work with the government in Washington, DC. When I arrived, the program was cut due to budgets, and so on and so forth. Again, we're talking 30 years. So a lot of things were happening financially, as far as New York is concerned, there was not a lot of hiring, there are a lot of hiring freezes. But I fell in love with Maryland, and decided I was not going to go back to New York, I was going to make this work in Maryland turned out to be a wonderful place to not just live but to raise a family as well. So I've had no desire to return to the north, I visited a lot, but I have no desire to return to the north. So Madeline will be my home until it's no longer my home. I kind

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Ashley Biggs 02:56

of feel the same way. So I'm right there with you. You know, I did my grad work in New York. And then I went to New Orleans well, just outside of New Orleans, Mississippi. And now I'm here. And of course, I'm raising a family now. So yeah, we're all it's all

J

Joseph Beckett 03:13

good. It's all good. It's all good. I mean, Marilyn is still probably one of the top 10 states to live in. And I feel that it's been a fair state. There's not been much in the way of controversies that caused me to have a desire to take my family and move to somewhere else. It has been really again, it's been very good to me, and it's got wonderful people, generally, people are fantastic. Academics are great, economic seem pretty strong and steady. So I can't complain. I cannot complain, I will not complain.

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Ashley Biggs 03:44

Well, no complaints from me either. So I'm gonna get started. My first question to you is what is the primary objective of the Maryland accessible textbook program?

J

Joseph Beckett 03:55

Great question, Matt. The old because that was the Mac to cut down on the number of syllables that we're using. But my primary objective is to provide accessible textbooks to print disabled students attending two and four year colleges in the state of Maryland. We are not the number one there are other organizations that do the exact same thing that we do. What makes us

different is that we are personalized. That means we have complete and direct contact with our students. We talk directly with staff and faculty. We visit college campuses, we have visits to organizations that the students are interested in. We try to become one with them and have them know that ultimately, the mat team and the MAP program itself will always be behind them along their academic journey. In the 14 years that I've been a part of it. It has had great successes, yes and some misses along the way. Of course, colleges is not always a win for many students. But our primary job is of course to provide accessible textbooks to two and four year colleges in the state of Maryland and It has been a great journey so far.

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Ashley Biggs 05:02

Okay, so who is eligible to benefit from the MAT program?

J

Joseph Beckett 05:08

It's changed in the last 14 years. And initially, it was solely for the students who were blind. We didn't call it print disabled at that time. But it was for students who are blind and had proof or verification that they were indeed, visually impaired. But the eligibility for the MAP program is based on any student attending American college who has been identified as having a print disability or the inability to read printed text as documented by a medical doctor or professional, the college or even, surprise, surprise LBPD. So we are in the running for identifying students who can benefit from the services that we provide. And that's actually very good, because we have, I think that it gives us more direct access to them. But our biggest biggest supporter, and resource would be the SDS office, the Student Disability Services Office. But any student that is identified as having a print disability is welcome, as long as they are attending a two or four year college in the state of Maryland, regardless of where they may, may have been born, or where they may presently live as far as permanent residents is concerned. So Sue from Arizona, who goes to University of Maryland, to benefit from the service.

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Ashley Biggs 06:18

Just a quick follow up on that. But a student who's enrolled in an online university who lives in Maryland would not qualify, is that correct?

J

Joseph Beckett 06:26

That is correct. That is correct. That is something that we're looking into, only for the sake of fairness. But we are a government organization. And so we have to follow the guidelines as provided by the legislation. And the General Assembly, I can't really do that much. I can't you know, I can't twist that, but so much. As much as I would love to help all students who are in a school in the state of Maryland, online schools are still a little bit tricky, and we're working on seeing what we can do about that.

