Cheryl Broom [00:00:08]:
Hi, I'm Cheryl Broom, CEO of GradComm and host of Higher Ed conversations. Today I have a fantastic guest on Beth Noel is Director of Communications and Creative services at Middlesex Community College and Beth and her team, as well as a committee comprised of people across campus recently over the last couple of years, have moved their institution forward by embracing an inclusive and accessible design mindset. They have gone through, combed through and fixed over 2500 webpages, over 3000 PDF's, and worked with nearly 300 digital content creators across their campus to make sure that what they are communicating is accessible. So how did they pull this off and where are they going from now? Well, this is a great conversation that's going to inspire you to take a look at your own communications materials and perhaps even change the way you approach accessibility and inclusive design. I was really impressed with Beth and her wealth of knowledge. I learned some things that I never knew before and I think that you're going to really be inspired by this conversation. So hi Beth, thanks so much for joining me today on the podcast.

Beth Noel [00:01:30]:
Thank you so much for having me, Cheryl. I'm really looking forward to talking with you.

Cheryl Broom [00:01:34]:
Yeah, I am so excited about this topic. It is so important and I feel like it's something everybody's finally paying attention to but may not necessarily fully understand yet. So how did you get so involved in this world of accessibility and inclusive design? What is the background? What is the story?

Beth Noel [00:01:55]:
Sure, I think for me there's probably three separate components that make this so important to me. The first is I really am committed to the practice of diversity, equity and belonging. And in my role as a communicator, being able to use my communications to foster narrative change and to bring people to have trust with us as an institution is really important to me. So I've been doing a lot of work around belonging and equity at my institution. The other issue, I think, is what many of your listeners have experienced, which is a lovely letter from the office of Civil Rights saying, hello, your content is not accessible. And I think because so much of our content was in PDF form that my team created for print purposes, my institution just decided that my team was the team that could solve this problem. So it became my problem. And finally, the third component I think, is I am the mom to a neurodivergent 19 year old who started high school online during COVID and just last year had to go through the college search process and being along the journey with them and experiencing where they were struggling with communications really just brought it home to me and personalized it a little more that, you know, my kid's probably not the only kid that is finding the FAFSA information confusing and probably not the only kid that doesn't really understand the application instructions.

Beth Noel [00:03:36]:
So it really kind of all coincided and aligned at the right time, all within a three year period. For me, Cheryl, that I think just gave me the confidence to really say to my administration and senior

leadership, I want to do this. I want to do accessibility, but I want to do it right and I want to be all in.

Cheryl Broom [00:03:57]:
That's great. And it's amazing. As we have this conversation and the listeners hear you speak, I'm amazed that you've accomplished as much as you have in just three years. So stay tuned, people listening, because when you hear what Beth has done and her team has done it, it really is impressive. It was a heavy lift and there's a lot, I think, to be proud of. I want to go back to the letter that you received.

Beth Noel [00:04:22]:
Sure.

Cheryl Broom [00:04:24]:
So what kind of sparked this, at least in your institution, was PDF's on the website. And I think that is something most everybody is struggling with. So what was it about these PDF's that rose the red flag initially?

Beth Noel [00:04:38]:
Yeah, I think we were just lucky enough that we got a spot check from the OCR, and I know with 100% that the PDF's were not compliant. I designed some of them. Right. I'm a graphic designer by training. That's how I started my marketing career. And actually, one of the documents that my institution is really proud of are these pathway maps. They have their street and directional branded, and there's little dotted lines and little icons for capstones. And they are beautiful and they've won awards and they are 100% inaccessible.

Beth Noel [00:05:20]:
And so I think with the thought of potentially facing some fines and also the potential of losing our ability to award financial aid really made my president at the time highlight this as a priority. We were told we had nine months from the office of civil Rights to come up with a plan and try and figure out what we were going to do and remediate some of this stuff. And I'm not somebody that backs away from a challenge. So when no one else was really raising their hand to say, okay, what are we going to do? How are we going to focus our attention on this in a meaningful way? I was right there at the table and picking up the charge.

Cheryl Broom [00:06:06]:
So what was the plan? Where did you start?

