

Chapter 9

Institutional, Legal, and Attitudinal Barriers to the Accessibility of University Digital Libraries: Implications for Retention of Disabled Students

Sushil K. Oswal

University of Washington, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter takes a look at the impact of accessibility barriers to today's digital libraries on disabled students' ability to succeed and considers the wider institutional implications of such barriers in light of disability laws in the United States. It analyzes the implications of these barriers from the broader institutional policy perspective in improving the access to higher education for users with print disabilities. The author concludes by reiterating that achieving technical accessibility through adherence to industry or legal standards alone is not adequate for making usable research and teaching libraries available to students and scholars with print disabilities. The author also emphasizes that engaging actual disabled users both in the design and development stages of the platforms, user interfaces, and content presentation schemas for these knowledge repositories is of utmost importance.

INTRODUCTION

As Henry Alphin, Jennie Lavine and Roy Chan in their call for this collection stress that “Meeting basic accessibility requirements in the global economy is a critical first step for developers, media specialists, designers, usability professionals, and accessibility experts for ensuring that their IT (websites, multimedia, software, hardware) and digital (web, audio, video, media) infrastructure are accessible and afford-

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able to all universities and university stakeholders”, this chapter aims at discussing the accessibility of digital libraries in higher education from the perspective of disabled stakeholders ranging from students, faculty, and staff to the members of the wider community interested in availing the afore-mentioned affordances in university library collections and related technological infrastructure. The chapter pays particular attention to the accessibility challenges faced by users with visual and hand-motor disabilities who are often excluded by library planners, administrators, technology designers, software developers, and digital publishers due to their ableist orientation with technology, their over-dependence on inaccessible mouse-centered navigation systems, their ignorance of or indifference to the usability and accessibility needs of disabled users solely dependent on computer interaction through keyboard input or adaptive devices, such as, speech input through voice recognition software and headpointers. Most of these usability and accessibility problems result from these designers and developers’ unfamiliarity with the pertinent national and international web accessibility standards, such as, the 1998 Section 508 Guidelines enshrined in the 1973 Rehabilitation ACT of the United States and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0) from the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) of World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), and their overall exclusionary attitudes toward disability. This chapter tries to address the overarching question—how does this digital technology affect the blind knowledge workers in general and students and faculty in higher education in particular.

I begin with a short discussion of the present participation of disabled students in higher education and its impact on the employment among the disabled. Consistent with contemporary cultural values of promoting effective work environments for all individuals, this article offers evidence of inefficiencies and disparities in university-based knowledge economies marked by inadequacy of accessibility policies and instructional structures, requiring wide-ranging shift in policy formulation about digital technologies and their management. The author conjectures that these dismal conditions must have something to do with the universities’ attitudes towards digital access for the disabled, their policies about acquiring accessible or inaccessible technologies, and their desire to, or lack thereof, tackle with accessibility issues in a timely fashion (Dequin, 1990).

This chapter should be of interest to campus leaders and library planners, institutional policy wonks, student affairs administrators, and librarians in general. The library access issues highlighted in this chapter and its implications section delineating the consequences of this neglect to the institution and its primary stakeholders—the students and the faculty--ought to draw attention of ADA coordinators, human resource personnel, faculty leaders, disability specialists, digital library infrastructure designers, and institutional researchers invested in the future of higher education.

In spite of and despite the location of accessibility needs of this historically impoverished minority vis-à-vis and across other competing institutional, technological, and curricular interests and imperatives, the campus leaders in all functions of the university must realize that any constructive steps taken to enhance accessibility for disabled library users will improve teaching and learning for all students (Slatin, 2002), increase college access and retention, and bolster graduation rates. Besides these tangible and easy-to-measure outcomes, this accessibility will enhance academic, cultural, and human diversity on university campuses; develop 21st century skills among library planners, faculty, and students while cultivating global citizenship values among all of the aforesaid (Alphin, 2013).

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