Understanding the Context: Accessibility in Higher Education

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Adapted from previously published article for the NASPA Disability Knowledge Community

"Information accessibility standards" and "technology procurement policies" may not sound like terms that college staff and faculty should be thinking about right off the bat, but these terms are absolutely critical to the work we do as professionals who seek to improve the experiences of students engaged in postsecondary education.

So much of what we do is a function of interactions with technology. We provide online services to students to initiate and check the status of processes related to admissions, registration, financial aid, and more. We offer online courses, interactive tutorials, and social media engagement points. We provide technology-based pathways for students and employees to travel through our institutions. The challenge is that if we aren't careful, we can easily place barriers in those paths without realizing it.

Universities and colleges are required under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act to ensure the accessibility of their *programs as a whole*. This means that not only buildings but also learning materials and online environments must be usable by people with disabilities. Our virtual pathways are often traveled by those using screen readers, file readers, voice recognition programs, modified input devices, caption and subtitle files, Braille displays, and more. We must evaluate the degree to which our processes and learning materials can be accessed by individuals using a wide range of hardware and software. Those who rely on accessibility features can be impeded when information accessibility standards and technology procurement policies are either not clearly established, or not reliably enforced. There are not always equivalent alternatives to our online offerings, which means some end users can find themselves at a dead end.

The Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, is making Internet accessibility a priority (Nylen, 2010; Parry, 2010; Rowland, 2010). The need for technology to be usable by the full population it is meant to serve is clear, and yet national studies have documented miserable rates of accessibility throughout college and university websites (Bohman, 2004; Waddell, 2007; Whiting, 2008).

Institutions must make a conscious effort to educate staff and faculty, develop appropriate policies, and commit to ongoing evaluation plans (Bohman, 2007). The best way to proceed will depend on a constellation of factors such as campus climates, population demographics, and internal and community resources (Rowland, 2007).

Recent articles, studies, cases, and statements have called attention to the gap between what we know our students and employees need and what many of us seem to be delivering (Bohman, 2004; Loiacono, 2009; Whiting, 2008). To close that gap, we need to transform our approach to ensuring accessibility. Doing so is in our own best interest. When we make our online services and information usable through good design, we not only help our students, but also attract a wider market, save money, and protect ourselves by demonstrating an understanding of legal mandates.

We need to infuse awareness of potential barriers into conversations at all levels to make sure that steering committees and working groups are considering the needs of a wide range of users prior to the procurement and deployment stages. We need to make sure our virtual environments incorporate the digital equivalent of ramps and elevators so everyone has an equal shot.

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