Beth Noel [00:06:10]:
Yeah, well, we started with reaching out to some local resources. So we do have two schools in our region that are dedicated to learning and education for people with disabilities. And so we did reach out to those schools. We had them work with us to try and do an audit of figuring out what web content could be improved and then really working with them to understand why the PDF's and were inaccessible. What about them made them inaccessible? And then we really

tried to tackle it in phases. First was it they bless them, they went ahead and fixed all the contrast issues and did all of those little tweaks to the CSS to make our site better. But it was really the PDF's that required some extra attention, and we just started tackling it piece by piece. We created a workforce called our digital Accessibility team, and it was comprised of folks from my team, from enrollment services, from instructional online learning, from human resources.

Beth Noel [00:07:21]:
And we all agreed that we were going to take accountability for this work and that we were going to support each other. So that when it was time for me to say to folks, sorry, you can't use that PDF anymore, HR was saying, correct, sorry, you can't use it. This is your affirmative action officer, and I'm telling you that this is not accessible. So that was really, really key is having that cross college team, because as many of your listeners know, shared governance is very important in higher ed, and particularly when change is required. Some of our folks are a little stuck. Right. It's sometimes hard to get people to move into a different direction if they've been used to doing something one way for so long. So it really was kind of taking it PDF by PDF, but being really aggressive about timelines and setting up some benchmarks for percentages of the site that we wanted to be cleaned up on a fairly aggressive timeline.

Cheryl Broom [00:08:27]:
So now that you've gone through this, pretty much everything that you make now is accessible. I mean, whether or not it's going to be posted on the website. Right. You have changed the institutional culture to really account for accessibility and inclusion in all materials. Has that been difficult? Is that a challenge?

Beth Noel [00:08:49]:
Oh, it has been difficult, for sure. You know, I've gotten a lot of pushback from folks and no disrespect towards them at all. Everybody is trying to do the best that they can with the resources that they have, but it's not uncommon for me to be asked, why do we have to still do this? If only 4% of our students have a visual disability? Why do we have to put this effort in? Why does it take so long? Or my favorite, which is, I don't think it looks good. It's not pretty. Well, I agree, as a graphic designer. I agree that sometimes accessible documents might seem plain, but we need to look at our users, our audience, and if we look at it from a business perspective, the center for Disease Control says that about 27% of adults identify as having a disability. So that would be a quarter of our potential students. So why would we make a business decision that excludes a quarter of our potential enrollees? So I trying to shift that narrative to really help people understand that there's a business component and there's a financial side to that business component.

Beth Noel [00:10:10]:
I think another plus for me at my institution is our mission is about belonging and equity. And so our strategic plan is written with that in mind. And it just makes it easier for me, when I'm talking with folks, to point back the accessibility work to our belonging mission, which has been super helpful.

Cheryl Broom [00:10:34]:
And that's actually such a great piece of feedback for people who are trying to do the same initiatives on their campus, is that most community colleges, diversity and belonging is central to who they are as an institution. And this is so much a piece of that. So it's shifting that mindset to be like, oh, there's Beth again, like tearing apart my document. Like, no, I need.

Beth Noel [00:11:01]:
Yeah, I'm the Ada cop and I know, I get it. And that's okay because it needs to be someone for sure. And I think, you know, if we try and reframe our thinking away from turning our communications into accessible communications and really shift to starting with accessibility, it makes it much easier. And I think it also makes it easier for people to buy into. I think when they, when we have the conversation with clients early on about what is your goal, how are you sharing the information? Because we want to make sure that we're writing it to be accessible. We want to make sure that we're designing it to be accessible and we want to take into account all of those options, whether it's being used digitally or printed.

Cheryl Broom [00:11:54]:
Right. I love that idea of starting with accessibility. Like, this is not something that you do after the fact.

Beth Noel [00:12:03]:
Oh, correct.

Cheryl Broom [00:12:04]:
This is something have in mind from the beginning.

Beth Noel [00:12:07]:
Absolutely. And I think the marketers out there that are listening probably are resonating with this concept and they're feeling it deep in their bones. The. Oh my goodness. I have a document that I ran through acrobat and the accessibility Checker says I have 385 failures. How do I fix it? And yeah, it's hard to do. It's hard to do the cleanup after. So setting your documents up correctly first, getting the buy in from your internal clients first makes that transition to accessible communication so much easier.