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Ashlev Biaas 06:52

How does Matt ensure that textbooks are accessible to students with disabilities, the

J Joseph Beckett 06:58

MAP program uses a software known as Dauphin originated in Europe, it is now pretty much housed in Canada. So we will using the North American side of this too often programming stuff and software, Dolphin basically converts text into into accessible text. So printed text into assessable, Texas is done through Dauphin. It is designed specifically to convert standard text into a format conducive to the students requirements. And that's very important, we have to make sure that we are meeting the requirements of the students as opposed to our own ideas of what they need. We have to listen very closely to the students. prior to sending the student a completed manuscript, the team checks for quality of sound. For audio conversions that is combated compatibility with other applications like fusion 2000. That's very important. There are many applications right now that are being downloaded by the students independently. And even though we don't have direct access to all of those applications, we still have to find out if what we're providing them, even if it's in a PDF format is ideal and conducive to the applications that they're using. So far, we haven't had anyone come back and say I can't open this. On occasion, we may get someone who's having difficulty technical difficulties, but ultimately not impossible for them to open up our documentation on their independent applications. Additionally, we have exhaustive communication with students about the quality and accuracy of the textbooks, I think that's really most important that we talk directly to the sources and not assume that everything is fine. So we do email the students immediately after receiving prior to and after receiving the documentation that we've converted to make sure that it's accessible to their needs. If it is not accessible, we actually go back and start from zero. To find out what the problem is, we try to make sure that if there is an issue, we find a resource that can help us walk through what the challenges the difficulties may be, or on rare occasions, we may even change the conversion to something else. So they may ask, they may ask for a Word document. But we may provide them with an audio document just to make it a little easier for them to be able to work through what it is that they need. Again, so far, it's been a positive experience. And hopefully we won't have any more challenges as technology begins to change. And it constantly constantly changes. So we try to stay abreast of that as well. So what formats are available, the format's available presently, audio or mp3. We also have large print, we have more recent requests for large print lately. I don't understand exactly why but I'm with that I'm very happy that they're asking for that ePub which is kind of rare, but still they asked for ePub Braille for smaller projects. So anything under 20 pages we may look at, for Braille for those students that need it. Or if they have a refreshable braille they may send them the document via the internet so that they may download it or if they have difficulty they may come to us it will download it for them. We are happy to do that. We also have word for those students that need to be able to cut and paste for research purposes. and PDF for those students who are utilizing the document in other do other applications and other formats that are most most conducive for their learning. So those are the 123456 or so six to seven or so that we're using at present. Fortunately, there are certain things that we cannot do mathematics are still working on challenging scientific formulas and calculations, were also trying to work on it's very challenging to try to put that into a format that could be either listened to, or put into an application. And foreign language is still a little bit tricky, though, that's getting easier and easier as time goes on dolphin has introduced classes, for upcoming, anything that's upcoming regarding conversion and accessibility. So they've been very, very good company to work with organizations to work with, I should say, we try to stick with anything that they're doing at this time, we are investigating other forms of formats into other

resources, such as we do use Adobe, a lot. Now, more so than we have in the past. Adobe has done a wonderful job, especially when it comes to conversion to a Word document, there are less mistakes than I found in Dolphin. But dolphin has been old, reliable. And so we continue to go back to them as often as necessary. But that's how we put together our format. And it's according to the students need or the SDS officers need for the student, if they should change that, by the way, that they say, you know, guys, I don't need PDF, would you mind putting this into a large into a large print, we can do that. And we can do it relatively quickly. So anyone who needs to change their format, we're willing to do that for them, if it is something they feel would be most conducive for their academic excellence. And that's all we're here for. We're not trying to be teachers or administrators, we're simply trying to be assistance in their journey academically.

