E-Learning Accessibility Model: A Culture of Collaboration and Outcomes Assessment

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ABSTRACT
Using data from 22 in-depth interviews with e-learning accessibility researchers, disability specialists, instructional designers, higher education administrators, and disabled current and former higher education students, a strategic model of e-learning accessibility for disabled college students is developed. Collaboration, including interviews with experts and students, provided an underlying fabric in this study and highlights the need for interdepartmental and interdisciplinary support and communication when developing an accessibility culture. In understanding the opinions, perceived needs, and outright demands of experts and students on the topic of e-learning accessibility, a grounded theory approach resulted in a spectrum of views that was instrumental in developing a framework of which nascent e-learning programs could utilize as a new foundation and established e-learning programs could implement as an inherent aspect of the institution’s culture. Recommendations—including developing e-learning accessibility as part of the culture of the institution, with a focus on collaboration, program evaluation and outcomes assessment—are presented.

Keywords: Accessibility, Collaboration, Disability, E-learning, Outcomes Assessment, Student Engagement

INTRODUCTION
Accessibility in the e-learning environment is a growing area of interest in higher education research. Although disability scholars and instructional technology designers discuss best practices, a project on the scale of a conceptual model of accessibility for disabled students in the higher education e-learning environment will push such scholarship to a new level. Consequently, an accessible e-learning environment will open doors for many disabled students who were previously burdened by insufficient technology or were unable to attend college altogether.

Traditionally, higher education administrators and researchers have been concerned largely with socioeconomic factors and issues of diversity when examining access to higher education. However, accessibility is comprehensive and should include extending opportunities for people with disabilities, given that students with

DOI: 10.4018/ijopcd.2013070102
disabilities encompass all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and represent 11 percent of undergraduate students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) and eight percent of graduate students (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). In this light, while disabled students usually receive accommodations for accessibility, most of these accommodations are made in response to legal mandates. These reactionary measures include adherence to regulations, such as Sections 504 and 508 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as well as anticipation of new regulations.

Another way which accommodations are made on a reactionary basis is that students must actively seek assistance from professors, administrators, and disability professionals. This means that students self-select according to their disability and, accordingly, it is relatively impossible to know the number of legally-defined disabled students who do not seek help because of pride, fear of red tape, or any other hindrance. Many disabled students could fit the archetype of Rao’s (2009) “previously untapped learners with specific needs” who would benefit from increased access and engagement in higher education studies through an updated structure or recognition.

Currently, there are three trending factors making accessibility to online higher education programs by disabled students an important area of study. First, institutions of higher education are being held increasingly accountable by governments and elected officials, as well as other constituents, including parents and employees. Such accountability has led to an increased focus on improvement of the student experience through outcomes assessment (Yorke, 2004), and offices of institutional research have grown in both size and scope over the past decade, to the point of a ubiquitous presence (Swing, 2009). Second, rapid growth of technology in higher education has led to a marked increase of blended and online programs (Tomei, 2010), which both opens doors to previously untapped students and provides new areas of accessibility issues. Third, the growth in online and blended learning has led to an increased need for a focus on nontraditional student engagement.

The strategic model of accessibility developed through the research in this study provided a foundation to increase disabled student engagement and retention. Accordingly, such a model of accessibility has the potential to increase engagement and retention of all students, as the model was not designed as a mutually exclusive process. Ultimately, the research conducted in this study built upon the relatively limited existing scholarship on higher education accessibility of disabled students in the e-learning environment and contributes new scholarship to elicit interest in the subject.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guided the research in this study:

1. How can online and blended course development and design be altered and improved to increase universal student engagement in a manner that limits the need for disabled students to self-select and actively seek accommodations?

The study does not focus on self-selection as a negative attribute; moreover, the study assumes that self-selection opens students to opportunities because of the lack of an inherent need to go through the process of identification and formalities. Some students identify with difficulty, rather than disability (Riddell, Tinklin, & Wilson, 2006), and thus self-identification, for purposes of this study, would not be a necessary component of accessibility initiatives:
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