Beth Noel [00:12:45]:
So, Cheryl, my team, we work with a mantra and we try and use this lens for all of the communications that we're creating. And it is. Accessibility isn't extra steps, it's steps you've missed. And we do really want to communicate that to our clients because they often, I think, feel as though the accessibility component is added work. And if we build it in at the start, it's not really added work, it's we're working smarter, not harder.

Cheryl Broom [00:13:18]:
And it's such a good mantra too.

Beth Noel [00:13:19]:
Yeah, agreed.

Cheryl Broom [00:13:21]:
Yeah. I think that's so important and that does change the mindset from being, this is something that's a punishing to this is no, this is something that's so important that we are going to begin with it. And so you are, your team also dedicates, or you dedicate time for your team for professional development. And I know I struggle to find professional development for my team in this area. How do you keep up to date with all that's up there? Are there recommendations that you can make to others on where to find information?

Beth Noel [00:13:54]:
Yeah, we kind of pull professional development from everywhere. My school, we do have a LinkedIn learning account as part of our institutional professional development. So my staff has access to all of the LinkedIn trainings on creating accessible PDF's and PowerPoints and word documents. But I've also found a lot of trainings actually internationally that have been really helpful. It really seems as though the UK and Australia do a much better job of taking accessibility and universal and inclusive design into account. From the beginning, finding training on accessibility has been harder than it has been finding professional development on inclusive design. And that was a pretty big shift for my team and my institution. Accessibility is, it really has a narrower scope and it really is about doing the bare minimum to make accommodations.

Beth Noel [00:14:59]:
So your document needs to be read by a screen reader. Inclusive design, which we see a lot, used for things like curriculum and product design, is much more robust and it includes things beyond just someone's ability. It includes factors like language, where they live in the country, age, gender, how they identify, and so it's more robust. And if you start to think about using inclusive design instead of accessible design, you're actually incorporating accessibility into that. Right? Accessibility is kind of the first step, but if you can shift to an inclusive mindset, not only will your pieces become accessible for those with disabilities, but they will also become accessible for the.

Cheryl Broom [00:15:50]:
Rest of the world, that is great. So two things really quick, and then we're going to take a quick break first. I see a niche for you, Beth. You're so passionate, and every time that we've talked about this subject, I get so motivated to do more. So I want to thank you for taking this so seriously and for the work you do. And I think you should bring some of this to the US. So I see a niche for you. I see a business for you.

Beth Noel [00:16:19]:
Sounds good.

Cheryl Broom [00:16:21]:
And I do want to dive more into this idea of inclusive design because I know you did do some training at a national conference and you do have some really good tips on how people can start making their designs more inclusive. So I want to dive into that when we get back. But first, we're just going to take a pause and learn a little bit about our sponsor.

Cheryl Broom [00:16:41]:
How do higher education decision makers find the right solution when technology evolves at light speed? Well, we usually start with our network. Edtech Connect is the network that's democratizing the higher ed technology conversation. Edtech Connect is free, so anyone with a email address can sign up and list the software and services they use and their role at their school.

Cheryl Broom [00:17:07]:
Once you're in, you can find out.

Cheryl Broom [00:17:08]:
What solutions similar schools are doing all over the country. Whether you're looking to find the hot new AI tool or maybe learn options, you have to upgrade your campus search engine or even get to your short list of marketing solution vendors, Edtech Connect is the place to go.

Cheryl Broom [00:17:24]:
So visit edtechconnect.com and set up your.

Cheryl Broom [00:17:27]:
Free profile to get a pulse for what's happening with higher ed technology today.

Cheryl Broom [00:17:33]:
All right, we're back. So before the break, Beth was explaining the difference between accessibility, which is the first step, and doing kind of the bare minimum to make sure your documents are accessible and then going a bit further and having your designs be inclusive and the difference between those two. And I was commenting that Beth had done some really great workshops at NCMPR, which is a professional development organization for community colleges. And you had taught a little bit about inclusive design. So I'd love to hear some of your tips for how to make designs more inclusive.