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Ashley Biggs 12:01

So how can students request accessible textbooks through you? Another

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Joseph Beckett 12:05

great question, Ashley, thank you very much. And we used to call them DSS. But now I'm referring to it as the Student Disability Services office, at the college or university, they have to identify themselves as a student who needs those services they have to come with verification will be verified by their SDS student disability service office, that they do have this disability, at which point, the office will contact the MET program. And we will provide documentation to get them started. The only two pieces of documentation that's most important at this present time will be a student agreement, in which they agreed to utilize the documentation that we see on the textbooks that we send them, they agree that that would be solely for the purposes of their academics, and that they're not trying to sell the information or transferring information to other students, so on and so forth. And the second document that we provide would be a verification form, which is filled out by two parties, one party would be the college or university itself. And the other, of course, would be the student signing that all the information above is correct and accurate, to the best of my knowledge. In the 14 years, we have not had any hiccups. And I say that because I certainly appreciate the students honestly, and appreciate the fact that the college and universities have here very, very closely to what it is that we need for our own in house documentation for our own files, and for quite possibly any anything that may come down from the government asking for us to provide information of our services in what we do. So that is pretty much how they can request. But there is another part to that funnel funnel party that once the student becomes a student for our services, they no longer have to go through DSS they could come and call directly to us. So by second semester, usually we know who the students are, we know what their needs are, we have their documentation. They don't have to make requests to DSS, although many still do. Because it's easier for them. They can contact us directly via email or even through a phone call. And we will fulfill their own their needs. That's usually graduate students, graduate school students that would do it that way. Basically, they just didn't have time to go to a DSS office or talk to someone else to do a third party to get to us. So they will call us directly and that's that's worked out wonderfully.

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Ashley Biggs 14:24

Well that all sounds great. So tell me what does it cost a student to do this go

J Joseph Beckett 14:29

nuts cost you absolutely nothing whatsoever. This is a free service. It is amazing. We are a public library. So as a public library, we are obligated to provide as many features as possible. And this is one of them. I will say that anyone that was thinking to get a textbook converted or made accessible independently can spin as much as the textbook itself, anywhere from \$100 to \$1,000. To get the textbook converted my team and I will do it free of charge and we have no intention of ever Changing that policy unless the government makes the decision to change the policy. So all of our services are free. Everything that you receive is free. The only cost to a student would be the purchasing of the textbook from their textbook provider be the bookstore on campus, or independent bookstore or online like Amazon, providing them a textbook. That's the request that's made not by LBPD, per se, but part of the writer for general assembly when this came to fruition over a decade ago. So again, no cost to students, no cost to colleges and universities, time and effort and patience is the only thing that we asked, the the individuals have been no out of pocket expense for this service whatsoever.

A Ashley Biggs 15:42

What resources or support does the MAT program offer to faculty and staff to facilitate accessibility?

J Joseph Beckett 15:50

Hmm. By design, by design, the MAT program is principally student based, and in many ways student driven, we will on occasion, have interaction with faculty and staff, particularly for special cases, such as open educational resources, or we ours, which are usually staff produced, so we would have to contact the staff to get some input from them about which direction would they like us to go? What is it that they that they hope to achieve? What is it that they wish to provide to their students, or other colleagues even, we also direct faculty and staff to events outside of their purview, for example, colleges and universities that are not constantly in contact with services of disability disability services outside of the university, we'll never really know what's available to them or to their students. So we will include, in our conversations with them events, such as events from NFP, or ABA, or publishing associations, or other organizations that can help assist them in being, I guess, better stewards for their students. And that is part of that's not a written part of the job. But it's part of the job that I think is probably even more important than getting the student in there, it's getting the stamp duty and five, to understand to understand how important it truly is for their students to have for them to have the knowledge of their students needs outside of what this university and the college would recommend. And they seem to appreciate that Johns Hopkins seem to appreciate it that particularly Morgan Stevenson, those are schools that come to mind, who seem to benefit greatly from those outside resources. So that's what we try to do for faculty and staff as often as possible. But our interaction is not as direct as it would be for the student disability service office and those personnel inside of that office. But we try our best to stay in communication with with the academicians on the campus. And every now and again, I'll get a text asking for more direction or guidance. But it's rare, to be honest, it's quite rare.

