


Chapter 13

Keeping It Compliant: ADA in the Online Classroom

Cara L. Metz

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2447-2665>

The University of Arizona Global Campus, USA

Sarah H. Jarvie

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9401-4275>

Colorado Christian University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter will discuss what disabilities are, how they can impact students in an online classroom, and what it means to be ADA compliant. In addition, this chapter will provide some examples of practical applications for designing ADA compliant online classrooms with the purpose of creating relationships. Higher education faculty are at the frontline, making online classrooms accessible and setting the tone for the learning environment. They can engage in relationships with all students and work actively to come alongside those who may need additional support in the classroom. It is in creating relationships with students that barriers are broken and more opportunities for access arise.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to building relationships, it is important that a student feel seen and understood. Instructors who design their classroom to meet the needs of students at all ability levels can begin to build trust and empathy with students, especially those with disabilities that affect how they learn. Instead of waiting until a student discloses a need that might cause them to get behind in their courses (Huss & Eastep, 2016), instructors can proactively build a classroom that is usable for all students (Edwards et al., 2022; Guilbaud et al., 2021; Terras et al., 2015). This approach demonstrates empathy and a culturally inclusive environment, possibly opens up higher education to those who might not have had access to it before (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2012), and creates from the start an environment of inclusion and equity (Huss & Eastep, 2016). Even when instructors are unaware of their attitude toward disability

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accommodations, if they approach their classrooms with an ableist attitude, students are less likely to reach out for the support they need (Evans et al., 2017). Viewing disability as an element of diversity to be celebrated in the student body can foster access for all students (Cory, 2011).

People who have a disability are less likely than those without to complete a higher education degree and be employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). A student with a disability is defined as someone who has different physical, cognitive, sensory, or emotional characteristics from a normative population to the extent that they require services or accommodations to be fully active in a classroom (Heward et al., 2017, as cited by Kurea et al., 2021). Online education provides an opportunity to remove barriers that exist in other educational settings (Moorefield-Lang et al., 2016).

Disabilities will be both disclosed and undisclosed in the classroom. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2022) reports that only one-third of students who had a disability reported it to their college. Even with only one-third reporting, 19 percent of non-veteran undergraduates reported having a disability, and 26 percent of all veteran undergraduates reported having a disability (NCES, 2018). It is essential that instructors create a classroom that is welcoming to all students, regardless of disability. Additionally, they must advocate for students who need more services. Building relationships with students is a great way to have conversations about what might help them best. Disabilities might be undiagnosed, the student may not be used to advocating for themselves, especially if they are younger and their parents or guardians were able to advocate for them before (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Hong, 2015). Perhaps students who transition into college are eager to not be identified as a disabled student with their new start in higher education (Hong, 2015). Students who have a disability are less likely to complete their education compared to those who are non-disabled (NCES, n.d.).

This chapter will also provide some examples of practical applications for designing ADA compliant online classrooms with the purpose of creating relationships. Higher education faculty are at the frontline, making online classrooms accessible and setting the tone for the learning environment. They can engage in relationships with all students and work actively to come alongside those who may need additional support in the classroom. It is in creating relationships with students that barriers are broken and more opportunities for access arise.

HISTORY OF ADA

First implemented in 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (commonly referred to as ADA) was a way to establish guidelines and standards to provide accessibility and equal access for all (Betts, 2013). It covers physical disabilities and mental health challenges and provides an equal opportunity for employment and education by prohibiting discrimination against such individuals. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended (Section 504) (King & Piotroski, 2021) is the other federal statute that governs accessibility of online education. Section 504 is a national law that provides protection from discrimination based on disability for those who qualify (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). All educational institutions that receive federal financial assistance are subject to Section 504 (King & Piotroski, 2021). In 1998, the Section 508 Amendment to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was added requiring federal agencies to make their electronic and information technology accessible. Together these statutes require materials like websites, videos, PDF files, and other information technology be made available to all individuals, including those with disabilities.

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