Beth Noel [00:18:11]:
Absolutely. I think, you know, I'm a problem solver by nature. So as I was doing this research, I didn't find a lot of information on inclusive communications. You know, it was really tied to curriculum and in the classroom kind of learning. So I just kept doing more research and pulled out what I thought was most relevant for my team and started working with folks at my institution to try and adopt these four kind of basic principles. To me, these are probably the most impactful. And I think also in some ways, the easiest to sell internally to your. To your stakeholders.

Beth Noel [00:18:49]:
And the first is really providing a comparable experience. You know, accessibility really just says that we have to provide an alternative. Right? You have to make sure that there are captions, you have to make sure that screen reader can read it. You have to make sure that there's a curb cut. Right, if you're talking about physical disabilities. But with inclusive design, making that shift to it can't just be alternative. It needs to be comparable and have the same amount of value. So that's.

Beth Noel [00:19:22]:
That's kind of a big thing to think about. How do you shift from just, oh, my God, I'm crossing my t's and dotting my I's and getting it done to making sure that the person who has to use it in a different format is getting as much fulfillment and knowledge out of it as they would have. Someone who doesn't have a disability.

Cheryl Broom [00:19:42]:
This makes me reflect on my son, who has ADHD, and he was taking his permit test of the DMV. And here in California, the permit test is done online. There's no, there's no chair. You have to stand in front of a computer and the entire DMV can see you take this test and you're allowed to get, I think, nine questions wrong, and then you fail. And every time you get a question wrong, a big red stop sign comes up on the screen. So I'm watching my son completely, like, unable to focus. There's so much noise, there's so much attention. Every time he gets a red button, he's like panicking and looking at me and I can't help him.

Cheryl Broom [00:20:29]:
So he fails, then he fails again. And then I told one of my girlfriends this story. I'm like, this is so stressful for him with this stupid red button. And she said, you can request a paper test. And I was like, okay. So we did. We requested a paper test and he passed it. And he passed the paper test without a problem.

Cheryl Broom [00:20:51]:
But man, what a non inclusive design, like, from the environment to the test itself, like, set him up to fail. And that's not fair to someone that's already struggling with test taking. So I don't think anyone with the DMV is going to listen to this, but, I mean, it does really impact people. Design is important.

Beth Noel [00:21:15]:
It really does. And some recent studies that were done on the college undergraduates, little over 30% of them self identified as having a cognitive disability. So think about. Your campus is full of students who struggle with prioritization of content and who struggle with too much going on on the page and text at an angle and contrast. Those are all simple things that we can fix if we think inclusively.

Cheryl Broom [00:21:46]:

Exactly. Or you look at it, you look at a document, it has so much text. I mean, even me. Sometimes I'll look at something I can't even read. This it is. I cannot understand this. It is too much going on here.

Beth Noel [00:21:58]:
Yeah, absolutely.

Cheryl Broom [00:21:59]:
So I really loved your presentation at NCMPR because it spoke, you know, to me as a mom, just like in the beginning of our conversation, you had said as a mom that this really spoke to you as well. And I loved your, some of your tips for designing for users with anxiety, which is something I would have never even considered. Like, there are a lot of people who. Communications can make them anxious.

Beth Noel [00:22:21]:
Absolutely.

Cheryl Broom [00:22:22]:
And you have some really good, simple tips for that. And I don't know if you remember them, but I have them pulled up on my computer.

Beth Noel [00:22:28]:
Well, I think one of them is, and this is a common practice with inclusive design, is really to hand control over to the user. So make it that they can choose how and when they use this communication. Right. They might be, you know, at home with a newborn in their arms that just fell asleep and they're trying to fill out their fafsa. And your institution has a great how to video that automatically pops up and starts playing music that can be very disruptive, even for someone who is just temporarily in need of an accommodation. So really putting the control over to the user so that they can choose the orientation that they're using, the device they're using, whether or not they zoom in, how the page flips, all of those things can really help make a difference in the way that someone is able to ingest information.