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Ashley Biggs 17:55

Okay, so we talked about students getting the textbook getting the textbook to you, that it doesn't cost them anything, right? How long does it take you to convert a textbook,

J

Joseph Beckett 18:07

when I started this process, it took forever, forever. We were working with a different form of dolphin at the time, we were very limited in how quickly we could do things. And our budget was small and be regardless of we just said there's no cost to the students. But there was a small cost to us only because we have to get software and things of that sort. So we were a new organization or two years old when I entered this position, and it was still on the ground. We weren't we weren't floating yet. We weren't even trying to float at that period of time. What occurred within a year and a half and a stronger team, I put together stronger team textbooks that used to take us, let's say 100 Page textbook will usually take us a month and a half when I started 100 Page textbook will take us three days, maybe 240 Page textbooks will take a week 1000 Page textbook may take three weeks to complete. That includes providing students with descriptions from pictures in may include the reformatting of charts and graphs that we found or would be found as being extremely important to them. Additionally, we try to make sure that anything that is in in a side or the margin notes are also included, footnotes are included, anything that the student would need to try to include. Another thing that we do that many of the organizations that I know of have not has not done or have not done would be we start from the very beginning of the book. And what that means is that every acknowledgment every profile, any information that's in the book we put into the document so the students will never have a question or the professor you'll never have a question about what may be missing that we found To be extremely important, particularly for graduate students who needed to have a page with work cited, or footnote page or anything of that sort. But he tried to do also ensure that in that turnaround time, that if we are not capable of completing a, let's say, hypothetically speaking, we get seven books. It's not, it's less hypothetical than I think, now that I'm calling, but we make it seven books at a time. We are not pot it's not humanly possible for for team of three, to finish seven textbooks averaging 40 pages each. So we actually address each book independently and cin chapters to the student weekly, or several chapters weekly from the book, rather than trying to compute the whole book, which puts them behind, we learned that the hard way that puts them behind, we try to make sure that they always are at the same pace as the class itself. The other part of that is we asked what chapters do you need. And the reason we asked that is because I was an adjunct professor for four years, there were many occasions, I would say, started chapter three and not a chapter one. So I had to work with my team to have them understand that even though the book starts at chapter one, we may need to talk to them to get chapter five completed first, because they need that before we get to chapter one. And that and that works out but we have a we have a policy, I have a policy as the person that is managing this program. And my policy is, if we cannot get a book done within a month, then we're not doing our job is just as effectively as we should, or as efficiently as we should. So every book is guaranteed pretty much. And depending on the complexity of that book, within a month, you will have your completed textbook in your possession. I'm very proud of my team for working so diligently to make sure that that timeline is met. So thank you team.

A

Ashley Biggs 21:49

Thank you, Joseph, for handling the textbook conversion process so effectively.

How do you handle updates or changes to textbooks edition?

J Joseph Beckett 21:54

, just had this conversation not too long ago in New York. Basically, what what is what we have found, what the academic community has found is that publishers who change a textbook yearly, in some cases, so it would be edition three, and then the following year, you'll have edition three E, or edition four or something of that nature. And we were saying, but because of the fact that it is a new edition, we will not we will not not not ever tried to convince the students to use the old edition. And there are many reasons for that. New Additions obviously, may change information. And they may add on right as a new writer to it, they may change the direction of the chapters. Then there'll be additional information that's coming to them from some other academic location, Europe, China, wherever they you know, wherever that book information may be coming from, they have to make sure that it is conducive, the book itself is conducive to what it is that the students may need. So I will not provide the student with a previous edition if I cannot find the current edition, I will let that be known to them. The drawback to having a new edition though, is that new editions sometimes come slowly. So a professor may have the syllabus state that you have to get a certain edition of a certain textbook, that textbook may not be in the market on the market or are out in for for purchase at that time. So that sets us back quite a bit. When situations of that sort take place. I tried to get the syllabus myself from the professor. Contrast, compare the chapters from the new book and the old and see if there's anything from that book that I can provide. This has happened a lot more. As far as new books not being available. It's happening a lot more in the last four years. COVID changed a lot, a tremendous amount. So publishing the books, and getting them out was a little tricky for about a year, new editions were coming out, but the expense was two grades and students decided that they were going to find alternative methods to get their textbooks, which is why OER had become so important. There is a lot of work to my understanding. To lower the prices of textbooks for students. I hope that will occur so that the information provided will not be lost. You and I were in college, we had to buy the textbook. There was no other alternative internet or not. We had to buy the textbook. We had to buy the textbook and we have to buy highlighters. Of course our students do not use highlighters, but they certainly use technology that would highlight information that they need. But um, we had the new textbooks buy as if it's a brand new textbook. We start from the beginning we push aside anything that we prefer to leave receive that have the same title and focus solely on what it is that we've seen the new book that we've received. I think everyone appreciates that and When students know that those books are not available, they're very appreciative to get communication saying we have not yet received this book. Let us know if there's something we could do. In the meantime, to make this journey easier for you. Most of them, most of them say no problem, let us know when it arrives. And again, once it arrives, that turnaround time still remains one month, because when it arrives, so that's pretty much what we are and who we are. So phenomenal, phenomenal concept, when the founder of this of this program is a gentleman by the name of Jim McCarthy, who worked for the library for the blind and disabled when it was called the labyrinth of the Blind and Physically Handicapped. He went through the legislation, he and I read Medea, the den director, Jill Went to General Assembly and push this concept, explained why it was important, explained that we were not the primary resource for students, but a follow up when needed. We've become the primary for many. But the concept that they came up with in 2009, has not changed. And we intend to continue to simply grow in the best way we possibly can. We are calling off the students. There are many, many students in the state of Maryland that can benefit from our services, particularly those who are attending schools in the West, and the north, and a few in the south. But the West, particularly, to my

