Chapter 61
Accessibility Implementation for Disabled Students in PMBOLD Environments

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ABSTRACT

Project management theory provides an organized, cost-effective approach to providing an accessible e-learning environment. Such a collaborative project has the opportunity to bring together such professionals as instructional designers, disability services staff, and institutional researchers. Accessibility as an afterthought is a costly approach, and disabled students are a large enough minority to seek equality of opportunity. E-learning accessibility empowers the individual by providing educational content in formats that not only encourage collaboration and learning, but also reduce frustration and develop a sense of inclusiveness. A project manager who understands the importance of e-learning accessibility will be able to grow the project from the ground up in a manner that empowers the disabled, while benefiting all learners.

INTRODUCTION

Information technology has transformed the higher education landscape while subsequently enhancing educational opportunity for myriad students. E-learning courses can now be found in research universities, liberal arts colleges, and regional community colleges. Also, online learning has been the foundation of educational initiatives of

such for profit innovators as the University of Phoenix and Walden University. Yet, as e-learning matures and students continue to take advantage of such opportunity, it is evident that knowledge exchange through the transfer of digitized information will require accessibility initiatives in order to be inclusive.

Access to higher education brings to light issues of socioeconomic disadvantage and aggressiveness toward diversity efforts. Accessibility for disabled students is usually the mission of the

office of disability services (ODS) or a similar arrangement, and directors in these positions often lack the influential vice president title. Major efforts to increase accessibility for disabled college students are often responses to legal mandates or high profile struggles. In order to resolve a U.S. Department of Justice civil rights complaint, the Pennsylvania State University worked closely with the National Federation for the Blind (NFB) to develop an accessibility strategy for blind students, faculty, and staff (Cummings, 2011). Many leaders of institutions of higher education (IHEs) have been watching this case closely because they know that the implications will affect higher education globally. However, colleges and universities can take a more proactive approach toward accessibility for disabled students, rather than a reactionary approach aligned solely toward legalities.

E-learning has been revolutionary for disabled students because of the possibility of multiple formats of content. Instead of a traditional role of face-to-face (F2F) content delivery, college students can listen to audio recordings, watch videos, participate in discussion boards, work in virtual groups, and involve themselves in both asynchronous and synchronous learning endeavors. Instead of relying on traditional textbooks which "froze information in a single format" (Coombs, 2010, p. 1), information technology exposes the student to as many formats of knowledge exchange as the instructor or IT department are willing to offer.

Successful e-learning programs that incorporate accessibility components into the entire structure of the process will be best prepared to meet the needs of disabled students. It is much more costly to implement accessibility as an afterthought, and thus providing a structure with accessibility in mind—on top of a flexible foundation while anticipating changes to meet the needs of learners—is an economically efficient formula. Project management theories provide optimal organization processes for implementing an accessible e-learning environment, including updating an existing environment to meet the needs of disabled learn-

ers. Designing with all learners in mind entails a universal approach which can be best met through project management theory. Each of the parts is out there: project management theory; adaptable information technology; and IHEs that wish to implement new e-learning courses and programs, as well as those that wish to improve their existing e-learning courses and programs. This chapter will assist higher education administrators, instructional designers, instructional developers, and consultants in putting the disparate parts together in order to develop, or improve, e-learning courses and programs while providing an inclusive environment for disabled students.

BACKGROUND

Overview

E-learning accessibility is an issue that has recently come to the forefront of higher education. Administrators, course designers, developers, and instructors can no longer neglect the needs of disabled students in the e-learning environment. Although online learning has provided newfound access to disabled college students, that access is limited if courses are improperly designed or, essentially, designed without accessibility in mind. Whether developing a single course or an entire program, project management theory can benefit project managers who are creating plans, monitoring costs, and keeping everyone on schedule.

E-learning accessibility needs to be built into the process from the very beginning. American college students with disabilities represent 11 percent of undergraduate students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) and 8 percent of graduate students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). While not previously considered in dialogue on diversity, disabled students have grown into a sizable population that cannot be ignored.

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