Cheryl Broom [00:23:28]:
Yeah, definitely. Yeah. And that's interesting, that control to the user. So in your example with the video, you're not saying, hey, don't have the video. Just let people choose whether or not they want to watch it, don't force it on them, you know?

Beth Noel [00:23:43]:
Exactly. Don't have it auto playing and have the volume off. Right. And have captions already on so that in the moment, the person who is engaging with the communication has the ability to use it in the way they need to, to be successful. Absolutely.

Cheryl Broom [00:23:59]:

Yeah. That's great. I also loved your tips for making sure that people know what comes next. So once they maybe complete an action on an application that they know. Okay, next. Now you're going to do this so that you're signposting what's coming up. And I thought that was a great example.

Beth Noel [00:24:17]:
Yeah, absolutely. I think, you know, at least in my experience with my kid, that's something that even to this day, they're an adult. They want to know what's happening after now. Yeah, right. So, you know, when you fill out this form and click submit, you can expect a response like this at this time. And to folks that might not be neurodivergent, that might seem like overkill or, you know, sharing information that might not be needed, but it really does, I think, help people get a better sense of what to expect. And it eliminates a lot of stress for folks if they know what they're going to have to do now.

Cheryl Broom [00:24:58]:
Yes. And that's something we actually give feedback to institutions when we do our secret shopper projects is you go through the application and then you're never told, like, when are you going to hear back? Or what's the next step, you know? Or you see, we just finished when I was reading the draft this morning. It's like, you will get our email response in one day, and then four days goes by and nobody got a response. Our secret shoppers, like, what happened? And she's all stressed out that she's going to get fired from her secret shopping job. Imagine if youre an actual student and that's the communications you're receiving. So these are things, I think, that are really important to think through. You also have some advice around writing and not just design, but making sure that writing styles are more inclusive. What are some tips you have around that?

Beth Noel [00:25:42]:
So working in higher ed, Sheryl, you know that there are a lot of big words, and college campuses and a lot of the employees have advanced degrees, and sometimes we talk at a really high level. And I think it's important when we're writing content, particularly for, I think, community colleges that do deal with a large population from whom English is a second language, to really try and make sure that copy is written for someone who has an 8th grade education level for whom English is their second language, and trying to simplify it, removing words that are unnecessary, trying to not use idioms either. You know, I have three of my employees are employees who are international or are first generation, and sometimes I use phrases in staff meetings and they have no idea what I'm talking about. And it's a colloquialism. And we write like that sometimes. So really trying to take a step back and make the writing as clear as possible and also structure it so that the hierarchy is really clear. I think you know, as. As we continue to work in higher ed, it seems like we're always being asked to stuff more into each communication.

Beth Noel [00:27:04]:
Right. We're asking everything to do more. I want it to increase enrollment, and I want it to also, you know, make my coffee and also help me do an oil change. Like, we're asking so much. And

really, to have a communication be accessible and inclusive, we should be focusing on one task at a time. Right. If it has to be multiple tasks, then we need to make sure that it's really clear. Student, do this step first.

Beth Noel [00:27:34]:
This is what you should focus on. And then now that you've completed that, move on to this step, instead of, you know, sending readers on a winding path through our communications, where they're just like, I don't even know where to start.

Cheryl Broom [00:27:49]:
I'm, like, giving you a standing ovation in my chair right now because I can't tell you how many times we get hired to come in and look at communications, and they are so convoluted and dense and difficult to understand. And then when we ask, why is it written that way? Why do you have these pages of, like, 10th font, ten font size rules and regulations in the back of the schedule? It has so much more to do with the institution. Well, that's there because we want to be able to say that it was printed.

Beth Noel [00:28:20]:
Exactly.

Cheryl Broom [00:28:21]:
But it's not helping anybody. It's not accomplishing what you want to accomplish. So stop coming at communications from this institutional viewpoint and look at it through the lens of a student.

Beth Noel [00:28:31]:
Yeah, absolutely.

Cheryl Broom [00:28:33]:
Simplify it. Yes, absolutely.