understanding, there are over 10,000 students that can benefit from what it is that we provide. We used to work with trade schools, but that became a little challenging and difficult and didn't meet the requirements as printed by the General Assembly and the state of Maryland. So we kept it simple, became less complicated. And as a result, we have survived for 16 years now. And

A Ashley Biggs 26:49

J Joseph Beckett 26:50

I'm very, very proud of my group, I'm very proud of the library for their service for their not just the services, but their support. I think supporting the colleagues support the community support, the college support has been extremely important. So we want to try to save the world as much as we can one person at a time, by way of converting textbooks for students with disabilities. That's my PSA. But I do believe in what I do. My team loves what they do. We were a good team of people. And we were accessible as well. We are very accessible eight hours a day, sometimes more than five days a week. Our response is good. And our students appreciate it. So any additional questions? I'm here for you. Well,

A Ashley Biggs 27:36

how do people get in contact with you? Ah,

J Joseph Beckett 27:39

there are several ways, the easiest way is to contact me through Joseph J. O S E P H dot Beckett, B E C K e tt@maryland.gov. Again, Joseph dot Beckett at Maryland spelled out that G O V, I would say call but we work 80% from home, sometimes the calls that come through. So any emails that are sent to me are immediately responded to. And it's the easiest way to do that. If you must get in contact with me by phone, or you could do it by calling 410-230-2453, which is my direct line. Or you can call it the reference that school patch, I can possibly patch you through to me or send me information regarding the needs that you may have. But again, in response to how to get in contact, I respond to all calls and all emails within 12 hours or less. I try to respond immediately it makes it much easier. But if I'm out and about or in the field or that outreach, I will follow up the following day immediately or that evening, even after hours to let you know that I've received your information. And certainly I will assist it the best way that I can as quickly as I can.


A Ashley Biggs 28:57

Thank you so much for being here. I appreciate it.


J Joseph Beckett 29:01

 JOSEPH BECKETT 29:01

Thank you. I hope it wasn't too rushed in too much information. But again, reach out to us. We're here. We're excited. We're ready. We would certainly love to support we can support 10,000 Students trust me we would. If you if there's anyone who's listening to this podcast, who wishes to have person to person discussion, I will meet you at your location. Or you can meet me at mine at the Library for the Blind put disabled parking Franklin behind the economic crash library. I am usually there Tuesdays and Thursdays. But I look forward to working with more students. I look forward to anyone who's listening to this with additional questions before answering those questions for you in the future.

 Ashley Biggs 29:42

Thank you very much. Thank you. Take care. Bye bye. Well, everyone. Thank you so much for being here and I definitely appreciate you listening in. We will be back next month. Make sure you subscribe.

 Maryland State Library Agency LBPD 29:56

This has been a presentation of the Maryland State law library agency. For links to additional resources provided by today's presenter. Please visit the show notes. For more information on MSLA for the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled, visit [Maryland libraries.org](http://Marylandlibraries.org)