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Title: The ACCESS Framework

Accessibility is the cornerstone of ensuring educators and students are provided with equal access to content, learning, and future prospects. While varied in definition depending on context, accessibility is a fundamental element of my teaching philosophy pertaining to digital education, compliance with standards to ensure all have access, and being readily available to support teacher candidates during their journeys and careers.

The ACCESS framework summarizes priorities to create a learning environment that enriches each learner and scholar.

ACCESS

A: Accessibility **C:** Compliance **C:** Connect **E:** Engagement **S:** Support **S:** Strengthen

Six Dots to Success

The braille cell, used to form dots for tactually written language, STEM, music, and other print content, consists of six dots and is arranged in two columns and three rows. This figure requires elements that work together and convey meaning and content. In the ACCESS framework, the braille cell provides a depiction of how **A:** Accessibility **C:** Compliance **C:** Connect **E:** Engagement **S:** Support **S:** Strengthen connect and work together to support learner engagement and access.



Image Title: The Braille Cell: ACCESS

Imaged description: the braille cell consists of six dots arranged in two columns and three rows. Each dot in this braille cell contains a construct of my teaching philosophy “ACCESS” as follows: Dot 1: A: Accessibility; Dot 2: C: Compliance; Dot 3: C: Connect; Dot 4: E: Engagement; Dot 5: S: Strengthen; Dot 6: S: Support.

A: Accessibility and C: Compliance

Accessibility and compliance on campus includes physical access to facilities, transportation, alignment with standards to promote safety and disability inclusion. However, these same terms generalize to the digital classroom in our course design, material development, presentation, and multi-media resources for instruction. Mason’s office of Access, Compliance, and Community (ACC) supports us all in this fundamental area of instructional design with a multitude of resources and support. However, embedding these constructs in courses takes considerable planning, retrofitting accessibility in materials and media, and adherence to national standards for accessibility compliance, such as the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These two elements require prudent planning, diligent selection of materials, and extensive commitment to integrating accessibility and compliance so all students can engage. Access and Compliance are fundamental elements of course content and overall program structure on which everything else can be built.

C: Connect

The VI Consortium primarily operates through distance education and includes candidates who are mostly not geographically close. However, that does not mean we cannot connect and form lifelong networks. Many of our teacher candidates will be the only TBVI in their county. Their communities of practice will be spread over many miles, counties, and state lines. They will face isolation. They will encounter times where not having a colleague in the same profession will be deeply missed. We must connect. We must form professional relationships with the vast technology commonly used in our professional organizations, mentorship, and friendships.

Courses and program structure aim to bring together our teacher candidates through synchronous modalities to ensure they begin their network, create their professional learning communities, and strengthen their ability to communicate with others in this highly specialized field of education.

E: Engagement

The TBVI program thrives off a distance education model. As a highly esoteric, but smaller program, we offer one lab course each year on campus. Requiring teacher candidates to come to campus on a regular basis is not an option due to the distance of most of our

students from our campus locations. Engagement in distance education courses requires skillful planning and delivery. Simply recording lectures, posting discussion board topics, and assigning essays and multiple-choice questionnaires does not engage teacher candidates, especially in the blindness field. Hands-on and experiential learning is needed to train teachers of students who are blind and visually impaired but requires considerable innovation in the synchronous and asynchronous learning environments.

S: Support and S: Strengthen

As I began my career as an adjunct faculty member at Mason in 2009 and then as the program coordinator and fulltime faculty member in 2016, I was humbled to be in a trusted position where our students rely on me for innovative and forward-thinking instruction. I quickly realized, our teacher candidates need support, however, that extends beyond curriculum and earning grades or completing courses. Our teacher candidates are incredible people. Many are dealing with intensive life circumstances but want to live with purpose and serve children who are blind and visually impaired.

We must support our teachers. They are dedicated professionals, many of whom balance serving as provisionally licensed educators as they work on their credentials and degrees. Early in my academic career, I realized I do not have all of the answers. I have listened to my teacher candidates explain some of the most concerning dilemmas and challenges they are facing, and I simply do not have the answers to support them all the time. Prioritizing support for our teachers and strengthening our community are key elements that are not necessarily on a rubric, but foster the personnel support and connection needed for a strong educator community.

Conclusion

Using the framework of “ACCESS”, can provide scholars with accessible, compliant opportunities to learn, while facilitating connection, engagement and supporting and strengthening our community as we work to make positive change for the benefit of children who are blind and visually impaired.