Beth Noel [00:28:35]:
And, you know, I think it's particularly because of COVID I think a lot of institutions shifted to the self service kind of model. One stops are really popular. And, you know, I think we believe, particularly in the community college landscape, that people just want to come online, sign up without ever having to talk to anybody, and then take classes. But I think, you know, what we learned coming out of the pandemic is that warm handoff is really important. So we are at my institution having conversations with our enrollment center and advising and admissions. Now, as we redesign our website to really talk about what can we remove, what kind of content can we remove, and leave that to that warm handoff. So we give just enough information, and we encourage the user to ask for a phone call or ask for a chat, and then that's where we can, in those, you know, one on one connections with the students provide more of that intense information that really somebody who just wants to know what the nursing program is like, they do not need to read all that at this stage. Right.

Beth Noel [00:29:48]:
So really trying to make the experience more personable instead of expecting our written communications to do all of it.

Cheryl Broom [00:29:56]:
I think a big takeaway from this part of our discussion is that when you think about inclusivity from the beginning and this entire experience, you're really helping all students. Not just one particular type of student, but really everybody.

Beth Noel [00:30:14]:
Absolutely. Who doesn't need a little bit of extra help sometimes.

Cheryl Broom [00:30:19]:
Right, exactly.

Beth Noel [00:30:20]:
You've had a real rough day. You know, you can't think through the steps on that financial aid form. You might be a very calm and smart person, but today is a really bad day.

Cheryl Broom [00:30:34]:
Right.

Beth Noel [00:30:34]:
So you don't want to wade through all that information. How can we make it so it's easy to understand? You know, somebody might also have a broken arm. Right. Even temporary disabilities or disabilities circumstances do impact how we digest information and understand the world around us. So starting with inclusivity and accessibility can help get us so much closer to being not only transparent, but easy to use for folks.

Cheryl Broom [00:31:07]:
Exactly. And helping students be successful, I mean, that's, at the end of the day, that's what we're here for.

Beth Noel [00:31:13]:
Exactly. And I think some of these, you know, these steps and work that we've done here on my team, we've seen it, that it also has a pretty significant impact on retention. So, you know, kids want to go to college. Parents want their kids to go to college. Right. And we all understand what melt is. We all know that from the end of the fall semester to spring, we're going to be losing students, students who might have struggled. Well, maybe some of that struggle is because we're being confusing as an institution.

Beth Noel [00:31:45]:

So we have seen an increase in our retention, a significant increase in some of the changes we have made around making our communications more accessible and inclusive.

Cheryl Broom [00:31:58]:
What a great success story. Love it. I love that. Well, you have just been such a delight to talk to, and I'm sure, you know, you have so many tips. I'm going to link your NCMPR presentation or show notes and encourage people to take a look at some of the other wonderful tips that you shared in that presentation. But is there anything else you want to leave listeners with? Any other advice or things they should be thinking about?

Beth Noel [00:32:23]:
Yeah, I think, you know, just be persistent, but don't be really hard on yourself as a communicator. You already have a lot to do. We know that marketing teams are doing a lot more with a lot fewer resources, and so just focusing on some simple things and some simple changes you can make one at a time and just keep plugging away at it. It's not going to happen overnight. My institution, as accessible as we are, there's still places where we know we need to make improvements. And that's okay as long as we're all committed to get there eventually. And certainly anyone who's listening, please feel free to reach out to me on LinkedIn. I'm happy to talk about this.

Beth Noel [00:33:06]:
I'm happy to share and help you make an impact at your institution.

Cheryl Broom [00:33:10]:
Well, thank you so much, Beth. It's just been an absolute pleasure to talk to you.

Beth Noel [00:33:14]:
Thank you, Cheryl.

Cheryl Broom [00:33:20]:
And that wraps up this episode of the Higher Education Conversations podcast. I'm host and GradComm CEO Cheryl Broom. A big thank you to our sponsor, Edtech Connect. Edtech Connect is free, so anyone with the email address can sign up and list the software and services they use in their role at their school. So visit edtechconnect.com and set up your free profile to get a pulse for what's happening with higher ed technology today. And while you're online, take a few minutes to leave our podcast, a five star review. It will help other colleges and universities find us and learn from the great experts we have on the show. That's it for now.

Cheryl Broom [00:34:00]:
Until next time.