

Chapter 22

Web Accessibility Policy for Students with Disabilities in U.S. Postsecondary Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

“Web accessibility” is the ability to access information online. In distance education, most instructional material is located online, and anything that prevents a person from accessing these materials becomes a barrier to distance education. Demand for distance education is growing, and the Web is the most common mechanism for its delivery. Not all Websites are accessible, despite the availability of design guidelines. The purpose of this chapter is to inform Web accessibility policy decisions at U.S. postsecondary institutions by increasing the awareness of Web accessibility issues in distance education, examining societal implications, and discussing methods for improvement. This chapter also reviews the current U.S. legal context and provides alternative cost-justification and cost-benefit frameworks for consideration by policymakers.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education combines technology and pedagogy to break down the barriers of time and place, enabling students to enroll in and complete coursework from any location with a computer and an Internet connection. The flexibility provided by distance education is a substantial benefit to students who cannot, or prefer not to, travel to a physical campus. However, one group of students—those

with disabilities—is overlooked when it comes to distance education at many postsecondary institutions in the U.S.

“Web accessibility” is the ability to access information on the World Wide Web, or the Internet. In distance education today, most instructional material and related information is located online. Anything that prevents a person from accessing this content becomes a barrier to distance education. It is possible to reduce these barriers, but it is a challenge to gain attention and support for Web accessibility policy because it involves technology

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-782-9.ch022

that can be difficult to comprehend, and students with disabilities represent a relatively small portion of the population.

Why are Web accessibility measures needed in U.S. postsecondary education, and what are the policy consequences in U.S. postsecondary distance education? Web accessibility measures are needed because they reduce barriers to distance education for students with disabilities. Demand for distance education is growing, and the Web is the most common delivery mechanism for distance education. However, not all Websites are accessible, despite the availability of design guidelines. Web accessibility policy provides increased opportunities for learners and is consistent with the social justice principles of equal access and nondiscrimination. Web accessibility policy can be better understood through models of disability, alternative cost-benefit frameworks, and can be cost-justified using metrics such as social return on investment (social ROI) (Wilson & Rosenbaum, 2005). U.S. postsecondary institutions need to be aware of recent legislative changes, such as the reauthorization in 2008 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which provides the legal basis for a broader interpretation of disability and sets the stage for increased requests for accommodations by students with disabilities.

Web accessibility policymakers at U.S. postsecondary institutions face a myriad of challenges, including increased demand for distance education, alternative models of disability, unsympathetic socioeconomic paradigms, competing social theoretical perspectives, lack of technological understanding, and a changing legal environment.

This purpose of this chapter is to inform Web accessibility policy decisions at U.S. postsecondary institutions by increasing awareness of Web accessibility issues in distance learning, examining societal implications, and discussing methods to improve Web accessibility. This chapter also reviews the current U.S. legal context and provides alternative cost-justification and cost-benefit frameworks for consideration by policymakers.

BACKGROUND

Growth in Distance Education

As demand for distance education grows, Web accessibility policy becomes more important. Online enrollment as a percentage of total enrollment at U.S. postsecondary institutions more than doubled from 2002-2006. In the fall of 2002, enrollment in online distance education courses represented 9.7% of total enrollment. By the fall of 2006, online enrollment had grown to 19.8% of total enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Increased computer use by students (especially mobile computing) is now supported by new and smaller equipment designs, reduced equipment cost, and greater broadband and WiFi network availability on college campuses, in libraries, and in public meeting places.

The annual growth of online enrollment far outpaced the annual growth rate of total enrollment in U.S. degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the same period. Between 2003 and 2006, growth in total enrollment in U.S. postsecondary institutions averaged 1.525% per year, while growth in online enrollment averaged 21.85% per year (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

The Internet is the primary means of providing distance education at U.S. postsecondary institutions. Of U.S. postsecondary institutions offering distance education courses in 2000-2001, more than 93% used Websites to deliver those courses (Waits & Lewis, 2003). The trend toward increased use of Web-based instructional content in distance education is likely to continue as the availability of broadband and WiFi access also continues to increase, and the cost of computing continues to decrease. The economies of scale possible in Web-based instructional content distribution, and on-demand access to this content, benefit both students and institutions.

The Sloan-C Report *Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning* (Allen & Seaman, 2007) indicates that institutions list access as the

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