Chapter V

Distance Learning as a Form of Accommodation

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Abstract

Over the recent past, the population in schools and the options for education have changed. Recently, the number of students identified as special needs has increased, as has the number of special needs students included in "regular" classrooms. Specific laws pertain to their education, including the U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), which requires that students with disabilities each have Individual Education Plans (IEP). An aspect of the IEP is the possibility of using assistive technology to assist in the student's education or in accommodation or modifications needed for disabled access. The web-based learning environment itself can be considered an accommodation or modification of instruction to meet the needs of special needs students. Opportunities are increasing in the online distance learning environment for colleges and universities,

and the increase is expanding to the high school and middle school programs. When creating online instruction, it is important to follow the accessibility standards such as the Section 508 and W3C accessibility standards to enable persons with disabilities access to the educational material. Within the U.S., more than 26,000 K-12 students classified as IDEA hospital/homebound, received education through some form of "distance education" as of 1999. While the methods of instruction do not commonly include online delivery, it is an option that should be investigated. In-depth examples of a school system's hospital/homebound program, online programs being used by a school for students with disabilities, and a state public online school and its interactions with students with disabilities are presented. The results of a survey of online schools and their services for students with disabilities are also reported.

INTRODUCTION

Special education programs or resources are offered through schools to assist in educating children with special needs. In addition, they provide resources for the rehabilitation for those with disabilities. Disability rights leaders have said that the application of technology will be the equalizer of the 21st century (Flippo, Inge, & Barcus, 1995). Through the use of assistive technology (AT) devices, many students can decrease their isolation and become a part of a regular classroom, even if they are physically not in the actual classroom at all. Assistive technology is a tool that can provide a method for an individual who is experiencing a disability to participate in a classroom. Screen readers that read aloud the text on the screen or web page can overcome barriers to accessing electronic information encountered by students who have vision disabilities. Captions can overcome barriers for students who have hearing disabilities. Some access solutions that use principles of universal design are built into the hardware or software of computers and programs (RESNA, 2001). The design of a distance learning course, or the participation in a course through distance learning, is in itself the application of assistive technology, and is an accommodation to instruction that can meet many of the special needs of learners in today's schools.

According to the Half the Planet Foundation (2001), an organization that supports the application of technology to promote the values of the Americans

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