Autlook Project

Expanding Learning and Community Participation

through a Social Networking Website

An Initiative of Engaging Abilities at the University of Michigan

Development Committee

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Abstract

The Autlook Project is the central facet of a dynamic disability outreach initiative with the goal of creating inclusive and supportive safe spaces for people with disabilities at the University of Michigan and in local communities. Participants in the Autlook Project will make a profile at autlook.org, a social networking website that will enable them to connect with other people allied with disability communities.

This project arose in response to a clear need in the UM and local communities for a visible social and community network for people allied with disability communities. Through interviews with many potential participant groups, an optimal structure and array of services were identified to integrate into the Autlook Project. Specific issues were identified with the campus and community climate for people with disabilities, and proactive steps to mitigate these issues were integrated into the planned outreach and educational activities.

Progress was made in all areas of development for the Autlook Project, including establishing office space, server and web development, research support, and community building. The prototype has evolved to best fit the needs identified in the interviews, in particular through the inclusion of more website-level organizing and interaction tools. The Autlook Project will also be fully integrated with a student initiated research program examining attitudes toward and resources for people with disabilities at UM and in surrounding communities. Creating real connections between the virtual Autlook community and the home communities of Autlook participants is essential.

Introduction

Through a social networking website, the Autlook Project will facilitate direct connections between and among people identified with disability communities and students interested in learning more about or volunteering within disability communities. By creating an ability-focused shared community space, the Autlook Project seeks to create an inclusive atmosphere for people with disabilities at UM and in local communities. The university and community outreach aspects of the Autlook Project will be supported by the educational and advocacy programs of Engaging Abilities, a local non-profit organization founded by R. Petrak.

Autlook will broaden students' social perspectives and be applicable in their studies as well as future careers by creating a personal connection between students and disability communities, and imparting a rich and nuanced understanding of the lived experience of disability. Participants who are affected by disabilities will be able to build stronger social networks on campus and in their home communities. Students can reach beyond campus to connect with peers and community members. These interactions will help promote positive social and academic outcomes by enabling students with disabilities to find mentors and positive role models with disabilities. When students leave UM, they will be able to participate in the Autlook Supporting Success Network (ASSN), which will enable them to connect with former UM students and community leaders who are allied with disability communities to help promote positive employment outcomes. In local communities, participants will be able to share resources and network.

Motivation

The original idea for this project arose out of the desire to pair students who are interested in volunteering in their local disability communities with appropriate volunteer placements. R. Petrak has been working as an autism intervention consultant for the past nine years, and has repeatedly noted the need for improved social and community supports for families affected by autism. As a Supplemental and Graduate Student Instructor throughout this time period, R. Petrak has also consistently encountered students interested in learning more about and volunteering in the autism community. After connecting numerous students to families in need, it was clear that the most pressing need was a way for these parties to connect independently. Once the idea for the Autlook Project was conceived, numerous other applications of the tool became apparent.

Our goal is to establish Autlook as a well known online resource that connects, empowers, and improves the quality of life of people interested in or affected by disabilities. We are excited about the utility of the website for academic functions, such as collecting research data and improving the campus experience of students with disabilities. After interviewing members of the disability community, we have expanded our long-term goals to include hosting numerous online services and activities. For example, we now anticipate using video conferencing software to provide educational and advocacy services in real-time.

Interviews

To inform design decisions, interviews were conducted with representatives of each of the target participant groups, including students, staff, and faculty at UM and community members in numerous outreach communities. Several themes emerged from this research.

Many students from the Health Sciences Scholars Program are interested in volunteering in and learning more about the disability communities at UM in their home communities. A large proportion of the UM student population comes from Michigan so we have created the Michigan Autreach Program (MAP) to answer this enthusiastic response. The MAP will increase visibility for people with disabilities in communities across Michigan, and will facilitate the expansion of the Autlook Project to these communities over the next year.

One student, a 20 year old male with ASD, is excited to use Autlook both for volunteer opportunities and to "meet more people like me." Many students with disabilities who were interviewed indicated feeling disconnected from a disability community on-campus. It was frequently noted that social and emotional supports are limited for students with disabilities on campus, and people with "invisible" disabilities, such as learning disabilities or chronic illness, are often expected to keep their disability "in the closet" unless they are making a formal disclosure for accommodations. Frequently, students with disabilities noted that they only disclose their disability to instructors when absolutely necessary for specific accommodations due to the significant stigma surrounding disabilities.

Another important set of observations emphasized the high level of enthusiasm for increasing the visibility of disability communities. This reified the clear potential for the Autlook Project to successfully bridge the gap between the university and local communities, since the needs of each of these disability communities are so similar and there is much enthusiasm for advocacy to promote positive change in attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Design Process

Several important steps have been taken to establish the physical, virtual, and community infrastructure for the Autlook Project. On campus, we have been concentrating on community building by raising awareness about disability issues and identifying disability friendly faculty, staff, and student leaders to participate in the Allies for Ability Network. Allies have identified themselves as being socially supportive to the issues facing those with disabilities or chronic illness, and will receive a logo sticker for their office or dorm door or window which will help to create visible safe spaces and opportunities for constructive dialogue.

Over the past month, Engaging Abilities has established office space at 1881 W Liberty St in Ann Arbor to facilitate community outreach. Numerous steps in the technical development have also occurred, including server development, research to predict initial and long term webhosting needs and costs, and securing a web domain. The Institutional Review Board Application for the Autlook Project research is in progress, and we are investigating factors that support successful university-community partnerships to inform our planning.

Prototype Details

All Autlook participants will construct a personal profile by completing surveys about their personality, their available and utilized community services, and educational history. Participants will be able to connect with others based on criteria such as location, experiences, or interests, and will be able to choose to keep areas of their Autlook profile private from all or selected other participants. This tool will be open to students, staff, and faculty across the University of Michigan campuses, enabling an intercampus dialogue to participants to reach across campuses to connect with peers and relate experiences.

In MAP communities, Engaging Abilities will partner with local libraries to increase the accessibility of the Autlook Project by creating a safe space for disability communities within the library and making the technology available for people to participate fully in the project. An Autlook profile will include several key elements, such as participant's communities of interest and Autreach activity areas. There will also be several community wide interactive resources, such as a forum for planning and announcing online and real world events, ranging from organized outreach activities to impromptu social invitations. Students with disabilities will be able to utilize an Idea Box to discuss the ways that campus life could better accommodate their needs.

An ability-focused paradigm is central to the mission of Engaging Abilities and will be fully integrated into the structure of the Autlook Project. For example, a participant may volunteer to facilitate a weekly role playing game or a discussion about resources in their community, depending on their skill area. This ability focused approach to integrating resources will promote positive community building and be personally rewarding for participants.

The data volunteered by Autlook participants will be part of a student-organized interdisciplinary research and community outreach initiative. This research will give the university community access to important, currently unavailable information about the climate for students with disabilities on campus.

Conclusion

The Autlook project fills many needs at UM and in local communities. Through MAP, it facilitates a symbiotic relationship between students and individuals and families with disabilities. ASSN connects employers with students and alumni seeking work. Many online features provide both social and educational activities, as well as forums on topics of interest to the disability community. Through Engaging Abilities, Autlook will even be able to facilitate real-world events and benefit from long-term support. However, Autlook is more than the sum of all the services it provides. It is a gateway between living rooms, classrooms, and offices. Autlook is a partnership between the people and institutions of the university and the state.